



# ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.1, No.3 & No.4 Jul.-Sep., Oct.-Dec., 2023

## Confusion of Images: Talking about the Realistic Painting of Photos and Photographic Painting

Guo Wenning

**To cite this article:** Guo Wenning, “Confusion of Images: Talking about the Realistic Painting of Photos and Photographic Painting,” *Art Frontier* 1, no.1 (January 2023): 65-70, <https://doi.org/10.64212/RVLX6412>.

**DOI:** 10.64212/RVLX6412

**ISSN:** 2835-5490

**EISSN:** 2836-841X

© 2023 Frontier Press.

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

**Website:** [www.artfrontier.org](http://www.artfrontier.org)

**Email:** [artfrontier2023@outlook.com](mailto:artfrontier2023@outlook.com)

**Publishing Frequency:** Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



# Confusion of Images: Talking About the Realistic Painting of Photos and Photographic Painting

---

Guo Wenning

## Abstract

Chinese and Western painting have different concepts and methods. As far as realistic painting is concerned, in today's information age, when facing the vast number of images that exist, we encounter confusion about these readily available images. This article discusses the problem of images from two aspects: the trouble of the photograph in realistic painting and how images are converted into paintings with exploration of the differences between Chinese and Western realistic paintings, and the issues of using photos as creative materials for paintings.

## Key Words

Image, photograph, appropriation, realistic painting, schema

Before Impressionism, western painting had developed along the “truth” close to vision under the guidance of science and rationality, although this truth was influenced by regions, nations, religions, cultures, and aesthetic tastes in different periods. Styles varied, but the basic artistic rules were there to follow. Among those, sketching is one of the most important means of Western realistic painting. Outstanding artists always refine and generalize through the study of human characters and the laws of the nature so as to make the artwork conform to the aesthetic taste of a certain era and nationality, and transform natural objects into works of art with stronger visual appeal. Although Chinese traditional painting did not develop in the vein of Western realistic painting, its research and understanding of natural objects has a unique artistic system and characteristics of continuity. Chinese painting pays attention to the artistic concept of learning from nature and the unity of nature and man. Through deep observation of natural objects, the details of the surface are removed to grasp the painting elements that can best reflect the natural images. A comprehensive set of observational and thinking systems for the creation of Chinese painting were formed through integration and rearrangement of the picture's image. Chinese traditional painting has

always used unique ink tools and paper materials to incorporate calligraphy into painting, writing its grand idea, expressing its spirit, transpiring its spiritual mood, and expressing its artistry and rhyme, which gradually distanced itself from the real and objective nature of the subject. As the Master Qi Baishi said, “the beauty lies in the difference between depictions of real and unreal”, and freehand brush-painting has also become the core aesthetic concept of traditional Chinese painting. Both Western realism and Chinese freehand brushwork are inseparable from the observation of nature, and learning from nature is an artistic rule that both Chinese and Western painting respect. However, the emergence of photography has made it easier and quicker to obtain images and this invention has rewritten the history of art, while the flood of images in the information age has also caused many artists to fall into confusion about images.

## 1. The Troubles With Photographs and Realistic Painting

For realistic painting, photographs undoubtedly replaced the long-time use of models to a certain extent, while

it made it easier to depict details. It was the promotion of photography that drove realism and the subsequent naturalistic painting movement that swept Europe and led to the neoclassical artistic achievements that bloomed to their final glory in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Concurrent with photography's emergence, Western realistic painting represented by neoclassicism finally came to an end, and Impressionism and its subsequent modernist painting style subsequently came onstage in art history. The emergence of Impressionism is not so much the result of the impact of technology on painting, but a new way that Impressionist painters found to distinguish it from photos. The development of modern Western art history was also evolving in this stream, and various genres of post-impressionism modernism emerged. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, realistic painting has declined day by day, while young artists increasingly create contemporary art that focuses on the humanistic atmosphere, personal feelings, and the latest social news.

