

# Nelson Goodman

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# Context of Goodman's Life and Work

## **Nelson Goodman (1906-1998)**

- Anglo-American philosopher in the analytic tradition
- Made contributions in Logic, Philosophy of Science, Metaphysics and Epistemology as well as Aesthetics
- Developed a holistic, nominalist, constructivist, and cognitivist philosophy within which art, as well as science and philosophy, plays a crucial role in our understanding of the world.



# Context of Goodman's Life and Work

## **Nelson Goodman (1906-1998)**

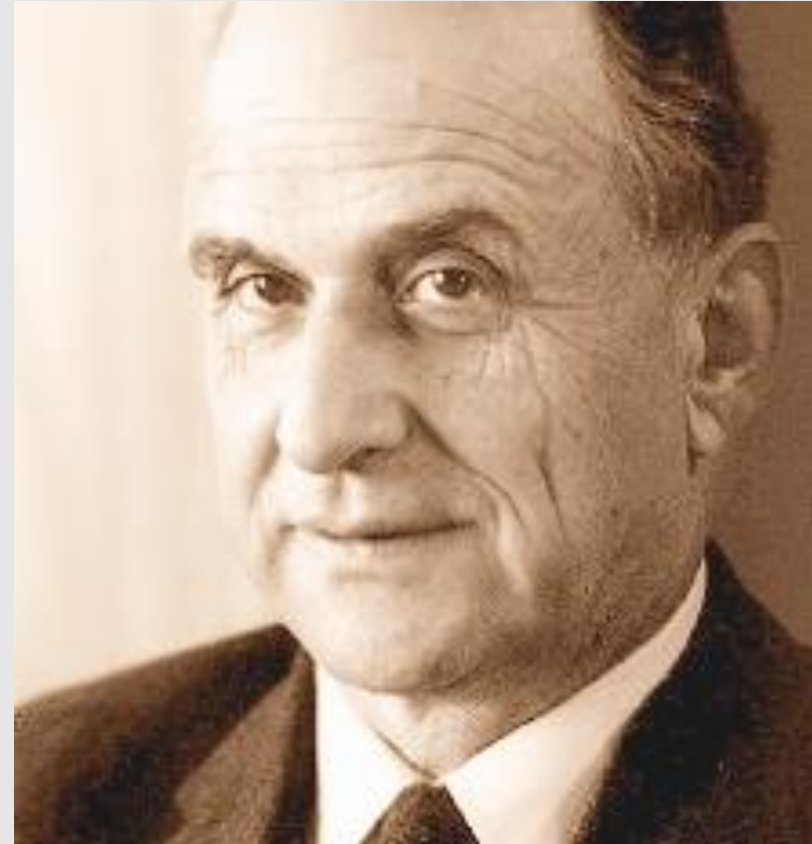
- He studied at Harvard for both his BS and PhD degrees
- And after teaching at numerous Universities, eventually settled at Harvard as a Professor as well.
- While undertaking his PhD studies in philosophy, he directed the Walker-Goodman Art Gallery in Boston.



# Context of Goodman's Life and Work

## Context of the Analytic Tradition

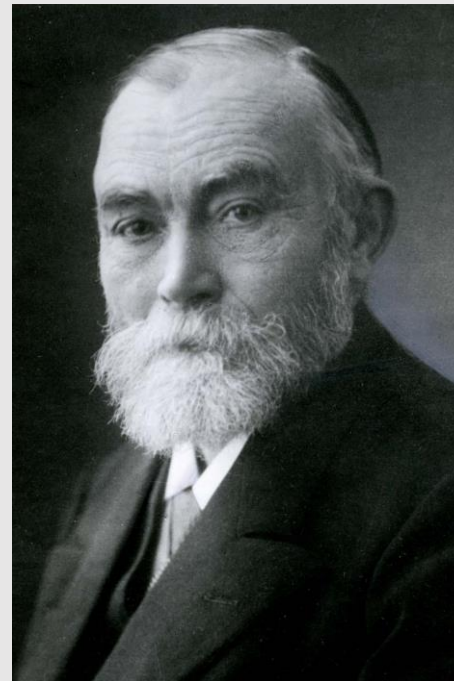
- The Analytic tradition of philosophy began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- It focused (initially) on attempting to clear-up philosophical confusions by logically analyzing concepts down to their simplest forms, so that errors in reasoning would be transparent. This, it was thought, would lead to a method for demonstrating the correctness (or incorrectness) of philosophical theories and give us sure foundations of knowledge.



