

Shadows

The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art

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This is a slight volume lavishly illustrated and which originally served as a companion volume to an exhibition at the National Gallery in London 1994, with the purpose of displaying pictures with shadows. However, shadows are rarely predicted in classical painting. Leonardo railed against them and admonished artists to do away with them by suffusing the light and never depicting objects in stark sunlight. The reason for that must be that shadows are not considered aesthetically pleasing but distracting messing up a picture. However, if you are committed to realism, you must include them as they are in front of your eyes. On the other hand every picture is made by selection, and even if your goal is realism, you still have artistic freedom. Thus depicted shadows are comparatively rare, and hence it becomes an interesting game for visitors to galleries, in particular to National Gallery to be on the outlook for shadows, thus making their visit into a more active one. In fact, this would be only one particular example of the aspects of the works of the old masters, whose technical skill and devotion to detail have not been surpassed by the modern ones, whose attitude towards art is profoundly different from those of the past. Admittedly the perspective would be rather narrow, but it would be an exercise indeed in art appreciation, making the active viewer marvel at the accomplishments of the past.

Of course shadows are not banned all the time. When realism is at a premium, such as in a *trompe l'oeil* they take pride of place, because the ability to cast a shadow is a sign of solidity and real physical presence. The shadow itself may be an immaterial thing, in a precise sense only existing in the eye of the beholder. You cannot weigh a shadow, it has no weight, it is not made out of atoms, and thus in a strict sense not a material object¹. But no matter how immaterial by itself it points at something solid and material as already suggested. Also a shadow does not exist, or at least does not become manifest, unless cast on a surface. They are like ideas which cannot be pinpointed in the abstract but show themselves only in concrete situations. This leads of course to the famous metaphor of Plato, whose conception can only be cast as metaphors. But the author does not elaborate.

Changing tack, he points out the trivial, yet not obvious, fact that you cannot draw your own shadow, as you do so the shadow changes². The principles of shadows are the same as those of perspectives, we have a point source of light, corresponding to the eye of the painter, out of which emanates rays, while of course the eye does not emanate any

¹ although of course exhibiting many physical properties such as being colder than its environment, and has a much more direct physical explanation than e.g. the rainbow, who appears even more spectral, after all the physical position of a shadow cast can be pinpointed.

² An amusing thing is a drawing showing the former past time of tracing silhouettes on the reverse side of a thin semi-transparent pieces of paper.

rays, although that was a reasonable assumption in classical times, but receive them. Thus the tracing of shadows was a mechanical device to form realistic pictures, as far as mere contours go. With semi-transparent media, as celluloid, the process can be carried to its extreme and provide moving images on the screen, a connection the author does not explicitly mention possibly as being too much of a digression. But he mentions the popular shadow shows prevalent during the 19th century, and even displays a striking picture of one. Those were nothing but elaborations on the rabbit tricks, i.e. by contorting your hands, all kinds of shadow images can be produced, in particular rabbits. This used to be popular even in my own childhood, but with modern technology and children over saturated by sophisticated produced images it does no longer cut any ice.

But shadows being more or less inevitable in realistic depictions, they have been exaggerated in some paintings to bring relief to a flat picture and enhance its illusion. But shadows can also be used more creatively, meaning not as a necessary evil, but as something in its own right. For one thing it can point at presences outside the frame of a picture, thus serving as a story-telling rôle; and most cleverly in one of the caricatures shown, of letting the shadows reveal the real nature of some public figures, as drunkards, swines etc, ostensibly using the rabbit trick.

And this would provide a fitting finale to this somewhat curious and delightful little essay.

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