Photography's Influence on Painting

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All artwork shows influence from the society in which the artists live, the materials available to them, as well as the technology of their eras. Prehistoric man used cave walls as ground and pigments made from ocher, and his subject matter was influenced by superstition and nature. Geometrically based linear perspective, first utilized by sculptor and architect Filippo Brunelleschi, allowed for the perception of depth in drawing and changed artistic vision from that moment forward. The late eighteenth century ushered in the Industrial Revolution. Artists in Western Europe in this era benefitted from a surge in technological progress with paint in tubes as well as from a more diverse clientele found within the increasingly wealthy middle class. Just as significantly, the development of photography influenced art in the second half of the nineteenth century. The camera's influence was apparent in the visual characteristics of paintings, the subject matter, and the powerful direction in which artists were able to take their creative visions.

In the seventeenth century artists used what is called the *camera obscura*, which is Latin for "room dark" and is defined as "a darkened enclosure or box with a small opening or lens on one wall through which light enters to form an inverted image on the opposite wall" (Janson and Janson 651). It is believed that some artists used this method to project images onto canvas as far back as Caravaggio during the Baroque period. In a statement released by the BBC, Area Head of Art Conservation Department at Studio Art Centers International, Florence, Roberta Lapucci, is quoted as saying, "Light-sensitive substances applied to the canvas would have 'fixed' the image for around thirty minutes, allowing Caravaggio to paint the image with broad strokes using white lead mixed with chemicals and minerals that were visible in the dark." Due to the

inability to create a truly permanent image, this technology could be used only as a tool to assist artists in drafting their artwork. Although the capability of projecting an image was not new, in the nineteenth century the technology introduced by the *camera obscura* took an innovative direction.

To gain a better understanding of photography's impact on painting, first it is necessary to look at history just prior to the creation of the fixed image. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Western European nations were exploring foreign lands and expanding their boundaries. This period also involved great turmoil, with the French Revolution wreaking havoc in the lives of many people. The artist Goya, who lived through this tumultuous period, was passionate about painting scenes that depicted the human condition of his times. However, he typically made a living as the official portrait painter of the Spanish royal family. Before the invention of the camera, artists like Goya, were the sole recipients of commissioned work for portraits, commemorative architecture, or the archiving of historical events. However, once photography became the mainstream means to capture clear and accurate likenesses of subjects, many artists needed to experiment with different media to support themselves. This development in technology did not mean that photography immediately replaced painting and drawing, but rather that it thinned out the number of available commissions. These changing circumstances may have been a blessing in disguise for artists who were pressed to take their work to new heights and who were freed to explore different passions.

In 1837, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre came up with the answer to the problem of the impermanent image of the past by creating a process that could permanently fix the picture; he captured the first permanent photograph of an artist's studio: *L'Atelier de l'artiste*

(www.sfp.photographie.com). Named after its inventor, the Daguerreotype is "a metal plate

coated with a light-sensitive silver solution, which, once developed in a chemical bath, resulted

in a unique likeness that could not be replicated, but that recorded the desired image with

astonishing clarity" (Arnason and Kalb 16). The term *photography* means "drawing with light"

because at first it was considered simply a drawing aid. Since the mid-nineteenth century,

photography has truly become a fusion between science and the creative eye. As with any new

electronic gadget of today, the first box cameras captured the curiosity of people who wanted to

know what they were capable of producing.

While the concept of photography was understood before the daguerreotype came into

existence, the ability to gaze at an actual photograph that did not disappear after a short time

made the concept a reality. Artists reacted to this new device with amazement and curiosity. Art

historian Peter Kalb writes about this occurrence:

> The most immediate and obvious impact [of photography] on painting can be seen in the
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> work of artists eager to achieve a special kind of optical veracity unknown until the
>
> advent of photography, a trend often thought to have culminated in the 'instantaneity' of
>
> Impressionism, and resurgent in the Photorealism of the 1970s. (15)

This invention was so significant that the French government conducted an official inquiry into

the process. Paul Delaroche, a painter himself, wrote in the official report that "Daguerre's

process completely satisfies all the demands of art, carrying certain essential principles of art to

such perfection that it must become a subject of observation and study even to the most

accomplished painters" (Kleiner 847). Edgar Degas and Thomas Eakins were so intrigued with

this new ability to capture a moment in time that they both pursued photography as an additional

creative outlet (Arnason and Kalb 15). In 1972, painter, novelist, and historian John Berger

wrote in an insightful article titled "Ways of Seeing" that the invention of the camera changed the way people in general and artists in particular saw the world. This new and different perspective was immediately reflected in painting. Berger saw the effect of the camera on painting as similar to the way we perceive the effect of the computer on business over the last thirty years. Once the camera and the computer existed, everyone had to have one, and then nobody could imagine life without either of them.

