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Author(s): Barbara E. Savedoff

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## Looking at Art Through Photographs

### I. PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRODUCTION AND THE VALUE OF THE ORIGINAL

In "Museum Without Walls,"<sup>1</sup> André Malraux wrote of the way in which photography has transformed our knowledge of art. The ready availability of photographic reproductions means that we are no longer limited to what we can see in local museums, what we can garner from hand drawn reproductions, or what we can remember from our travels. Photographs bring to us the art of the world. Through them, we can become familiar with art in public and private collections all over the globe. And photography, by allowing us to bring together the images of artworks in diverse collections, has also transformed our knowledge by facilitating comparison and analysis. Through photographs, we can compare a painting in the Louvre with one in the Prado, or we can survey the entire oeuvre of a particular artist. According to Malraux, this expanded knowledge and range of comparison has facilitated the reevaluation of different artists and periods of art, and has enlarged our notion of artistic value. He points out that the isolated work of a relatively unknown style will not be appreciated. Photographs, by making possible a familiarity with the whole output of an artist or period can remedy this situation, by allowing us to judge works on their own terms.

While Malraux argues that our knowledge of art and our notion of artistic value have been expanded by photography, Walter Benjamin argues that the nature of artistic value has been fundamentally changed. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin claims that in the face of photographic reproduction, the original artwork can no longer retain the special value and authority it traditionally possessed.<sup>2</sup> According to Benjamin, photography makes available to all artworks the mechanical reproduction which was formerly

only available to such objects as cast bronzes and woodcuts. The photograph reproduces everything but the original's presence in space and time, its history. The original's continued value thus depends on the continued importance of its "presence," but it is precisely this importance which is undermined by the widespread acceptance of reproductions. Unlike the original, the reproduction can be brought wherever the viewer is, and it is accepted as a suitable replacement. The remote unique object with a specific history is replaced by a multipliable image which can be distributed and possessed, which is no longer confined to a particular context. The original's unique history is depreciated and its special value and authority, its aura, is destroyed.

John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, echoes Benjamin's argument and adds that in the age of photographic reproduction the value of the original artwork—so important for the art market and for the social hierarchies it serves—can only be explained by its rarity.<sup>3</sup> The monetary value of the original can no longer be tied to the uniqueness of its image, and hence, can no longer be tied to the uniqueness of its meaning. Still, we have a need to justify this monetary value as arising from some qualitative difference between the original and its replicas. This need gives rise to what Berger calls a "bogus religiosity." The artwork becomes "impressive, mysterious, because of its market value."<sup>4</sup> The monetary value of the original causes the spectator to imagine that the original gives rise to a unique experience.

Each of the above thinkers focuses on the reproducible images of artworks to the neglect of art's non-reproducible properties. And even when the non-reproducible properties are given token acknowledgment, they are not considered essential to our knowledge and understanding of

art. This single-minded emphasis on image leads Malraux to present an overly rosy picture of the way in which reproductions function and it enables Benjamin and Berger to mount their politically motivated rejection of the value of the original.

Malraux is only partly right when he says that photographs bring to us the art of the world. They bring to us only certain aspects of that art, what might be called its images. So while photography has made possible the study of art as we know it today, it has also shaped that study—we have come to identify art with its photographically reproducible image.

It is this identification which is behind the loss of aura which Benjamin describes and which allows Berger to make his extravagant claims about the loss of a unique value for the original. If a work of art is reduced to its photographically transmittable properties, any claim for a special artistic, rather than commercial, value for the original will seem bogus.

Benjamin may indeed be right that works of art have lost their aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, but this loss may itself rest on an inappropriately reductive approach to art. Such a reductive approach is evident in Benjamin's woodcut analogy, which ignores the fact that the multiple prints of a woodcut are not copies of a unique original, whereas the reproductions of a painting are copies—copies which differ from the original in many ways. By the same token, Berger may give an accurate account of the bogus religiosity which can surround an original, but his claim that this is the only possible explanation for the value that we still attach to originals rests on the mistaken belief that an artwork's reproducible image is its only possible carrier of meaning.

In this paper I will argue that despite the claims of Benjamin and Berger, the unique value of the original artwork has not been destroyed by photographic reproduction. What *has* happened is that photography has changed, perhaps irrevocably, the way we see paintings and sculptures, and it is this fact which makes it so difficult to discover and appreciate the unique value of the original.

