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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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# *On the Apparent Incompatibility of Perceptual and Conventional Accounts of Pictures*

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ABSTRACT. What are pictures? To answer this question, one of the most successful approaches is what has been called the perceptual account. On this approach, pictures are fundamentally characterized by the way they are perceived by subjects. This principle can for example be fleshed out by claiming that pictures foster a specific type of twofold perceptual experience in subjects. By contrast, another type of account, that I shall call conventional account, is somewhat neglected nowadays because it appears as insufficient to distinguish pictures from other kinds of representations. These two types of accounts are often presented as incompatible. However, it is not obvious in what sense they are so. The aim of this paper is thus twofold. Firstly, to precisely identify the differences between the perceptual and the conventional accounts of pictures. Secondly, to suggest that there might still be a role for the conventional account. To provide support for this view, I will show that the perceptual and conventional accounts may not have the same explananda, leaving open the possibility that a theory of depiction integrating both might be built.

## **1. Introduction**

What are pictures? When trying to answer this question, it seems that we have to choose between at least two different kinds of approaches. It is often said that these two approaches are not only different, but also incompatible (Hyman and Bantinaki, 2017).

The first kind of account is perceptual. It has been notably defended in the works of Christopher Peacocke (Peacocke, 1987) and Robert Hopkins (Hopkins, 1995, 2012), among

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others. To be sure, these authors' views are by no means identical and there are many different varieties of perceptual theories. However, it is possible to identify a common thread: a representation is a picture if it can be experienced in a certain way under normal circumstances. The vitality of this idea is attested today by the vast and recent literature on the nature and components of pictorial experience (Ferretti, 2017; Jagnow, forthcoming; Nanay, 2018; Voltolini, 2018).

The other kind of approach is conventional (Hyman and Bantinaki, 2017). This conception has been famously defended by Nelson Goodman (1976). It is more difficult to pinpoint exactly the core principle of this account than for the first one. Let us say for now that its fundamental claim is that one can give a definition of a picture, without making reference to the way pictures are experienced (Kulvicki, 2003).

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I want to precisely identify what the contradiction between these two accounts ultimately boils down to. Secondly, I want to suggest that they may actually not be suited to explain the same cases. To do this, I will be relying on discoveries in developmental psychology that have not been given enough attention by philosophers. If the claim I defend proves to be correct, it leaves open the possibility that the two approaches might not really be incompatible and that a theory of pictures and depiction integrating both might be built.

I shall start by stating the basic sets of principles espoused respectively by the perceptual and conventional accounts of pictures (2). This will allow pointing out the disagreements that separate the two (3). Finally, I will try to show that these accounts are not suited to explain the same explananda (4).

## 2. Perceptual and Conventional Accounts

Let us start with the perceptual account. To be sure, this account does not consist in one totally homogenous theory. It actually comes in different versions. However, my aim is to pinpoint the common thread that lies at the core of these different strands. This common principle is the following: an object  $x$  is a picture if it can be experienced in a certain way. Moreover, this experience must be visual.

One version of the perceptual account is exemplified by Richard Wollheim's position (Wollheim, 1980, 1993, 1998, 2003). He claims that encountering a picture elicits a peculiar

perceptual experience, which he calls twofold. The idea is that perceiving a picture entails two aspects or dimensions. On the first hand, one has an experience of a marked surface located in front of them. On the other hand, one also perceptually experiences a represented scene. Twofoldness entails that pictorial experience has a particular phenomenology that is not shared with other representational experiences.

To account for the twofoldness of the experience of pictures, it is necessary to consider the faculty that Wollheim calls "seeing-in". Seeing-in is the ability to see *y* (what is represented) in *x* (the representation). To say more about what seeing-in actually consists in, Wollheim tries to distinguish it from seeing-as (Wollheim, 1980), which is the capacity to see *x* as *y*. This comparison unveils three characteristics of seeing-in. The first one is that, while we can only see some particular as some other particular, seeing-in extends to both particulars and states of affairs. The second feature which is specific to seeing-in is that it doesn't require localization. What Wollheim means by this is that when I see *x* as *y*, I need to be able to indicate which part of *x* I see as *y*. By contrast, Wollheim claims that there is no such requirement for seeing-in. When I see *y* in *x*, it is not because I see *y* in this or that part of *x*. Finally, and most importantly, seeing-in allows to give attention simultaneously to the features of the representational medium and to what is represented. For Wollheim, this is not true of seeing-as.

