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BEYOND VISUAL RESEMBLANCE: CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND HISTORICAL TIME IN ART HISTORY

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Abstract: Comparisons between images made in distant artistic settings can disclose historical connections overlooked in familiar narratives. Yet a recovered connection changes art history only when it alters the explanation of the works concerned. This review reads transcultural art history alongside studies of viewing, visual agency, and historical time. Two studies anchor the discussion. Li Jun places Song-period tilling-and-weaving imagery beside Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescoes in an inquiry into Eurasian exchange. Richard Coulton draws on material and archival evidence to reconstruct the acquisition and subsequent handling of early Qing plant paintings in British collections. Their findings invite different kinds of historical revision. Coulton recovers relationships within a defined body of objects; Li asks whether a wider account of contact can change how Renaissance art is understood. Juneja's critique of inherited art-historical categories, together with work by Clunas and scholars of image survival and contemporaneity, brings the interpretive stakes into focus. The scope of a revised history, the article argues, rests on what the proposed relationships explain about artistic practice and reception.
Keywords: Transcultural art history; Image translation; Visual resemblance; Reception; Historical temporality

1 INTRODUCTION

What might pictures associated with Lou Shu's tradition of tilling and weaving have to do with Ambrogio Lorenzetti's civic frescoes in Siena? Li Jun places their visual affinities within a much wider account of silk and exchange across Eurasia [1]. Richard Coulton, working with early Qing plant paintings preserved in Britain, starts from inscriptions, physical alterations, and collecting records that can reunite objects long treated as separate [2]. Both studies unsettle the boundaries within which images have been described. They differ, however, in what they seek to change. Coulton reconstructs the history of a particular group of works; Li's comparison invites reconsideration of the geographic frame in which Renaissance art is explained.

Juneja's transcultural art history questions the assumption that styles and periods emerge within self-contained cultures [3-4]. Clunas locates the history of Chinese painting partly in its changing audiences, whereas Bredekamp examines the effects generated by pictorial form in encounters with viewers [5-6]. Research on survival and contemporaneity also unsettles the dates and divisions through which artistic change has traditionally been described [7-11]. These studies open different lines of inquiry. The discovery of a shared motif, the reconstruction of its use, and a change to the history of a period do not amount to the same finding. Their relations can be investigated through particular works, the circumstances of their circulation, and the explanations already offered for them.

The article draws on fifteen Chinese and international publications from 2016 to 2025, selected for their relevance to these debates. Its scope is thematic rather than exhaustive. The discussion moves from the reconstruction of connections among images to the histories of viewing and the temporal categories used by later art historians. Li's and Coulton's studies remain in view because each tests, in a different setting, what follows from recovering a previously neglected relation [1-2, 12].

2 CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND THE PROBLEM OF CONNECTION

2.1 Image Doubles and the Limits of Visual Genealogy

Li's account of the image and its doubles begins with the complexity of pictorial making. The depicted world, the maker's position, and the traditions available to that maker meet within a single image [1, 12]. A picture may gather conventions whose histories extend beyond the place where it was produced. Its apparent unity can thus conceal relations among different artistic traditions. Li's inquiry follows the formation of the image through these relations, moving beyond the simpler model in which an original picture is copied elsewhere.

Juneja extends the problem to the categories with which art historians describe their material. Objects and practices develop through encounters, and the histories of style or period often conceal those formative relations [3-4]. Li's layered image makes such histories visible within a work; Juneja asks what happens to the discipline's classifications once those histories are taken seriously. Iorio's discussion of artistic circulation offers a useful caution here: movement becomes historically intelligible through specified actors, routes, and practices, rather than through the invocation of circulation as an explanatory label [13]. Together, these approaches make cultural translation a question about the making of both images and historical knowledge.

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Li places imagery from the tilling-and-weaving tradition associated with Lou Shu beside Lorenzetti's civic paintings within a wider account of silk production and movement across Eurasia [1]. His proposed pictorial parallels stand alongside exchanges in materials and practices. The argument depends on how convincingly those strands can be connected. Even an established similarity between two arrangements would leave questions about their use in Siena and their place in local artistic developments. Li's larger proposition concerns the Renaissance itself: could a history of Eurasian relations explain aspects of its formation that accounts confined to Europe leave obscure? The studies assembled here make the stakes of that proposition clear. Its historical validity still calls for a fuller comparison of the proposed contacts with competing explanations of Sienese art.

