

# The Ancient Theory of Imitation (*Mimesis*)

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## Not an art theory but a theory of pictorial representation

One important goal of theories of art is to distinguish between art and non-art. An art theory, sometimes condensed into a definition of art, should help us to understand what art is, how it works, and how it differs from other human activities and artifacts. In most handbooks it is maintained that the theory of imitation (*mimesis*) is one of the major art theories in the sense just given and that it is also the oldest one of which we know.

The theory of imitation as we find it in ancient texts is not, however, a theory of art; it is a theory of pictorial representation. The ancient theory of imitation was never used to distinguish between fine arts and their products and other human skills and artifacts. The basic distinction for the ancient theory of imitation was that between pictures and real things. For example, a house is a real thing which you can use in many different ways, but a painting representing a house is an imitation which you cannot use as a house even if it looks like a house. You can do nothing with it other than look at it in its capacity as a picture. As Plato maintains in *The Sophist*, the imitation is a sort of "man-made dream produced for those who are awake" (266 C).

We do not find the idea that the basic and distinguishing characteristic of works of art is that they are imitations until the 18th century, such as in the works of Jean Baptiste Dubos and Charles Batteux. This idea was, however, rejected by most critics during the 18th century and since then has been ridiculed as inadequate and superficial.

### Forms of mental image (aisthesis)

When Alexander Baumgarten suggested for the first time that aesthetics was an intellectual pursuit (*Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735), § 116), he started from the basic distinction, originally made by the Greek philosophers and the Church fathers, between *aistheta* and *noeta*, i.e., between what we receive from our senses and what we think. Aesthetics should be concerned with sensuous knowledge as logic is concerned with thought.

*Aisthesis* was described in the ancient tradition as the process in which mental images of the contingent qualities of individual things are presented to the mind. When we see a house, for instance, there is a mental image of the house in the mind of the perceiver, an image of its colours and shapes. The basic metaphor used to characterize this process was that of pressure. An individual thing presses its contingent qualities upon the senses like a signet ring which, when stamped into wax, delivers its form but not its matter to the wax. The class of mental images was divided into several subclasses that were distinguished from each other with regard to vividness, consistency, and relation to the outside world. Traditionally, six different mental occurrences were regarded as mental images of individual things. (*Correct*) perceptions of things in the world are true to the things perceived and are also vivid and consistent. I can have a correct mental image of a house, and this mental image is vivid and consistent with the rest of my situation. But we also know that the images we have of the world can be distorted; we then call such images *illusions* in order to distinguish them from, for instance, (*correct*) perceptions. Sometimes we have *hallucinations* which may be described as mental images caused by fever, drugs, etc., with no relation, neither true nor distorted, to objects in the outside world. Their vividness and consistency may vary.

(*Correct*) perceptions, illusions, and hallucinations are received by or generated within the person having them, and this reception has often been seen as a passive process; the wax merely receives the form of the signet ring. But it has been claimed that the sensory apparatus can also be active, i.e., it can by itself present mental images to the mind. *Memories* are one type of such images. When we remember something we have a mental image of that something, and we know that the mental image does not now answer to something in the world, but that it has done so. *Dreams* are another kind of mental image generated by the mind or the sensory apparatus. Dreams are sometimes very lively but seldom consistent, and a dream has no correct relation to the outside world in the sense of being an image of a particular external and existing object. Occasionally, elements in the dream can refer to particular existing things, but that is not characteristic of them. Dreams are, instead, characterized by their ability to freely combine previously experienced material. Finally, *imaginings* are a kind of mental image. When we imagine something we know that the mental images created by the senses do not answer to something in the outside world. The mind is free to compose mental images of any kind whatsoever, the only restriction being that the composite elements must be previously known to the person imagining. Like memories, but unlike "passive mental images," imaginings can be generated by will, at least to some degree.

## The apprehension of imitations as a form of aisthesis

When Plato calls imitations “man-made dreams produced for those who are awake,” he singles out the apprehension of pictures as yet another distinct kind of mental image. Looking at or listening to an imitation resembles but is not a dream because the spectator is awake. This fact implies that the viewer or listener is aware that it is an imitation and not a real thing which he or she is apprehending. If a person looks at a painting representing a house and believes he is looking at a real house, he makes a perceptual mistake; he has an illusion. Thus, it is necessary to know when you apprehend an imitation correctly that it is an imitation and not a real thing, and also to know how to act in accordance with the knowledge that it is an imitation and not a real thing.

