



Digital Culture and the Practices of Art and Art History

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Digital Imagery and User-defined Art

Gary Schwartz

"It's still the same picture, isn't it? What difference does it make if they change the label?" This is what we say when a museum demotes a painting from "Rembrandt" to "School of Rembrandt" or from "Caravaggio" to "Follower of Caravaggio." Incontrovertible as it may sound, this sentiment is not really accurate. As a physical object, the painting may indeed stay the same at first, but its fate will have been modified. It will be removed from the main galleries and put into storage, on one of those moving racks where it is far more likely to undergo damage or be misplaced. Its condition will no longer be a matter of great concern to the curators. Should a deaccessioning round come up, it will be near the top of the list; there are always gamblers out there who will pay a premium on the bet that the deattribution will be reversed. Once a downgraded painting leaves the protective museum environment, the odds on its long-term physical survival drop precipitously.

Public and scholarly perception of the merits of the painting is affected much more quickly. Hardly has the formula been intoned—"It's still the same picture, isn't it?"—before it starts looking like a different picture, with weaknesses we never noticed until then. Once removed from sight, very few deattributed works are ever asked for again. Their postcards are allowed to go out of print and none of the former admirers of the work complain.

Changes in attribution are not the only external circumstance with deep influence on our treatment and perception of art. The way in which they are reproduced is another. As an art historian working mainly on seventeenth-century Dutch painting, I find myself pondering the possible effects on museum objects of the changes now taking place in the way images are generated and transmitted. The following remarks are limited to one aspect of this many-sided question. Which practice associated with digital imagery is apt to have the greatest effect on museum objects and what form might this take?

The first place I saw color television when it was introduced in the 1950s was at the home of a wealthy family friend, our lawyer and state representative. He turned on his set and began fiddling with the dials that adjust the color. When the complexion of the people in the picture had reached a nice bright orange he grunted with satisfaction and went back to his chair. Before I could stop myself, I asked him whether he couldn't get the colors any better than that. He answered simply, "I know they're not natural, but I like them that way." Indeed, it was his television set and the pictures were being put at his disposal with no conditions attached. Why shouldn't he look at them the way he liked?

A jolt of the same kind awaited me the first time I edited a book with color illustrations, Horst Gerson's *Rembrandt Paintings* of 1968. The powerful lights the photographer turned onto the pictures we were photographing revealed more colors and details than could be seen in daylight—more than

could have been seen by Rembrandt. His manipulation of screens and filters and exposure times completed a process that began with his choice of film, with its trade-offs between grain and speed, truth to color, durability, and cost of processing. The results were images that I knew to be full of arbitrary and subjective elements, and yet I was unable *not* to see them as accurate reproductions of the paintings. The following stages as well, technical as they may have been, piled one judgment call on another: sizing, cropping, photolithography, hand correction, platemaking. All of this was a prelude to the *moment suprême* at the press. Four-process colors—the three subtractive primaries (magenta, yellow, and cyan) and black—had to masquerade as Rembrandt's palette, and my artistic knowledge and editorial talents served as their alibi. Painful choices had to be made, safeguarded, and defended. Again, the final product looked to my eye like the paintings I had seen. Here was a microns-thin layer of printer's ink on a sheet of coated stock, with very dubious credentials, and I was seeing it as if it were a robust three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old creation by Rembrandt. I knew that I was deceiving myself, but not exactly how.

A number of things about these experiences upset me and continue to do so. Being forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of the techniques that bring us our daily quotient of images was bad enough. Worse was that our acceptance of images relayed through the media of television, photography, and printing reveals an extraordinary insensitivity to the originals we profess to worship down to their least details. The lowest common denominator between original and simulacrum is low indeed. To call paintings two-dimensional, as we habitually do, is indicative of this reductive attitude. If we are satisfied so easily that an original has been "reproduced," what in the original are we seeing in the first place? The fact that the simulacra are manipulated—guilelessly, unapologetically, as a matter of course—by intermediate operators or the end user means that the ultimate appearance of images we instinctively regard as the work of artists are to varying degrees determined by ourselves. Apparently, we like it that way.

