

Chapter 3

Painting, Photography and Reproductions

But all the excuses for art are flimsy and fade; what endures is the art itself, the paint keeping intact whatever hope or intention worked for that perilous moment.

John Updike

Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image.

Susan Sontag

1.

Painting is, in part, a technology, one produced by the human “machine” of the embodied mind. It maintains a superior position within the visual arts because Painting allows the greatest nuance in representing both visible and imagined worlds. The most subtle variations in color, brush stroke, edge quality or shape can pull a painted image into greater resemblance—even enhancement—of the original or, more easily, lose whatever hold had existed. Like life, like dreaming, the moment-to-moment within making a painting is a jeopardy: conditional and transitional, but, under trained hands, also mostly redeemable. Once finished, however, the fix of the image locates a painting’s value; it offers stability in the face of time’s adamant changes, reminding of what was, but may no longer be: youth, position, a particular experience—individual or shared.

Photography is, at its essence, a technology. A mechanical eye and chemical magic, it smoothes the grit and eliminates the odor of nature. Perfectly. Again and again and again. In contrast to

painting's extensive materiality¹, the *it* of photography barely exists: light bounced intricately off objects and atmospheres, captured first onto emulsion coated glass, or film; then, through these results, onto another emulsion coated surface. Digital photography increases this magic, as the camera captures light that remains even more fluidly malleable within photographic computer programs. Photography is only image, but, Oh! What an image!

New approaches don't necessarily improve on the results that older ones offered. Scientific and mechanical inventions that advance a prior manual process may increase technological speed or ease of production, may even facilitate previously unattainable understandings of our worlds, but valuable qualities accessed through a more immediate experience are often absent from the updated product. Still, usually, eventually, we embrace the *new*, the improved way. Sometimes it's an alternative whose ease makes it preferable, other times it completely eliminates the prior practice. References to the death of Painting appear throughout its long history, in most cases when stylistic conventions—once fresh, persuasive—turn brittle and ineffective with overuse. But soon—whether in response or by coincidence—a different perspective is put forth, or a color usage, or a new means of addressing spatial illusion or volume appears. Painting becomes vital yet again.

Over the last 150 years or more, Painting's death has been attributed primarily to Photography—and, more and more, its motion derivations: Film and Video. Early Photography didn't challenge the grace or metaphors of Painting; instead it offered the resultant fixed image without requiring equivalent time for either the learning or production. Further, the image that photographs produce *is* what is seen: "literally, a trace of something

¹ Discussed in detail in the *Gathering* section of this book

brought before the lens"². Thus, Photography presented more *truth* than Painting, even when its translations were chromatically limited and unnatural.

Popular understandings of photography throughout its existence perpetuate the embrace of this *image verité* even as Photography's appearances shift in response to further technological advances, and stylistic and cultural impositions influence its perception. But the challenges Photography holds for Painting's viability as a contemporary artistic practice have never derived from ordinary people. Rather it has been theorists proclaiming usurpation. These theorists—usually, not being practitioners of either form—are limited to only an intellectual understanding and thus are more likely to be less materially astute.

Much is often overlooked in contemporary arguments pitting Photography against Painting. As Photography delivered painting from the absolutism of *the real*, Science contributed to advancements in what painters could explore—more varied color, portability (via tube paints) for painting on site, views of the microscopic and images of people, places and things quite distant from the painter's location. However, the practices of painters—past and present—influence the primary advances available for the *visual* products of photography.³ While Science offers Photography increasingly better optics, more portable machines, more sensitive films and, of late, digital imagery and its computerized manipulations, Painting continually challenges the camera's single point of view and limited focal distinctions. Painting has greater flexibility for compositional variation, while also maintaining provenance over images of what cannot otherwise be seen, or can only be imagined.

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* p 24

³ As Lewis Mumford noted in his essay "The Metropolitan Milieu," one stellar exception is found in Albert Stieglitz's "part-by-part revelation of a woman's body." These photographs framed figural form as no fully realized painting yet and "achieved the exact report of the hand or the face as it travels over the body of the beloved."

