

# Approaches to photographic art I: life imitates art

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The word “photography” derives from Greek roots meaning “light” and “writing”. Photography, then, is writing with light. In conventional photography, such as landscapes or seascapes, many elements in addition to effective lighting are necessary to turn an ordinary snapshot into a memorable image. A suitable composition will have balanced color fields, leading lines such as a road, pathway, or river that draw the eye into the scene to a focal point of interest, a sense of depth created by layered foregrounds, midgrounds, and backgrounds, the golden light of sunrise or sunset to create dramatic colors and shadows not possible in the mid-day sun, and perhaps the inclusion of a human figure or animal to add a sense of scale. For images of wildlife, animals in action rather than static images provoke enhanced interest. Birds in flight, for example, especially if taken from above, below, or directly in the line of flight, birds landing on or taking off from water, a hawk with extended talons, or an eagle carrying prey are far more interesting than a picture of a bird sitting on the branch of a tree. Photographers constantly search for unexpected ways of looking at things.

In my search to discover new ways to present what is ordinary in different, even extraordinary, perspectives, and with a mind prepared by my background in art history, I began to crop from my images areas that I thought contributed the most to their beauty, eliminating superfluous elements to preserve only the most dramatic features while still retaining the general context of the composition. As my camera equipment became more sophisticated, I obtained similar images in high resolution without any cropping at all. During this process, I noticed that my camera saw elements in my subjects invisible to the naked eye. And when I began to crop these images, I discovered features that reminded me of the various brush strokes used by the master painters. Thus, I created exciting and artful images from ordinary snapshots simply by cropping and with a

few minor adjustments in the digital darkroom, without “photoshopping” special effects or adding elements not present in the original subject matter. In this process I reduced some images to balanced color fields, seemingly created by bold strokes, pointillist dots, or impressionist dabs, sometimes partially, and sometimes totally, removed from the original context from which I had extracted them. Others turned into the broad bold color fields favored by the abstract expressionists in the modern era. In either case, despite sometimes losing the original context of the images, a new paradigm of beauty emerged: I had entered the world of abstraction—by the very process of abstraction—from a previously recognizable subject yet without altering its fundamental content.

To illustrate these points, I have selected three artists from the nineteenth century (Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat) and three from the twentieth century (Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko). The nineteenth century artists are the subject of this paper while the remaining three will be the subject of another paper (“Approaches to Photographic art II”) to appear in a subsequent issue of this journal. The fundamental thesis of both papers is that if any of the artists under discussion had stood where I had stood with a camera in hand instead of a paintbrush, they would have taken the pictures I took.

*Figure 1* is an image I obtained of seaweed slowly moving to and fro with the waves in shallow water close to the shore at the Point Lobos State Reserve in California. Upon closer examination, it is not difficult to imagine the horizontal brush strokes of Claude Monet [1840–1926] delineating the wave action, as they appear in a painting he created in 1882 with very similar subject matter (*Figure 2*).

*Figure 3* is an image taken looking down from a 40-foot cliff onto a small beach below, with water moving over sand and submerged rocks, with deeper, darker water to the left.



**Figure 1** Monet at Sea Lion Cove, Point Lobos, 2013.



**Figure 2** Claude Monet, "Shadows on the Sea. The Cliffs at Pourville", 1882.



**Figure 3** van Gogh at North Plateau Trail Beach, Point Lobos, 2012.

There is an infinitely variegated pattern of rich and subtle colors, throughout. The transparent water's surface appears to have been painted with bold, closely-placed, well-defined horizontal strokes. Most observers have told me their first impression of this photograph was that it, indeed, was a painting. Compare this to *Figure 4*, a painting by van Gogh [1853–1890], similarly characterized by a variegated palette of colors applied in thick layers with rapid, even frenzied,



**Figure 4** Vincent van Gogh, "The Ravine", 1889.



**Figure 5** Seurat in the Carmel Valley, 2016.

strokes of either a brush or a palette knife. van Gogh may have seen patterns like this in nature.

Driving in the Carmel Valley 2 months ago, I came across this wondrous bloom of wildflowers on the adjoining mountains (*Figure 5*). I imagined this to be the result of massive paint spills that had run down the mountainside, tailing off at the end as if drawn down further with a gigantic dry paintbrush. Closer inspection revealed the color fields to be composed of multiple dots and I thought



**Figure 6** Georges Seurat, “Study for ‘A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte’”, 1884.

immediately that Georges Seurat [1859–1891] might have derived his technique of pointillism (*Figure 6*) from an observation such as this. In Seurat’s time, pointillism was Seurat’s attempt to develop a technique for art to imitate life. From my current historical perspective, what I saw in the Carmel Valley, as in the previous illustrations, became another instance of life imitating art.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I believe the images I take achieve their painterly look because I am consciously looking for the sources of painterly technique as they exist in nature. Of

course, I have an advantage over the nineteenth century painters with my powerful lenses and the full frame sensor in my camera that reveal elements not visible to the naked eye. That the masters were able to develop their techniques from direct observations *en plein air* redounds to their powers of observation and creativity and their ability to transform what they saw into the representative dots, swirls, dabs, and wisps that conveyed so convincingly the essence of what they tried to capture on canvas.

Did what these artists see represent the truth, the reality, of what they depicted in their paintings? It was not their intent to record photojournalistic representations of their subjects, nor is that my intent with the photographs I take. Picasso once said the he could paint a hundred versions of the same scene and come up with a hundred versions of the truth. It is possible, also, for me to alter a photograph so that it bears no relationship to what the camera saw. It is up to both the artist and the observer, then, to choose wherein the truth lies. Truth then, is what artist and observer choose it to be.

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## Footnote

*Conflicts of Interest:* The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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