Using New Photo Technology to Restore Legibility of Cultural Assets

[Hanging scrolls • Transom pictures • Documents • Sliding screen paintings • Votive tablets • Stone monuments • Deity images • Buddhist images • Solid objects • Etc.]

Without altering a work in any way, our original technology will restore its legibility with photographic images of what it looked like long ago.

[Introduction]

It is often said that as cultural works with important histories grow aged, weathered and dirtied, they will reach the end of their useful existence. But photographic images approximating what a work was like in the distant past can now be made, without any alteration of the work, thanks to new software that that extracts additional data from black-and-white images made with established photo techniques (ultraviolet, infrared or high-contrast photography), and melds that data into color photographs. This technology has contributed to the historical verification of cultural works.

Legibility through Photo Technology

• The Visible and the Invisible

People get various kinds of data through the five senses. Yet light, the basis for vision, **includes a great deal of data beyond that which is visible to the eye**. Light is a type of electromagnetic wave which the eye can see within the wavelength range of **400 to 700 nanometers**. We perceive light of different wavelengths as different colors. In broad terms it shifts through the spectrum of purple, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. Among the electromagnetic waves that we call light, **those with wavelengths somewhat shorter than purple (beyond the purple end of the visible spectrum) are known as ultraviolet**, and **those with wavelengths somewhat longer than red are known as infrared**.

Infrared Photography

Infrared radiation, or light with wavelengths longer than red, can be recorded using special **infrared photographic film**. For some time, infrared light has proved useful to archaeologists for viewing ink inscriptions that are otherwise illegible, especially on *mokkan*, the wood strips used for official records in ancient Japan. There is no reaction to wood or dye, but **mineral pigments including India ink absorb infrared rays** and therefore **show up in black**. Though an India ink inscription is no longer visible on the surface of a wood strip, there are still **residues of the ink** inside the wood fiber. **Infrared rays can pass through a thin piece of wood** and **reveal an image of the remaining ink**. But while that is true for residue that has permeated a material such as wood or paper, in the case of paper that is inscribed or painted and then pasted to a piece of wood, if the paper eventually peels away, the probability of a residue in the wood is extremely small.

• Example of India ink writing made legible with infrared radiation



Viewed with the eye



Image with legibility restored

Restoration of an India-Ink Painting using mainly Infrared Light

·Comparison of monochrome and infrared images



Color Image As seen with the naked eye. Ink is faded. Serious staining, blotting, discoloration

Restoration of a Painter's Seal



Barely discernible to the naked eye



Restored Seal Image Seal restored through image processing based on color image



Monochrome Image Like the color image with the hues removed. Similar staining, blotting, discoloration.



Present Condition



Infrared Image Filter eliminates data visible to the naked eye. Less staining, blotting, discoloration. Previously invisible inking of background ridge line and clouds



Legibility Restored through Image Processing The ridgeline at upper left, and the moon among clouds at right above the figure, are discernible.

·Ultraviolet Photography

Ultraviolet radiation, or light with wavelengths shorter than purple, is invisible to the human eye (as is infrared radiation). Ultraviolet photography is often used when restoring paintings and verifying writings, as it brings out subtle differences that the eye cannot distinguish. It does not react to India ink, but reacts well with thickly applied whitish pigments. Ultraviolet light is captured with ordinary photographic film, but only when light in the visible spectrum is eliminated, so a special filter is used to make a photograph of only the ultraviolet range. The range of light with wavelengths even shorter than ultraviolet includes X rays and gamma rays.

Restoration with Ultraviolet and Infrared Light



Viewed with the eye

High Contrast Photography



Image with legibility restored Infrared light brings out black inking, ultraviolet light brings out white pigment.

There are some writings and pictures that are so far gone as to be only faintly visible and impossible to understand. Infrared photography usually works well, but **infrared film has the disadvantage of being coarse-grained**, and there are cases where fine brush lines are not captured. From another approach, **increasing the contrast in a faint image** can make the contents legible. High-contrast photography requires **special film** and a **special developing process**.



