

Van Gogh painting
on coffee mug



reproduced, and many of these reproductions have been touched up or altered by means of computer graphics. For most of us, knowledge of famous paintings is not first-hand, but through reproductions in books and on posters, greeting cards, classroom slides, and television specials about art history. The technology of images is thus central to our experience of visual culture.

Representation

Representation refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us. We use words to understand, describe, and define the world as we see it, and we also use images to do this. This process takes place through systems of representation, such as language and visual media, that have rules and conventions about how they are organized. A language like English has a set of rules about how to express and interpret meaning, and so, for instance, do the systems of representation of painting, photography, cinema, or television.

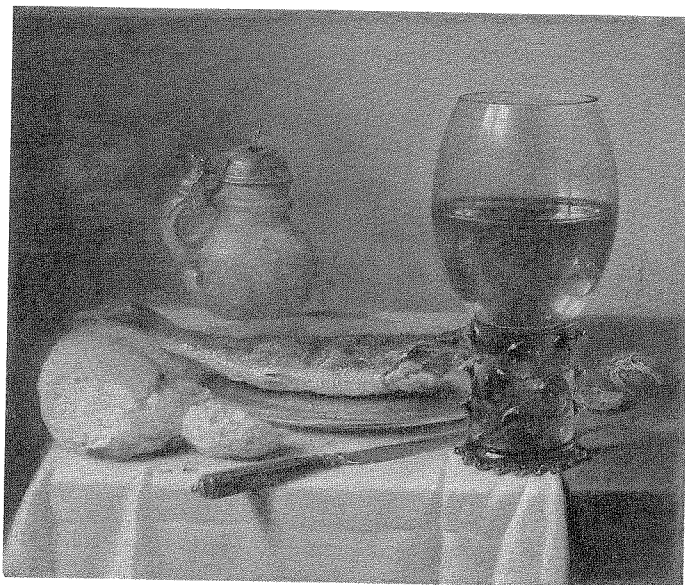
Throughout history, debates about representation have considered whether these systems of representation reflect the world as it is, such that they mirror it back to us as a form of *mimesis* or imitation, or whether in fact we construct the world and its meaning through the systems of representation we deploy. In this *social constructionist* approach, we only make meaning

of the material world through specific cultural contexts. This takes place in part through the language systems (be they writing, speech, or images) that we use. Hence, the material world only has meaning, and only can be “seen” by us, through these systems of representation. This means that the world is not simply reflected back to us through systems of representation, but that we actually construct the meaning of the material world through these systems.

Over time, images have been used to represent, make meaning of, and convey various sentiments about nature, society, and culture as well as to represent imaginary worlds and abstract concepts. Throughout much of history, for example, images, most of them paintings, have been used by religions to convey religious myths, church doctrines, and historical dramas. Many images have been produced to depict seemingly accurate renditions of the world around us, while others have been created to express abstract concepts and feelings such as love. Language and systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination.

The distinction between the idea of reflection, or *mimesis*, and representation as a construction of the material world can often be difficult to make. The still life, for instance, has been a favored subject of artists for many centuries. One might surmise that the still life is simply about the desire to reflect, rather than make meaning of, material objects. In the still life on the next page, painted in 1642 by Dutch painter Pieter Claesz, an array of food and drink is carefully arranged on a table, and painted with an attention to each minute detail. The objects, such as the tablecloth, dishes, bread, carafe, and glass, are rendered with an attention to light and seem so lifelike that one imagines one could touch them. Yet, is this image simply a reflection of this particular scene, rendered with skill by the artist? Is it simply a *mimesis* of a scene, painted for the sake of demonstrating skill? Claesz worked in the seventeenth century, when Dutch painters were fascinated with the still life form, and painters painted many such works with attention to creating the illusion of material objects on canvas. The Dutch still life ranged in form from those that were straightforwardly representational to those that were deeply symbolic. Many were not simply about a composition of food and drink, but replete with allusions and symbolism, as well as philosophical ideas. Many works, such as this, were concerned with depicting the transience of earthly life through the ephemeral materiality of food. They call forth the senses through the

Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring, and Bread*, 1642



depiction of foods which are associated with particular aromas, in which partially eaten foods evoke the experience of eating. In this work, the fare is simple, a reference to the everyday food of the common people, yet one can also see the potential religious allusions of bread, wine, and fish to Christian rituals.¹ Yet, even if we simply read this image as a representation of food without any symbolism, its original meaning was derived from its depiction of what food and drink meant in seventeenth-century Holland. Here, the language of painting is used to create a particular set of meanings according to a set of conventions about realistically depicting the material world. We will discuss concepts of realism more in Chapter 4. Here, we want to note that this painting produces meanings about these objects, rather than simply reflecting some meaning that is already within them.

