

# Hierarchy of genres



A hierarchy of genres is any formalization which ranks different types of genres in an art-form in terms of their value. The most well known set of hierarchies are those held by academies in Europe between the 17th century and the modern era, and of these the hierarchy for the genres of painting held by the Académie française which held a central role in Academic art.



The argument regarding the aesthetic of painting, which continued to gain adherence since the Renaissance, was of the importance of allegory; the use of the pictorial elements of painting such as line and color to convey an ultimate unifying theme or idea. For this reason an idealism was adopted in art, whereby forms seen in nature would be generalized, and in turn subordinated to the unity of the artwork. It aimed at universal truth through the imitation of "la belle nature". Many dissenting theorists of the time (such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing) held that this focus on allegory was faulty and based on a wrong analogy between the plastic arts and poetry rooted in the Horatian dictum *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry").



Formulated in 1667 by André Félibien, a historiographer, architect and theoretician of French classicism, the hierarchy of genres considered history painting to be the *grande genre*. History paintings included paintings with religious, mythological, historical, literary, or allegorical subjects--they embodied of some interpretation of life or conveyed a moral or intellectual message. The gods and goddesses from the ancient mythologies represented different aspects of the human psyche, figures from religions represented different ideas, and history, like the other sources, represented a dialectic or play of ideas. For a long time, especially during the French Revolution, history painting often focused on depiction of the heroic male nude; though this waned into the 19th century.



After history painting, next came, in order decreasing worth: scenes of everyday life (called scènes de genre, or "genre painting", and also petit genre to contrast it with the grande genre), portraits, landscapes and finally still-lives. In his formulation, such paintings were inferior because they were merely reportorial pictures without moral force or artistic imagination. Genre paintings--neither ideal in style, nor elevated in subject--were admired for their skill, ingenuity, and even humour, but never confused with high art. The hierarchy of genres also had a corresponding hierarchy of formats: large format for history paintings, small format for still-lives.



Félibien argued that the painter should imitate God, whose most perfect work is in man, and show groups of human figures and choose subjects from history and fable. "He must," writes Félibien, "like the historians, represent great events, or like the poets, subjects that will please; and mounting still higher, be skilled to conceal under the veil of fable the virtues of great men, and the most exalted mysteries."



The British painter Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Discourses of the 1770s and 1780s, reiterated the argument for still-life to the lowest position in the hierarchy of genres on the grounds that it interfered with the painter's access to central forms, those products of the mind's generalising powers. At the summit reigned history painting, centred on the human body: familiarity with the forms of the body permitted the mind of the painter, by comparing innumerable instances of the human form, to abstract from it those typical or central features that represented the body's essence or ideal.



Though Reynolds agreed with Félibien about the natural order of the genres; he held that an important work from any genre of painting could be produced under the hand of genius: "Whether it is the human figure, an animal, or even inanimate objects, there is nothing, however unpromising in appearance, but may be raised into dignity, convey sentiment, and produce emotion, in the hands of a painter of genius. What was said of Virgil, that he threw even the dung about the ground with an air of dignity, may be applied to Titian; whatever he touched, however naturally mean, and habitually familiar, by a kind of magic he invested with grandeur and importance."





Though European academies usually strictly insisted on this hierarchy, over their reign, many artists were able to invent new and unique genres which raised the lower subjects to the importance of history painting. Reynolds himself achieved this by inventing the portraiture style that was called the Grand Manner, where he flattered his sitters by likening them to mythological characters. Jean-Antoine Watteau invented a genre that was called *fêtes galantes*, where he would show scenes of courtly amusements taking place in Arcadian setting; these often had a poetic and allegorical quality which were considered to ennoble them. Claude Lorrain practised a genre called the ideal landscape, where a composition would be loosely based on nature and dotted with classical ruins as a setting for a biblical or historical theme. It artfully combined landscape and history painting, thereby legitimising the former. It is synonymous with the term historical landscape which received official recognition in the Académie française when a Prix de Rome for the genre was established in 1817. Finally, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin was able to create still-life paintings that were considered to have the charm and beauty as to be placed along side the best allegorical subjects. However, aware of this hierarchy, Chardin began including figures in his work in about 1730, mainly women and children.



Until the middle of the 19th century, women were largely unable to paint history paintings as they were not allowed to participate in the final process of artistic training--that of life drawing, in order to protect their modesty. They could work from reliefs, prints, casts and from the Old Masters, but not from the nude model. Instead they were encouraged to participate in the lower painting forms such as portraiture, landscape and genre. These were considered more feminine in that they appealed to the eye rather than the mind.



Toward the end of the 19th century, painters and critics began to rebel against the many rules of the Académie française, including the preference for history painting. New artistic movements included the Realists and Impressionists, which each sought to depict the present moment and daily life as observed by the eye, and unattached from historical significance; the Realists often choosing genre painting and still-life, while the Impressionists would most often focus on landscapes. The history painting gained less favor through the vogue in Europe for Japanese culture and art, in the form of Japonism--in Japan significant importance was placed upon items such as laquerware and porcelain.



The paintings are the excellent portrayal of the events and scenes that we see around us. The painters are the best cameras of the world. They reproduce many different types of pictures. They even draw imaginary pictures that do not exist in this world. We tend to use both thinned oil paints and dense oil paints. Masterpieces can be dyed more than once, but each time it may be different from the existing paintings.

