

## Post-Print History of Reading in Western Paintings

**Authors:** Xu Huan, Luo Yonghang

**Date:** 2022-11-27T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Taking Western paintings as the entry point, this study investigates the developmental trajectory of Western reading history, explores its characteristics from an image perspective, practices the research approach of “using images to prove history,” and provides reference for Chinese reading history research. [Method/Process] With 588 Western paintings on the theme of reading as the research object, this study employs image analysis methodology to sort out and depict the developmental evolution of Western reading history from an image perspective, analyzes the evolution of perceptions regarding reading behavior across different eras, and finally summarizes the characteristics of Western reading history from this perspective. [Results/Conclusions] Western reading history from an image perspective is characterized by figure-centered narration, with religious-themed reading running throughout. Research on reading history using paintings should consider the influences of era factors, painting purposes, and degree of artistic processing.

### Full Text

#### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study examines the developmental trajectory of Western reading history through the lens of Western paintings, exploring the characteristics of Western reading history from an image perspective and practicing the research approach of “using images to prove history,” thereby providing references for Chinese reading history research. [Method/Process] Taking 588 Western paintings on the theme of reading as research objects, this study employs image analysis methods. Based on sorting out and depicting the evolution of Western reading history from an image perspective, it analyzes the changing perceptions of reading behavior across different eras, and finally summarizes the characteristics of Western reading history from an image perspective. [Result/Conclusion] Western reading history from an image perspective features

a character-centered narrative approach, with religious-themed reading running throughout. Research on reading history using paintings should consider the influence of temporal factors, painting purposes, and the degree of artistic processing.

The history of reading is fundamentally a history of encounters between the textual world and the reader's world [1]. During the ancient Greek and Roman period, writing flourished under the influence of the phonetic alphabet and papyrus. By the late 4th century BCE, social knowledge transmitted orally had decisively transformed into written transmission [2]. In the Middle Ages, Christianity promoted literacy and reading development through church schools, while simultaneously making religion the sole theme of reading during this period. In modern times, printing technology and paper dramatically changed people's reading behavior. Starting from the late 17th century, Western European readers' reading methods shifted from "intensive reading" to "extensive reading," fundamentally transforming people's understanding of reading.

With the arrival of the "era of image reading," visual materials have gained increasing attention. Jacob Burckhardt regarded images and historical relics as "testimonies to various developmental stages of the human spirit," capable of interpreting "the structure of thought and its representations in specific eras" [4]. Francis Haskell elaborated on the validity of "using images to prove history" in his work *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* [5].

Paintings are artistic works in which creators use elements such as lines and colors to outline images, depict scenes, and convey certain intentions. Reading, as a practical activity, always occurs in specific settings. From this perspective, studying reading through paintings possesses natural compatibility. Western painting has a long history, and numerous works have been preserved to this day. A considerable portion of these rich paintings depicts reading scenes from different periods, serving as important materials for studying Western reading history. However, current research systematically examining Western reading history from an image perspective remains relatively scarce.

This study takes digital collections from the Louvre Museum, the British Museum, the Hermitage Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art as primary sources, supplemented by works indexed in the "World Art Appreciation Database" and "Gallerix" —two comprehensive art search engines. Using the search query "subject/description = 'read' or 'book' " across different resource sites, with geographical limitation to Europe and temporal range from ancient Greece to the 20th century, we manually browsed and 筛选出 588 符合条件的 paintings (search conducted in April 2022). The selection criteria drew upon the definition of "reading pictures," choosing images where figures and books appear in the same frame and the figures are shown in states of about to read, currently reading, or having just finished reading [6]. This study aims to three-dimensionally present the developmental course of Western reading history from an image perspective, while practicing the research path of using images to prove history, thereby providing references for Chinese reading history research.

## 2 Analysis of Reading Images in Western Paintings

### 2.1 Developmental Course of Reading History in Paintings

**2.1.1 Reading in Ancient Greece and Rome** The primary painting form in ancient Greece was vase painting (a decorative art on pottery), characterized by a relatively realistic style that mainly depicted scenes of Greeks reading poetry. From the limited reading images available, we can infer that reading materials in ancient Greece primarily consisted of scrolls and clay tablets, with poetry as the main content. Regarding reader demographics, besides men who dominated social life, women with relatively low literacy levels in ancient Greek society also appeared as readers in paintings. In terms of reading form, collective reading dominated mainstream representation, while individual reading scenes were rare. Additionally, collective reading scenes often featured musicians holding instruments, suggesting that reading in ancient Greece was a form of vocalized, chant-like reading.