I want to address a possible objection, which is that Wollheim is not trying to give a definition for pictures. First of all, to answer this objection, it is sufficient to say that this paper does not purport to be a mere analysis of Wollheim's writings. It is rather concerned with the various answers that can be given to the question of what is a picture. Since the perceptual account, of which Wollheim is seen as the founder, is taken to be a plausible answer to this question (see Hyman and Bantinaki, 2017), it is useful to go back to his description of pictorial experience.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that Wollheim actually intended his account to be definitional. This can be seen if we take a close look at what constitute the requirements for any theory of pictorial representation according to him (Wollheim, 1998, 217).

Requirement 1: If a picture represents something, then there will be a visual experience of that picture that determines it does so.

Requirement 2: If a suitable spectator looks at the picture, he will, other things being equal,

have the appropriate experience.

These requirements specify that a picture that represents something must be capable of eliciting a certain type of visual experience, characterized by twofoldness and seeing-in, from suitable perceiving subjects. At first glance, it may seem like Wollheim is only giving a condition for representational pictures, that is pictures that represent determined referents. Therefore, there could be non-representational pictures and those would be left out of Wollheim's account. However, the most commonly accepted way to separate pictures from other types of representations is the relation between them and their referents (Hyman and Bantinaki, 2017). Pictures are depictive, while words and sentences are descriptive. This way of characterizing pictures makes it difficult to accept that there are pictures that do not represent anything else. If pictures are to be identified by their being depictive representations, then Wollheim's theory should be understood as entailing that every picture has to be able to elicit a twofold experience in suitable spectators.

This kind of analysis has been developed in various ways in the more recent philosophical literature on pictures (Peacocke, 1987; Hopkins, 1995, 2012). In addition, Wollheim's claim that twofoldness is at the heart of pictorial experience and what pictures are is still the backdrop of a significant number of more recent studies (Abell and Bantinaki, 2010; Briscoe, 2016; Hopkins, 2012; Jagnow, forthcoming; Nanay, 2005, 2011, 2015).

I now turn to the conventional account of pictures and try to clarify its basic tenets. To do this, I shall focus on some key ideas put forward by Nelson Goodman and John Kulvicki.

To begin with, both perceptualists and conventionalists agree on at least one thing: pictures form a subclass of representations. They are representations that are in a special kind of relationship with what they represent, namely in a depictive relationship. This raises the question of what makes an object depict something else.

The conventional account differs from the perceptualist in the answer it gives to that question. Nelson Goodman states explicitly that resemblance is neither a sufficient, nor a necessary condition for depiction (Goodman, 1976, p.5). But he even goes one step further and denies the role of resemblance in depiction: he rejects experienced or perceived resemblance as the explanans of the depictive relationship. In fact, this amounts to turning the perceptual explanation upside down, as it is claimed that experienced resemblance is not the cause of depiction but its consequence (Goodman, 1976, p.38).



It is therefore necessary to find another way to explain why an object is seen as depicting another one. The conventionalist answer is that objects are pictures because they are part of a specific representational system, i. e., a depictive representational system.

To make this clear, one needs to define the notions of “representational system” and of “depictive representational system”. It is helpful to use John Kulvicki’s work on representational system, which can be construed as substantiating some of Goodman’s ideas.<sup>3</sup> A representational system is a set of physical objects that count as token representations. These objects are grouped under symbolic types, thanks to a distinction between the objects’ properties that are symbolically relevant and the properties that are not. The token representation’s properties that are symbolically relevant are those on which its symbolic type supervenes. Moreover, a representational system contains certain rules assigning references to symbolic types (Kulvicki, 2014, pp. 92-94).

What then of depictive representational systems? It suffices to say that a depictive representational system is a specific representational system that is different from descriptivist representational systems. Depictive representational systems are those systems that consider relatively more object properties as being symbolically relevant than other representational systems (Kulvicki, 2014, pp. 94-95). Furthermore, in depictive representational systems, subtler differences in relevant properties are sufficient to change a token representation’s symbolic type, whereas, in non-depictive representational systems, differences need to be more important if they are to change the symbolic type of a token representation (Kulvicki, 2014, pp. 96-97).