Realistic painting, which has declined in the West, finally found the soil in which to continue to grow in China, which was determined by China's special conditions at that time. When the contemporary painting was developing rapidly in the West, China was in a time of "saving the nation and trying to survive". The realism advocated by Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Xu Beihong and others was not only an effective way to reform Chinese painting that was nearing exhaustion, but also became a powerful weapon for anti-Japanese propaganda at that time. Obviously, the development of modern Chinese art is not in sync with that of Western painting. When the curtain dropped on Western academicism and classicism after hundreds of years of prevalence, the Chinese had just started taking lessons in Western realistic painting. Since it was difficult to see the original works of Western realistic painting, various misunderstandings of the realistic painting by the Chinese occurred during this period. After China's reform and opening up in the 1980s, Chinese modern painting ushered in new opportunities for development, and realistic painting also entered into new development when artists were no longer limited to superficial imitation but were also able to pay more attention to the research of realistic techniques, forming a wave of realism in today's mainstream art circles. However, in the face of the rapid development of information technology such as digital technology and virtual images, the channels for obtaining images are becoming more and more convenient. On the issue of how to treat images, how to use images, and how to avoid the "photographic" in paintings, there are different viewpoints from all sides with various views and opinions.

Many old gentlemen from fine arts institutions

particularly object to painting derived from photos, and many experts in the industry also have criticisms. Traditional painting is indeed a skill, and it has elements of art, but it is based on the so-called "artistic skill". To achieve proficiency in the technique, long-term training is required. Just as Rodin said: "No moment of inspiration can replace long hours of work which is necessary to make the heart and hand each other!"<sup>1</sup> Ancient artists realized that it took long-term training to achieve eye-hand coordination and that copying and sketching are essential methods to learn painting skills. Only through sketching can one truly understand the artistic laws of the human body and nature, so it has also become the only access for learning arts. To trace the root of the problem to the iconoclastic Jeremiah of image is not the answer, nor is iconoclastic renovation the basis for aesthetic purity or ideological critique. What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the impact of images for good and evil, capable of distinguishing between their varied usages and historical specificities.<sup>2</sup> It is true that nowadays you can freeze an image by clicking on a mobile phone, which brings much convenience to painting, especially realistic painting which requires depiction of details. The information provided by the image is far greater than what our naked eyes can see and even confuses the difference between photograph and paintings; it limits visual discrimination. Many painters can obtain a great deal of image data without leaving home, subsequently a large number of so-called realist painters have emerged. Their works are as detailed as photos, and even confuse the boundaries between photos and paintings. If it is a super-realistic painting there is nothing wrong with it, such as Leng Jun's super-realistic works *The Design of the Mona Lisa* and *Xiao Tang*, which really pushed the realistic skills and details to an extreme. However, to claim it as neoclassical or new realism is unsatisfactory, which is an important reason why China's realistic painting is criticized by the industry. Photography has therefore become the biggest problem for realistic painting creation in the age of picture reading. Art creation is different from the accurate depiction of nature—it is not to copy nature mechanically, but rather to see and understand nature through an artist's unique perspectives. Even hyperrealist paintings and photorealistic paintings are the result of the artists' active selection on the basis of sublation.

Paintings are always presented to the viewers in the form of traces, just as Alika believed that photographs have a negative effect on painting. He believed that a simple photograph is a harmful shortcut. It is just a copy of an image on photosensitive film; without the psychological vibrations of an artist's hand,

the photo is just a reflection, not a hand-painted trace.

## 2. How to Convert a Photographic Image Into a Painting

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the rapid development of science and technology makes us more and more closely connected with modern technology, and no one can avoid it. Naturally, whether or not photos can be used to draw pictures from cannot be generalized. Drawing from photos cannot replace sketching from nature, but many people overlook one point: painting has always been inseparable from the most advanced technology. In the ancient Greek period, it was believed that a certain proportional relationship would produce mathematical aesthetics, such as Pythagoras' golden ratio method. That latest scientific discovery was applied to sculpture, making ancient Greek sculpture a model of ideal beauty and classicist aesthetic standards. During the Renaissance, many painters used the latest knowledge of anatomy in order to express their cognition more accurately; Da Vinci even dissected more than a dozen corpses to obtain an accurate understanding of human anatomy. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Caravaggio and Vermeer used the most advanced pinhole imaging technology at that time to project the object to be depicted onto the canvas to obtain accurate body proportions and perspective.

