

Revisiting the Phenomenon of “Image-ization” in Sketching

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the rapid development of digital information technologies and photographic media, a phenomenon of “image-ization” has increasingly emerged in painting practice, whereby photographs are used to substitute for sketching from life. Taking sketching practice as its primary subject of inquiry, this paper reviews the manifestations of the “image-ization” phenomenon in contemporary painting and the debates surrounding it, and conducts a systematic analysis from the perspectives of the concept of sketching, its essential artistic significance, and the broader context of art education. The study argues that excessive reliance on photographic images not only weakens artists’ direct perception of real life and the natural environment but also tends to result in the standardization of pictorial language and a decline in emotional expressiveness. Through a comparative examination of the traditions of sketching in both Chinese and Western painting, together with analyses of representative artistic practices, this article highlights the foundational and creative value of sketching within artistic production. Furthermore, it explores the institutional and practical factors within contemporary art education that have contributed to the replacement of sketching by “image-based” approaches. The research suggests that only by returning to lived experience and direct engagement with nature, while reinforcing sketching practice and aesthetic perception, can the vitality and spiritual depth of painting be restored, thereby promoting the sustainable development of contemporary painting.

Keywords: Sketching; Image-ization; Painting Practice; Art Education

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1. Introduction

The widespread application of digital information technologies, while facilitating everyday work and life, has also generated a range of unintended consequences. For instance, photographic technology enables the rapid and accurate capture of transient visual images; however, its increasing penetration into the field of fine arts has exerted a significant impact on traditional modes of painting. This has contributed to the emergence of an “image-ization” tendency in artistic creation, wherein photographs are used as substitutes for direct observation from life. In particular, the increasingly prevalent notion of “painting from photographs” has led some artists to rely on pre-shot images, working in the isolation of the studio, under the assumption that sketching is both physically demanding and conceptually outdated. They maintain that such photo-based practices can still yield works capable of conveying lived experience and articulating intellectual or emotional content. Although this “image-ization” phenomenon and its associated issues have long attracted critical attention and debate within the art community, the tendency toward painting from photographs continues to proliferate rapidly across the country, becoming ever more pronounced^[1, 2].

One may legitimately ask: to what extent do contemporary painters still attach importance to sketching practice? The phenomenon of “image-ization” has, for a considerable period, remained a subject of divergent interpretations, accompanied by a persistent body of critical discourse characterized by both opposition and endorsement. Opponents contend that “Life is the source of artistic creation; ‘image-ization’ effectively severs the artist’s connection with life, thereby constraining perceptual sensitivity and imaginative capacity, and leading to works that tend toward excessive symbolization, formalization, and a loss of expressive vitality.” Conversely, proponents argue that “artistic practice encompasses both direct observation and the use of photographic references. Although the two differ in essence, sketching engages with three-dimensional, dynamic, and temporally contingent phenomena, whereas photography presents a two-dimensional, static, and fixed spatiotemporal condition, image-based painting derived from photographic references nonetheless represents a legitimate creative strategy”^[3,4]. In effect, the tendency toward “image-ization” has become increasingly pervasive within contemporary sketching practice, with some artists even expressing a degree of self-satisfaction in adopting such an approach. Upon closer examination, this phenomenon is often driven by attempts to affirm and privilege particular artistic orientations, which, in turn, give rise to certain misconceptions and speculative assumptions regarding “image-ization” in observational painting. These include, inter alia, the conceptual ambiguity surrounding sketching, an insufficient understanding of its essential significance, and an inadequate analysis of the underlying causes shaping the current condition of “image-ization”^[5].

2. On the Delimitation of the Concept of Sketching and Reconsidering Its Relationship with Artistic Creation

Sketching from life refers to a mode of pictorial practice in which the artist directly renders objects derived from nature, whether tangible entities or observed scenes, as primary subjects of representation. It encompasses still-life sketching, portrait sketching, and landscape sketching. Depending on its purpose, such practice may be oriented toward the refinement of technical skills, the accumulation of visual materials, or the fulfillment of specific creative objectives in the production of artworks^[6].

However, with regard to the conceptual understanding of sketching from life, many painters contend that it is no longer necessary to carry cumbersome painting equipment when working outdoors; instead, a high-definition digital camera suffices for a lightweight approach. In this view, the task is reduced to a cursory visual survey of the external environment, capturing photographs in a fleeting manner and collecting the required pictorial materials, thus obviating the need to endure harsh outdoor conditions to complete a work on site. Returning to the studio to paint from photographs is regarded as both convenient and efficient^[7].

Admittedly, the use of photographs as auxiliary tools in painting is not inherently problematic. Since the invention of photography, it has maintained a close and complex relationship with painting. On the one hand, photography exerted a profound impact on realist painting, prompting doubts as to whether representational painting could continue to exist under the technical advantages of photographic imaging; this tension became one of the driving forces behind the transformation of painting from “representation” toward “expression”. On the other hand, studies have shown that photographic images have indeed assisted certain artists in achieving notable creative results. For instance, the French painter Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* was inspired by black-and-white photography: the composition simplifies tonal gradation, omits intermediate transitions, and emphasizes stark contrasts, allowing the nude figure to stand out luminously against a dark background, while achieving a unity of form and color between the figure’s volumetric presence and its surrounding space. Similarly, the Impressionist painter Edgar Degas, in his depictions of ballet dancers, drew upon photographic effects in both the articulation of movement and the treatment of light and shadow.