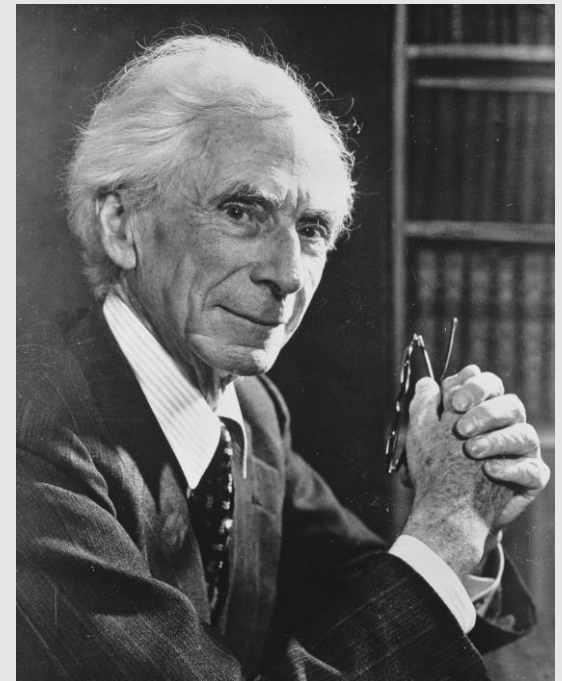
# Context of Goodman's Life and Work

## Context of the Analytic Tradition

- Because of its aims, analytic philosophy (typified in its earliest years by the likes of Gottlob Frege in Germany and Bertrand Russell in the UK) was, from its outset, interested in the development of both formal logical systems as well as the use of language as the medium of thought.
- Much of analytic philosophy before 1945 revolves around philosophical issues surrounding language (both ordinary and logical) and its relationship with knowledge, science, and mathematics.



Gottlob Frege



Bertrand Russell

# Context of Goodman's Life and Work

## Context of the Analytic Tradition

- Thus many analytic philosophers have also made contributions to logic and the foundations of mathematics and science.
- Goodman belongs to a generation of American philosophers (sometimes called 'post-analytic') who, beginning around WWII, started to become critical of the idea that one could achieve the kind of logical and epistemological foundations sought by the early project of analysis.
- Thus many of these philosophers (of which Goodman is probably the most extreme example) started to put their training towards developing anti-foundational accounts of philosophy, and its relationship with science, ethical and political life, and the arts.



# Context of Goodman's Life and Work

## Overview of Goodman's Project in *Languages of Art*

- He develops a general theory of symbols.
- For G. all symbols are related to the function of *reference*.
- Among symbols, three kinds of reference are of chief importance in Goodman's theory:
  - Denotation
  - Exemplification
  - Expression
- Our chapter "Reality Remade" deals with the denotation, and challenges traditional understandings of the process of representation (esp. depiction).



# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Key Ideas

- **Symbol** – Anything that stands for something else and therefore refers to it. Goodman's is a theory of symbols (or 'signs' as they are usually called today rather than 'symbol' which has a more restricted use) that takes its place alongside other theories including those in the European tradition of structuralism: e.g., the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure; as well as the American tradition of pragmatism: e.g., the semiotics of C. S. Peirce.
- **Denotation** – That mode of reference of representation: of depiction and description. Characterized by selective *predication* (i.e. picking out aspects of things that can be labeled).
- **Representation-of and 'Representation-as'** – The idea that that thing denoted can take an indefinite number of guises.
  - "Pictures of so-and-so" vs. "So-and-so-pictures"
    - Winston Churchill as a baby vs. Winston Churchill as a horse



# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Key Theses:

- Artistic representations classify/label the world by virtue of their use, construction, and embeddedness in a system of symbols; through this works of art make sense of the world.
- This process, though it can enlist resemblances, has very little fundamentally to do with the copying or imitation of that which it represents.
- Instead it is in the business of what Goodman calls 'world-making' and has more in common—by analogy—with verbal description than with its resemblance to the world 'outside,' whatever we take that to be.
- This means art has the power to literally shape our realities according to Goodman.

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Against Representation as Resemblance

“The most naïve view of representation might perhaps be summed up somewhat like this: ‘*A* represents *B* if and only if *A* appreciably resembles *B*,’ or ‘*A* represents *B* to the extent that *A* resembles *B*’. Vestiges of this view, with assorted refinements, persist in most writing about representation. Yet more error could hardly be compressed into so short a formula” (LOA, 4)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Representation and Symbolization

“The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance necessary for reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents[...]an object refers to and, more particularly, *denotes* it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance” (5)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Denotation

- Denotation relates to *predication*, even when the symbol system is not a linguistic one.
- In this sense pictorial denotation is thought, in analogy, by G. as a kind of visible, rather than verbal, *description*.