In today's image age, it is understandable that we use a lot of photos, but the problem is that we must make a distinction between using photos and copying photos. Since the invention of photography many painters have used photos, including the Realist master Courbet; the female body in his *Studio* and the characters in *The Funeral of Aonan* refer to photos. Impressionist painter Degas' *The Bathing Girl* and many of his dance scenes also refer to photos, but their paintings are still mainly sketches, and the photos are only references for painting. Bacon's paintings completely use photos, but his works are quite different from the photos. It can be seen from the above examples that the problem of today's realistic painting is not the fault of photos, but that many painters made mistakes when using photos. Whether we want the painting to be more like a photo, or whether we want to paint a photo more like a painting, this is the root of the question. If the portrait is a photo, then the problem becomes simple; if the photo is like a painting, it is not an easy task. There must be a complex conversion system to convert photos into paintings. This system requires personalized painting language, distinctive aesthetic taste, outstanding artistic character, and superb skills to express personal emotions freely. Each work can be more like a painting. The observation of the objective world in painting is not a detailed list but a kind of visual restraint. Many artists misunderstood Plato and Arist-

otle's mirror theory and the reproduction theory of Western realistic painting, confusing science with vision. This is why many artists fell into the passive copying of images and claimed that "what you draw is what you see". Artists must limit themselves to a certain technique, space, and time when painting, and must choose the most characteristic information while ignoring the information of its appearance. "Seeing with one's own eyes" is precisely the fundamental reason why painting is reduced to image. A work of art is not an accurate presentation of the objective world, nor is it a transmission of knowledge, but rather a "silent experience of the ineffable", that is, the transmission of the artist's emotions.

Photographs are fundamentally different from paintings. Photographs present the result of vision, while painting contains vision itself, that is, the way and process of seeing that is the question of how to see. The information presented to the viewer by the photo is not actively selected, but listed objectively, that is to say, the photo contains a lot of objective information, while the painting is limited to the objective information and it is only limited to expressing what it thinks best embodies its essence information. What the artist pursues is not the amount of information itself, nor can he surpass his technical means to list information without limit. In realistic painting, the experience of sketching comes first. Through sketching, we can observe objects, summarize and refine them, remove the false and keep the real, and then transform the reality in the eyes into the reality of the picture. This is an interactive mechanism between people and objective images, and it is also a complex conversion process. In the process of using photos, the artist should transfer the experience of sketching from life, and constantly match his own experience of sketching while using photo materials, while at the same time taking care of the artistic and language styles of the whole picture so as to make an objective object where photos are transformed into works of art with strong appeal and unique pictorial language.

Art creation is always a process of trial and error and making mistakes. Trial and error are to make the picture reach the established goal in our hearts continuously, absolutely accurate—even the masters are like this. The artist always corrects the picture according to the established pattern in the painting process to achieve the expected effect. This is a process of continuous trial and error. Making mistakes refers to the accidental nature of painting. In the process of painting, if a certain stroke fails to meet our expectations but produces another unpredictable effect, and this effect just inspires the artist's artistic inspiration, he will follow this stroke to change the final direction of the picture so that the work will produce a creative breakthrough on the basis of established expectations. This kind of painting is the source of inspiration that stimulates the artist's artistic creativity, and it is also the most charming element of