In the context of Chinese painting, certain works, owing to artists’ visual experience being mediated through printed albums, have, to varying degrees, referenced photographic sources. Examples include Dong Xiwen’s *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation* (Figure 2) and Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (Figure 3). Crucially, however, these artists engaged with photography only after undergoing rigorous training in sketching from life and mastering the techniques of representation; their use of photographic material was selective and interpretive rather than imitative. It is precisely this disciplined foundation that enabled their works to attain the status of artistic exemplars.

This suggests that the issue does not lie in whether photographs may be used in painting, but rather in how they are employed. The key depends on whether the artist's point of engagement with photographic imagery is conceptually and methodologically sound. From this perspective, the judicious use of images can indeed serve as a valuable reference. Yet in contemporary practice, the phenomenon of directly copying photographs has become increasingly prevalent. As a result, paintings tend to resemble photographs to an excessive degree. It is no exaggeration to assert that, in some cases, the languages of form and pictorial expression in painting have become inseparable from photographic dependence. Consequently, the richness of chromatic variation, the subtle vitality of brushwork, and the lived expressiveness of form have largely disappeared, leading to an estrangement from both the real world and original nature. Artistic creation thus risks devolving into rigidity and formulaic repetition, this constitutes the fundamental problem of "painting from photographs"^[8,9]. Such uncritical replication of photographs, even when motivated by the intention to imitate nature and life, ultimately results in the loss of painting's original purpose and mission at its very foundation.

Figure 1. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, oil on canvas, 130cm×190cm, 1863

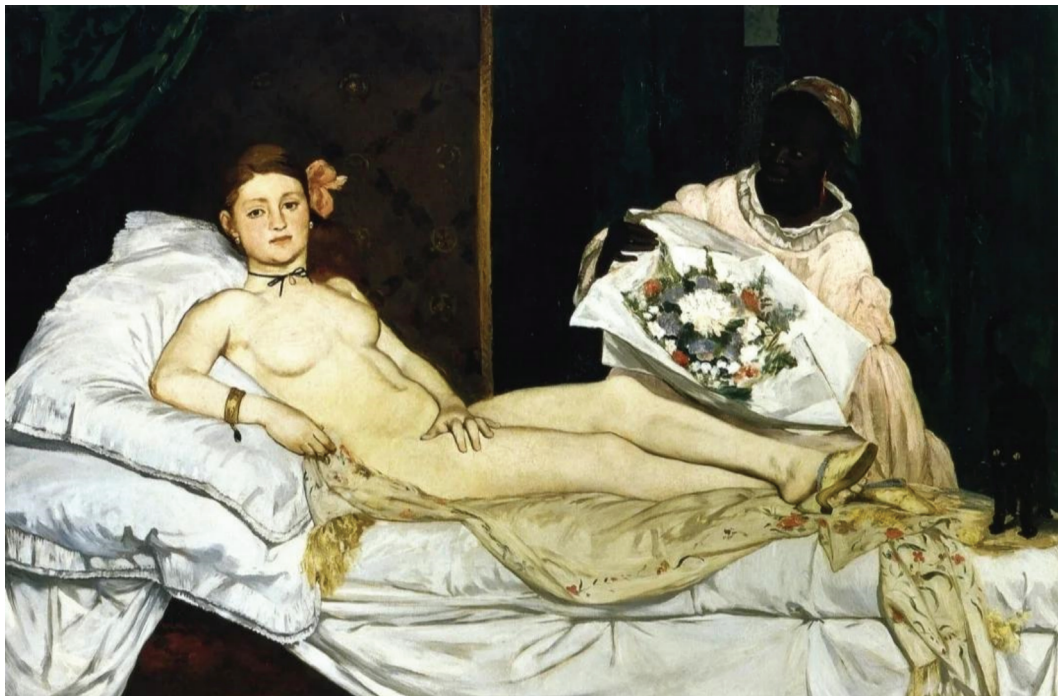
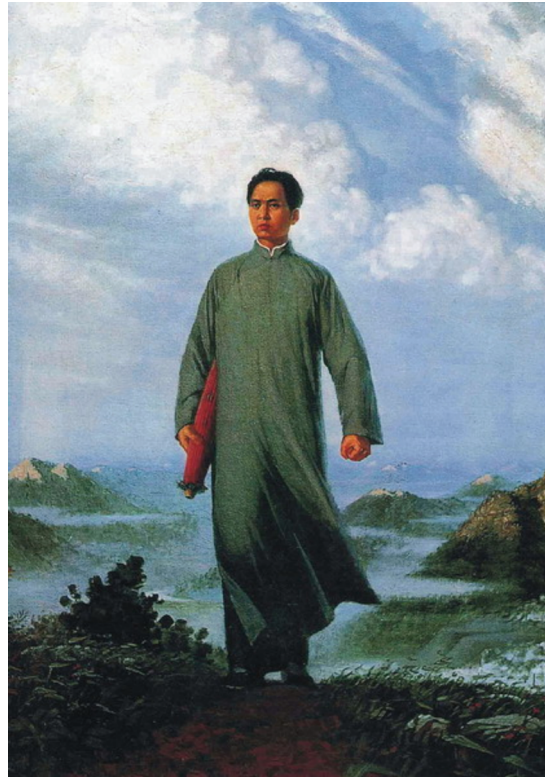


Figure 2. Dong Xiwen, *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*, oil on canvas, 230cm×405cm, 1953



Figure 3. Liu Chunhua, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, oil painting, 220cm×180cm, 1967



From a comparative perspective on the concept of sketching from life in both Chinese and Western traditions, the Western understanding places strong emphasis on depicting natural objects in accordance with their original appearance. It prioritizes the collection of visual materials for subsequent artistic production, foregrounding an ostensibly objective mode of representation. Within this framework, a completed painting is expected to closely resemble the people, objects, or scenes it portrays, an approach often described as a “natural attitude”, wherein pictorial content and represented appearance achieve a form of visual equivalence. Exemplary works such as *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt (Figure 4) and *The Third of May 1808* by Francisco Goya (Figure 5) were all created prior to the invention of photography, relying fundamentally on sketching from life as a primary means of artistic realization.

