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WORKING FROM PHOTO REFERENCES

*Working from photographs is controversial in the traditional painting world.
I use photo references myself so I wrote a handout for students. Comments are welcome.*¹

The history of art shows that masterpieces have been made from different mediums, working methods, subject matter and styles, in distinct countries and eras, by diverse personalities. Great paintings are as individual as the means by which they were created and the artists who did the creating. The Old Masters are sometimes portrayed as purists, adverse to anything that strays from “tradition”.² In fact they were sensible craftsmen, open to amendments to their trade, interested in getting the job done well and, when possible, efficiently.

More than practical, the greatest painters were innovators – inspired individuals open to experimentation and original ideas if such things produced enduring art. As soon as a new material, method, or technology appeared in the history of art, at least one great painter took it up with others soon to follow. While the Italians continued to work in centuries old egg tempera, northern painters delved into oil. Bellini painted on traditional wood panels while Titian embraced new canvas supports (Bellini eventually switched). Leonardo da Vinci innovated ceaselessly. Durer, a superb draftsman, devised a grid to facilitate his drawing. So did Holbein, another great draftsman. The evidence that Vermeer used a camera obscura is strong. Canaletto (and many others) used one for sure. Ingres referred to daguerreotypes. And when print photography appeared on the scene Delacroix, Degas, Manet, and many others used it.³

Ever evolving materials and methods evidence the creativity and practicality of great painters. Yet contemporary traditional realists who stray from the presumed “old master” way of doing things are often frowned upon. Using photographic references is sometimes portrayed as a sort of moral failing. Working from life is portrayed as a braver, more authentic way to create art - even though many great artists did not paint exclusively, or even primarily, from life.⁴

Traditional painters used many different reference materials to create their masterpieces. This included, but was not limited to, working from: life, memory, imagination, knowledge, (i.e. how a volumetric form transitions from light to shadow), personal sketch books, pattern books and cartoons that circulated from studio to studio, three-dimensional mockups, antique statuary, other artists’ drawings and reproductions of paintings. They copied, sometimes even traced, other painters’ imagery. All of this is well documented.

¹ This handout is not intended as a rationale to avoid the effort of working from life, to the extent that doing so is necessary to meet your goals as a painter. My point is that a painter should be free to determine that extent for him or her self (as did the old masters), without fear of judgment or censorship.

² I put “tradition” in quotation because not all commonly presumed old master traditions have genuine track records.

³ While there is a long history of artists (including many great draftsman) using optical devices to facilitate their process, it’s impossible to prove whether or not an old master would have worked from a photograph since it was not an option. But it’s reasonable to imagine some would have. Hans Memling worked from another painter’s portrait of a distant client; it’s not much of a leap to think Memling might have preferred a photo.

⁴ For the old masters, material reality was not the end, but rather the means to the end; the starting point from which to imagine and invent never-before-seen realities. How an artist related to his or her reference material (live models, memory, knowledge, imagination, another’s interpretations of reality, etc.) was a decision made by the artist, not dictated by a single, universally applicable rule. In this respect, I think the old masters were like artistic gods, *fully* in charge of the worlds they painted. Leonardo da Vinci said, “The painter’s mind is a copy of the divine mind, since it operates freely in creating...”. Kenyon Cox expressed a similar idea, “The artistic intention must dominate everything...mold everything to its purpose. Its sovereignty must be absolute and complete”. And critic J.B. Priestly said of the author Leo Tolstoy, “He works like a happy God, with a whole world to play with”. I like the idea of artist as inspired sovereign of his or her unique, creative universe.

While some contemporary realists disparage photo references, others see optical devices as the long-lost secret to old master painting. Yet we live in an age replete with visual aids (copy machines, digital cameras, projectors, even Photoshop!) and such devices do not guarantee great work. Give a camera obscura to an aspiring artist and it's unlikely that he or she will paint an original, Vermeer-like masterpiece.

In short, *photography and other optical aids neither hinder nor assure success in painting*. Photography is merely a tool, one of several means to an end: how to see and record subject matter. With an understanding of the pros and cons, you can choose whether or not to include photos in your creative process.

TO USE OR NOT TO USE PHOTOGRAPHY

“Begin by adorning yourself with these vestments: love, reverence, obedience and constancy.”

Cennino Cennini, 1370-1440, *The Craftsman's Handbook*

Cennini's advice for beginning a painting is as applicable to a contemporary artist as it was to a 14th century craftsman. Specifically it is *love* - for your medium, materials, working method, and subject matter - that gets you in the studio, on both good days and bad.

With that in mind, I encourage students to develop a process that suits his or her nature and goals. Choose a method (as well as medium, materials and subjects) that you love. Experiment and spend time with your choices. Stay attentive, curious, and open-minded. If your process suits you don't be deterred by others who espouse their way as the only path to great painting. There isn't a single path, as history makes clear.