This is not a one-way process. It is not simply a betrayal of the original by the reproduction. Our treatment of originals is also guided by these dysfunctional features in the transmission of imagery. As brilliant color printing captivated the art audience, and viewers like my state representative noticed that they preferred reproductions to originals, museums found themselves in competition with publishers and television producers. They began to glamorize their displays, to vie with the coffee table book. Not only did they introduce spotlights in the galleries to match the effect of the Skira tip-in, they also began restoring their objects more aggressively, to get at the colors that photographers had revealed to the public. Both of these moves necessitated the relaxation of conservation standards. Like a plate in an art book, museum objects were presented individually, out of context, against a plain white wall. Malraux's famous concept of the art book as a museum without walls or *musée imaginaire* is misleading. The

art book was also a catalyst for turning the museum wall into a vertical coffee table. By the same token, the makeup and dress of television personalities soon came to be a function of the way viewers twitched their color dials. Although I did not go back to check, I have the strong feeling that my older friend was perfectly satisfied with the default setting for the colors of *Dallas*.

Looking back, I now see these developments not as radical changes in the direction of art but as arbitrary stages in the ongoing dialectic between original and copy, model and representation, between an integral prototype and a reduced or codified or otherwise reconstituted simulacrum, which in turn affects the model. Since one person's original is another person's copy, these concepts tend to replace each other and fall into regressive patterns. In one basic sense, the "original" is nature, while the simulacrum—whether produced by hand or by mechanical, photographic, or electronic means—is a work of art.

From this perspective, the digitization of existing images (once more: I am not speaking of digital imagery as a medium for artists) is nothing but another way of reducing an original, by means of a conventional code and its instruments, to a representation we experience as an acceptable surrogate. It is then to be expected that the process of digitization, like every other form of facsimile production, will introduce its own dysfunctions and distortions into this process. The next question to ask is: At what junctures, with what techniques, does digitization most critically intercept the path from original to copy and the reciprocal movements back to the original? Does it intrude on the process in essentially different ways from photography or video?

For the moment, digital imagery takes the same starting point as those techniques: the visual appearance of an object. In most cases, the "original" for purposes of digitization is photographic, so that the entire subsequent trajectory is subject to the limitations of photography. Digitization is, of course, theoretically independent of photography. Alternatives to photography—radar, thermal, and sonic sensing, radiography, reflectography—are presently employed for special purposes, and in the future may be used to create electronic, printed, or fully physical facsimiles without (or with partial) photographic input. This is a bridge we will cross in 2000-something. However, who can predict whether digitization will be essential or desirable for those purposes? My own feeling is that the present heavy reliance on digitization is excessive. The next breakthrough might well be in robotics or crystallography or another material technology. This may happen before digitization has even achieved its present goals. Digital imagery at the end of the twentieth century, after all, is still anchored, through its dependence on photography, in the nineteenth.

If not at the front end, digitization certainly *has* furthered new action at the output side of image facsimile. Properties of the image that, once defined, used to be irrevocable can now be changed further down the line. There is a steady downward shift, placing more and more power over the appearance of images in the hands of the end user. Since the end user is increasingly someone who scans images himself, maintains his own Web site, or passes on information in some

other way, public or published images of any kind are subject to uncontrolled manipulation in an endless loop. No norm for reliability exists, let alone the means to enforce one. The appearance of a representation is a function of the taste and talent of the operator. Two generations after the introduction of color television, a new acme has been reached in the history of user-defined art, allowing the viewer fine-tune control over not only color but virtually every other visual aspect of an image.

As I remarked above, original objects are not outside the loop of mutual influence; they are right in it. Just as the art book affected museological restoration and display practices, so digital imagery is bound to have its effect on art objects. Predicting the nature of that effect is hazardous; I will attempt to limit the risk as much as possible by making the most obvious prediction I can think of, extrapolating on developments that have already begun. And that is: museums are going to give visitors more control over the appearance of works of art; they are going to make their holdings more user-definable.

Museums are already doing what they can to become more interactive. They provide visitors with self-chosen information on touch-screen monitors; they put their holdings on CD-ROM and mount virtual exhibitions on the World Wide Web. In view of public expectations, it is inevitable that they should do so. However, in terms of attracting and holding the attention of visitors, this is a self-defeating strategy. It places the museum in a competitive field where it will always come out second- or third-best to software publishers and Web providers. How many people will want to stand in line in a museum to look at a monitor offering information that they can access at home, with no one breathing down their necks?

Sooner or later, the museum will be induced to play its trump in this game: its control over original works of art. Of course, it is already doing so in negotiations with publishers over rights. But this development is a further slide toward audience loss, albeit compensated by cash. The trump trick I am contemplating would reverse this tendency, by making direct experience of the original an indispensable element for appreciating digital enhancement at its best. In this regard, another form of interactivity is a more appropriate model than the CD-ROM or the Web site. That is, the free-route audio tours one can now use in certain exhibitions or collections. While looking at the original, the visitor can access one or more kinds of commentary to enrich (or at least amplify) the visual experience.

