

# Pictures VS Great Works of Art--Eternal Values of Great Works of Art

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**Abstract:** Art belongs to people's spiritual life, but in today's media society, mass culture fills every corner of daily life. Movies and advertising images can be seen everywhere. Based on the book, *What do Pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images* by W.J.T. Mitchell, distinctions between high and low art are analyzed and discussed. Through the exploration of the different role and value of high art in the society, the eternal vitality and spiritual value of high art are advocated in the commercialized society.

**Keywords:** High culture, Eternal values of great works of art, Commercialized society

## 1. Introduction

Mr. Feng Zikai proposes that human life has three floors. According to him, human life can be divided into three floors: one is material life; the other is spiritual life; and the third is soul life. Material life is food and clothing. Spiritual life is academic art, and soul life is religion <sup>[1]</sup>. Art belongs to people's spiritual life. In other words, it is the reflection of people's spiritual life, but also affects people's spiritual world. Based on the book, *What do Pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images* by W.J.T. Mitchell, distinctions between high and low art are analyzed and discussed. Being a professor of English and art history in University of Chicago, Mitchell is a scholar and theorist with a wide interest in media, visual art, and literature as well as the emergent fields of visual culture and iconology. He is very famous in the study on the relations of visual and verbal representations in the context of social and political issues. In his book, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Mitchell makes the following statement: Why do we have such extraordinarily powerful responses toward the images and pictures we see in everyday life? Why do we behave as if pictures were alive, possessing the power to influence us, to demand things from us, to persuade us, seduce us, or even lead us astray? He suggests that we need to reckon with images not just as inert object that convey meaning but as animated beings with desires, needs, appetites, demands, and drives of their own. <sup>[2]</sup>

Average pictures have desire, wanting things from us while great works of art can transcend desire, purify our soul and provide us a more open and new perspective to view life. Moreover, when we get lost in spirit, they can direct us and illuminate our possible future from generation to generation. Since art belongs to spiritual life, it can enlighten and save people from materialism.

## 2. Distinctions between Pictures and Great Works of Art

Dr. Mitchell wants to point out the differences between pictures and works of art, emphasizing the distinctions between high culture and low culture. It is known that he is a scholar of media, visual art and literature. He goes between high culture (literature, art) and mass culture (media). With a wide and deep knowledge of high and low culture, he might have comments on the two fields.

In *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, he mentions the background of this statement. He points out that some scholars want to "update art history by playing catch-up with the text-based disciplines and with the study of film and mass culture...Contemporary discussions of visual culture want to erase the distinctions between high and low culture and transform the history of art into the history of images." <sup>[2]</sup>

Obviously, he is against putting pictures under language for he thinks that vision is as important as language in mediating social relation. He suggests that the study of pictures should be equally treated

as other studies such as literature. Moreover, he shows a skeptical attitude about erasing the distinctions between high and low culture. Arts have their own values. Thus, the key issue is to distinguish high culture and low culture.

In further analysis, he has listed different kinds of pictures. The first type is the “vulgar” mode of images such as commercial advertising and political or religious propaganda. These pictures directly express their desires. For example, commercial advertisements directly emphasize desires and sell commodities. The desire of these pictures is obvious. It wants to draw people’s attentions. It has the function of selling the products.

The second type has no direct signs of desire. These pictures pretend to have everything. For example, the picture by Zhang Huan (fig.1) seems to have everything, with modern and ancient. Moreover, images of men give us a sense of power and domination. However, the big bubbles and the directions of the bubbles may be seen as the desire of catching the spectators’ attention, directing us to look forward to the present and future, though the desire for look is not directly stated.



Figure 1: Zhang Huan, Private Collection

Mitchell further concludes that this sort of pictorial desire is the purism of modernist abstraction. It is negation of the beholders’ presence. More precisely, the desire not to show desire is a form of desire.<sup>[2]</sup> These types of pictures, directly or indirectly show their desire and the wanting of power, which implies that they may be in the subordinate position. What they want may be what they lack. Being impotent, they want a “mastery effect” over the beholders.

And the third type is “simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be nothing at all.”<sup>[2]</sup> In Diego Velazquez’s *Last Meninas* (fig.2), it seems to invite us to join in this picture. However, the dog is symbolized as guarding, preventing the beholders from participation. “This is a picture that wants nothing from us while pretending to be totally oriented toward us.”<sup>[2]</sup> The third type of pictures has the ability of wanting nothing at all, which would make them autonomous, self-sufficient, and perfect, beyond desire. Great works of art are this type of pictures.



Figure 2: Diego Velazquez, *Last Meninas*, 1656, Prado National Museum

Therefore, it is the criteria to distinguish pictures and great works of art to want or not to want, in

the analysis of Dr. Mitchell. Pictures such as commercial advertisement images, modern art images want power. Being impotent, they are in fantasy of “mastery effect”. Their desire shows their weakness. On the contrary, great works of art want nothing at all. They are autonomous, self-sufficient, and perfect, beyond desire.

### 3. Vitality of Great works of Art

Dr. Mitchell suggests that we need to understand great works of art as logical possibility entailed in the very notion of living things beyond desire. Obviously, great works of art need to be regarded as living things beyond desire. According to Helen Curtis, the criteria for the living organism are highly organized, homeostatic (stay the same), grow and develop, are adapted, take energy from the environment and change it from one form to another, respond to stimuli, and reproduce themselves. <sup>[2]</sup>

Mitchell argues that the criteria are internally contradictory. It is better in the way of metaphor. As for “growth and development”, images or works of art have a process of creating. And in the aspect of “homeostatic”, once completed, works of art are usually homeostatic. Walter Benjamin proposes the concept of “aura” of works of art, one element of which is authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is essentially substantively durable in the history it has experienced <sup>[3]</sup>. For example, the picture of marriage (fig.3 &4) has depicted the moment of marriage in the traditional rituals in a specific period of time, which would remain the same after depicted.