On a related note, one should be aware of the fact that representation systems are the products of stipulation (Goodman, 1976, p. 40). Therefore, they are conventional, hence the name of the “conventional account”. This means that representational systems may very well, and probably do, vary between different cultures, but also that they have to be learned by each individual.

As indicated earlier, the experience of a resemblance between a picture and its subject is seen by conventionalists as an effect rather than as a cause of depiction. This conclusion follows from the claim that the assignment of a depicted scene to a picture is determined by the picture’s belonging to a depictive representational system. To begin with, experienced

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<sup>3</sup>I should say that I don’t take Kulvicki to be a strict conventionalist.

resemblance is supposed to be a consequence of the specific features of depictive representational systems. Moreover, since this correlation between picture and pictured scenes is understood as conventional, resemblance must depend on how standard and commonplace a certain depictive representational system is to us (Goodman, 1976, pp. 36-39).

### 3. Disagreements between the two Approaches

Now that we have a clearer view of what the perceptual and the conventional approaches amount to, we can ask in what ways these approaches precisely seem to disagree.

The first source of disagreement concerns the type of learning that is necessary in order to see objects as pictures. Proponents of the perceptual account do not deny that some training has to take place before objects can be treated and understood as pictures. As a matter of fact, even plain visual perception does not come fully formed to newborn babies and needs to be developed. The disagreement is therefore on the exact type of training or learning that is necessary and sufficient to view objects as pictures.

The perceptualist claim should be understood as meaning that no specific training is required to see pictures. On the contrary, we rely on faculties that are in no way specific to picture perception to experience a resemblance between some marked surface and an actual perceived scene. The perceptual claim is therefore that the only training required to construe objects as pictures is one that is sufficient to acquire such faculties as normal vision, object recognition and resemblance perception. By contrast, proponents of the conventional conception hold that this is perhaps necessary but not sufficient for picture perception. It is also necessary to learn specific skills regarding the understanding of certain representational systems, and to learn which objects are generally considered to be members of those systems. In sum, the first source of disagreement between perceptualists and conventionalists is on whether developing normal perceptual abilities is sufficient to see pictures or whether learning some specific skills is needed.

The second source of disagreement is suggested by a remark made by Malcolm Budd in “The Look of a Picture” (Budd, 2008). He states that, if a picture resembles two different objects as seen from a certain point of view, we will see it as resembling the object we are familiar with. This goes to show that, according to perceptualists, we need to be perceptually acquainted with an object to perceive a similarity between a picture and the way this object

appears to us in our visual field. It follows that, according to perceptualists, we cannot have a full-blown picture experience if we have absolutely no perceptual acquaintance whatsoever with the represented object.

Notice that one might raise an objection against this characterization of the perceptual account. Indeed, even if I am not perceptually acquainted with the object that is represented in a picture, it does not mean that I cannot see resemblances between parts of this representation and things that I have already perceived. This would be a way to explain how we can see representations of objects we have never perceived as pictures. When I look at a photograph of a Moai statue, I can identify some parts of it: nose, mouth, eyes, human figure, etc. However, this account fails to provide the perceptual theory with an account of the perception of pictures of unknown objects. This is because perceiving a resemblance between some parts of a photograph and a human nose, a human mouth, etc., does not count as an experience of the type that perceptualists have in mind. The experience at hand may be called holistic, in the sense that it implies the recognition of the whole scene depicted on a given surface and not just of some disjointed parts of it. It follows that the mentioned objection is not convincing and that the perceptual account does indeed demand that the represented objects be known beforehand.

By contrast, the conventional account does not place such a restriction and demand that depicted objects be known beforehand. In fact, knowledge of, and familiarity with, a depictive representational system are taken to be sufficient to see an object as a picture, even if its referent is unknown to us. If I see pictures of the surface of Pluto, I can understand them as depicting something, even if I have never been to Pluto and have no previous experience of its landscape. Furthermore, I can interpret those pictures so as to gain information about the surface of Pluto, by distinguishing which of their features tell me something about the depicted scene (colours, shapes, etc.) and which do not (the weight of the picture, its size if I look at it on the Internet, etc.). This distinction is available to me because I am accustomed to using the depictive representational system of colour photography. Thus, the conventional account is more ambitious than the perceptual account on that matter. Indeed, it purports to explain not only how we can see some objects as pictures of things we already know, but also how we can use pictures of unknown objects as a source of information about them.