In contrast, although traditional Chinese painting did not formulate an explicit conceptual category equivalent to sketching, the underlying notion has long been embedded within its theoretical and practical discourse. For instance, Shitao advocated the principle of “learning from nature”, emphasizing the importance of direct engagement with the natural world through on-site observation. This suggests that traditional Chinese painting likewise sought a degree of visual correspondence between representation and the natural scene. Historical records further attest to this practice: in *Jishi* (Vol. 4) by Fan Zhen of the Song dynasty, it is noted that the painter Zhao Chang, renowned for his depictions of flowers, would observe them attentively in the morning dew and render them directly from life, even adopting the sobriquet “Zhao Chang of Sketching from Life”. Similarly, the Ming text *Xu Shi Bijing* records that artists such as Ni Zan of the Yuan dynasty favored sketching from life as a means of departing from established conventions. These accounts indicate that, although lacking a formally defined concept, practices akin to sketching from life have long existed within Chinese artistic tradition.

Moreover, the Tang dynasty painter Zhang Zao articulated the well-known dictum: “externally learn from creation, internally derive from the source of the mind”. This formulation underscores a dual process: on the one hand, understanding and apprehending nature through observation and study (“externally learning from creation”); on the other, transforming the beauty of nature into artistic beauty through the artist’s inner conception and emotional sensibility (“internally deriving from the source of the mind”). It is precisely through this synthesis that painting attains a poetic dimension. In this sense, sketching is not merely a technical procedure but constitutes a mode of expression that privileges spirit, subjectivity, and artistic conception, thereby affirming its central role in the aesthetic philosophy of painting.

Figure 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Night Watch*, oil on canvas, 363cm×437cm, 1642



Figure 5. Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, oil on canvas, 266cm×345cm, 1814



Another line of thought reflects an ambiguous understanding of the conceptual relationship between sketching from life and artistic creation. It posits that sketching constitutes merely a foundational stage: only after consolidating technical proficiency can one proceed to creation. Within this framework, creative practice is not limited to life-based approaches but also includes image-based production. In the author's view, however, such a position artificially segregates creation from sketching, thereby rendering the definition of sketching both narrow and absolutized. In practice, the creative process of painting demonstrates that sketching from life is itself a form of creation. It entails a process of perceiving, comprehending, and interpreting objective subjects, rather than mechanically imitating appearances. Under the interplay of perception, consciousness, and emotional experience, the artist integrates personal sensibility into the act of depiction, distilling and transforming what is seen, conceived, and contemplated into visual form. This constitutes creative sketching from life. Its prerequisite lies in direct engagement with nature, immersing oneself in the environment through sustained observation, attentive listening, and analytical reflection, so as to achieve a creatively mediated re-presentation of the object. Accordingly, sketching from life is not merely a straightforward act of rendering external forms; it must also convey the artist's ideas and emotions, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of painting itself. It is precisely in this integrative sense that the intrinsic relationship between sketching from life and artistic creation can be fully realized^[4].

Therefore, sketching from life is, in essence, a mode of artistic creation. Whether in the Western practice of direct, perceptual rendering, executed stroke by stroke before the motif, or in the selective engagement with subjects characteristic of traditional Chinese painting, the objects of depiction are invariably drawn from “first nature”. In each case, the making of a work entails an experiential immersion in the vitality of life and an intuitive apprehension of the laws of nature, followed by processes of transformation, editing, and selective emphasis. Such procedures are guided by a creative mode of thinking, through which sketching from life is realized as an act of artistic production. This form of sketching must not be reduced to the mechanical transcription of nature through “image-based” techniques made possible by the advent of photography. To do so would constitute a fundamental misdirection, whereby the practice deviates from its artistic essence and ceases to function as art.

3. The Essential Significance and Artistic Value of Sketching

In contemporary society, the phenomenon of “image-ization” has become increasingly pervasive. Does this imply that art can distance itself from reality and detach from nature, rendering sketching from life obsolete? Certainly not^[10]. If a painter lacks genuine emotional engagement and critical consciousness toward the depicted object, and merely reproduces photographic images devoid of vitality, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to produce a compelling work of art.

What constitutes the essential significance of sketching from life? Through rational reflection, it may be understood as a process of cognition and visual inscription that emerges from the dynamic interaction between the artist and the external world. Within artistic creation, sketching from life functions as an extension of the artist’s intellectual and spiritual faculties, serving as the point of departure for the articulation of subjective emotion. It is no longer confined to the traditional pursuit of truthful representation of visual objects; rather, within the context of a pluralistic cultural landscape, it embodies an exploratory engagement with complex artistic discourses, thereby acquiring a rich and multifaceted connotative significance^[11].