·Legibility restored through high-contrast photography

Image with legibility restored

Difficulties of Special Photography



Image Sharpness

Compared to the 2.4 x 3.6 cm film frame of an ordinary SLR camera, our film is 10.0 x 12.5 cm, or 14.5 times larger in terms of area. We sometimes use film as large as 20 x 25 cm, which is 58 times the area of ordinary camera film, and delivers that much more information. That level of detail is the only way to make very small writing legible or to recapture very fine ink details. Especially painting with infrared film, which has a larger grain than ordinary film, details cannot be brought out unless a large format is used.

• Exposure

Both infrared and ultraviolet radiation are included in sunlight, and can be photographed in sunlight, but the quantity or radiation changes with the conditions. It is best to use a special lamp, but they are difficult to obtain and expertise is required to set the proper exposure.

Developing

Infrared film picks up invisible light, and hence great care is required in its handling and developing. Even a professional laboratory will generally use infrared sensors, so to avoid fogging the image, the developing cannot be entrusted to an outside service. Unlike black-and-white film, the negatives are sensitive to invisible light, and so must be processed in absolute darkness (darkroom and developing tank).

Digital Imaging

Digital cameras are everywhere, and they produce excellent images. In a digital camera, the infrared range is wider than in a film camera, and because infrared light can fog the photos, most digital cameras block out infrared light entirely, making them unsuitable for infrared photography. There are also infrared scanners, which are expensive and deliver excellent images. But they are not suited to large works because they can only scan a small area for each image, nor can they be used with fragile cultural assets because they work through direct physical contact. Infrared video cameras are also available, and they are easy to use, but despite their high cost, they generally do not have strong enough image quality for restoration purposes.

A professional single-shot digital camera provides at best about **12 megapixels**, which is still far behind the resolution of a large-format analog camera. Even a scanning digital camera provides no more than about **100 megapixels**, and requires a half hour or so per shot. For reproduction of detail, digital cameras are still far from perfect.

Image Processing Software

In both infrared and ultraviolet photography, the invisible parts are revealed only when visible light is removed. Yet it is usually of little use to reproduce the invisible parts alone, for what aids us in understanding the original design is the overlaying of the visible and invisible components. In most cases there is no color in infrared or ultraviolet light, hence the images are obtained in black and white. With image processing software, the special black-and-white image can be merged into a color photograph shot at the same time.

Onscreen, without affecting the actual cultural asset, images of the invisible remnants are combined with a current color photograph. The image may then be **retouched** according to the artistic judgment and digital skill of the operator, to provide an approximate **replica** of the work's original appearance.

Restoring Legibility through Image Processing

There are many situations where infrared or ultraviolet photography do not provide good results.

It often happens that an image produced through an established special photography technique does not by itself provide clear results. Among works where centuries of darkening has made the image all but invisible to the naked eye, even **an infrared image** with its superiority to an ordinary black-and-white image **frequently provides very little new information**. An ultraviolet image, on the other hand, reflects such a strong reaction to thick, whitish pigment that it cannot be the sole basis for restoration.



Color Image Rather than the visible information it provides, color photography is often more useful for identification of details.



Ultraviolet Image

Because ultraviolet light reacts strongly to white and other bright pigments, sometimes it provides better contrast than infrared and offers the best result.



Monochrome Image

Black-and-white photography entails color sensitivity problems. With an image that removes the color elements of a color image and replaces them only with dark and light shading, the available data is extremely limited.



Infrared Image

Infrared light reacts well to faint India ink and slightly enhances the modulation, providing much more data than the eye receives, but in the end this may not provide the best result.

Legibility Restored through Image Processing

Special photography alone, regardless of how many skillful combinations are made, will sometimes fall far short of revealing the original design of a work. This calls for image processing, using software that is capable of **extracting only the needed data** and **optimally recomposing it on the display**. In the restoration shown below, in addition to using the software program, **retouching and delineating** were done according to the operator's judgment.



Current condition

Legibility restored through image processing

Restoring legibility by retouching or delineating

Even a special photography image that has been processed by computer will not always provide satisfactory restoration. If extremely faint brush tracks are detected, the

software can be manually operated to enhance the legibility by retouching and delineating.

