Historical Materiality of Painting
-- Preface to the Japanese Edition

It has been six years since The Double Screen first came out, during which I have often thought about its implications for my thinking of the history of art and how to study it. It may be helpful to the readers to outline some of my thoughts here.

Generally, this book falls into a larger project of studying the “historical materiality” of art objects, including paintings. This project responds to two problems in today’s art historical scholarship. The first is the vague notion of an “object” in an historical inquiry; the second is the de-materialization of painting through photographic reproduction. I remember that fourteen years ago, the Getty Trust and Brown University conducted a survey of research processes in the field of art history. The result is summarized in a book-length report Object, Image, Inquiry: The Art Historian at Work. The section about the "object” focuses on the tension between the "original" and "reproductions." Almost all the interviewees cited in this section voice their preference for working with original works of art in an historical inquiry; the concept of the "original object," however, remains intuitive and pertains, in one scholar’s words, to the "physical presence" of a work of art and its "object-hood."

This tendency to take an object as a "fact" -- as a self-contained entity that demands description, examination and interpretation -- seems to be shared by different kinds of scholars from connoisseurs to social and cultural historians of art. As a consequence, the idea of an original art historical object has remained one of the few large assumptions that has not been seriously contested in this discipline. Although it is by now a shared understanding among scholars that the concept of the object changes over time, various authors use the term "object" without defining it, but immediately
pair it with other concepts such as "reproduction," "subject," "context," "perception," or "interpretation." A specific pairing then provides a basic framework for a particular, though in most cases still unspoken, conception of the object. As a result, while the object remains fundamental for developing various interpretative theories and strategies, it itself often escapes problematization.

The Double Screen responds to such intuitive integrity of an original art historical object. It is true that there have been many studies of the object from various disciplinary perspectives: studies of objects as groups and classes; studies of the "history of things;" and studies of objects in terms of the subject’s formation. Although this book is to some extent related to all these issues, it has a specific focus and a more practical goal. Its focus is a series of paintings created at specific moments and places in history. Its purpose is to find a way to tackle these works of art directly and to keep them as both the focus and frame of an historical interpretation. This means that this interpretation will hopefully transcend the dichotomies of object/reproduction, object/context, and object/interpretation. One way to achieve this, I propose in this book, is to distinguish a historical painting from its current physical presence, and to gain access to the painting’s obscured historicity by reconstructing its historical materiality -- its material properties, construction, and signification. Thus I asked a question at the beginning of the book -- What is a (traditional Chinese) painting? -- and answered it by saying that “a painting must be understood both as an image-bearing object and as a pictorial image; the collaboration and tension between these two aspects makes a work a ‘painting’.”

Two additional factors add a sense of urgency in taking up this task. The first is a "look back" at traditional painting from their "de-materialized" electronic images of our time; the second is a "look around" at different art traditions in pre-modern periods. Those ghostly images of famous paintings on computer screens seem to provide a ground-zero, against which the materiality of the original works can be acutely
imagined. On the other hand, it has also become clear that even in pre-modern times, terms like "painting" refer to different things in different cultures and periods; used in a global context such terms dismiss the materiality of a particular painting format or medium. For example, as I suggest in this book, a handscroll painting in traditional Chinese and Japanese art does not have an overall frame but it does have a moving surface, and it is related to a spectator not just through the gaze but also through physical contact. A painted screen not only exhibits pictorial images on its surface but also divides and "shields" an architectural space. So in these cases the term "painting" really means little if an object's physical properties and the way of viewing it are not taken into account. Many methods and theories developed in the European painting tradition -- methods and theories based on a stable, two-dimensional pictorial representation and on the physical detachment of the subject and the object -- can be dangerously inappropriate when directly applied to a handscroll or a screen.

These are of course rather simple examples, but they do highlight three basic arguments in this book. First, as an image bearing object, an historical painting is often an organization of divergent materials, parts, and signs; and it includes both the decoration and what is decorated, the frame and what is framed, what is presented and what is concealed. A painting's design and construction are related to the ways in which it is displayed, viewed, handled, and placed. This also means that historical materiality of a painting is not restricted to the object per se, but implies external associations with a viewer, a handler, or an environment.

Second, the definition of a painting as an historical object, or its historical materiality, is not self-evident in the painting’s present physical existence, but has to be reconstructed through historical research. Most painted screens from the Tang to Ming dynasties, for example, have been turned into hanging scrolls. As for handscroll paintings, most people in China and Japan today no longer know how to handle them, and the modern museum only encourages this ignorance by turning a moving picture
into a still pictorial representation. Should the researcher study the processes of painting, mounting, storing, and exhibiting a painted screen or a handscroll in historical situations, he would gradually define such works as historical objects, not just as physical properties of modern art collections. When talking about the spectatorship of a handscroll painting, for example, he would have to reconstruct a situation in which the work is handled by a "primary viewer" who alone decides the pace of unrolling the scroll, while other "secondary viewers" look at the painting over his (or her) shoulders.

Third, as implied in the above two points, the historical materiality of a painting is not just what makes the work material, but is what makes it historically functional and meaningful. A study of historical materiality of a painting can thus potentially break down the dichotomies between reproduction and object/image, context and object/image, and interpretation and object/image. Such a study can break down the dichotomy between reproduction and object/image because what separates these two is actually their different materiality, which should be historicized, not prioritized. (For example, a photographic reproduction of a famous painting can be studied as a “translation” of the original work into a different material form.) It can break down the dichotomy between context and object/image because a painting’s historical materiality is defined in terms of both attributes and associations. It can break down the dichotomy between theory and object/image because its particular interest in a painting accords with a specific methodological objective. The sum of these breakdowns is a "return" to painting as an object with a new analytical stand and interest. This "return" must not be viewed as a rejection of interpretation. To the contrary, such a study should be thought of as an internalization of interpretation: rather than "inserting an object within a general history of meaning" or "abstracting text from any dependence on representation" -- two principal interpretative strategies summarized by Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, this study will relocate an interpretative process within the study of an object itself.
Although this book discusses style, iconography and symbolism of screen paintings, its basic analytical framework is the **historical materiality** of such paintings as image-bearing objects. Defined as the "material quality or embodiment of a thing," materiality is the sum of various physical and visual aspects that make up an art object. Since the study of historical materiality internalizes interpretation, there must be different emphases and research methods within this study. Moreover, because paintings differ in their material, construction, and environment, the ways to recover their historical materiality must also vary. In this sense, this book, which focuses on screens and screen images, only applies a general methodological approach to analyzing a particular type of historical painting. This specific subject requires specific interpretive methods, but it is hoped that this experiment will inspire studies of other art objects and images.

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June 2002, Chicago