As a mode of pictorial expression, the aesthetic value generated by sketching from life resides in its nature as a practice-based art. It constitutes an optimal means of experiencing life, engaging with nature, and refining artistic skill. Each patch of color and every stroke of line in the process of sketching directly touches upon the artist’s most vital and dynamic points of perceptual and emotional excitation, revealing the process by which each living entity, under the combined impetus of nature and the artist, releases its inherent beauty. It may be asserted that, once detached from sketching from life, artistic creation loses its inexhaustible vitality and renewal; painting from photographs alone resembles drifting in stagnant water, devoid of animation and expressive force. Without embodied experience and direct observation, how can the authenticity of pictorial emotion be realized? And how can the artist’s perceptual and affective responses be fully articulated? Under such conditions, works inevitably risk falling into conceptualization, artificiality, and expressive pallor. More problematically, some practitioners rely on digital software to recombine and rearrange photographed imagery, subsequently adding elements such as line, form, and color to achieve a satisfactory compositional scheme before proceeding to direct transcription. In this manner, without engaging in sketching from life, and through relatively simple technical manipulation, they are able to produce works for exhibition and even secure awards. Such utilitarian approaches to painting raise critical questions regarding artistic inheritance and cultural value: what significance remains for the transmission of artistic tradition, and where is the sense of reverence for life and nature? These issues warrant serious reflection. Therefore, when confronted with the vast, dynamic, and ever-changing phenomena of the natural world, the artist must cultivate both a curiosity for exploration and a passion for observation. This requires sincerity, perceptual acuity, and confidence, as well as the pursuit of authentic sensation through the coordinated engagement of eye, hand, and mind. It entails the full mobilization of one’s focus, energy, and spirit: perceiving the object with clarity, conceiving intention within the mind, and momentarily suspending self-consciousness, technical preoccupation, and rigid rational constraints. Freed from prescriptive rules and infused with spontaneity and vitality, the artist may express directly and intuitively, fully immersed in the act of creation. Through sustained practice in sketching from life, diverse artistic languages can be integrated into a distinctive formal synthesis that stimulates aesthetic sensibility and seeks to capture the objective corporeal presence of the subject, while achieving richness and vitality in formal expression. Only by condensing the artist’s lived insight into the pictorial surface can a work attain warmth, emotional depth, and a vivid, life-infused presence.

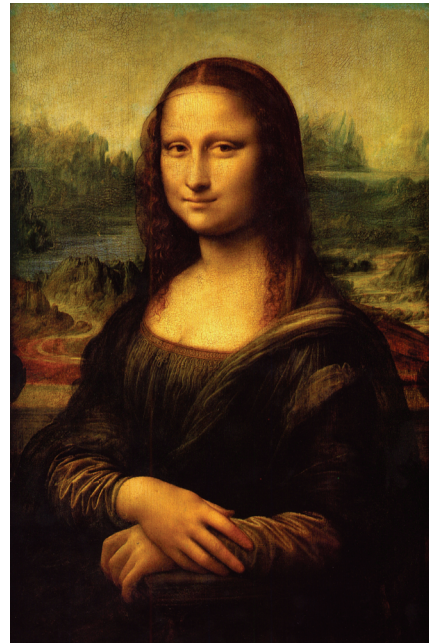
For the artist, the world presents itself as a realm of inexhaustible chromatic richness and perpetual transformation. Once immersed in lived experience and attuned to the rhythms of nature, one is inevitably drawn to its inexhaustible vitality and subtle beauty. From geometric configurations such as triangles and squares to irregular forms; from flora to fauna; from still life to the human figure and, ultimately, to landscape, the process of sketching from life constitutes a progressive deepening of one's cognition of nature's manifold charms. Taking the intricacy of the natural world as a form of spiritual aspiration, the artist's perceptual sensitivity and expressive capacity are gradually activated and advanced. As engagement with nature intensifies, depiction becomes increasingly invested with affective and perceptual depth, drawing the artist ever more profoundly into the aesthetic experience of the natural world. This, in turn, generates an enduring desire to refine sensory acuity and to develop ever more nuanced means of expression. Within this unending cycle of practice and aesthetic contemplation, of continual sketching and renewed perception, the artist becomes immersed in a dynamic creative state. It is precisely this sustained and self-renewing experiential process that constitutes the creative conception of sketching in painting.