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Representation as Imitation

“ ‘To make a faithful picture, come as close as possible to copying the object just as it is.’ This simple-minded injunction baffles me; for the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool, and much more. If none of these constitute the object as it is, what else might? If all are ways the object is, then none is *the* way the object is.” (6)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Representation as Imitation

“...[T]he object is to be copied as seen under aseptic conditions by the free and innocent eye. / The catch here...is that there is no innocent eye. The eye comes always ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart, and brain... Not only *how* but *what* it sees is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs.” (7-8, my emph.)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Argument Against Perspective

“The basic trouble is that the specified conditions of observation [for pictorial perspective] are grossly abnormal. What can be the ground for taking the matching of light rays delivered under such extraordinary conditions as a measure of fidelity? Under no more artificial conditions...a picture far out of perspective could also be made to yield the same pattern of light rays as the object” (13)

- Example: Kaleidoscope

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Argument Against Perspective

“Rather, the artist’s task in representing an object before him [sic.] is to decide what light rays, under gallery conditions will succeed in rendering what he [sic.] sees. This is not a matter of copying but of *conveying*. It is more a matter of ‘catching a likeness’ than of duplicating—in the sense that a likeness lost in a photograph may be caught in a caricature.” (14, my emph.)



# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Pictures as Sortals/Representing as Sorting

- How are we to understanding representation, when there can be representations of things that don't even exist, such as fictions?
  - Goodman thinks that representation, at bottom, is a form of classification, and that without making this clear, the function and usefulness of representation remains mysterious.
  - We can use these pictures and apply labels to them even when we do not understand that which the picture is sorting in advance (e.g. unicorns).

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Pictures as Sortals/Representing as Sorting

“All that matters here, I repeat, is that pictures are indeed sorted with varying degrees of ease into man-pictures, unicorn-pictures, Pickwick-pictures, winged-horse-pictures, etc. just as pieces of furniture are sorted into desks, tables, chairs, etc.” (24)

“Understanding a term is not a precondition, and may often be the result, of learning how to apply the term and its compounds.” (25)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## **Fictions against *Mimesis***

“...[W]here a representation does not represent anything there can be no question of its resemblance to what it represents” (25)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Representations-Of and 'Representations-As'/ Pictures of So-And-So and So-And-So-Pictures

“If I tell you I have a picture of a certain black horse, and then I produce a snapshot in which he [sic.] has come out a light speck in the distance, you can hardly convict me of lying; but you may well feel that I mislead you. You understandably took me to mean a picture of the black horse *as such*; and you therefore expected the picture not only to denote the horse in question but to be a black-horse-picture. Not inconceivably, saying a picture represents the black horse might on other occasions mean that it represents the horse as black (i.e., that it is a black-thing-picture denoting the horse) or that it represents the black thing in question as a horse (i.e., that it is a horse-picture denoting a black thing).” (29, my emph.)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Representations-Of and 'Representations-As'/ Pictures of So-And-So and So-And-So-Pictures

“Thus with a picture, as with any other label, there are always two questions: what it represents...and the sort of representation... it is. The first question asks what objects, if any, it applies to as a label; and the second asks about which among certain labels apply to it.” (31)

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## Constructivism of Representation

“If representing is a matter of classifying objects rather than imitating them, of characterizing rather than copying, it is not a matter of passive reporting...To admit all classifications on equal footing amounts to making no classification at all. Classification involves preferment; and application of a label...as often *effects* as it records a classification. The ‘natural’ kinds are simply those we are in the habit of picking out for and by labeling. Moreover, the object itself is not ready-made but results from a way of taking the world. The making of a picture commonly participates in making what is to be pictured” (31-32)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## Constructivism of Representation

“To the complaint that his portrait of Gertrude Stein did not look like her, Picasso is said to have answered, ‘No matter; it will’. / In sum, effective representation and description require invention. They are creative... That nature imitates art is too timid a dictum. Nature is a product of art and discourse.” (33)

# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## What counts for 'Realism'?

“Just here, I think, lies the touchstone of realism: not the quantity of information but in how easily it issues.... Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time....[READ ELLIPSIS] This relativity is obscured by our tendency to omit specifying a frame of reference when it is our own, “Realism” thus often comes to be used as the name for a particular style or system of representation. Just as on this planet we usually think of objects as fixed if they are at a constant position in relation to the earth, so in this period and place we usually think of paintings as literal or realistic if they are in a traditional European style of representation.” (37)

“Realistic representation, in brief, depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation” (38)



# Reading Goodman's "Reality Remade" in *The Languages of Art*

## What counts for 'Realism'?

“Representational customs, which govern realism, also tend to generate resemblance. That a picture looks like nature often means only that it looks the way nature is usually painted.” (39)