painting. However, if faced with the mechanical tracing of photos without refinement and generalization, and completely relying on the objective materials provided by photos, it will inevitably lead to photo-like images and, of course, we will not be able to appreciate the mystery of this at all. The ultimate goal of art is to convey emotions through works of art, “the main point is to move, to love, to hope, to tremble, and to live.”<sup>3</sup> Life is the source of painting, but painting is not equal to objective life itself; poor artists just passively describe the photo, and the final photo-effect weakens the expressive power of the painting and presents only a reproduction of the photo. It is true that good photos can stimulate our desire to paint. Sometimes we look through excellent photography works—the rich colors and the use of light make the photos have the quality of oil paintings. What kind of photos to choose for painting are a test of one’s aesthetic taste and artistic character. Good photos can be used, and even a photo-like effect can be achieved. In this sense, the use of photos is also a choice of artistic taste because the choice can better reflect the artistic wisdom of an artist.

The advancement of science and technology cannot replace human emotions, and works of art are just the materialization of emotional sublimation. In this era, we live in no one can avoid the influence of modern technology on us, and the key lies in the human factor. Modern industrial civilization and the development of science and technology have brought us into the era of information-based reproduction. Our eyes are full of the same buildings, cars, furniture, clothing and even expressions. Photographic paintings are undoubtedly the same as the above, and paintings that utilize handicraft skills are particularly precious. They carry our unique understanding and cognition of society, nation, culture, and aesthetics. Uniqueness is a sharp weapon against the era of duplication. Painting in the image age should maintain its independence from photos. Images can be copied but works of art are unique. From a historical point of view, advanced technology will definitely promote the development of art, and continue to innovate on the basis of inheriting the excellent traditions of the predecessors, thus forming new artistic concepts and new artistic traditions, and there is no creation without traditional inheritance. The powerful photo-painting will only be submerged in the vast ocean of images.

### 3. The Creation of Paintings and Image’s Connotation

Paintings, like archaeological relics and historical classics, are important documents for future generations in interpreting history. Compared with documentary

photos, even panoramic photos cannot fairly and objectively restore the original appearance of history. There have been too many misunderstandings through photos in history. Through the decryption of many photo archives, we have learned that politicians have tampered with photos for certain political needs, so photos that purport to be “seeing is believing” are sometimes quite different from the facts. Not to mention that the same event has different interpretations of the event due to the different perspectives of the photographers, and the narrative of the text adds to the writer’s position and subjective interpretation. Images such as paintings can more intuitively depict the historical memory of a society and a nation than the written word.

A photo is different from a painting. Through artists’ creative painting, a photo becomes an art product with a unique painting language and artistic appeal, and like many paintings in history it breaks away from the mechanical properties of photos and becomes an independent painting. While the elements of the photo are transformed into parts of the creative image, becoming an image document that can carry historical memory and national emotion, through the dissemination of images it then becomes a part of the historical record and the common historical memory of mankind. Here, the artist’s paintings are not only classified as artistic creations, but also become indispensable image documents that can interpret the unique history, culture, politics, and customs of a nation and a society. The creation of a painting requires a unique type of style and painting language, which requires certain painting skills, artistic talent, and the analyses and judgment of various types of paintings in art history in order to break away from the realistic copying and embezzlement of photo elements. Judging the quality of artworks is the aesthetic judgment of the eras and history they depict. How to interpret images, how to dig out the meaning of the eras behind the images, how to brush off the historical dust of paintings to face the real meaning behind the images and the interpretation of the connotation of the painted images, constitute the important research content of iconology.

Iconology is a scientific research methodology; it comprehensively integrates the art history research methodologies of art, philosophy, psychology, archaeology, sociology and other disciplines, which are used to explain the cultural factors and inherent meanings contained in works of art. Iconology in the modern sense was first advocated by the German art historian Aby Warburg. In 1912, Warburg first presented the concept of “critical iconology”. He attempted using image interpretation to interpret the image’s inherent meaning and humanistic connotation