The process of sketching from life is not merely a means through which painters refine and elevate their technical skills; it is equally a process of recognizing one's own limitations and deficiencies, an aspect of artistic cultivation that "painting from photographs" can never attain. For this reason, artists across different historical periods and cultural contexts have consistently acknowledged the indispensable importance of sketching from life^[12]. In the tradition of Chinese painting, artists have long adhered to the practice of direct observation and on-site sketching. The creative connotations of their works lie not only in the depiction of the inner spirit and outward form of objective subjects, but more fundamentally in the articulation of the painter's aesthetic vision, subjective consciousness, and emotional expression. This approach simultaneously emphasizes the authenticity of the external world and the intentionality of the artist's inner will. As a result, landscape painting, under the painter's brush and ink, embodies both the pristine beauty of nature and the emotive soul of the artist. For example, Zong Bing, who favored extensive travel before returning in later years to devote himself to artistic creation, articulated in his Preface to Landscape Painting the principle of "engaging with life". His statement "When visual perception and inner comprehension correspond, the eye responds in kind, and the mind resonates accordingly; through such correspondence, the spirit is stirred and transcends, thereby attaining the underlying principle", emphasizes that the essence of landscape sketching lies in capturing the spirit of mountains and waters. Similarly, Fan Kuan undertook repeated journeys to the Zhongtiao and Hua Mountains before creating *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* (Figure 6). Jing Hao, by carrying paper and brush deep into the Taihang Mountains and sketching countless pine trees, ultimately grasped their true essence. As recorded in *Bifa Ji*: "Astonished by their uniqueness, I observed them thoroughly. The next day, I returned with brush in hand to depict them; only after sketching tens of thousands did I approach their true form." These painters, through repeated immersion in nature and sustained observational practice, have left an indelible mark on the historical development of Chinese landscape painting. In Western painting, a flexible mode of thought and a freer expression of subjective emotion often lead to a relative attenuation of objectivity and a strengthening of subjectivity within the creative process. The use of imagistic and interpretive methods enables painting to reveal both the essential qualities of nature and the underlying aesthetic concepts, forming a distinctive visual paradigm. Masters such as Rembrandt, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and Leonardo da Vinci all produced enduring masterpieces through sustained engagement with sketching from life. For instance, *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci (Figure 7) is often regarded as a paradigmatic example of life-based study; in order to preserve the sitter's natural state, musicians were reportedly invited to perform during the sitting, thereby contributing to the emergence of her enigmatic smile. The Impressionist painters, moreover, strongly advocated for on-site painting practices, emphasizing subjective perception and individual style. In the works of Van Gogh, exaggerated color, bold forms, and spontaneous brushwork fully articulate personal sensation, establishing a distinctive creative philosophy. Likewise, the paintings of Picasso frequently feature unconventional human figures, inspired by real-life observation yet transformed through imaginative reinterpretation, ultimately achieving the artistic aim of expressing emotion through metaphorical representation.

Figure 6. Fan Kuan, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, ink on silk, 206.3cm×103.3cm, Northern Song dynasty



Figure 7. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, oil on panel, 77cm×53cm, c. 1503–1506



For the painter, in this age of pervasive image mediation, it is insufficient to remain content with creating works based merely on preexisting images. Rather, one must be willing to endure hardship, to enter into nature, to engage closely with lived reality, and to apprehend the vitality of life itself, thereby recovering the ontological foundation of painting. Taking aesthetic consciousness as the point of departure, and guided by sincerity of emotion and integrity of spirit, the artist should foreground the expressive power of passionate aesthetic experience while emphasizing the authenticity of lived feeling. Through sustained practice in sketching from life, the painter becomes increasingly attuned to qualities of purity, reverence, and a profound respect for life. It is, I would argue, precisely in this orientation that the essential significance of sketching from life finds its fullest and most concentrated expression.

4. An Analysis of the Causes of the “image-ization” Phenomenon in Sketching

To transform the current condition of the “image-ization” tendency in sketching from life, it is not sufficient merely to clarify its conceptual definition and essential significance; it is equally necessary to analyze the underlying causes that have given rise to this phenomenon and to address them with targeted and context-sensitive measures. Only through such critical intervention can sketching from life be redirected toward nature and reconnected with lived experience, ultimately returning to the artist’s sensibility and expressive practice^[13].

At present, sketching-from-life courses offered in art institutions of higher education have, to a considerable extent, become nominal in function. Students often engage in outdoor practice in a passive manner, and their increasing reliance on photographic images has further contributed to the proliferation of a cohort trained primarily in “painting from photographs”. Drawing on the author’s own teaching experience, for instance, during the spring and autumn terms, undergraduate students are regularly taken outdoors for on-site sketching. Yet it is striking that, although physically present in the natural environment, with easels set up and brushes in hand, students frequently sit together in small groups, photographing the scenery with mobile phones or tablets and subsequently painting from these captured images, while remaining largely indifferent to the vivid, dynamic reality before them. Under such conditions, the pedagogical significance of sketching from life is called into question. When students approach sketching merely as a task to be completed, the practice risks becoming a misuse of educational resources. Indeed, if this mode of operation prevails, one might argue that it would be more efficient simply to take photographs and complete the work in the comfort of the studio. A similar phenomenon is evident in studio-based courses such as drawing and color studies: even when real still-life setups or live models are present, students persist in photographing the subjects and working from the images. Despite repeated pedagogical emphasis on observing objects

directly from multiple perspectives, cultivating perceptual understanding through the eye, and internalizing experiential insight through attentive engagement, so as to imbue their works with genuine emotional content, many students remain unmoved and adhere to their established habits. When questioned about this tendency, some students respond that the entrance examinations for art programs require drawing from photographs, and that their prior preparatory training has consistently emphasized such methods; they have rarely, if ever, engaged in sketching from life^[14]. Consequently, they lack both the methodological awareness and practical experience necessary to create through life-based observation. Such responses are, on the one hand, understandable within the existing educational framework, yet, on the other, they evoke a sense of concern and helplessness regarding the current state of art education.