Mosaics and frescoes were the main forms of painting in ancient Rome. Roman painting emphasized secular life in subject matter and pursued grandeur in technique. However, mythological figures were not uncommon in reading-related paintings, particularly the frequent appearance of Muse figures in reading scenes. Two 1st-century frescoes excavated from Pompeii (now housed in the Louvre) depict the Muse goddess wearing a laurel wreath and holding a scroll while reading [Figure 1: see original paper]. Reading images from ancient Rome confirm that the codex binding format already existed during this period. The diverse forms of reading materials held by readers in these paintings also indicate the variety of carrier types at the time. Reader composition and reading content differed little from ancient Greece, but notably, individual reading scenes began to appear.

**2.1.2 Reading in the Middle Ages** Medieval painting emphasized the expression of subjective spiritual worlds, with subject matter constrained by Christianity, focusing primarily on iconography depicting holy persons or sacred events. Consequently, reading images from the Middle Ages mainly featured religious figures, including Christian saints, the Virgin Mary, and the Christ Child, with reading content related to religious doctrine. Significantly, in some reading images, books became important clues for identifying specific saints. In *Portrait of Saint Paul* (an altarpiece by Italian painter Lippo Memmi from 1330, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), the saint's identity is established through the small white-covered book he holds, inscribed with “.AO.ROMANO” (representing the Epistle to the Romans)—the legendary letters from Apostle Paul to various churches or individuals that extensively address faith, theology, and ethics, forming important foundations for later Christian doctrine [Figure 3: see original paper].

In Middle Ages reading images, the dominant form of reading material was the codex-style book. However, in most saint portraits, the book often appears

in a closed state, accompanying saints in various scenes. This representation, besides using books to indirectly reveal the reader's specific identity as mentioned above, also symbolizes Christianity's mastery of literacy and knowledge, enabling dialogue with God and understanding of divine will through Bible reading. From this perspective, the book element in saint portraits transcends individual significance to become a group symbol. The saints' role in comprehending God's will and spreading Christian doctrine is manifested through the image of holding books.

**2.1.3 Reading in the Renaissance** During the Renaissance, the proportion of religious-themed reading images decreased but remained mainstream. Simultaneously, under humanism's influence, religious figures shed their rigid, solemn expressions from the Middle Ages, displaying more humanized and richer spiritual appearances. The proportion of secular-themed paintings gradually increased, with portraiture as the primary form. Influenced by art patrons, this period's portraits mainly featured upper-class groups such as civic corporations (like commercial and craft guilds), religious organizations, courts, and wealthy individuals. In these upper-class portraits, readers' gazes rarely fell on the books in their hands, presenting states of about to read or having finished reading, with books possibly serving merely as decorative objects reflecting character traits.

In Renaissance reading images, religious and mythological figures still dominated, but images of secular readers such as monks, nobles, and merchants began to emerge, with male readers significantly outnumbering females. The increasing number of secular readers reflects how humanism liberated thought from religious constraints to some extent, making people realize that reading was not solely for religious service. Two notable characteristics of reader composition emerged: first, numerous scenes of female reading; second, more detailed distinctions in readers' professions, highlighting traits of doctors, astronomers, musicians, and other identities through different book contents.

Reading materials in Renaissance paintings included both medieval parchment manuscripts and newly emerged paper-based materials. In terms of content, religious books remained important, but under Renaissance influence, works from ancient Greece and Rome also constituted significant reading material.

**2.1.4 Reading in the 17th-20th Centuries** In reading images from the 17th-20th centuries, religious-themed paintings' proportion shrank to about 10%, and religious figures became almost indistinguishable from secular figures in presentation. In contrast, ordinary people's reading images became the mainstream of this period. Compared to relatively monotonous portraits, ordinary people's reading images featured richer content and forms, manifested in more diverse reading scenes and more varied composition of reading groups and content.

Regarding reading scenes, this period largely broke through indoor limitations, extending reading settings to outdoor locations such as park lawns, seashores, or forests. This change relates closely to evolving attitudes toward reading and

changes in book forms. As literacy levels continuously improved, reading for 17th-20th century readers became not only a means of acquiring knowledge but also a form of leisure and entertainment. Different types of reading materials such as books, newspapers, and magazines enriched readers' options while remaining portable.