In the scenario I am contemplating, the museum will augment such spoken information with personalized visual enhancements to its displays. Now that we have grown accustomed to looking silly walking around with audio headsets, we have been made ripe for virtual-reality helmets. Whether or not present-day VR can do the trick I do not know. But I do know what I would like to see with it. Let me take the National Gallery in London as an example. While looking at the Duccio *Annunciation* panel, I would like the helmet to show me, in a realistic but differentiable virtual projection, how scholars think it fits into the predella of the *Maestà* and how the *Maestà* looked on the high altar of the Sienese Duomo before it was removed shortly after 1500. If there are

differing theories, I would like to see the best of them visualized, hearing their authors defend them and perhaps debating with each other in front of the virtual display. If I feel like putting in my two cents, I would like to be able to do so. At Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* I might want to see what the effect of a less vigorous cleaning might have been, how it looks stripped, or how a new cleaning would leave it. (For that matter, why not execute that projected cleaning only in the script, and let the painting be?) What did Monet's *Water Lilies* look like in its original frame, or next to its nearest neighbors in the series? Rembrandt's sweet portrait of *Saskia van Uylenburgh as Flora* started out as *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. May I see the X ray of the head in position? Please zoom in on the right hand of the cittern player in this Godfried van Schalken and enlarge it by a factor of ten. While you're at it, let me hear what chord he's playing. Show me the damage that vandal caused to the Rokeby *Venus*. The golden calf in the Poussin isn't gold enough for me. That's better. Kindly print it for me that way in poster format and have it ready when I return this stupid helmet.

To purists this will be anathema, but as I described it (no doubt in impossibly idealized form), such a display would be primarily an integrated presentation of information, hypotheses, and speculations now offered in diverse media: scholarly articles and monographs, exhibition catalogues, documentary films, digital reconstructions. The three great differences would be: the projection of images into the user's perceived space; the play between the virtual images and the actual work of art; and the user's control of these features.

Whether or not this particular technical application will come into being, I have succeeded in convincing myself that as a result of digitization museums will seek ways of putting more power over the appearance of their objects into the hands of visitors. What effect will this have on the perception of art? By rights it should further subvert the image of the work of art as an immutable creation, looking exactly the way the artist intended it to. The present appearance of an object in the gallery will take its place in a continuum of other thinkable and visualizable guises. In keeping with their work of the past decades, art historians will show works of art to museum visitors and to each other as the mixed products of physical survival, historical contingencies, and conceptual patterns. Ideally, empowered viewers will be able to see the effects of these factors, discount museum interventions, compensate historical losses, and perform viewing experiments of their own.

Although this is how I interpret current developments, I must say that alternatives are readily conceivable. There are

other present-day developments that could feed into very different futures. The freedom with which images now change hands is under attack by holders of all kinds of legal rights, some of whom claim control over the form an image may or may not take. The boundlessness of digitization is giving rise to a countervailing need for touchstones, for authenticity, for unmanipulable values, for verity as an antidote to virtuality. To some, art fills this role. The art museum could be further sanctified, the art object exempted from the general thrust toward increasing individual control.

Perhaps both things will happen: the liberation and curtailment of user definition. Allow me to correct that. Undoubtedly, both things *will* happen. Digitization does not come with a compelling value system of its own. The digitized Bible is used by fundamentalists as well as text critics, and both communities also harbor antidigital schools. The research division at Microsoft will design tools that would grant viewers optimal insight into and control over art images while the legal department will be building barriers against their unrestricted implementation. Principled opponents of interference with the artist's work will agitate against virtual reality in the museum.

To predict the outcome of the free-for-all between cultural and commercial interests, techniques, and ideologies that is shaping up would be even more foolhardy than I have been until now. However, I feel strongly that we should be on our guard against one particular combination: the alliance of digital imagery with the sanctification of art. In this constellation, owners of objects and images would attempt to impose on users mandatory perspectives and canonical interpretations of art. The sanctification of art in a digital environment would also play into the unholy hands of the most successful manipulators of images now operating: the games merchants. The makers of pseudohistorical games are already milking the mystique of art for what they can get out of it. I see in this a potentially serious threat to the open discourse on art to which we are so dedicated, and in which we would like to train our students. User definition may not be an unmitigated blessing, but in its opposite lie the seeds of a nasty curse.

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