I will first discuss the circumstances which have led to the primacy of the reproduction. I will argue that our experience with looking at photographs actually conditions how we look at art. I will then turn to an examination of the ways in which photographic reproductions di-

verge from originals and will argue that the consequences of these divergences for our understanding of individual artworks and movements can be critical. Finally, I briefly consider the ways in which an increased attention to the central role of photography in conditioning how we view art and in disseminating information about art may shed light on the recent history of painting and criticism.

## II. THE PRIMACY OF THE REPRODUCTION

Reproductions not only determine how we know distant and inaccessible works of art, to a large extent they condition our knowledge of all art. This is because viewing the reproduction has become the paradigmatic art experience.

There are several factors which lead to this primacy of the reproduction, not the least of which is that encounters with the original work can be elusive or highly unsatisfactory. Viewing the original can involve such obstacles as battling crowds at a museum blockbuster show, coping with reflections or poor light, or straining the neck to see a top row of frescoes. The photographic reproduction lets us see what we can't see first hand. With an art book, we can view the image under "perfect" conditions, whenever we like and for as long as we like.

Photography even conditions our first hand encounters. When we know the photographic image first, it can determine what we see when we look at the original. Afterwards, the photograph can determine what we will remember. The poster, the post card, the colorplate, come to replace the painting.

There are several ways in which our familiarity with photographic reproductions may determine what we see when we stand before the original. We may see only what photographs have led us to expect, or less blindly, we may *look* for what photographs have led us to expect. This last phenomenon is described by Susan Lambert in *The Image Multiplied*: "Response to the original is tempered by considerations, perhaps only in the subconscious, of how the image lives up to our vision of it in reproduction. The place of discovery is taken by a search for the anticipated."<sup>5</sup> And even if our familiarity with photographic reproductions leads us, in looking at an artwork, to search for that which is not conveyed by photographs, what we see is still

conditioned, though negatively, by a comparison with them.

Finally, there is a more fundamental way in which our viewing of paintings may be conditioned by photography—photographs provide us with a rival set of conventions of image-making. Our heavy exposure to photographs in daily life provides us with models of perspective and composition, with a distinctive sensibility, which will inform what we see and how we interpret what we see when we look at paintings. For example, we can find both portrait paintings and portrait photographs which “catch” the sitter in mid-gesture. How often do we think of the difference in import that this capturing of the instant has in each medium? What is quite natural for the photograph is contrived for the painting. We might say that the painting indulges in a second kind of illusion—added to the illusion of spatial representation is the illusion of spontaneity, of instantaneous recording. But our familiarity with the photographic model can make us insensitive to this second sort of illusion.

To point out photography’s wide ranging influence on our perception of artworks is not to assert that before photographs people always experienced art first hand. The print was the means by which art images were disseminated in the past. These illustrations were of course less accurate than photographs in recording how a painting looked, but prints were more up front about their limitations—there was not the illusion of objective duplication, so there was not as much temptation to accept them as satisfactory substitutes for the originals.<sup>6</sup> Photographic reproductions do carry with them these illusions, and this magnifies their influence.

I have argued thus far that photographs in general and art reproductions in particular condition the way in which we view art. I will now consider the effects of this conditioning by briefly discussing some of the specific ways in which photographic reproductions diverge from the original. It is the primacy of the photographic reproduction *together* with its divergence which transforms our perceptions of artworks and which diverts us from the “unique value of the original.”

### III. THE DIVERGENCES OF REPRODUCTION

Malraux points out that the absence of color in early photographic reproductions limited the kind

of understanding that was possible in the study of Byzantine painting. The black and white reproduction led to the reduction of the painting to its drawing. Since, according to Malraux, the drawing was bound up in convention whereas the innovations of Byzantine art concerned the use of color, this reduction of painting to its drawing led to an unfair dismissal of Byzantine art as “repetitive and static.”<sup>7</sup>

Malraux uses this example to show the importance of the advent of color reproductions, to show how the reduction of paintings to black and white images can lead to a distorted evaluation of a whole period of art. But just as the reduction of paintings to black and white images can lead to a limited understanding, so too can the reduction of paintings to color images. Even color reproductions fail to convey crucial properties of the original works of art and these failures can lead to distortions in our understanding.

In what follows, I briefly discuss some of the changes effected by photographic reproduction. These changes may, in some cases, be obvious. Less obvious is the way in which these changes can constitute a major obstacle to our understanding of art. The mere acknowledgment of reproductive divergence does not serve to correct the distorted images we form of art; and it is my intent to show that these distortions can be substantial. (In the interest of space, I will confine my discussion primarily to the case of painting.)

(1) Reproductions do not capture the colors of the original. And though the accuracy of color reproductions may improve, a photograph can at most show the colors of a painting in a fixed light and from a fixed angle. So, for example, the gold in an altarpiece is reduced to one color among others. Its gleaming incongruity is not preserved.