Since both Painting and Photography are two-dimensional visual forms, they share much visual language. In times when efficiency, speed and explicitness are valued above nuance, suggestion and intricately skilled effort, Photography and its relatives may appear as usurpers of Painting's historically held cultural position. However, since Painting and Photography each answer quite different human needs, my bet is that in the long run they will be understood as partners, with differing strengths and challenges, not requiring mutual exclusivity.

Therefore rather than causing a death, Photography released Painting from its service as historical documentarian; from the cultural need for Painting to re-present observed or idealized nature. Thus liberated, Painting sprinted past conventions held hundreds of years and in the ensuing time since, painters have expanded and condensed just about every physical and conceptual aspect imaginable, offering visual truths Photography can never appropriate because they only result from humanly directed physical material.⁴

2.

A painting exists uniquely, always in one specific location at any given moment and so limits its audience. Most often, painters seeking connection with other painters console themselves about the distance between by looking at photographic reproductions. The practice of making reproductions of paintings begins with the study of painting and matures through the copies historical apprentices produced toward developing skills required by their master artist. The more adept of these reproductions, like the miniature portraits that traveled from court to court to entice a marriage contract between royals, might be carried from one location to

⁴ Photography can explore the realm of abstraction—and some photographers have constructed dimensional forms using photographic images—but the scientific developments in photography have been aimed at the increasingly ephemeral, primarily because it is that arena in which it is most uniquely effective.

another as an acknowledged copy toward attracting attention to a particular painter's achievements, suggesting potential contributions to a royal court or papal post. Printed reproductions eventually carried the images of otherwise unattainable paintings beyond the wealthy patrons to merchants and then to workers. These facsimiles expanded image access continually—both as increasingly less expensive and more easily distributable print methods evolved, and as education and travel became more broadly accessible. Where commercial values of original art are high, reproductions cost considerably less. As with fine jewels or the Constitution of the United States, a fine replica may even replace the public face of an original while it is kept safely locked away.

Early in modern times, when printmaking took over this broadcasting task, engraving, then intaglio, then lithography, each initially offered images announcing what painters or sculptors in Italy had accomplished, for example, to those in Belgium or England and vice versa. Each print method devised is less difficult to master, as each set of materials and skills move closer to the most immediate art of Drawing, though all rely on hard won manual and perceptual skills. Limited to blacks or browns and the white offered by paper tones until the latter part of the 19th century, limited in size due to conceptual understandings and practicalities of their purposes, printed copies were easily understood as imitations that would never offer the experience of the original. Print reproductions served primarily to suggest the value of traveling to see the original, or, if able, to pay for its traveling to be seen.

Photography—a mostly chemical process quite unique from manual printmaking—gained cultural value from its similar production of identical multiples. Its verisimilitude advanced Photography past previous facsimile methods as the most effective courier of the image of other arts. Through its compatible interface with many established printmaking methods,

Photography radically altered trans-cultural accessibility and induced an accepted equivalency between *original* and *reproduction* through its unarguable accuracy in capturing *image*. The presence of photo-reproductions developed a market whose existence consequently increased the value of the original. But more insidiously, the same process mandated a priority reading of the surface image, deleting from consideration and removing from consciousness the diverse materiality of the original works.⁵

3.

As with any reproduction of Painting, a photographic reproduction diminishes the original object's aesthetic and material power. For over fifty years, most initial encounters with important and/or famous works were through magazines, books, projected slides, and, more recently, on a computer monitor. Through reduced or enlarged size and the color alterations imposed by varied films, camera types, printing processes, projectors and computer screens, each media distances the original differently, but all distort our perceptual relationship with the work.