In sum, proponents of the perceptual and conventional accounts seem to disagree on at least two aspects concerning the definition of pictures. Firstly, they seem to have incompatible views on what kind of training or learning is required to be able to see objects as pictures.

Secondly, they seem to take different positions on the necessity to be perceptually acquainted with the subject of a picture to see it as such.

#### **4. The Compatibility of the two Accounts**

Bearing these differences in mind, I want to suggest that they do not lead to an incompatibility of the two accounts of pictures. The general idea is that they might both be correct and that there is no contradiction between the two because they do not ultimately share the same explananda.

Let us flesh out the idea that both accounts of pictures actually target different explananda. To do this, it is useful to distinguish two different capacities with regard to pictures: picture recognition and picture comprehension. This distinction is borrowed from developmental psychology (DeLoache and Burns, 1994).

Before showing how this distinction helps bridge the gap between the perceptual and the conventional account of pictures, let us briefly describe the empirical results that lead to the distinction. First of all, there is substantial evidence that young infants are sensitive to two-dimensional information and can recognize faces, objects, and abstract patterns in pictures (Barrera and Maurer, 1981; DeLoache, Strauss and Maynard, 1979; Dirks and Gibson, 1977; Rose, 1977). For instance, in DeLoache et al. (1979), 5-month-olds were acquainted with one of two small dolls. Then, the babies were shown either the actual two dolls or pictures of the dolls. The result was that they looked longer at the novel one (whether it was a new doll or a picture of a new doll), indicating that they recognized the picture of the familiar doll. This recognition of pictorial content cannot be attributed to failure to discriminate between two and three-dimensional stimuli. DeLoache et al. showed a doll and a picture of that same doll to a separate group of 5-month-olds in a standard visual preference test. There was no prior familiarization. The real doll was looked at longer than its picture, which indicates that the infants could discriminate between them. Other experiments have also shown that young infants, and even newborns, are able to discriminate between photograph and referent (Slater, Rose, and Morison, 1984). In sum, the main conclusions of studies on young infant's reaction to pictures are the following. (1) The higher-order information that is invariant in two and three-dimensional versions of the same object is picked up by infants. (2) Discrimination between entities and their pictures by infants is reported, showing that depth cues are not ignored.

However, further studies show that the ability to recognize what is pictured and to discriminate between two and three-dimensional objects does not empirically go with the capacity to exploit the symbol-referent relation to form beliefs about reality and guide actions. DeLoache and Burns (DeLoache and Burns, 1994) presented children of varying ages with a picture showing where a toy was hidden in a room. The children were then encouraged to retrieve the toy, which required using the picture as a source of information about the location of the object they were looking for. To succeed in this task, the children first needed to recognize the objects in the picture. At the same time, they also had to understand the relation between the picture and what it depicts. Furthermore, they also needed to be able to use the picture as a guide for action, that is, as a source of information about where they should search in the room. The main result was that children who are younger than 30 months do not use the picture of the room to guide their search efforts. The obvious conclusion that DeLoache and Burns draw from their experiments is that, in spite of infant's ability to recognize depicted objects, young children do not understand the relation between picture and referent. It follows that to know how a picture is related to what it represents or to be able to use pictures as sources of information, recognition of the referent is only the first step.

Those results lead to distinguish between at least two distinct abilities related to perceiving pictures. On the one hand, picture recognition is the ability to identify which object or scene is represented in a picture. Furthermore, it also involves the ability to visually discriminate between objects and their pictures. On the other hand, picture comprehension is the ability to understand the exact relation between a picture and its referent. It is this second capacity that is thought of as paving the way for the possibility to use pictorial information to form beliefs about reality and guide actions.

Once this distinction is clear, we may come to its consequences for the debates about what it is to see an object as a picture. Our hypothesis is that it is picture recognition that is explained by the perceptual account of pictures, while the conventional account is most likely to account for picture comprehension. To be precise, I am not suggesting that pure picture recognition without picture comprehension, such as can be found in children younger than 30 months, could also exist in adults. After this threshold has been crossed, those two faculties always seem to coexist. To make my claim clearer, I should say that it depends on the possibility that picture recognition and picture comprehension constitute different ways to relate to pictures, rather than two distinct faculties, in adults. The idea is that we do not always do the

same thing when we see an object as a picture. In some cases what matters is our recognition of an object as depicting something else, and in others our comprehension of what the picture tells us about its referent. In the first cases, even though we could use pictures to form beliefs about reality and to guide our actions, it is not because of this possibility that we see the objects that afford it as pictures. Rather, we see them as pictures because we experience them as depicting an object or a scene. Therefore, my claim is that seeing an object as a picture can actually indicate two different attitudes towards this object and that each picture account targets a different attitude.