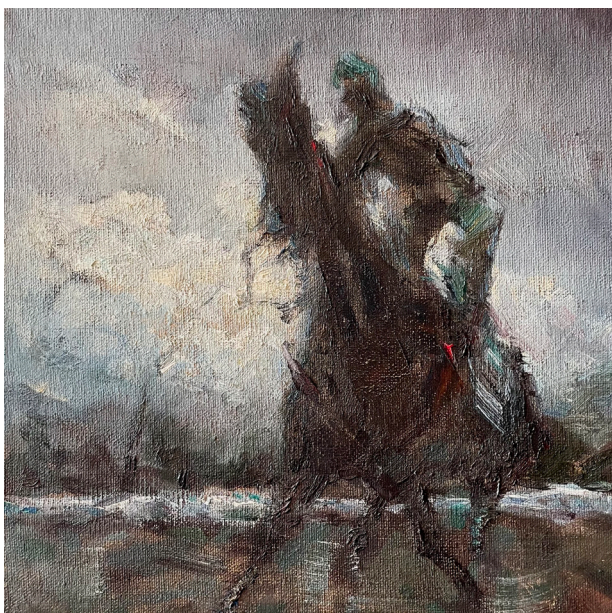


Figure 1. Guo Wenning. *Light Cavalry No.2*. Oil on canvas, 40×40 cm, 2014.

of artworks on the basis of iconography research. He regarded art history as the most important aspect in the history of cultural thought, artworks as the common memory of human beings, and cultural factors as the bond of the emotional integration of members of the society. Through the study of images, he interpreted the significance of artworks from a macro perspective with a multidisciplinary knowledge background, which made him stand out among his contemporaries who were doing other disciplines such as biographical research, positivism, and style history research. His research on iconology broke through the limitation of aesthetic appreciation of artworks in traditional art history. On this basis, he further emphasized the social function and epic significance of images, making iconology a methodology of art history research. At the same time, Vienna scholar Heinrich Wölfflin published *Principles of Art History (Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe)*, which systematically analyzed the appearance of artworks according to the type of style and took artworks as the first-hand historical data study of art history. Since then, iconology and stylistics have gradually become an important research basis for the discipline of art history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before the invention of photography, painting had served most of the functions of photos. Painting is an important media for interpreting mythology, religion, and recording human history. Image narrative is also the main expression method of history paintings and genre paintings, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, with history paintings given the highest status. The creation of history paintings embodies the artist's

contemporary interpretation of history; meanwhile it was subject to a specific era, it was a part of history but not the entire history. The image interpretation of history paintings has become a common focus of attention for art historians and art creators; the interpretation of history paintings requires a special decoding of the images in the pictures. Only through the excavation and interpretation of iconology can the meaning of the images surface, and combined with the interpretation of literature, we can truly understand the epic significance and meanings contained in special historical images. The emergence of photography at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century made the collection of painting elements more convenient, and it also greatly advanced realistic painting. The creation of history paintings in France and Spain and the critical realism painting in Russia were all developed and reached their peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the early days of New China, the creation of realistic painting and history painting became the main expression of Chinese painting. After the reform and opening up of China, due to the influence of Western modernism, realistic painting gradually declined in China. Since entering the new era, the creation of historical paintings led by the state has regained its vitality, and a large number of classic history paintings have emerged. The creation of these history paintings is completely different from historical photos and video materials. Artists have used historical photos and video materials, and organically combine people's general memory of history with historical facts, thus supplementing the historical records of text, photos, and video materials in which shortcomings have been corrected and re-constructed, and at the same time have added the artist's contemporary understanding of history, becoming an eternal image that transcends historical moments. Therefore, history paintings have also become an important and unique way to reinterpret historical events in the information age.

Different from the intuitive expressions of photos, artists always cleverly hide the meaning of the work behind the image. Only through the layers of decoding by art historians can the artworks' true connotation of epic significance be interpreted. The image composition of paintings has been inherited and innovated by generations of artists in the history of art, and many classic creation schemas have been formed. The interpretation of schemas is also a focus of our research on iconology; schema is a style of painting. For example, the painting schema of Christian themes can always be traced back to that of ancient Egypt, and the painting creation of revolutionary historical themes in New China can always find its origin in the Peredvizhniki schema. The innovation of paintings is inseparable from the inheritance of classic schemas, and the times also call for



Figure 2. Guo Wenning. *Light Cavalry No. 4*. Oil on canvas, 50×60 cm, 2020.

new painting schemas to interpret the present, which is sometimes more like a paradox; only innovations based on inheritance can continue to advance, otherwise, it is like water without origin and trees without roots.