In light of this situation, the author does not endorse the examination format in large-scale art entrance tests that relies on painting from photographs". While some scholars contend that such a practice is justifiable, arguing that these examinations were originally based on direct observation (life drawing) and were only later adapted to photographic references due to the increasing number of candidates, with the intention of ensuring fairness and procedural equity, this perspective overlooks the broader and more profound consequences of this shift. Indeed, it is precisely this transformation, exemplified by the art entrance examination system, that has contributed to the rise and entrenchment of the "image-ization" paradigm within art education. Over several decades, the practice of painting from photographs has gradually become the dominant mode of instruction and assessment. As a result, the spiritual dimension of artistic practice and the foundational awareness of working from life have been significantly eroded among art students. Under such circumstances, we must critically the very prospects of future artistic development.

Up to the present, the prominence of the unified art entrance examination remains undiminished. In pursuit of university admission, many art students resort to short-term intensive training programs offered by private preparatory institutions, through which they are able to meet examination requirements within a matter of months. However, this task-oriented mode of learning, centered on painting from photographs and geared primarily toward examination performance, has led to a noticeable decline in the overall level of artistic proficiency, becoming an increasingly widespread phenomenon. More critically, such practices have further undermined students' capacities for working from life. It is not uncommon to observe that many art majors in higher education find themselves unable to paint without photographic references. When confronted with real subjects, they often lack the ability to determine appropriate viewpoints, to perceive and analyze light, or to organize pictorial composition effectively. Given the growing concerns regarding the quality of incoming students, one must seriously question how art education, under these conditions, can sustain its long-term development. By contrast, earlier generations of artists, in their pursuit of artistic excellence, undertook arduous efforts, carrying their painting equipment into mountains and forests, enduring harsh environmental conditions, and spending entire days outdoors in search of suitable motifs. Even in advanced age, many senior artists continued to devote themselves to sketching practice. It is precisely through such sustained commitment to working from life that the continuity of artistic tradition and the impetus for innovation have been maintained. Moreover, under the influence of various interest-driven mechanisms generated by the unified art entrance examination system, private art training institutions, traditionally adept at expedient and shortcut-oriented pedagogies, have proliferated extensively. In response to the examination format centered on painting from photographs, these institutions often eliminate the need for life drawing practice, which requires a high level of natural talent and involves a long learning process, instead codifying and transmitting a range of formulaic techniques for reproducing photographic images^[7]. This tendency has not only exerted a profound impact on foundational art education but has also significantly attenuated the expressive and affective dimensions of artistic creation. (1) The practice of copying photographs engenders a passive mode of visual perception among art students. Photographs capture merely a transient configuration of light, while the camera produces images that are inherently partial, segmented, and fixed. By contrast, human perception is an activity of consciousness and thought; the observation of real-world objects generates diverse aesthetic experiences contingent upon variations in viewpoint and spatial positioning. This fundamental distinction underscores why photography cannot substitute for life drawing in fostering the multiplicity of pictorial expression. (2) The replication of photographs weakens students' perceptual faculties. Human cognition operates through sensory engagement with the material world. When students indiscriminately transpose

photographic content onto the canvas, without attending to the intrinsic differences and specificities of actual objects, their perceptual sensitivity toward reality is liable to diminish sharply. In contrast, working from life enables a multisensory encounter: one may perceive the breathing rhythm of a model, the fragrance of fruit, or the dynamic force of cascading water. Such embodied experiences serve as vital stimuli, activating perceptual awareness and catalyzing creative motivation. (3) The replication of photographs severs the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in painting. Life drawing constitutes a process of perceptual engagement and active inscription, encompassing analysis, judgment, inference, synthesis, and formal abstraction, processes that fundamentally differ from the camera's passive and mechanical objectivity. Accordingly, both subjective and objective dimensions, as well as rational and affective faculties, are indispensable within painterly practice, albeit in varying proportions depending on the artist's stylistic orientation. It thus becomes evident that, in negotiating the tension between representation and expression, artists calibrate differing balances between subjectivity and objectivity in accordance with their individual sensibilities, thereby generating diverse visual articulations of the natural world. By contrast, the photographic image, insofar as it isolates subjectivity from objectivity, often results in compositional ambiguity and stylistic homogenization, manifested in works that lack clear hierarchy and exhibit a pervasive sameness.

It can thus be argued that the unified art entrance examination system constitutes a primary structural cause behind the increasingly pronounced "image-ization" tendency in life drawing practices in recent years. To a considerable extent, this has indirectly contributed to a partial and reductive conception of art education, alongside a marked deficiency in the cultivation of creativity. Such outcomes run counter not only to the renewed pedagogical emphasis on working from life in contemporary art education, but also to the original intention of the examination system, to identify and select genuinely talented individuals^[14]. Addressing this condition at its root requires a reorientation toward foundational art education. This entails fostering students' creative thinking and latent learning capacities, enhancing their comprehensive artistic literacy, and, crucially, encouraging a return to life-based artistic practice. Only through such systematic reform can art education cultivate more accomplished, versatile, and intellectually engaged practitioners.

5. The Return of Sketching in the Context of the Information Age

In the contemporary context of the information age, the "image-ization" tendency within life drawing has become increasingly pronounced. For artists, it is imperative to remain consistently grounded in lived experience while upholding principles of integrity and innovation, staying on the Front Lines of Our Times, and critically clarifying the relationship between life drawing and artistic creation so as to avoid formulaic and conceptually vacuous works^[3]. The purpose of life drawing extends from the mere recording of life, to the experiential apprehension of it, and ultimately toward its expressive transformation. This process encompasses a multiplicity of factors, including the rendering of color, light, and environmental conditions as objects manifest within spatial contexts. It involves a progression from observation and perceptual capture to documentation and creative reinterpretation, shifting from an emphasis on faithful depiction toward the cultivation of the artist's spiritual and emotional expression as well as creative capacity. Such practice demands a highly developed ability in pictorial organization. Through the cumulative enrichment of life drawing experience, artists gradually distill a distinctive personal visual language, arriving at more vivid and affirmative interpretations of the forms and colors encountered in the visible world. In this sense, life drawing also constitutes a vital mode through which the artist's inner sensibility is liberated and the imagination allowed to unfold with intellectual and emotional resonance.