The possibility of perceptual mistakes when looking at or listening to imitations was of great concern to Plato. When in the *Sophist* (268 B.C.) he characterizes sophists as imitators, he sees the sophists as having an outward behaviour similar to that of wise men. In reality, however, they are not wise; they just appear to be wise, and that is all they intend. Plato seems to fear that most people are tricked by such illusions, and he did not believe ordinary men to be capable of guarding themselves against such mistakes. He recommends that the higher guardians of the ideal city acquire a true knowledge of the nature of imitations as an antidote against such perceptual mistakes (*Republic* 595B). Plato seems, however, to have overestimated the danger of perceptual mistakes in connection with imitations. Most people know the difference between imitations and “real things” and act accordingly. The real danger, as Plato also saw, is the moral influence exerted on human behaviour by imitations.

The apprehension of imitations is dreamlike in character in the sense that the mental image produced by the imitation can be a free combination having no reference to real existing things. In making pictures the makers are as free as dreamers to combine elements into objects that have no reference to the outside world, the centaur being the standard example of this. Horace adds that the combination must also show *decorum*, i.e., follow what is proper (*Ars poetica* 1-37).

Another difference between dreams and mental images called forth by imitations concerns how they are generated. Dreams are generated spontaneously in the mind of the dreamer, but the apprehension of imitations is triggered by external man-made objects. The fact that pictures and imitations are man-made also distinguishes them from ‘natural’ images such as reflections and shadows, which are made by God or nature (*Sophist* 265B-266D).

### Some basic properties of imitations according to ancient thought

Plato writes in *The Sophist* (240 A-B) that a picture (*eidolon*) is similar to things of the kind it represents, that it is similar in only certain respects, and that it is no more

than similar in respect to the things in question. Similarity is in ancient thought understood as having properties in common and the idea that individual things and mental images can have properties in common was founded in the belief that perception basically is a kind of impression, a process in which individual objects deliver their shapes but not their matter to the mind. Thus, the mental image as a kind of individual impression is similar to the external individual object it represents by having properties in common with it within the range of the capacity of the relevant sense organ. Imitations and pictures are things seen or heard, and the properties they can share with the things they represent must therefore be capable of being seen or heard.

Furthermore, a picture or an imitation cannot share all of the properties of the thing represented. If something shares all of the properties of something else, it is not a picture or imitation of that thing but a second example of it (*Cratylus* 432 A-B). The fact that an imitation is only partially similar to the thing it represents, a house for instance, may help the viewer classify the thing he is apprehending as an imitation and not a real thing.

Finally, the only function of a picture and an imitation is to be similar to a certain extent to the thing represented. (*Sophist* 240 B). Pictures and imitations are made in order to be seen or heard and thereby produce mental images of things they are only similar to in certain respects. They are dreams (an imaginative kind of mental image) man-made for those who are awake, i.e., who know they are not what they represent. For example, when Aristotele writes that a tragedy is an imitation, this meant to the ancient reader that the tragedy was characterized as an image, not a real thing, i.e. the tragedy was seen as something man-made with the sole purpose of creating mental images (perceptions) in the mind of the perceiver, images which the perceiver knows do not represent or answer to real things. The spectator sees Oidipus acting but he and she know that it is not the real Oidipus but an actor.

### **Kinds of imitation**

The important thing when discussing imitations is, however, not the imitation as an external thing and its similarities to other external objects but the mental image it triggers, i.e., the fact that the spectator sees or hears an individual object which he or she knows is not a real thing. This man-made dream produced for those who are awake can be triggered by a number of different kinds of things. Aristotle (*Poetics*, ch. 1) distinguishes between kinds of imitations with reference to the medium used, such as words, gestures, shapes, colours, etc. The external imitation object does not necessarily physically resemble the things it represents but rather results in a mental image representing something

individual. The recited words of Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, do not resemble the wrath of Achilles but call forth mental images of that story in the minds of the listeners.

Both Plato and Aristotle maintain that music is imitative in character. For example, Aristotle states in *The Politics* (1340a17-19) that "musical times and tunes provide us with images of states of character." It makes sense to claim within the outline of the theory of imitation sketched here that music is a form of imitation. When we say "this piece of music is sad," this means in terms of the theory of imitation given here that I hear sadness or an expression of sadness in the piece of music in the same way as I see a house in the painting. The sounds I hear are similar to expressions of sadness I have met with before in music or in "real" life, and I know that the thing I hear is merely similar to real expressions of sadness, and that the only function of the piece of music is to show us this representation of sadness. The result is a mental image of sadness, and we can be affected by the mood of the mental image by this showing of an individual and characteristic expression of sadness.