Figure 3 & Figure 4: Jan van Eyck, 1434, London National Gallery

In terms of “taking energy from the environment”, pictures gain different values in different environment. As for “responding to stimuli”, some artworks are interactive, especially in the traditional works. In discussing “reproducing themselves”, we need to ask “why this metaphor seems to have a life of its own”. Mitchell goes on explaining that the best definition of a living thing is dialectical--“a living thing is dead.” He puts forward the concept of “negation of the negation”, which means “undead”. That is to say, life is embodied in the inanimate figures of painting or sculpture. The following examples will elaborate it. In *Mona Lisa*, a masterpiece by Leonardo Da Vinci, he gave life to a piece of canvas by painting the smile of Mona Lisa. And Vincent Van Gogh brought the canvas life of sunflower (fig.5), which might also embody his attitudes towards life.



Figure 5: Vincent Van Gogh, Sunflower, 1888, Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam

Rodin, a well-known artist, conveyed his passion and love through a marble. Then the marble has a name, "Kiss", which is kind of humans' passion.

All these inanimate objects are inserted with humans' sincere, true emotions and thinking, which make them alive. Mitchell suggests that all the tropes of vitality and desire we apply to visual art can also be transferred to the field of textuality. Let's take *Sonnet 18* by Shakespeare for an example: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? /...../When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st/So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee <sup>[4]</sup>. Shakespeare wrote his sonnet on a piece of paper but claimed that as long as human beings exist, and this sonnet can pass from generation to generation. Then beauty of the protagonist in this sonnet would be alive.

#### 4. Values of Great works of Art

From the above analysis, we can see that the distinction between average pictures and great works of art is to want or not to want. Being impotent, average pictures are lacking and wanting something. These pictures have desire. On the contrary, without desire, great works of art have the characteristics of being autonomous, self-sufficient and perfect.

Why do average pictures have desire? According to Burger, art functions as institution. Theory of creativity is a social structure rather than model of individual genius. Art is operated in the social field such as the art schools, academies, critics, market, and technologies <sup>[5]</sup>. Obviously, art has functions and serves the art school, academies, critics, market. This makes it serve as a role of a servant. Therefore, under the circumstance of lacking power, pictures of this kind want power and are full of desire. These pictures cannot escape the fate of kitsch since their creators produce them just for the sake of serving. This kind of art is usually in the form of advertisement images, modern art, political pop and so on.

As a contrast, great works of art can transcend desire. It can be inferred that their creators create them not just for the sake of serving but more possibly for the sake of expressing or presenting human nature of all kinds such as feelings, emotions, thinking, love, life and death. They merely want to express things coming from their innermost selves and unconsciousness. In the process of creation, artists of this kind are in the situation of being self-sufficient without any desire. They are fully content with their process of creation to express themselves. Therefore, works by them also appear to be self-sufficient, reflecting their sincere feelings and meditation towards life. Once the inanimate materials such as canvas and paper are injected with sincere feelings and thinking of mankind, they become living things. "Living" may mean great works of art, metaphorically, have the elements of living organism.

As an opposition to death, "living" here, also means their eternal values to mankind. Great works of art can live or pass from generation to generation because they are embodied with the very nature of mankind. With that character, they can arouse people's innermost instinct, empathy and emotions, helping people to relearn themselves and reflect life experiences, to be aware of their life situation, to be emotionally capable, to have more sympathy towards self and other. Moreover, great works of art can direct mankind back to the right track when they are lost spiritually. Great works of art, though without desire, are of great values to mankind's development. They can nurture mankind intellectually and emotionally, bringing out "human" out of mankind.

However, in the contemporary commercial society, every corner of daily life is crowded with mass culture. Films, advertisement images seem to attack and invade our eyes everyday as long as we are at street, online, watch TV and so on. To catch up with the trend, some scholars want to update art history by playing catch-up with the text-based disciplines and with the study of film and mass culture. They want to erase the distinctions between high and low culture and transform the history of art into the history of images.

This kind of practice may attract more attention to academic study of visual culture, however, erasing the distinctions between high and low culture is harmful to mankind development. Values of high culture and low culture differ a lot to us. Their roles in our society are of vital difference. Low culture is an institutional product with the function of serving. Being impotent, they desire for look. Metaphorically, low culture is more like a servant, service workers, sellers, and even prostitutes in our society. However, high culture, transcending desire and being self-sufficient, are more like a graceful lady, angles, fairies and even goddess. Though being not easy to approach, once reached and appreciated, they will purify our soul and provide us a more open and new perspective to view life. Moreover, when we are lost in spirit, they can direct us and illuminate our possible future.

It is a common sense that our society needs all kinds of people. Different people may make different contributions. They should be equally treated. But, because of different values and roles, differences of them should be fully recognized. We should treat them equally but differently. Similarly, high culture and low culture should be treated equally but differently. The eternal values of great works of art, high culture should receive our sincere appreciation and respect.

## 5. Conclusion

In discussing the statement by W. J. T. Mitchell, the differences of high culture and low culture are obviously shown. Average pictures have desire and wanting things from us while great works of art, transcend desire, purify our soul and provide us a more open and new perspective to view life from generation to generation. Moreover, when we are spiritually lost, they can direct us and illuminate our possible future. Different cultures may make different contributions. High culture and low culture should be treated equally but differently. The eternal values of great works of art, high culture, should receive our attention, understanding, respects and be given a proper position in our society, especially in the highly commercialized society with a fetish of money and commodities.

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