Representation is thus a process through which we construct the world around us, even through a simple scene such as this, and make meaning from it. We learn the rules and conventions of the systems of representation within a given culture. Many artists have attempted to defy those conventions, to break the rules of various systems of representation, and to push at the

definitions of representation. In this painting, for example, *Surrealist* painter René Magritte comments upon the process of representation. Entitled *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29), the painting depicts a pipe with the line in French, “This is not a pipe.” One could argue, on the one hand, that Magritte is making a joke, that of course it is an image of a pipe that he has created. However, he is also pointing to the relationship between words and things, since this is not a pipe itself but rather the representation of a pipe; it is a painting rather than the material object itself. Philosopher Michel Foucault elaborates these ideas in a short text about this painting and a drawing by Magritte that preceded it.² Not only does he address the painting’s implied commentary about the relationship between words and things, he also considers the complex relationship among the drawing, the painting, their words, and their *referent* (the pipe). One could not pick up and smoke this pipe. So, Magritte can be seen to be warning the viewer not to mistake the image for the real thing. He marks the very act of naming, drawing our attention to the word “pipe” itself, and its function in representing the object. Both the word “pipe” and the image of the pipe represent the material object pipe, and in pointing this out, Magritte asks us to consider how they produce meaning about it. Thus, when we stop and examine the process of representation, as Magritte



René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), 1928–29

asks us to do, a process that we normally take for granted, we can see the complexity of how words and images produce meaning in our world.

The myth of photographic truth

The rules and conventions of different systems of representation vary, and we attribute different sets of cultural meanings to each—such as paintings, photographs, and television images. Many of the images discussed in this book were produced by cameras and through photographic or electronic technologies. These images belong to the various worlds of fine art, public art, advertising, popular culture, alternative media, the news media, and science.

No matter what social role an image plays, the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of *subjective* choice through selection, framing, and personalization. It is true that some types of image recording seem to take place without human intervention. In *surveillance* videos, for instance, no one stands behind the lens to determine what should be shot and how to shoot it. Yet even in surveillance video, someone has programmed the camera to record a particular part of a space and framed that space in a particular way. In the case of many automatic video and still-photography cameras designed for the consumer market, aesthetic choices like focus and framing are made as if by the camera itself, yet in fact the designers of these cameras also made decisions based on social and aesthetic norms such as clarity and legibility. These mechanisms are invisible to the user—they are *black-boxed*, relieving the photographer of various decisions. Yet, it remains the photographer who frames and takes the image, not the camera itself. At the same time, despite the subjective aspects of the act of taking a picture, the aura of machine *objectivity* clings to mechanical and electronic images. All camera-generated images, be they photographic, cinematic, or electronic (video or computer-generated), bear the cultural legacy of still photography, which historically has been regarded as a more objective practice than, say, painting or drawing. This combination of the subjective and the objective is a central tension in camera-generated images.

Photography was developed in Europe in the early nineteenth century, when concepts of *positivist* science held sway. Positivism involves the belief that *empirical* truths can be established through visual evidence. An empirical truth is something that can be proven through experimentation, in

particular through the reproduction of an experiment with identical outcomes under carefully controlled circumstances. In positivism, the individual actions of the scientist came to be viewed as a liability in the process of performing and reproducing experiments, since it was thought that the scientist's own subjectivity would influence or prejudice the objectivity of the experiment. Hence, machines were regarded as more reliable than humans. Similarly, photography is a method of producing images that involves a mechanical recording device (the camera) rather than hand recording (pencil on paper). In the context of positivism, the photographic camera was taken to be a scientific tool for registering reality and was regarded by its early advocates as a means of representing the world more accurately than hand-rendered images.

Since the mid-1800s, there have been many arguments for and against the idea that photographs are objective renderings of the real world that provide an unbiased truth because cameras are seemingly detached from a subjective, particular human viewpoint. These debates have taken on new intensity with the introduction of digital imaging processes. A photograph is often perceived to be an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life. We refer to this concept as the myth of *photographic truth*. For instance, when a photograph is introduced as documentary evidence in a courtroom, it is often presented as if it were incontrovertible proof that an event took place in a particular way. As such, it is perceived to speak the truth. At the same time, the truth-value of photography has been the focus of many debates, in contexts such as courtrooms, about the different "truths" that images can tell.

Camera images are also associated with truth-value in more everyday settings. A photograph in a family album is often perceived to tell the truth, such as the fact that a particular family gathering took place, a vacation was taken, or a birthday was celebrated. Photographs have been used to prove that someone was alive at a given place and time in history. For instance, after the Holocaust, many survivors sent photographs to their families from whom they had been long separated as an affirmation of their being alive. It is a paradox of photography that although we know that images can be ambiguous and are easily manipulated or altered, particularly with the help of computer graphics, much of the power of photography still lies in the shared belief that photographs are objective or truthful records of events. Our awareness of the subjective nature of imaging is in constant tension with the legacy of objectivity that clings to the cameras and machines that produce images today.