To illustrate this, let us compare two distinct situations. In the first situation, a person sees a picture of an object she has already seen before, for example a photograph of the house she grew up in. In the second situation, the same person is presented with a picture of a previously unknown object, namely a photograph of the surface of Pluto. It is obvious that the first case requires the ability to see a resemblance between what is actually perceived and what is remembered. As a result, the perceptual account provides a satisfactory explanation of how we come to see the photograph as a picture. Indeed, the photograph brings about an experience of the resemblance between a marked surface and a visual memory. This is why the marked surface is seen by the perceiver as depicting her childhood's house. By contrast, the other case does not seem to rely on memory. Indeed, the task consists in interpreting a representation in order to learn about the features of the depicted object. This is obviously a process that is different from comparing visual memories with an actually perceived scene. Therefore, it is not convincing to say that the photograph of Pluto is seen as a picture because of an experience of resemblance between the image and the depicted object. What is crucial in this kind of cases is that knowledge of the norms of pictorial representation allows extracting information about reality from the picture. In other words, it is not thanks to a specific visual experience that the marked surface is seen as an image. Rather, the reason it is seen as such lies in the ability of the perceiver to understand in which representational system the artifact is to be put, namely a pictorial representational system. For example, one needs to know that the photograph is a colour photograph (and not a black and white photograph) to understand whether the picture actually provides information about the actual colours of the surface of Pluto.

To motivate my claim, I would like to make two remarks about the empirical data mentioned previously. To begin with, one should remember that experimental studies show that picture recognition is present in very young infants (Barrera and Maurer, 1981; DeLoache,

Strauss and Maynard, 1979; Dirks and Gibson, 1977; Rose, 1977). Furthermore, psychologists go as far as saying that no specific training is necessary to acquire this faculty. In the words of DeLoache and Burns “No special picture-perception abilities are required to recognize the depicted information, because so much of the invariant information that one can pick up visually from looking at the real  $x$  is also present in the picture of  $x$ ” (DeLoache and Burns, 1994, p. 105). It follows that this faculty satisfies the main condition of the perceptual account, which is that picture experience relies on unspecific perceptual abilities. This motivates the claim that this type of account is more suited to explain picture recognition. On the other hand, picture comprehension develops later on, as it is not found in children under the age of 30 months. This suggests that our general perceptual abilities are not sufficient for this faculty. What more is required? It seems that some kind of specific training related to how pictures should be interpreted is necessary to comprehend them, and not only recognize them. While the precise nature of this training is not entirely clear, it probably entails learning how to use pictorial representational systems to gain information about reality. Therefore, it is the conventional theory that seems more likely to account for this faculty. Indeed, this type of theory postulates that we have to undergo some kind of specific training before we can see objects as pictures and extract information from them. In sum, the perceptual account can be taken to target picture recognition, while the conventional account targets picture comprehension.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to pinpoint the basic tenets of the perceptual and conventional approaches to pictures. Then, I focused on the differences between these two accounts. In spite of these differences, I argued that they do not lead to an incompatibility between the two accounts. I have rather tried to show that they might ultimately have different explananda. On the one hand, the phenomena that perceptualists try to account for are typically cases in which we recognize a present or previously perceived object that is represented in an artifact, which we therefore see as a picture. Studies show that this experience does not rely on learning a specific set of abilities related to pictures; visual perception seems to be sufficient. On the other hand, conventionalists have built a theory that is very useful to tackle the fact that in everyday life, we very often use pictures of objects we have never seen. The reason we take those artifacts

to depict something else is that we have become so familiar with certain depictive representational systems that we almost forget we are using them. Thus, I have shown that those two accounts are not incompatible. This can be considered as a starting point for a syncretic theory of pictures, aiming to explain the vast array of cases in which we call something a picture.

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