



## What is Narrative Art ?

Art History



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visual arts do not have a temporal dimension needed for actual storytelling. Painting and sculpture, as the most common classical art forms, operate in spatial terms. Rather than having to read a text word by word, the viewer needs only to look at the painting before him/her and to “read” the image. This apparent difference between verbal narratives and the one told by pictures could also help us understand the alleged mediating role of art in our past (and present, as well).



Trajan's Column with a Statue of St Peter on top

1 Image = 1000 Words



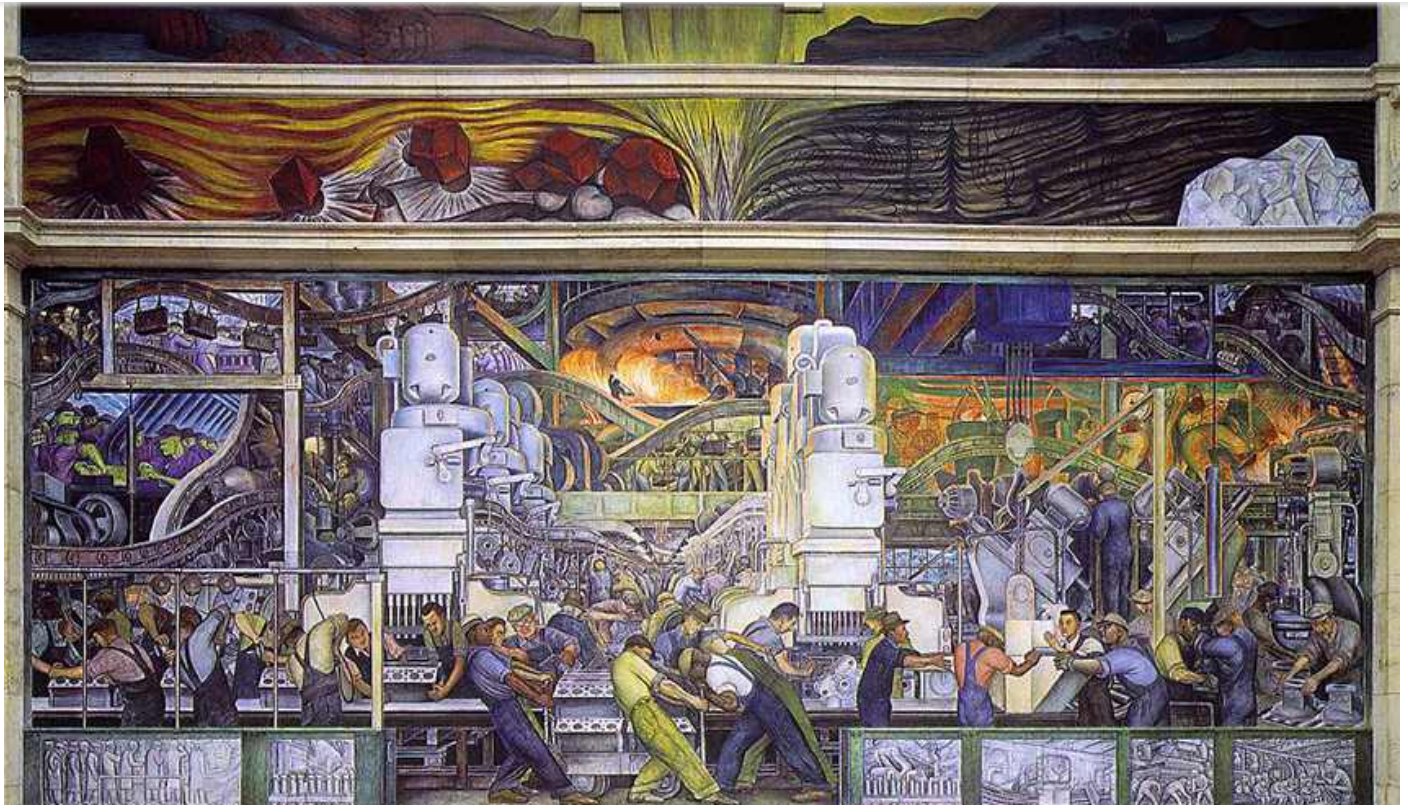
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what we know, our history is only what the winners have aimed to tell us, much rather than what the objective truth was like. Thus, great historical narratives were told in order to maintain the power of the ruling class, to instruct and articulate the masses, but also to inform the future generations. Quite often, the aristocrats employed **painters rather than writers to tell their stories for them**. One of the main reasons why this method was important is the number of illiterate people, which was much greater in the past than it is now. But apart from that, it is also the unique power of images to instantly translate a message. Therefore, it was very common to have a painter work for the king or a religious patron and illustrate particular subjects, simultaneously ignoring some of their aspects that might not be in favor of the ruler or the church. Narrative art conveyed the messages of compassion, of fear, or of a distinction between right and wrong, alluding to the preferred type of behavior and evoking a sense of self-regulation in the viewer.<sup>[1]</sup>