The most obvious change in the visual characteristics of art brought on by photography was in this new way of seeing that the camera introduced to the artist. For example, the option of cropping a photograph by selecting only part of a subject included in the image plane allows for a more intimate connection so that the viewer is placed inside the scene. In the painting *Ballerina and Lady with a Fan* (http://www.philamuseum.org), Edgar Degas seats the viewer with the vantage point pushed up beside a segment of a woman in the audience in the foreground. Furthermore, in the early stages of camera development, long exposures with a camera were required to capture the image. One of the effects of this procedure is shutter-drag, which allows for beautiful fluid movement and gracefully blurred selections. Artists such as Whistler tried to capture this effect on the canvas. His oil painting *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket* (http://www.dia.org) shows the fluidity of a fireworks show, capturing multiple bursts cascading in a blazing shower to the ground. Stopping action with a photograph was one of the most fascinating discoveries for many. Before stop-action, it was difficult to capture a muscle tensed, an odd expression, or the gait of a horse in mid-step. After examining photographs, Degas did a series of jockey paintings (http://www.philamuseum.org/) in which he studied the gait of the horse, capturing the rider pulling back on the reins to control the horse's pace. The legs of the horse are up in the air and stretched out in a long stride.

Throughout history the subjects most favored by artists were scenes depicting religious themes, portraits of royalty, and beautiful landscapes. Many of the paintings had a theatrical quality to them because the models were ever-so-carefully posed. In the second half of the nineteenth century, photography began to influence artists' choice of subject matter because of the medium's ability to take a snapshot of ordinary people doing everyday things. The decisive moment that the photographer chose to click the shutter gives the viewer a window into the subject's world at that second. This freezing of the moment caused painters to take notice of everyday scenes, and then they tried to capture those moments as majestically as they had in a carefully posed royal portrait. A fine example of this approach is clear in *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* by Auguste Renoir, (http://www.musee-orsay.fr) where the artist captured a moment in time during a typical Sunday afternoon gathering in Paris. The subjects are not posed like models; instead, they are stopped in mid-step, gesture, and gaze. The brushstrokes have also been painted with gestures that appear to stop in mid-stroke.

The approach to painting taken by many artists up to this point in history showed an attempt to reproduce their subjects with great accuracy in every minute detail. When this approach is taken to its limits, artists refer to it as *trompe-l'oeil* or "to fool the eye." Photography takes *trompe-l'oeil* to an even higher level of reproducing a realistic image. In reference to the impact that photography had on some artists, Arnason and Kalb write that it "took the scrupulous fidelity of the photographic image as a good reason to work imaginatively or conceptually and thus liberated their art from the requirement of pictorial verisimilitude" (15). Perhaps the greatest contribution the development of the camera gave to artists was the freedom to experiment and expand their creative vision, which ultimately led them towards abstraction of form. The theory of the Form dates back to Plato. Using a bed as an example, Plato explains that although there

may be many different types of beds, there is only one idea of the bed; this idea is the Form, and everything else is an imitation. The artist who paints the bed is imitating the carpenter who built the bed; the carpenter is in turn imitating the creator of all of nature, God (Plato 254). Abstraction in art reduces the subject matter to its simplest shape, flattening it until it gives just enough to leave the viewer with the idea of the subject or the Form. In this way, viewers are able to interpret the subjects themselves. During the period of Impressionism, which began in the late 1800s, artists were trying to capture the first impression of the subject to leave the viewer with the mere hint of the Form. In Claude Monet's oil painting *Impression Soleil Levant aux Nymphéas* (http://www.marmottan.com/), the boats and the figures are all reduced to mere silhouettes, and the background allows for just a suggestion of a shipyard and smokestacks, giving the viewer a beautiful impression of the forms of the waterfront.

A tremendous number of events and inventions have changed the direction of art. The power of photography was just one of those influences. Berger writes,

> The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing. (10)

In the end, it is the viewer whose perception is influenced by the artwork or the photograph. In fact, today we have become so accustomed to the still image that we have difficulty imagining art and life without it.

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