Furthermore, the goal of reproducing accurate color can conflict with the presentation of the subtle or ephemeral character of a painting. For example, Ad Reinhardt’s “monochrome” paintings contain slight variations in color. As one looks at one of his black paintings, squares of different shades of black begin to emerge. The difficulty in seeing these variations, their slow appearance and disappearance as light and angle change, is very much a part of the experience of his work, but it is an aspect that is inadequately conveyed by most reproductions.

Reinhardt's paintings are typically reproduced in a way that makes the slight variations of color as distinct as possible.

(2) The surface of a photographic reproduction is markedly different from the surface of the original artwork. In reproduction, the texture and bulk of paint is exchanged for flat glossy paper or an iridescent screen. This not only leads to a loss of color and spatial effects, it also prevents us from seeing the way a painting is constructed.

For instance, reproductions do not convey the substantiality of the shapes in Elizabeth Murray's paintings. The thickness of the paint gives the forms a physical presence, an air of necessity. In photographs, these forms have a more arbitrary ethereal quality. And reproductions do not show the texture of the canvas which comes through Francis Bacon's paintings, a texture which conflicts with, subverts, their ghostly photographic look. In reproduction, the ghostly look is not subverted.

(3) Reproductions do not preserve the scale of the original. A painting which depends on its enormous size for impact, for example, Barnett Newman's 18' *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, may appear trivial and uninteresting when reproduced on the page of a text book. But more than its impact is lost. With Newman's work, the very point of the painting is obscured by the reduction of scale, for the painting is partly about that scale.<sup>8</sup> Berger could plausibly maintain that reproductions of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* have the same meaning as the original only if meaning is arbitrarily defined as dependent on image alone.

(4) In reproduction, the physical presence of the painting is lost. The importance of this loss is most obvious for works which emphasize their objecthood through size, unusual shape, multiple panels, or three dimensionality of painted surface, but it is no less an issue for standard easel paintings. Even a full size reproduction of a Vermeer portrait does not have the physical presence of the original. The reproduction is an image of something which exists elsewhere.

(5) The reproduction does not usually present the frame which surrounds a painting, and as any comparison between a reproduction which shows a frame and one which doesn't will demonstrate, the absence of a frame means that we are less insistently aware that we are looking at a reproduction rather than the artwork itself.<sup>9</sup> This

absence can thus contribute to our tendency to neglect the divergences of reproductions and contributes to our tendency to use the reproduction to replace the artwork.

The absence of a frame also means the loss of its many important functions. The frame mediates between the space of the room and that of the painting, and by preventing the immediate juxtaposition of the two, it can facilitate the illusion of fictional space. In addition, it can encourage the reading of the painting as a receding space, by bevelling inward towards the image.

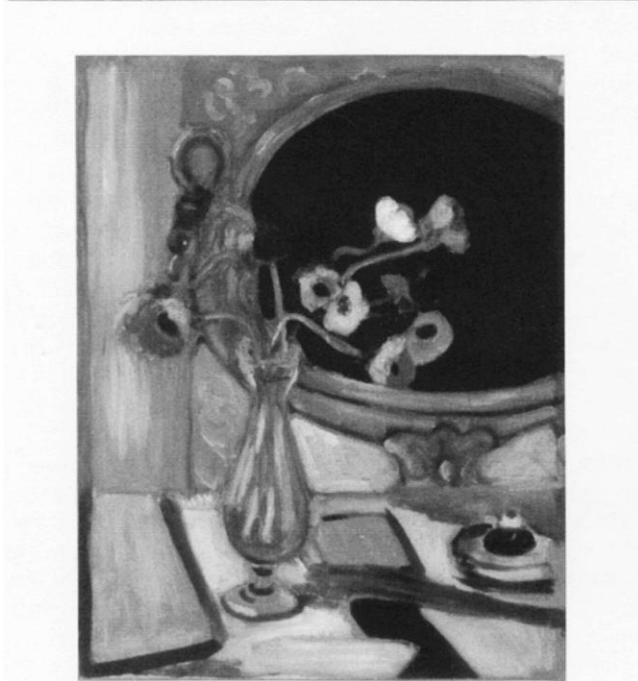
The presence of the frame is also sometimes important compositionally and thematically. The doorways, windows, and mirrors within paintings can echo the frames which contain those paintings. For instance, in Matisse's *Anemones with a Black Mirror*, the frame of the mirror is very prominent and parallel to the picture plane, so it very strikingly corresponds to the frame of the painting. The echo effect that is created, and a resultant compression of space between the two frames, is completely lost in reproductions that do not show the frame.<sup>10</sup>

Even when the reproduction includes the frame, the relationship between painting and frame is obscured because the material differences between them are not preserved. Painted canvas and carved wood become continuous elements in the flat photograph.