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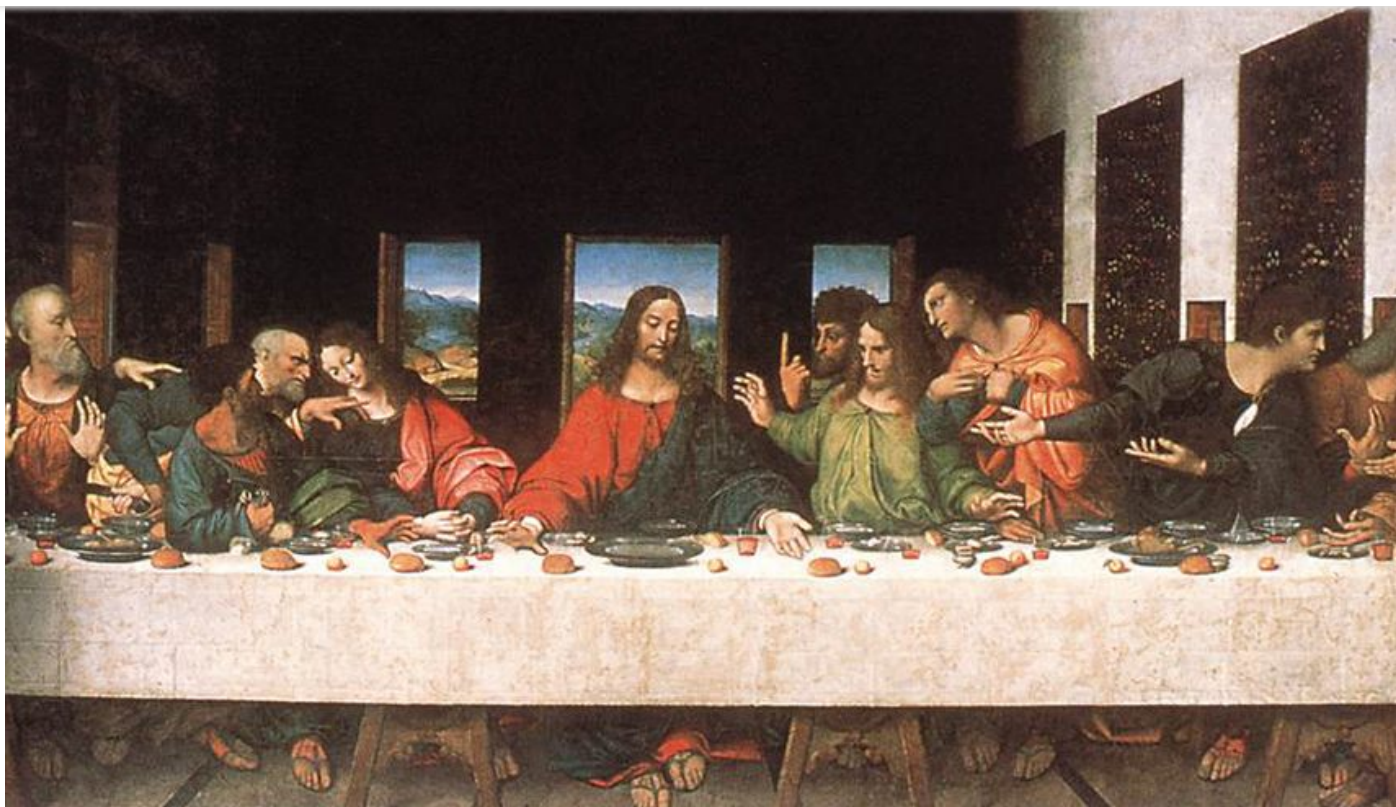
Diego Rivera's controversial mural in Detroit, commissioned by the Ford Motor Company. The murals were supposed to represent the industry in a positive way, but the outcome seemed different

## Narrating History

Most of the visual narratives depend on the time of their creation and the cultural context - **different civilizations pursued diverse manners of "speech"**. In ancient Rome, there was a particular architectural format intended to be read as a book - a triumphal column. It is a cylindrical form, known for an engraved story that literally revolves around the column, starting from the bottom and continuing towards the top like a spiral tracing its circumference and height (the most famous one today is Trajan's column). Since the story becomes less clear as its sequences reach greater heights, historians presume that



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Leonardo da Vinci - The Last Supper