The masterpieces of the past help us understand painting deeply; they reveal to us how great art manifests in an infinite variety of forms. Staying true to one's nature and goals is a hallmark of the best painters. They aren't deterred by the weight of tradition. Instead they are inspired by it to replicate and reinvent the larger truths of traditional painting: a well-crafted, beautiful, transcendent image.

So, if you are passionate about working from life, embrace it with enthusiasm! On the other hand, if you enjoy painting from photographs (or imagination, or sketchbooks, or any other means) and achieve desired results, than do so without apology. Whatever your preferred visual reference(s), don't assume what works for you is requisite for everyone else. Art making is too varied for that presumption, as the past proves.

All working methods (like materials) have pros and cons. Whether working from photographs, life, or any other reference material you need to understand the benefits and drawbacks inherent to your process to work effectively. A list of potential pros and cons of both live and photographic references is provided at the end of this handout.

MAXIMS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

1. *You can always tell a painting made from a photograph.*

This is not true. It is when a painter is inattentive to the drawbacks of photos that their use is evident (and it is only for these paintings that the self-serving maxim, “You can always tell a painting made from a photograph” is pronounced.) In fact there are *many* paintings based on photographs or other non-live references that are not recognized as such because the painting is a good one. Equally true, it is possible to work from life and produce a faulty painting, yet how often is that given as a reason not to paint from life? In a good painting, the question of what the artist used for visual reference doesn't occur initially. It is an irrelevance. The viewer is simply, happily absorbed in the artwork.

2. *Photographs flatten form. They don't capture color accurately and cause distortion. Photos lie.*

All of the above is potentially true (although some problems can be addressed with proper lighting and camera use). It's important to understand and address the drawbacks of photography - as well as the drawbacks of any other reference material, including live subject matter.

Not all of photography's limitations are inevitably problematic. If a painter wants to contrast volume with flat shapes (as did many old masters), a photo can be a good way to see flattened form. Contemporary viewers sometimes presume the primary goal of traditional painting is “realism” – but a literal chronicling of

the world was rarely, if ever, the foremost intent of old master painters. They included enough realism to make subjects recognizable (more or less so, depending on the artist and the era), but no more than necessary. They were attentive to both representation *and* visual abstraction.

3. *Photography is acceptable only for painting moving or transient subject matter.*

Children, animals, and weather are sometimes said to justify photographic references. However, if a photograph is a sufficiently good resource to paint an animal, why isn't it equally useful for a vase? Conversely, if a photo is a poor way to paint an adult, how can it lead to a successful portrait of a child? Justifications aren't necessary once a painter has demonstrated the utility of his or her reference material.

4. *Working from photographs is cheating.*

The old masters were not adverse to expediciencies.⁵ Nevertheless, if working from photos truly made the challenge of producing a good painting easier, then the many artists who work from photos would be consistently painting well, which isn't the case.

5. *Great art requires personal interaction with subjects. Paintings made from photos lack heart and soul.*

It is sometimes presumed that to faithfully represent a subject requires working in the subject's presence, and personal interaction is necessary to elicit the emotional response requisite for great art. A human's capacity for perception is infinitely more refined than a camera's, and working from life is an invaluable experience that *all* great painters, to *varying* degrees, made use of. However, contrary to popular lore, many traditional painters did not paint exclusively, even primarily, from live models. Hans Memling worked from another artist's painting of a subject who couldn't travel to Memling's studio. Yet Memling was renown in his time and today for life-like, expressive portraiture. Jan Gossart made a masterpiece by painting directly atop a parchment tracing of the head of God taken from a painting by Jan Van Eyck. These are just two of *many* examples I could cite of great art created from references other than life.

It isn't true that an artist must be in the physical presence of a subject to paint it with feeling or conviction. Few works have more authenticity than Giotto's Arena Chapel, which involved little or no painting from life. Art history is replete with images of joyful angels and suffering saints for whom no live model existed. Instead artists worked from a combination of live studies, memory, imagination and deep feeling. A painter can have genuine love for his or her subject matter even if the subject is not personally known or present. (Conversely, it is possible to work from life and show no affinity or empathy for a subject.)