(6) The reproduction not only fails to convey the function of the frame, it also fails to convey the function of the surrounding wall. The flat surface of the wall is important insofar as it serves as a foil for easel paintings and as a ground or negative space for shaped canvases. In a reproduction, the image of the artwork is flush with the paper on which it's printed, and the white that occurs within the painting is put on the same plane as the white of the surrounding paper.

The loss of architectural surroundings also has serious consequences for our understanding of murals and frescoes which interact with their environment. For instance, the eccentric shape of a fresco may seem frivolous and arbitrary when its architectural determinants are concealed.

(7) In viewing a reproduction in a book, we look down at a page instead of up at a wall or a ceiling. This change in orientation interferes with much more than our reading of a painting's



Henri Matisse, *Anemones with a Black Mirror*, 1918–19. Oil on canvas, 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>". Corporate Art Collection: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc. © 1993 Succession H. Matisse/ARS, N.Y.

perspective. For instance, it reverses the dominating position of a portrait which looks down at the viewer—the viewer of a book acquires the position of dominance and control. The book reproduction also reduces the physical sense of top and bottom. Morris Louis's upside down drips do not seem as unsettling when viewed in a book, and Pollock's drip paintings do not seem as explosively defiant of gravity.

(8) We lose the ability to move closer and farther away. This prevents us from discovering the tension between a painting's visual effect and the surface which allows that effect. For instance, we lose the ability to see strong outlines of objects dissolve into fuzzy areas of color as we move closer to a painting, and we lose the ability to see a dense textured surface become a deep atmospheric space as we move away. The loss of this ability is detrimental to our understanding of the work of artists as different as Velázquez, Monet, and Cezanne.

Our understanding of art is not only affected by our restriction to properties transmittable by photographs, we are also influenced by the properties added by them. These can include the mysterious aspect lent to an imaginatively photographed sculpture, the new coherence found in a painting reproduced in black and white, or the interest added by the detail visible in an enlargement.

Malraux recognizes this aspect of reproduction when he speaks of the "fictitious" arts created by photography's systematic falsification of scale, its use of the fragment, and of special lighting. But though he realizes that the interest and the comparisons that result from this fictionalizing are spurious, he does not take this to be a serious problem. This is evident in his acceptance of works which have gained interest only through photographic lighting, enlargement, and fragmentation, as worthy, *in reproduction*, of inclusion in the Museum without Walls.<sup>11</sup> The fact that it is only the photograph of the object which has interest is a matter of indifference to him.

The changes brought about by photography do not disturb Malraux because he is primarily concerned with that which, according to him, emerges all the more clearly through the "specious unity imposed on works" by photography—style.<sup>12</sup> He describes how objects as diverse as frescoes and stained glass, tapestries and greek vase paintings, have become colorplates. "In the process they have lost their properties as

objects; but by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to style they can possibly acquire."<sup>13</sup> Since for Malraux it is the story of style which is of overwhelming importance, which conveys with unparalleled force "the notion of a destiny shaping human ends," the limitations of photographic reproduction become its virtues.<sup>14</sup>

Berger also recognizes the fact of photographic "additions." For example, he describes how photography, through close-up, allows an allegorical figure in a painting to take on new interest as the portrait of a girl, and he describes how television enables the paintings it shows to take on new meanings as it transmits their images into millions of new environments.

Like Malraux, Berger welcomes these new meanings. But unlike Malraux, he does not acknowledge their spurious nature and excuse them in the interest of some broader insight they provide about the development of art. No excuse is needed, because for Berger the value of an artwork is just a function of the individual and changing uses of its image. The particular work no longer has a fixed value independent of these.

Both Malraux and Berger speak of the changes wrought by photographic reproductions as enhancing the artworks themselves. Malraux allows for this conflation of a work of art with its photographic incarnation because his interest in art is primarily limited to style. Berger demands the conflation because he is interested in the proliferation of meanings that can be achieved through the recontextualization of an image. But even if we do not limit ourselves to either of these interests, the conflation can occur simply because our experience with reproductions so overshadows our first hand experiences of art.

#### IV. SOME HYPOTHESES

An attention to the central role of photography in conditioning the way we view paintings and in disseminating information about them may shed new light on the recent history of art and art criticism. It would be quite surprising if the wholesale reliance on photographs and slides in curating, teaching, and research had not left its mark on the art world. I will close with some hypotheses on this topic.