· Legibility enhanced by delineating characters





Comparison of image processing and delineation techniques



Restored through image processing



Restored through delineation

Report record and restoration example











川は先生

^{枚方宿鍵屋資料館/NPO法人画像による文化財復元研究会} デジタルで復元した欄間絵から見える 昭和初期に描かれた淀川と舟運風景

江戸時代の船宿・鍵屋を改修した大阪 府枚方市立枚方宿鍵屋資料館の蔵ギャ ラリーで、11月23日から12月12日 まで、「甦る淀川の情景〜鍵屋資料館 別棟 欄間絵の復元~」と題する展示 会が開催された。主催したのは枚方市 の NPO 法人画像による文化財復元研 究会。表面がくすんで不鮮明になって いた資料館内の欄間絵を,同研究会が デジタル画像で復元。水車や川面を泳 ぐ魚などの淀川の情景が甦ったため, 枚方市教育委員会と共催で,原画と復 元画を公開展示することになったもの。 公開期間中は「復元された絵はどこ ですか」と訪ねてくる見学客が多かっ た。お目当ての絵が描かれていたのは, 別館2階の和室の欄間だ。襖の籠居 と天井の間にある, 高さ 29 cm, 横幅 1m80cmの2枚の木製の板の両面に、 墨絵が描かれているが、経年変化で薄 くなり、肉眼では判然としなかった。 「そこで赤外線で撮影した画像をパ ソコンに取り込み, 画像処理ソフトを 駆使して、消えかかった文字や線を少 しずつ再生する作業を繰り返しました。

その結果、淀城と水車の風景、河岸で

水夫が舟を引く様子,宇治橋と思われ る橋,カエデの葉がそよぐ川面を泳ぐ 魚という4つの絵柄が,くっきりと復 元できました」と,同研究会代表の大 隠卿由さんは説明する。 3週間かかったという復元作業の結

果、絵柄はもちろん、落款から大正から昭和にかけて活躍し、枚方の風景などを主なテーマにしていた地元の日本 画家・中井吟香という画家の名も明ら かになった。

また、常数ととちに書かれていた 等一四の文字から、欄間絵は「昭和 8 (1933) 年に、鍵屋の建物改修を機に描 かれたのではないか」と教育委員会で は推測している。 京都、大阪のほぼ中間に位置する校

方は江戸時代に東海道の宿駅であり, 京と大坂をつなぐ淀川の水上交通の中 継地でもあった。淀川を行き来する三 十石船に向かって,小舟に乗って 「餠 くらわんか。酒くらわんか」と乱暴な 言葉で呼び掛けながら盛んに飲食物を 売り付ける「くらわんか舟」の威勢の 良さなど、その賑わいが知られていた。 淀川の船便を利用する客の待合所を 船宿というが、鍵屋は江戸時代栄えた 船宿で,鍵屋浦から,くらわんか舟を 出して商売をしていたという。その建 物は枚方宿を代表する町家建築。平成 13 (2001)年、東海道の宿駅と淀川舟 運によって繁栄した枚方宿の歴史を伝 える「市立枚方宿鍵屋資料館」として



2月 12 日まで鍵屋資料館内の蔵ギャラリーで開催された「甦る淀川の情景〜鍵屋資料館別棟 間時絵の復元〜」。現状の欄間絵と復元画像を見比べることができた



んかやかになうでラキ 6 月に設した もので、最新の写真技術を駆使して、 古文書や美術品などさまざまな文化財 の復元に役立てようと活動している。 腹元の対象となる文化財を探している 時に教育委員会から鍵屋の欄間絵のこ とを聞き、地域貢献NPOサポートファ ンドの助成金を受けて、作業に取り組 んだ

「国宝などの重要な文化財は手厚い 扱いを受けていますが、今回のように、 身近な神社仏閣や資料館にも、劣化し たままで取り残された貴重な文化財が あります。これからも埋もれた文化財 を復元し、後世に伝える一助になる活 動をしていきたいと思います」と今後 の抱負を話している。

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