2.2 Reconstructing a Dispersed Collection

Coulton's early Qing plant paintings present a different evidentiary problem. He examines approximately 2,400 Chinese plant images, mainly in holdings of the British Library and the Oak Spring Garden Foundation [2]. Inscriptions, formats, records of acquisition, and changes in mounting allow him to retrace connections obscured by dispersal and cataloging. Annotation is central to the identification of 309 paintings across the two institutions as parts of the Bunko-Brewster assemblage. This painstaking work revises the early history of acquisition and the later treatment of the paintings. Their makers and the organization of production are less securely documented, and Coulton leaves those questions open.

The objects carry evidence of what happened after they reached Britain. Some sheets appear to have been cut and rearranged as manuscript material, changing how the paintings could be handled and viewed [2]. Those alterations affected the objects available to later collectors and scholars; catalog entries and subsequent groupings may then have shaped their identification as botanical illustrations. Such a description is useful, but it may not reproduce the categories used by their makers or intermediaries. Coulton works most persuasively where surviving objects and archival records illuminate one another. His reconstruction makes the paintings' British collecting history much clearer while leaving much of their earlier reception beyond recovery.

The material history reconstructed by Coulton leads naturally to the problem of reception. Cutting, mounting, and cataloging changed the objects that later viewers encountered. Acquisitions and changes in display were also changes in the settings in which the paintings could be interpreted. These acts are more readily documented than the meanings individual viewers attached to them, but they show how a work's history continues after production. For cultural translation, such changes matter alongside any proposed connection between pictorial forms.

3 IMAGE MEANING, VIEWING, AND VISUAL FORCE

3.1 Reception as a Historical Relation

Clunas organizes his history of Chinese painting around its audiences: the gentleman, emperor, merchant, nation, and people [6]. Each points to a setting in which paintings were collected, valued, displayed, or described. The categories do not represent fixed kinds of spectators. They reveal how the status of paintings has changed with the institutions and practices that brought them before viewers. In this account, "Chinese painting" is itself a historically made category. A work's reception belongs to the history of that category, alongside the production and survival of the work.

A painting's passage into another collection can alter its place in a visual culture even when its design survives unchanged. New titles, mounts, catalog entries, and display arrangements may affect what viewers take it to be. Coulton's plant paintings make these changes unusually tangible: cutting, annotation, and rearrangement transformed both the objects and the circumstances in which they could be examined [2]. The surviving traces document actions rather than a complete sequence of viewers' thoughts. They nevertheless give reception a material history. An account of cultural translation gains precision when it follows these acts of presentation and classification.

3.2 Visual Agency and the History of Viewing

Bredekamp shifts attention from the circumstances of viewing to the activity of images within an encounter. His distinction among schematic, substitutive, and intrinsic image acts concerns the ways pictorial form can produce effects rather than merely carry meanings assigned elsewhere [5]. Composition and material presence help shape a viewer's response. The argument is especially pertinent to histories that explain reception chiefly through patrons, institutions, or discourse, leaving the particular configuration of the image with little analytical work to do.

Clunas and Bredekamp illuminate different sides of the same encounter. A picture may invite a response through its composition, but the response acquires a recognizable social meaning among viewers who encounter it within particular institutions and practices [5-6]. Neither the formal effect nor the setting can be assumed in advance. The encounter has to be reconstructed through the traces it leaves: pictorial features, the ways works were displayed or handled, and records of how they were understood. This is where a claim about visual agency becomes historically specific.

Resemblance becomes less straightforward when reception and pictorial form are considered together. Similar designs may organize very different experiences in a fresco, a manuscript, or a collection. Conversely, a work that has been copied or adapted may lose much of its original appearance while retaining a recoverable connection to an earlier image. In each situation, the alteration matters as much as the likeness. The evidence may lie in a change of medium, a new commission, a sequence of versions, or the use to which a picture was put. These histories provide a firmer account of translation than the presumption that a recognizable form brought an unchanged meaning with it.