Our dependence on reproductions may at least partially explain the current prevalence of vari-

ous socio-political, psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches in art history and criticism. These approaches allow scholars and critics to concentrate on those properties of artworks (such as representational content and compositional relations) which can be transmitted by photographs and to neglect those which cannot. These approaches are not only fostered by research practices which have come to depend more and more on photographs, they are well suited to a readership which is often wholly dependent on photographs for its knowledge of the works discussed. The reader typically understands the critic's text in the light of an accompanying reproduction. And through the process of replacement described above, it is the reproduction that the reader expects the text to illuminate—at least, it is only with respect to the reproduction that most readers will be able to judge the text. To discuss things not knowable through the reproduction, or to discuss things that appear to be contrary to what the reproduction shows, seems self defeating.

This concentration, in writing on art, on the aspects of paintings which are reproducible can lead to a skewed understanding of what paintings are about, and a skewed valuation of various movements and works can result. Our dependence on reproductions favors art which reproduces well or which exists primarily through documentation. Art which depends heavily on non-reproducible properties cannot be successfully understood through photographs, and its influence is thus curtailed.

With respect to contemporary art, the use of photographic reproduction not only influences our understanding of artworks, it also plays an active and direct role in determining what is seen and what is made. The widespread use of photographs and slides to select artworks for exhibitions and awards almost ensures that photogenic work will be selected and supported over non-photogenic work. For many professional purposes, the way a painting looks in a photograph is now more important than the way it looks in person. In this way, photography not only conditions how we view paintings, it is shaping the world of painting. The dependence of the art world on photographs means that contemporary artists cannot avoid thinking about how their work will look in reproduction, even if they resist letting such considerations influence their art.

Recent movements in the visual arts can be understood as a response to the prominence of photography and the prevalence of reproduction. On the one hand, Abstract Expressionism, color field painting, and Minimalism can be seen, at least in part, as attempts to emphasize the features (such as size, color, surface, and "objecthood") which differentiate painting from photography and as attempts to frustrate photographic reproduction. They can be seen as efforts to defy photography's encroachment on painting's territory and to obstruct photography's appropriation of paintings through reproduction.

On the other hand, movements such as Photorealism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art embrace photography and reproduction—Photorealism, by adopting the look of the photograph; Pop Art, by celebrating reproducibility, the multiple image, and the mass market consumer product; and Conceptual Art, by abandoning aesthetic properties in favor of verbally or photographically transmittable ideas.

If we turn to more contemporary art, we see work that does more than simply embrace reproducibility. Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger create works that are about reproduction and about the recontextualization celebrated by Berger. Even though their works use images, the message is conceptual. Artists who de-emphasize the importance of aesthetic features while emphasizing the conceptual are accommodating an art world where photographic transmittability is everything.

The notion of an original may no longer be relevant to a wide range of contemporary work which embraces reproducibility. Nevertheless, for an even wider range of work, past and present, an acquaintance with the original is necessary for an adequate understanding of the artwork and for an appreciation of its richness and complexity. The unique value of the original is not imperilled by photographic reproduction. What is imperilled, in a world increasingly dependent on reproductions and facsimiles, is our attention and sensitivity to such value.<sup>15</sup>

BARBARA E. SAVEDOFF  
Department of Philosophy  
Baruch College  
The City University of New York  
New York, NY 10010



1. André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, tr. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton University Press, 1978).

2. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

5. Susan Lambert, *The Image Multiplied* (New York: Abaris, 1987), p. 16.

6. In fact, according to Lambert, most prints did not aim at exact reproduction. They adapted the designs of paintings to the conventions of prints and served as inexpensive images for the masses. For the most part, these prints were not used to convey information about some absent masterpiece.

7. See Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, p. 30, for a discussion of this example.

8. Arthur Danto might have something like this in mind when, in "The Artworld," he talks about the impossibility of a radical miniaturization of a Newman. A Newman engraved on a pinhead would become "a blob, disappearing in the reduction." (A. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 [1964], p. 574.)

9. This point was made by Allen Furbeck, in conversation.

10. On occasion, the absence of a frame can have its advantages, as when the frame is inappropriate for the painting. For example, the color of a frame can interfere with a painting's color relations. This is true of the frames of Matisse's *Seville Still Life* and *Spanish Still Life*, both owned by the Hermitage. The vibrancy of the reds and yellows which predominate in these paintings is drained by the gold tone frames, and for this reason the paintings look much stronger in reproduction.

11. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, p. 25.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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