

## **A New Gaze: How Photographic Reproductions Change the Way We Appreciate Artworks**

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*1. We have become accustomed to appreciating paintings and drawings through photographs in art history books or museum websites. How is the appreciation of a photographic reproduction different from the appreciation of the original? What is lost (if anything), and what is gained (if anything)? Finally, did photographic reproductions change our relation to the original artwork, and if so, how?*

We often fail to realize that photography was merely invented around 200 years ago, and it's hard for us to imagine living in an era in which appreciating paintings through photographs is not available. The invention of photography has completely changed the way we appreciate paintings, for we don't need to travel a long distance merely to have a glance at a certain painting to have a precise perception of it anymore, as what artists had been doing for thousands of years before photography was invented. Photographic reproductions provide us with a totally different perspective when we see the paintings through camera lens, a new gaze towards artworks. In this essay, a series of questions regarding the appreciation of a photographic reproduction will be discussed, including how it is different from the appreciation of the original, things gained and lost as a result of it, and how it changed our relation to the original work.

The appreciation of a photographic reproduction is different from that of the original mainly in three aspects. First, different amount of information is able to be acquired. Abundant details of the original are lost when we appreciate a painting through photographs, such as the brushwork, the texture of the canvas and the pigment thickness. When we appreciate the original in art museums, we can take a closer look at the painting to figure out how each stroke is drawn,

but it's generally impossible to do so via photographs, for such high resolution is usually too difficult to obtain. Take Mondrian's *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow* as an example. It seems that it can be easily painted using Photoshop or something if you just google it and appreciate it on your computer screen. It's most likely that only when facing the original can we notice that Mondrian has tried to paint those lines and color blocks with different brushwork and even with different pigment thickness to reach perfection. And it's also hard to fully avoid the color difference between the original and its photographic replica, making the appreciation through photographs not so reliable. These technical obstacles result in a loss in details when appreciating an artwork through its photographic reproduction. Second, the perspective we can adopt to appreciate an artwork is different. When we appreciate the original in the art museum, we are free to select the perspective we see the painting. We can walk from side to side, choose an appropriate distance and angle, and there are few limitations. But things are completely different when looking at a photograph since the perspective has been predetermined by the photographer. The appreciation of a photographic reproduction instead of the original eliminates the possibility of various perspectives, which is definitely a loss in the artwork's value. Third, people hold different attitude towards the photographic reproduction and the original. As Freeland said, "...the aura of major artworks from the past has not really disappeared, despite ever more vivid technologies of reproduction...people do still make a pilgrimage to see Leonardo's original painting in the Louvre, and the feeling of awe is almost religious." (Freeland, 2001) The "substantive duration and its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin, 1936) of the original still attracts people from all over the world to gather together to see it in person, even though the image of the painting itself can be easily acquired on the Internet. The history tied to the original makes it irreplaceable, and people take the artwork much more

seriously when appreciating the original, paying more attention to the details that are frequently ignored when simply looking at a photographic replica. Take my own experience as an example. A few seconds of appreciation of the photographic reproduction is usually enough for me when I'm trying to gain a basic understanding of an artwork, which is obviously not enough at all, but I will probably spend hours in front of the original observing. People's attitudes are absolutely different when presented the photographic replica and the original.

As is stated above, when appreciating a photographic reproduction instead of the original, various detailed information about the artwork is lost, together with the freedom to choose our own perspective. But is there anything gained in this process? To answer this question, we have to take a close look at how photographic reproductions change our relation to the original.

First, the advance in photography and the birth of the Internet makes it unprecedentedly easy for ordinary people to approach the classic paintings, and the sanctity of the original artwork is partly deconstructed as a result. As is said by Benjamin, "...that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (Benjamin, 1936), photographic reproduction of the artwork eliminates the so-called "worship value" of the original to some extent, and breaks the monopoly of art in the past that only few rich or noble people have access to the original artwork. And some artists are also consciously trying to eliminate the aura of the original. Andy Warhol, significant American pop artist, intentionally created a series of paintings to be replicated and spread among the public in 1960s. The value of his artwork such as his well-known *Marilyn Diptych* precisely lies in the process of its widely replicated which displays an anti-traditional attitude rather than the artwork itself, and the aura of the original is deliberately deconstructed by the author. In other words, new value is given to these artworks for their reproducibility.

Second, the wide-spread photographic reproduction of the paintings forms brand-new context of the original artwork. Extensive accurate reproduction of the original promotes the emergence of diverse interpretations in different cultural backgrounds, which has greatly enriched the meaning of the work, weakening the significance of the original to some extent considering that the artwork is adequately shared worldwide. Traditional artwork has been given new meanings in the process of its wide spread owing to the photographic reproduction.

Now we can go back to answer the previous question. Though much is lost when appreciating paintings through photographs, it has positive significance in art history in a sense because it provides us with a completely different perspective towards the artworks. When we gaze the paintings through the camera lens of another person, modernity is given to this traditional genre of art.