Knowing that it is not a real expression of sadness makes us react differently when listening to the piece of music than to real expressions of sadness. The same is true about looking at pictures. Knowing that the thing represented in a painting is just a representation and not a real thing makes us react differently. Aristotle writes in *De anima* (427b23-25) that "[a]gain, when we form an opinion that something is threatening or frightening, we are immediately affected by it, and the same is true of our opinion that inspires courage; but in imagination we are like spectators looking at something dreadful or encouraging in a picture." And in the *Poetics* (1448b10-12) he notes that, "[o]bjects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and dead bodies."

In a hilariously funny scene in the play *Thesmophoriazusai* (133-174) Aristophanes seems to ridicule an idea, now lost, which might have been some kind of ancient theory of expression. The poet Agathon appears in woman's clothing because he is writing a female role and he claims, "For as the Worker, so the Work will be." One of the characters of the play replies,

Then that is why harsh Philocles writes harshly  
And that is why vile Xenocles writes vilely  
And cold Theognis writes such frigid plays.

### Making imitations

Xenophon relates an anecdote in his *Symposium* (IV.21) about a person who was teased because he never had anything else in mind but his lover. He replies: "Do you not know that I have so clear an image (*eidolon*) of him in my heart that had I the ability as

a sculptor or a painter I could produce a likeness of him from this image that would be quite as close as if he were sitting for me in person.” And Philostratus in *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (II.22) maintains that imitations are due to a mimetic faculty which is twofold, namely, the ability to form mental images and the technical skill to convey these mental images into matter. “Man owes his mimetic faculty to nature, but his power of painting to art [skill].” When we see images in the stars, in shadows, and in reflections, the mimetic faculty is activated. Also, looking at paintings and sculptures is dependent on the mimetic faculty: “[T]hose who look at works of painting and drawing require a mimetic faculty; for no one could appreciate or admire a picture of a horse or a bull, unless he had formed an idea of the creature represented.”

It is often maintained that the theory of imitation is concerned with the relation between the imitation and the outside world, i.e., between the picture and the model or models in the outside world. What is the model of an imitation or, which is the same thing, what is represented in the imitation? It can be an individual thing or person, and Xenophon relates in his *Memorabilia* (III.11) how painters use beautiful women as models. But it can also be a memory image, as Xenophon observes in his *Symposium* (IV.21). Porphyry in *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books* (1) also describes how a portrait was made in secret of the philosopher Plotinus by a painter who went several times to Plotinus’ lectures and used the composite memory image he thereby created as the model for the painting.

Xenophon in *Memorabilia* (III.10) and others stress the possibility of choosing elements and putting them together in such a way that the final result will exceed what we normally find in this world. Pliny in *Natural History* (XXXV.64) writes how the painter Zeuxis who, when commissioned to make a painting of a goddess, “made an inspection of the virgins of the city, who were nude, and selected five in order that he might represent in the picture that which was most laudible feature of each.” Cicero in *De inventione* (II.1.13) comments that Zeuxis used this technique “[f]or he did not believe that it was possible to find in one body all the things he looked for in beauty, since nature has not refined to perfection any single object in all its parts.”

Maximus of Tyre in his 17th *Oration* (3.18) writes that, “[i]n reality you would never find a body precisely like a statue, since the arts aim at the greatest beauty.” He thus rules out the use of an individual external object as a model; the imitation and picture is not a slavish copy of an external object, something the theory of imitation is often said to imply. But what directs the painter or sculpture in choosing the elements and according to what pattern are pictures put together? Greek authors and philosophers have stressed since classical times that crucial to the production of paintings and sculptures are the

mental images which have been produced in the mind of the painter or sculptor: “[I]t doesn’t matter whether he had his model without, to fix his eyes on, or within, a notion conceived and built up in his own brain” (Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 65). Imagination creates mental images of particular things with their sensuous qualities, colours, and shapes, and the production of imitations and pictures is characterized by the same freedom of combination as dreams and imaginations. In (correct) perception the object presses its form without its matter upon the mind of the perceiver. In a way, the production of pictures is the reverse order of (correct) perception: the skilled hands of the painter or sculptor model the matter to coincide with the mental image. Every craftsman “carries the model in himself and conveys its form into matter” (Alcinous, *Isagoga* IX), “keeping his eyes upon the pattern and making the visible and tangible objects correspond in each case to the incorporeal ideas” (Philo, *De opificio mundi* 4).

Finally, authors such as Cicero (*Orator* II.8-10) and Seneca (*Epistulae morales* 65) have claimed that Platonic ideas may serve as models for pictures and imitations. Plato himself denies this vehemently in the *Republic* (598A). Although Platonic ideas cannot be grasped by the senses, the conviction that pictures can represent Platonic ideas has appeared now and then in the history of the theory of imitation in order to enhance the value of pictures. The reason for this is the fact that the abstract intellectual world is regarded even today as much more valuable than the fleeting and ever-changing world of the senses, which is the domain of imitations.

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