In short, the proliferation of images in the information age has caused us a lot of confusion towards the creation of paintings, but the advancement of technology cannot replace human emotions, and artworks are just the materialization of emotional sublimation. In this era, we live in, no one can avoid the influence of modern technology on us, and the key lies in the human factor. Modern industrial civilization and the development of science and technology have brought us into the

era of information-based reproduction. Our eyes are full of the same buildings, cars, furniture, clothing and even expressions. Photographic paintings are undoubtedly the same as the above, while those paintings that remain in the realm of handicraft skills seem to be particularly precious, carrying our unique understanding and cognition of society, nation, culture, and aesthetics. The uniqueness of artworks is a sharp weapon against the era of duplication. Painting in the image age should maintain its independence from photos. Images can be copied but works of art are unique. From a historical point of view, advanced technology will definitely promote the development of art, and continue to innovate on the basis of inheriting the excellent traditions of the predecessors, thus forming new artistic concepts and traditions; meanwhile, those photo paintings that lack traditional inheritance and creativities will only be submerged in the vast ocean of images.

*Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology*

GUO WENNING(1971- ), received master's degree from the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts and doctoral degree from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. The works have won the Grand Prize (top prize) of the First National Mural Painting Exhibition, the Excellent Works Award of the 10<sup>th</sup> National Art Exhibition. Currently, he lives and works in Beijing, teaching at the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, serving as the director of the oil painting department and the master's supervisor.

Editor: Liu Kexin

## ENDNOTES

1. Rodin, A. *Art, Entretiens Reunis Par Paul Gsell*. Shen Baoji, Translation. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press. 2002, p.6.
2. Michel, W.J.T. *Image Theory*. Chen Yongguo & Hu Wenzheng, Translation. Peking University Press. 2006, pp.2-3.
3. *Ibid.*, p.9.

## REFERENCE

1. Danto, AC. *After the End of Art*. Lin Yaqi (ed.), Translation. Taiwan: Ryefield Publishing House. 2004.
2. Li Weiming. *Image and History: A Discussion on Chinese Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press. 2005.
3. Michel, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chen Yongguo, Translation. Beijing: Peking University Press. 2012.
4. Michel, W.J.T. *Image Theory*. Chen Yongguo & Hu Wenzheng, Translation. Peking University Press. 2006.

## 圖像的困惑——談寫實繪畫的畫照片與照片化問題

郭文寧

**摘要：**中西繪畫雖理念不同、方法各異，但對於寫實性繪畫而言均面臨“畫照片”與“照片化”的現實問題，“畫照片”是指藝術家進行藝術創作通過畫照片的方式開展藝術創作，“照片化”是目前藝術展覽中許多作品呈現出照片一樣的風格。在資訊時代的今天，圖像的獲取方式呈現多元化與簡易化的趨勢，圖像的氾濫與圖像的困惑成為藝術家無法逃避的問題。面對浩如煙海的圖像素材，我們遇到了這些唾手可得的圖像的困惑，“如何選取圖像並進行有效的藝術創作”，“是否可以打破照片作為藝術創作的唯一方式”，“當前創作能否聯繫前圖像志與圖像志的理論”等問題成為我們當前思考的問題。本文從“寫實繪畫‘照片化’的困擾”與“如何將圖像轉換為繪畫”兩方面討論圖像的問題，尤其通過寫實繪畫創作體會來探索中西寫實繪畫差異兼談照片作為創作素材的問題。

**關鍵字：**圖像；照片；挪用；寫實繪畫；圖式