## Days, Months and Years in a Single Painting

In the following centuries, this exhaustive and quite **direct interpretation of book chapters** was being gradually modified into simpler versions. Painters and sculptors aimed to make pieces that tell the **entire story in a single glance**. Quite often, especially during and after the Renaissance, the narrative was emphasized by the artist's technical tactics - a specific use of light and shadow, choice of a medium, etc. Most of the great masters paintings operated in this manner. The paintings would sometimes depict the protagonist(s) or segments of events in several different stages in a successive manner. Such is Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine



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Leading the People by Eugene Delacroix, a painting that many would regard as his masterpiece. It represents the events that marked the Three Glorious Days of the July Revolution in France. The painting is filled with dense content, semi-chaotic but with a bright message. The central figure is an allegory of liberty, depicted as a dominant woman leading the mass; the rest of the characters stand for various types of people who we all benefit from the revolution, regardless of their social and economic status (at least that is how Delacroix saw it).<sup>[3]</sup>



Eugene Delacroix - Liberty Leading the People, 1830



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remembrance of genre painting that followed were major contributors to the diversified plethora of narrative art as we know it today. Telling the anecdotes of ordinary people, whether politically charged or not, became one of the main subjects of European art in the past few centuries. This type of narration remains popular even today. It was always modestly uplifting, feeding the spirit of people as they enjoyed remembering the little things and joyful activities from their day-to-day lives.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder - The Fight between Carnival and Lent, 1559

## How Wide is the Scope of Narrative Art ?



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advent of the modern age, art was no longer controlled by patrons, and its independence was declared several times and on different occasions. The way that art transmits a message became increasingly complex, and dramatically different than before. Dominant art was the one that was **liberated from the need to serve a purpose**. It was being produced for its own sake (l'art pour l'art), being almost assimilated with aesthetics, detached from any implicit narratives. The other way around narratives was through the art of historical avant-gardes, which pursued a sort of critical "non-art" or art of the meta-medium (ready-made)<sup>[4]</sup>. However, now that it is in our historical past, it is **hard to say that Modern art does not have a story of its own**. Even if it is not representational or metaphorical, it is almost impossible for art to escape the interpretation of the viewer. Moreover, art is stuck in the maze of its own cultural value, which ultimately makes a non-narrative seem like just another kind of narrative (on the other hand, we may argue that there is no such thing as non-aesthetics as well). Art has always, even if non-voluntarily, reflected the mood of the era - and that makes it almost inseparable from narratives.<sup>[5]</sup>





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Rachel Rose - Lake Valley, 2016. Still from video, 8'25". Image via Pillar Corias

## Art That Does Not Tell Stories

Still, there is a major difference between work that is created with an **intent to deliver a certain story**, and the one that operates at a **different level of human perception**. This is probably the key to sorting art in separate categories. We tend to associate the former with artworks made in the past and the latter with post-conceptual and contemporary art. In this regard, Modernism, which to be fair is probably a crossover between the two, is still a bit closer to the first category. This is because Modern art (in a really general meaning of the term) was still vaguely **dependent on the narrative in its endeavor to negate it**. For this reason, and from today's standing point, it



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to say, the common contemporary art viewer is concerned by what it can do.<sup>[6]</sup> This goes hand in hand with the kind of artworks characteristic for the late 20th and the 21st century - immersive installations, performances, digital works. But even the traditional art forms, sculpture, drawing and painting, seem to re-invent themselves in this era (just take a look at this year's Turner Prize laureates, for instance). If there is a message hidden behind the artworks, it is often obscure, distant or secondary.



Michal Dean, Turner Prize at Tate Britain, via designboom

## Narrative Art in 21st Century



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art's favorite narrative medium is video, as it serves as an ideal agent of the present-day aesthetics, being conspicuously practical at the same time. Nonetheless, the classical mediums still prove to be just as operative. Interestingly, the cause of story-telling has not inherently changed either. Art lends itself to the revolutionaries, socially-engaged movements and people who want to change the one-dimensional outlook on history (the Black Arts Movement, Afrofuturism, Feminism, etc.) - but it is still often used as a tool. It is only the patrons who have changed. Instead of serving the leaders with bad reputation, narrative art now seems to be in the hands of the people. It now aims to criticize and to protest, instead of submit to the authorities. In what seems to be the contemporary alternation of genre painting, narrative art tells intimate stories and personal experiences, creating a familiar image that the public can relate to. In a more poetic sense, narratives in contemporary art speak of imaginary worlds or alternate versions of future (a few of them bright, but most of them dystopian and dark, I'm afraid).

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Featured images: Hieronymus Bosch - The Garden of Earthly Delights ( 1490-1510), detail; Michelangelo - Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-1510) and The Final Judgement (1536-1541); Detail from Trajan's column where two Roman auxiliaries present Trajan with severed enemy. All images used for illustrative purposes only.

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