4 HISTORICAL TIME AND ART-HISTORICAL NARRATION

4.1 Survival and the Problem of the Interval

Didi-Huberman's account of Aby Warburg approaches recurring images through intervals, interruptions, and returns [7]. An earlier form may become newly legible long after the circumstances of its first appearance have disappeared. Such recurrences disturb the smooth succession of styles often assumed by conventional period histories. They also make the interval between appearances an object of inquiry. An apparent gap may contain forgetting, transformation, or later acts of recognition; it need not be treated as empty time awaiting a missing link.

For images separated by place and date, this account changes how resemblance is interpreted. A modern scholar may recognize a recurrence that the artists concerned never described; evidence of direct encounter would establish a different connection. Didi-Huberman's reading of survival gives the uneven histories of forms a place in analysis without settling individual questions of contact [7]. Sequences of images, traces of use, and changes of setting may point toward a continuing practice that has undergone substantial transformation. They may also reveal a similarity that became historically significant only in a later act of interpretation. The distinction shapes the history that can be written.

4.2 Competing Accounts of Contemporaneity

Dong Lihui shows how the use of "contemporary art" as a period name emerged through particular intellectual histories in China and the West [8]. A single date does little to explain those histories. Her account of the "temporal turn" also distinguishes the proposals associated with Agamben, Groys, and Osborne [9]. Their arguments concern, in different ways, a subject's distance from the present, the experience or production of present time, and the coexistence of temporalities that resist a unified chronology. The differences matter to art history because naming a practice contemporary already implies a view of its relation to earlier work.

Smith emphasizes the uneven and multiple ways artists inhabit the present [11]. Osborne gives greater theoretical weight to the difficulty of thinking the present as a unity formed from disjunctive times [10]. Joselit, writing about heritage, follows the renewed use and circulation of inherited images in contemporary art [14]. These accounts help explain why older works can become newly urgent without their earlier histories changing in retrospect. Reuse belongs to the later practice; the meanings available to the work's first audiences still have to be reconstructed in their own setting.

The resulting difficulty is as much historiographical as temporal. Paintings are made, moved, altered, and seen again; historians decide which of those episodes they regard as constitutive of a tradition. Juneja's challenge to inherited stylistic and regional divisions and Clunas's questions about the historical limits of "Chinese painting" show how unstable familiar classifications can be [3, 6]. Costa traces another part of this problem through the international conferences at which the field began to define its methods and reach [15]. A change in periodization therefore belongs to the history of art-historical judgment. Its value can be tested by what the new arrangement enables us to explain about the works and their histories.

5 WHEN DOES TRANSCULTURAL EVIDENCE REVISE ART HISTORY?

5.1 From Contact to Historical Explanation

Juneja's work makes the revision of inherited styles and periods a central problem for transcultural art history [3]. In individual cases, the relevant question is whether the proposed connection helps account for how works were made or used. A motif's presence in a painting may have had little bearing on its composition. An exchange documented only unevenly may nevertheless have shaped the practices through which the work emerged. The strength of a claim about contact and the significance assigned to that contact need to be assessed separately. A period narrative changes when the newly recovered relations alter the account of artistic development, rather than merely enlarge the map of possible influences.

Consider the kind of history under revision. Provenance research may establish the earlier unity of a scattered collection and correct the dates at which its objects were acquired. A revised account of a whole artistic period needs a more extensive argument about the making and circulation of works. It must engage with the features that the prevailing explanation leaves unexplained and with competing accounts of those same features. Documents, techniques, iconographic sequences, and production settings may each contribute; in many forms of exchange the chain will remain incomplete. The case is persuasive when the available traces, taken together, make the proposed connection more convincing than plausible alternatives such as independent invention or a widespread convention.