## 2.2 Types of Reading Images

Through analysis of the 588 Western paintings' thematic content, reading-themed images can be divided into three categories: religious themes, secular themes, and other types.

**2.2.1 Religious-Themed Reading Images** Religious-themed reading images 主要指 paintings featuring religious figures reading or reading scenes from religious stories. Specifically, they can be subdivided into saint portraits, Madonna and Child portraits, and biblical narratives.

**(1) Saint Portraits.** Saint portrait reading images typically depict one or more saints (identified by halos behind their heads) holding books in standing positions facing forward, with no obvious facial expressions, creating a solemn and dignified atmosphere. In most saint portraits, books appear in closed states, accompanying saints in various scenes [Figure 4: see original paper].

**(2) Madonna and Child Portraits.** These images feature the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ, depicting scenes of maternal companionship. In these compositions, Mary often holds the Christ Child, usually shown in states of currently reading or having just finished reading [Figure 5: see original paper].

**(3) Biblical Narratives.** These images focus on stories and allusions recorded in the Bible, depicting scenes such as the Annunciation, Christ' s Passion, and the Coronation of the Virgin [Figure 6: see original paper].

Religious-themed reading images flourished during the Middle Ages and gradually declined after the 18th century. In medieval times, to emphasize religious figures' sacredness and majesty, paintings typically featured rigid, solemn expressions. During the Renaissance, influenced by humanism, religious figures painted by artists began to acquire "human characteristics," with richer facial expressions, though still retaining some divine features like halos. In 17th-20th century reading images, religious-themed paintings' proportion shrank to about 10%, with religious figures becoming almost indistinguishable from secular figures.

**2.2.2 Secular-Themed Reading Images** Secular-themed reading images 主要指 paintings featuring secular figures reading or secular reading scenes. Specifically, they can be subdivided into portraits, women reading pictures, outdoor reading pictures, and reading by light pictures.

(1) **Portraits.** Portraiture depicts specific individuals, emphasizing their typical characteristics. Initially, portraits were exclusive to a small number of people, mainly depicting religious groups, courts, and wealthy citizen classes. After the 17th century, portraits of ordinary people gradually emerged. In portraits, readers often hold books in states of currently reading or having finished reading, as shown in [Figure 7: see original paper].

(2) **Women Reading Pictures.** After the 17th century, the number of paintings specifically depicting female reading scenes increased, with diverse content roughly divided into several categories: first, scenes of women reading letters, where their expressions convey emotions such as joy or longing; second, scenes of elderly women reading, which feature heavier tones and more focused expressions compared to the relaxed, joyful depictions of younger women [Figure 8: see original paper]; third, scenes presenting reading as a leisure activity, where women appear relaxed and languid while reading, as if passing time.

(3) **Outdoor Reading Pictures.** In the 19th century, influenced by Romanticism, the number of paintings with outdoor settings increased. Reading was no longer confined to indoor spaces, with venues becoming more diverse and casual, indicating that reading had become an increasingly common activity [Figure 9: see original paper].

(4) **Reading by Light Pictures.** During the 17th-18th centuries, paintings emphasized the use and representation of light and shadow. Works from this period employed light and dark effects to highlight readers' expressions, allowing viewers to see their focused demeanor as if silently absorbing and digesting the book's content [Figure 10: see original paper].

Overall, the evolution of secular themes experienced a process from elite to mass classes. During the Middle Ages, secular reading images began to appear, with upper-class figures such as nobles, monks, and merchants dominating. By the 17th-20th centuries, as Western painting entered its modern development period driven by capitalism, the secular nature of reading images continuously strengthened. Ordinary people's reading themes surpassed upper-class portrait themes, making ordinary people's reading an important component of 17th-20th century reading images.

**2.2.3 Other Types of Reading Images** Ancient Greece and Rome were important periods for both reading history and Western art development. However, due to the distant time period, many artworks have been lost to history. The scarcity of paintings makes it difficult to subdivide their reading images, so they are collectively categorized as other types.

In ancient Greek and Roman reading images, poetry reading was the main subject. In these paintings, readers (including both mythological and secular figures) often unroll scrolls with both hands, reciting the poetry inscribed, frequently accompanied by figures holding lyres or other instruments [Figure 11: see original paper].