In the author's view, sketching from life constitutes the most fundamental and indispensable component of artistic training for students of fine arts. Embedded within this practice is a rich process that moves from the exploration of natural laws to the organization of pictorial order. It provides sustained visual discipline while simultaneously generating moments of creative insight, enabling the gradual internalization of artistic language through cumulative experience. Moreover, the experience of life drawing evolves from an initially passive reception into an active and self-reflexive mode of engagement, thereby forming an integral continuum within the entire process of artistic creation. At the same time, life drawing affords a profound encounter with the cultural resonance of the natural world and the humanistic dimensions embedded within diverse regional contexts. It allows the artist to engage with historical memory and cultural traditions, and to pursue spiritual value within the continuum of lived experience. Plateaus, mountains, and rivers; fields of wild vegetation; the unadorned lives of

farmers and the everyday labor of workers; agricultural activity and industrial production, these seemingly ordinary yet often overlooked elements of reality constitute the primary perceptual sources and inspirational stimuli for artistic creation. Only through direct immersion in such environments can the artist generate an authentic impulse toward creation, an immediacy that defines the unique vitality of life drawing. Prolonged engagement with life drawing practice also underscores the critical importance of its on-site immediacy. This resonates with the trajectory of Chinese painting, which historically moves from “learning from external nature” to “attaining the inner source of the mind”, wherein empirical nature is transformed into an artistic nature imbued with poetic expression. A comparable dynamic can be observed in Western painting, which evolves from representational realism toward subjective expression. In both traditions, such transformations testify to the generative efficacy of life drawing as a foundational artistic method.

To this day, a number of painters continue to rely on photographs as the primary basis for their creative practice. Owing to the ease with which images can be produced, reproduced, and disseminated, photographic media provide artists with an expanded range of visual options. This convenience, however, has also led some painters to become deeply dependent on such image-based resources, to the point of creative inertia. A revealing anecdote, cited in a prior study, recounts an encounter between two painters during a sketching excursion: one artist, expecting an exchange of insights on direct observation, was instead astonished when the other remarked, “I have just shot more than a dozen rolls of film; with these photographic materials at hand, I can paint with ease for the next decade,” a statement delivered with a discernible sense of self-satisfaction. A similar conversation occurred between two painters (here referred to as A and B). Painter A inquired: “In recent years, you have produced a substantial body of work, and your artistic skills have improved markedly, what is your method?” Painter B replied succinctly: “I purchased a Sony high-definition camera.” Subsequent developments have demonstrated that such a phenomenon is not isolated; rather, it has recurrently manifested among certain influential Chinese painters. This reliance is even more pronounced among other segments of artists and art students, for whom the absence of a camera renders the act of painting almost inconceivable.

In contrast, a number of painters steadfastly adhere to the sketching, continually pursuing innovation through direct engagement with nature while embracing the experiential process of on-site creation. At every moment, from the initial gesture of the brush, to the formation of lines, the application of ink, and the laying of color, the painter’s immediate perceptions and affective responses are crystallized, endowing the work with a sense of uniqueness and irreproducibility. A representative example is the event “Traversing Hexi—Chinese Oil Painting Masters’ Gansu Sketching Tour” (early May 2024)^[15], initiated by Fan Di’an, Chairman of the China Artists Association. Fifteen distinguished oil painters gathered in the Hexi Corridor, departing from Lanzhou and traveling through Wuwei and Zhangye before reaching Jiayuguan. Despite their extensive experience, these artists persisted in conducting sketching under intense sunlight, confronting the profound and expansive landscapes of the snow-covered frontier Great Wall, the majestic Tiantishan Grottoes, the vividly colored Danxia landforms, the historically significant Mati Temple, as well as sites such as the Camel City ruins, the First Beacon Tower of the Ming Great Wall, and the Jiayuguan Fortress. Through acute perceptual engagement with the sublime craftsmanship of nature, combined with technical mastery and artistic perseverance, they rendered and rearticulated the dynamic spirit of the contemporary era alongside the extraordinary natural and cultural landscapes of the Hexi region. Fan Di’an has emphasized that the essential principle of oil painting lies in the dialectic of “preserving the orthodox while innovating”, that is, maintaining the core of artistic tradition while courageously pursuing exploration and breakthrough, aligning artistic practice with the rhythms of the present age, and incorporating new elements and conceptual frameworks so as to produce works imbued with vitality and contemporaneity. From the perspective of cultural inheritance, Wang Shengli foregrounds the freehand spirit as a central tenet, elucidating the intrinsic relationship between sketching and artistic creation. He calls upon both educators and students to revalorize sketching as a foundational discipline for the comprehensive cultivation of artistic literacy. Drawing upon classical theory, he invokes Gu Kaizhi’s proposition of “conveying the spirit through form, achieving the unity of form and spirit,” alongside Xie He’s “Six Principles of Painting,” and the Song dynasty’s evolution of freehand aesthetics from “learning from external nature” to “deriving from the inner source of the mind”. In this lineage, empirical nature is transmuted into an artistic nature through processes of abstraction and sublimation; expressive oil painting,