Two-dimensional media suffer the effects of reproductive viewing more than do Sculpture or Architecture precisely because there is less of a shift in the actual volume of original and copy. While we recognize that Sculpture, Installation or Architecture can be only provisionally conveyed, the similarities that Painting and Photography share, along with the illusion of photographic truth, compel a kind of primal acceptance of the reproduced painting as we see first see it, imprinting upon memory and imagination only its image. Thus, while our awe in physically experiencing a cathedral or standing in the presence of Michelangelo's *David*

⁵ While photographs of photographs as printed in books and magazines are also a reduction of the experience to be had from the original, the distortion is considerably less.

increases over our experience of its image, disappointment is often expressed when face to face with a similarly notorious painting. Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, for example, continually yields responses like: *Oh! It's so much smaller, more drab, less clear, than I imagined from the photographs!*

But imagine if this weren't so. Imagine a scenario that brought people living in photography-dominated times to real paintings before they ever saw extensive reproductions. This was the vision of a Philadelphia man named Albert Barnes. Born working-class in 1872, he became wealthy beyond anticipation after prodding a group of chemists toward discovering the compound he patented as the anti-infective Argyrol⁶. With the money the medicine eventually yielded, Barnes began collecting Art and much of what he collected was the new modern stuff that the establishment still rebuffed. At the same time he gathered Pennsylvania Dutch tools, barn ornaments and furniture along with pre-Columbian and African objects whose approaches to human forms were not dissimilar to those of Modern painters.

A devotee of educator-philosopher John Dewey, Barnes experienced threads of connection expressed visually across cultures and classifications, and determined to house his collections making these apparent to anyone seeing them. Housed in the Philadelphia suburb of Marion, the collection's varied teaching galleries organized multiple works on and along three adjacent walls, evocative of the three sections of a Christian altarpiece. But instead of religious images detailing the life of Christ or other Biblical episodes, Barnes' altars demonstrated aesthetic principles. Further, in opposition to prevailing museum trends, no labels offered intellectual entry to what was viewed. No photographs carried the collection beyond its walls.

⁶ Coincidental to Barnes ideas about visual art, Argyrol's primary use was in the eyes of newborns toward preventing blindness.

Initially only Barnes' students viewed the work. Blue-collar workers and young college students committed to attending weekly lecture/discussions at the suburban Philadelphia estate for a nominal annual fee. Initially the weekly observation session took place in a different gallery with the lecture focused on how the art, ornaments and furniture reflected its specific aesthetic principle. More advanced classes, like those taught briefly by British philosopher Bertrand Russell, soon followed these, and eventually, to compensate a much needed tax break, a limited number of public viewers could tour the galleries on weekends.

I first encountered this amazing collection at the invitation of my high school art teacher, who hoped, she later confessed, that I would *discover* Matisse and realize the superiority of his paintings over those of Picasso. I did—or at least, I began to—although on that Saturday morning we wandered the galleries separately and without talking; she told me nothing about Barnes or his ideas. And while there were many visits over many years before I awoke to Barnes' purposefulness, from the first these visual conversations he arranged compelled my attention differently than had most other exhibitions. What came closest were the mysteries offered by an entire room from an Indian temple, a medieval cloister yard, a compound of Japanese houses: all situated within the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The encompassing context of these spaces resonated more deeply than the PMA's other galleries' walls, traditionally strung—painting after painting—in linear progression through art's history or within a single artist's career.

From the perspective of the Philadelphia art establishment—those at prestigious museums and universities—Barnes was an inappropriate curator whose ideas held important art works away from *more deserving*—read *better educated*—eyes. Theirs. After his death, his designated executrix carried on the foundation's mission, but with her death in 1987, the frames Barnes

placed around his ideas and the collection that evidenced them began cracking under public and legal pressure. Many of Barnes' paintings by Matisse, Picasso, Renoir and others have now traveled the world; much of the collection's recent color documentation constitute a glossily photographed catalogue and provide the requisite postcards that subliminally advertise the collection. Preparations are underway toward relocating the works—hopefully within original contextual arrangements—to a new building on Ben Franklin Parkway, to be more easily visited along with the Rodin Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The number of art historians, educators and critics who anticipate that books, slides and the internet serve the culture well as seductive messengers, or as a means of extending an object's commercial value, far exceed those who comprehend the negative influence photographic reproduction exerts on visual art encounters. Equally pervasive, the teaching of introductory levels of art history and visual art appreciation through slides and textbook images alone, precluding actual engagement with comparably important works, remains the norm. There is a practicality to these attitudes: physical access to great art works is rarely possible within a fifty-minute class meeting. But these practices jointly contribute to dulling generations of perceptual sensitivities, tendering the actual world as one made real only through its photographic reproduction.