5.2 Siena and the Qing Plant Paintings

Li's juxtaposition of the tilling-and-weaving tradition with Lorenzetti's frescoes draws its significance from a larger inquiry into silk and Eurasian exchange [1]. Read at the level of a pictorial motif, the comparison may suggest a connection between particular ways of representing work and civic life. Read as an intervention in Renaissance history, it carries a heavier burden: those relations would need to illuminate artistic developments that accounts centered on Europe have explained differently. The argument cannot rest on a single matching arrangement, though a lack of direct borrowing records would not by itself settle the matter either. What needs closer assessment is how the visual evidence, material practices, and possible routes of contact bear on one another. The present review cannot adjudicate that larger historical

claim from the published studies examined here. It can identify precisely where the proposed cross-cultural account would have to change the explanation of Sienese art.

Coulton reaches a more definite conclusion within a narrower history. Inscriptions and physical details tie 309 paintings in the British Library and Oak Spring collections to a previously dispersed assemblage; acquisition records also alter the chronology of British collecting of plant images obtained from Xiamen [2]. Cutting, mounting, and later annotation then help explain why the paintings came to be held and described as they were. The findings revise the history of these objects' acquisition and presentation, with consequences for how their collecting history is written. They tell us less about the painters' working conditions or how the images were understood before they left China. Those questions require sources closer to production and early use, which Coulton's surviving evidence does not consistently supply.

Coulton can revise a chronology of collecting because material traces and acquisition records disclose relationships absent from the earlier account. Li's proposed connections enter a broader argument about Renaissance formation, where the burden of explanation is different. Would the Eurasian evidence illuminate features of the frescoes or the practices around them that an account centered on European artistic developments leaves insufficiently explained? Juneja's criticism of enclosed cultural histories makes this question pressing; Li's layered conception of images suggests where such histories might be visible [1, 3, 12]. The particular comparison must still be made. A challenge to inherited categories has force when it exposes a limitation in an actual history of works, rather than only in the categories used to describe them.

5.3 Historical Time and the Revision of Narratives

The distance between an artwork's production and its later interpretation is central to Didi-Huberman's account of survival and to the differing approaches to contemporaneity examined by Dong, Smith, and Osborne [7-11]. Works that have long been familiar may acquire a different historical significance when dispersed objects are brought together or previously neglected connections come to light. Such discoveries tell us something about the questions asked by later historians. They offer less certain access to what artists knew or how their first audiences understood the works. Those earlier circumstances have to be reconstructed from the surviving traces of artistic practice and reception.

This distinction becomes particularly important when Li's and Coulton's studies are considered alongside one another. Coulton follows early Qing paintings through their acquisition, physical alteration, and classification in Britain. These successive interventions form part of the history he seeks to recover [2]. Li's comparison of the Sienese frescoes, by contrast, raises questions about the geographical boundaries conventionally assigned to the Renaissance [1, 12]. Reading the frescoes within a Eurasian context changes the questions brought to them, but the historical significance of that change depends on what can be established about artistic exchange and production in Siena. The possibility of a broader history emerges from the comparison; the part played by particular contacts remains a matter for historical investigation.

6 CONCLUSION

Li's comparison challenges the tendency to treat Eurasian connections as peripheral to the history of the European Renaissance [1, 12]. Its implications extend beyond the identification of possible visual affinities. If the proposed connections contributed to artistic developments in Siena, they would call for a different account of how those works took shape. The evidence examined here does not yet establish the extent of that contribution. Coulton's reconstruction offers a useful contrast. Through the material histories of early Qing paintings and their passage into British collections, he recovers relationships obscured by subsequent collecting and classification [2]. The resulting revision is more closely defined, but it changes our understanding of the objects and their historical circumstances.

The significance of these studies becomes clearer when the history of artworks is considered alongside the history of their interpretation. Accounts of viewing and visual agency have drawn attention to the circumstances in which images acquire meaning [5-6, 14]. Research on survival and contemporaneity has complicated the temporal boundaries within which those encounters are understood [7-11]. Juneja's work brings a related challenge to the geographical and chronological divisions of art history itself [3-4]. What matters in each instance is the historical consequence of recovering relationships that earlier scholarship neglected. Some discoveries clarify the movements and uses of particular objects; others may require a reconsideration of the categories through which larger artistic developments have been explained. The distinction rests on what the evidence allows historians to establish about the making, circulation, and interpretation of works.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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