CONCLUSION

Nature was a primary source of inspiration for traditional painters. Both representational and abstract visual elements are given by the material world, and in no way am I arguing against working directly from life. I mean only to counter the precept that a traditional painter must *always* work from life. This is a modern-day assertion not supported in any way by the history of art. Neither a photograph nor a live model creates a painting – a human being does. We do not judge the artists of the past on their working methods, but let the paintings speak for themselves.⁶ With this in mind, I encourage students to stay creative and open-minded as they develop their process, to discover what works best for them.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING FROM PHOTOGRAPHS AND/OR LIFE

Many artists paint from neither photos nor live models; instead they use other resources such as their imagination, sketchbooks, etc. I don't mean to minimize the value of other working methods. However for various reasons (among them, the desire to address the controversy surrounding photo references) this handout is focused on working from photographs versus life. For the sake of clarity, I've categorized considerations as "pros" or "cons". In fact, *they are definitively neither*. What is helpful to one painter may be a hindrance to another, and vice versa. Suggestions for addressing drawbacks are in italics.

⁵ On the contrary, they seemed to welcome efficient tools and techniques, as evidenced by many aspects of old master working methods.

⁶ I don't mean to suggest my work is evidence that great painting emerges from photo references. There are better examples: Delacroix, Degas, Eakins, Manet, Homer, Boutet de Monvel, Rockwell, etc. - far too many to list here.

PHOTOGRAPHS - PROS

- Lighting is captured and thus consistent.
- Subject matter is controlled and consistent. Once the artist has designed the visuals of his or her image, those visuals stay in place.
- Provides visual reference for moving subject matter (young children, animals, etc).
- Provides ongoing visual reference over long periods of time (during which a model may shift position or is not available, still-life items rot, weather conditions change, etc).
- Image is translated from three-dimensions into two-dimensions. Flat, abstract patterns are made apparent. (However some painters prefer the experience of flattening three-dimensionality themselves versus having the camera do it.)
- Photo can be readily reproduced, drawn upon, cut and pasted, digitally altered, and otherwise worked with to produce a well-designed visual reference from which to paint.

PHOTOGRAPHS - CONS

- Distortion caused by curvature of camera lens.
This can be addressed if distortion is recognized and amended in the drawing or painting.
Distortion also can be minimized if subject is photographed from a distance using a zoom lens.
- The over simplification of values, particularly halftones.
This can be amended with proper lighting: a one-source, full spectrum, 5000-7500 Kelvin, 80-100% CRI, diffused, controlled light – either natural or artificial.
- The flattening of form.
Use proper lighting, and have an understanding of how three-dimensional form transitions from light into shadow. (In traditional painting, flatness was often contrasted with volume, so flattened form isn't invariably a negative.)
- The actual color of subject matter may not be accurately reproduced in a photo.
Make on-site color studies and take good notes when absolute fidelity to a color is necessary - for example, when you need to reproduce a sitter's eye or hair color, or want to clearly recall the hues of a particular landscape on a certain day. (However it is not always necessary to faithfully reproduce the precise color of all subject matter. Good color and color relationships sometimes necessitate altering the local color of objects.)
- Plagiarizing other people's imagery by using photographs other than your own. There is the risk of copyright infringement, as well as not developing the capacity to compose original imagery.
Photograph and work from your own images. If you refer to others' photographs, read about the rights and restrictions implicit in such use, as outlined in current copyright law.
- The possibility of tracing images to reproduce them, which can weaken drawing skills.
Continue to draw regularly.

And finally, perhaps the most important consideration when working with photographs:

- A tendency to copy the photograph too faithfully; to stop paying attention to the painting - the image you are creating - and instead give too much attention and fidelity to the photographic reference.
This can be addressed by staying attentive to a painting. The artist must be very insistent on being "in charge" of the image, and do what is necessary to it to make a strong image (including altering the photograph – significantly, if necessary).

WORKING FROM LIFE - PROS

- The eye has a greater range than a camera; visual subtleties can be more accurately seen and experienced.
- Image is seen stereoscopically, in three-dimensions. It can be easier to feel and render form. (Some painters consider this a potential drawback; flatness, an important visual element, gets neglected).
- Painter has a direct, personal interaction with subject matter. (While this is helpful to many painters, some painters find interaction distracting and problematic.)
- Develops drawing skills.
- Original imagery is created – no copyright infringement.

WORKING FROM LIFE - CONS

- Light source may change. Subject matter may move. (Some painters value the mutable qualities of working from life. They feel it injects liveliness into their process and artwork.)
- Artist may not take sufficient time to design the image (since live subjects move or are paid by the hour). Consequently the resulting image, while faithfully rendered from life, may be poorly designed, not well organized visually, or inattentive to all parts of the visual language.
- Image is seen stereoscopically, in three-dimensions. Flat, abstract patterns may be harder to see.

And finally, as with photo references, perhaps the most important consideration when working from life:

- A tendency to copy the physical subject matter too faithfully; to stop paying attention to the painting - the image you are creating - and instead pay attention only to the material object in front of you.
This can be addressed by staying attentive to a painting. The artist must be very insistent on being “in charge” of the image, and do what is necessary to it to make a strong image (including adjusting the subject matter – significantly, if necessary).

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