

WU HONG

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My research focuses on East Asian Buddhist art. For my PhD dissertation, I am primarily concerned with typological development of Japanese sculptures of the Asuka period and their religious and socio-political implications. My current project deals with early Chinese Buddhist art, with a particular focus on the notion of divine and the Buddha image as a living entity. I have also developed an interest in the phenomenological approach to images and artistic experience, but am exploring ways to systematically inquire along such a direction.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*; Francisco Varela, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*; Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

Advantage: it provides a convenient framework of analysis.

Disadvantage: such rigid compartmentalizing scheme sometimes oversimplifies a more complex scenario. Style and iconography are not intrinsic properties but rely on a viewer's perceptive and cognitive apparatus. What is undertooood as a stylistic element by one group may be seen as an iconographic feature by another group. Such fluidity in cognition is not uncommon, especially in inter-regional cultural transmissions. I am not aware of an alternative approach that can do a better job, but when applying the old scheme of “style” and “iconography”, I see them not as distinct, immutable categories but as flexible understandings dependent on the viewer.

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

My research benefits significantly from the affect turn or the sensorial turn, which allows me to analyze images and visual forms beyond their stylistic and iconographic constitutions.

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

The notion of an embodied experience.

For a long time, western philosophy has been dominated by a rationalist approach and the presumed separation between mind and body. But to quote Antonio Damasio, Descartes is wrong and there is great potential to reconsider the theories of Spinoza (which has much in common with Yogacara Buddhism). My research is informed by this new direction in philosophical studies and I am interested in exploring how vision, together with our other sensorial organs, leads to an artistic experience that is more bodily than intellectual.

6. *What is your specific understanding of “meaning” in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

I see two modes of communication of meaning. The first is consciously perceived and processed by our brain (e.g., we recognize an iconographic message in one painting). The second works more directly on our body while the perception process may be unconscious (e.g., a painting may convey a particular kind of feeling or affect).

7. *To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

The phenomenological encounter with an image is not an act between the viewer and the image in a vacuum, but a situated experience dependent on all players in the specific circumstance and the circumstance as well.

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

Yes. We are better aware of the complexity of the relationship, but to further investigate the mechanism of interaction among different factors in the relationship is still very difficult.

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers’ understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

Our perception and cognition of the outside world depends on our perceptive capacity and cognitive apparatus, which is continuously evolving given new experience we acquire at every moment of life. Therefore, encounter with an image will certainly impact on our subsequent encounters with other images and other aspects of reality and experience.

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

The physical aspects of images, but also with extending qualities associated with feelings to be invoked in an interacting person. For instance, marble tends to be associated with feelings of cold, sublime etc.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

Images are a crucial element in the life of their viewers and users; they have an impact on their way of life, such as an icon dictating its owner to pray to it every day as a morning ritual etc. While a user determines the usage of an image, an image also claims a share of its user's time and prescribes a particular way of interaction between the image and the user.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

Many art historians have pointed out that tactile perception is involved, especially in perceiving illusional space as depicted in an image. However, other senses also play a role. Just like a red apple already activates the olfactory sense of its viewer without the need of projecting the scent itself, an image can also arouse other senses of its viewer.

In Buddhist rituals, olfactory and auditory aspects are important parts that, together with sight and tactile experiences, condition the body of a participant in a particular mode that is most suited for receiving or connecting with the divine.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

I thought they are already assimilated into studies of visual culture/material culture?

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

Models in transculturation studies etc.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

This is hard to avoid. Linguistic terms are loaded with meanings developed from its intellectual lineage. For instance, in Chinese texts, there is a stress on 灵验像 (images that are numinous and efficacious), yet to what extent “numinous and efficacious” is comparable with “divine” deserves discussion. We need to be more aware of such differences when using English to discuss non-European phenomena.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

In addition to the material aspect of the finished artwork, perhaps investigations of the material aspect of the creation process would also yield insightful results. I find James Elkins' *What Painting Is* also quite inspiring, though similar works are few in art historical research.

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