accordingly, emerges as a distilled and elevated articulation of natural experience. Furthermore, Wang Hui asserts that Chinese expressive oil painting fully activates the artist's creative potential and individual endowment, granting a liberated space for self-articulation and self-representation. This, in turn, significantly contributes to the diversification of artistic styles. It follows that, within the contemporary context of the information age, the age of intelligence, and the age of images, the construction of cultural meaning, temporal sensibility, and lived imagery in painting necessitates a sustained return to life and nature. Artists must prioritize continuous sketching, observing, reflecting, and critically engaging, so as to cultivate distinctive pictorial languages and stylistic identities. By grounding their work in objective reality while infusing it with subjective perception, artists can enhance the creative potency of their practice, thereby endowing their works with singular artistic character and enduring aesthetic significance.

Therefore, in the practice of sketching, when confronted with the same landscape, the same figure, or the same still life, markedly divergent pictorial outcomes inevitably emerge under the hands of different artists and within varying contextual conditions. Such variability gives rise to a multiplicity of visual forms and expressive modalities. As the well-known adage suggests, "there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand readers", each painter develops a distinct stylistic idiom and creative language. Through sustained engagement with sketching from life, even a single object, such as a vase, can generate innumerable artistic interpretations, thereby greatly enriching the inexhaustible vitality of artistic expression and continuously responding to the cyclical dynamics of aesthetic desire, fatigue, renewal, and reconfiguration. In this sense, the principle that "traveling ten thousand miles surpasses reading ten thousand books" acquires particular relevance within artistic practice. Only through active and sustained participation in sketching observation can artists cultivate a singular aesthetic identity. It is precisely for this reason that contemporary art pedagogy and practice place renewed emphasis on, and confer heightened value upon, the discipline of sketching from life.

Conclusion

In the contemporary context, the rapid advancement of photographic technology has rendered images ubiquitous. While saturating the visual field of everyday life, this proliferation simultaneously exerts a certain degree of displacement upon painting as an autonomous artistic practice. Within sketching methodology, the phenomenon of "image-ization" has, in fact, become more acute than the issues previously identified. Some painters contend that the accessibility and formal diversity of images provide new visual resources for painting, stimulating creative production and enabling artists to more effectively grasp the pulse and spiritual core of the times, thereby articulating its distinctive times characteristics and advancing artistic development. This position is not without merit: the age of images has indeed transformed the modes and procedures of painting. However, excessive reliance on images risks rendering artistic creation rigid and depleted. When painters lack the capacity to critically mediate, transform, and reconfigure photographic materials, their practice devolves into dependence on photography rather than its selective and reflective utilization, two fundamentally divergent creative trajectories.

Sketching engages directly with the vitality and mutability of the phenomenal world; accordingly, the fluid transformation of creative thought and the sudden emergence of inspiration become more dynamic and generative. As such, it remains a fundamental pathway for the production of pluralistic artistic forms, with works derived from direct observation exhibiting inexhaustible variation and richness. For instance, in the works of Eugène Delacroix, one discerns an intense inner passion for life conveyed through figural representation; Chaim Soutine foregrounds a sense of inner purity and moral sincerity; while Moïse Kisling articulates a melancholic sensibility through the subtle modeling of facial expression. Similarly, in the vision of Paul Cézanne, the pictorial field is structured through geometric forms such as cylinders and spheres as a means of reconstituting natural experience; by contrast, Vincent van Gogh infuses the canvas with fervent vitality, employing dynamic brushwork and intense chromatic contrasts to articulate a highly subjective mode of seeing. This diversity is not confined to differences among artists of distinct stylistic orientations. Even within the same artistic movement, painters engaging in sketching demonstrate markedly individual expressive qualities. Among the Impressionism, figures such as Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, and Claude Monet all advocated painting from life while cultivating distinct personal idioms. Likewise, within the Barbizon School, artists including Jean-François Millet, Camille Corot, and Théodore Rousseau consistently upheld the primacy of direct observation, yet each developed a singular and recognizable artistic language.

If the practice of painting from photographs is taken as a substitute for sketching, amounting merely to the objective transcription of photographic images, it inevitably reduces the complex, dialectical relationship between the artist's subjective consciousness and the objective forms of the world to a simplified and mechanistic procedure. In such a mode, active observation of lived reality and nature is displaced by passive viewing of images, and reflective engagement with life is supplanted by the replication of visual data. Under these conditions, it is difficult for such works to establish genuine aesthetic resonance with viewers. As articulated by Fan Di'an, the critical question remains how to "preserve the orthodox while innovating", and how to produce artworks that genuinely articulate the spirit of a new era, thereby cultivating artists capable of meeting the cultural needs of the nation, society, and the broader public. This imperative requires not only a return to lived experience through sustained sketching, but also a conscious reinforcement of the epistemological and methodological significance of sketching. Only by addressing, at its root, the prevailing condition of "image-ization" can painting reclaim its autonomy. Emphasis must therefore be placed on the intrinsic expressive language and formal aesthetics of sketching painting itself. Through its immediacy, vitality, and sincerity of spiritual content, such practice has the capacity to deepen aesthetic perception and enrich the emotional and expressive dimensions of artistic production.

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