Besides paintings from ancient Greece and Rome, the Neoclassical period also produced numerous works depicting ancient Greek reading scenes, predominantly featuring ancient Greek poets and philosophers. However, these paintings' representations of ancient Greek and Roman reading scenes suffer from varying degrees of historical inaccuracy, which is detrimental to understanding the actual reading practices of those periods. Lawrence Alma-Tadema's 1885 work *Reading Homer* depicts a young poet wearing a laurel wreath reading Homer's works to a festively dressed audience, yet the painting includes a type of rose that did not exist before the 19th century [Figure 12: see original paper].

## 2.3 Analysis of Reading Elements in Paintings

**2.3.1 Readers in Paintings** Based on identity, readers in paintings can be roughly categorized into religious figures, upper-class readers, and secular class readers.

Religious figures were the main reading subjects during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Saint Jerome most frequently appears with books, likely due to his identity—in the Catholic Church, he is recognized as the patron saint of translators, librarians, and encyclopedia authors, making these symbolic meanings naturally associate him with books. The Virgin Mary is also a significant religious reader image; in Christian mythology, she enjoys the venerable title “Sedes Sapientiae” (Throne of Wisdom), symbolizing wisdom. Additionally, the Virgin's reading image represents female reader images of that era to some extent.

Secular reading figures emerged during the Renaissance. Initially, upper-class readers completely dominated, partly because their education gave them literacy levels far exceeding commoners, and partly because Renaissance painters relied on artistic patronage from churches, merchant guilds, and nobility, thus focusing their depictions on these groups. By the 17th-20th centuries, secular reader images had become completely dominant, with ordinary and female reader images rising rapidly. The emergence of ordinary reader images indicates that educational popularization provided a broader demographic foundation for reading, while under the influence of scientific rationality, ordinary people increasingly valued reading.

**2.3.2 Reading Materials in Paintings** Reading materials in paintings can be divided into scrolls, parchment manuscripts, and paper-based materials based on their forms.

Scroll-form materials mainly appear in ancient Greek and Roman paintings, with a few medieval paintings also featuring scrolls. Readers typically hold scrolls with both hands, with content primarily being poetry. Codex-form materials emerged and flourished during the Middle Ages; based on readers' identities and the overall context of the period, their content can be basically determined as religious books. The codices depicted in paintings are relatively large, con-

sistent with medieval religious books' characteristics—large formats for reading aloud needs. In terms of details, reading materials in paintings appear relatively simple, with solid-color covers and no other decorations, which contradicts our understanding of medieval manuscripts' ornate covers. This may relate to Christian asceticism. From the clasp elements painted by artists, we can infer that medieval book materials were parchment, which expands and contracts with temperature and humidity changes, requiring covers and clasps or straps to prevent deformation.

Paper-based materials emerged during the Renaissance and eventually became mainstream. In terms of specific content, religious books remained important, but works from ancient Greece and Rome also constituted significant reading content [Figure 13: see original paper]. Since the 17th-20th centuries, reading materials in paintings have changed considerably in both binding and content. On one hand, different types of reading materials such as books, newspapers, and magazines appeared in paintings; on the other hand, book clasp designs basically disappeared, indicating that paper had completely replaced parchment. Meanwhile, reading content varied significantly according to readers' identities—doctors had pharmaceutical formulas before them, astronomers studied astronomical content, etc. This period featured numerous female reading scenes, but most did not depict specific reading content. Based on readers' expressions, they were likely reading novels that were both simple and time-consuming.

**2.3.3 Reading Venues in Paintings** Influenced by religious-themed paintings and portraits, most reading scenes in medieval and Renaissance paintings either featured sacred characteristics or solid-color backgrounds, making it difficult to identify specific temporal and spatial contexts. In identifiable scenes, indoor reading has consistently been significantly more prevalent than outdoor reading. Among indoor reading scenes, those by tables, under windows, and under lamp/candlelight are the most common. The presence of lamps and candlelight also indicates that some reading activities occurred at night.

Outdoor reading scenes have existed since the Renaissance but have consistently maintained about 10% representation. Specific settings vary widely, including lawns, seashores, forests, or under trees.

## 3 Evolutionary Characteristics of Reading in Paintings of Different Eras

### 3.1 Evolution of Reading Image Themes

Reading images in Western paintings show a thematic shift from religious to secular. Beginning in the Renaissance, religious reading images gradually decreased while secular reading images increased, aligning with the overall trend of Western painting themes. This evolution from religious mythology to secular life also reflects a major cultural transformation in the West. Western traditional culture has long been viewed as a religious culture emphasizing the afterlife

and transcendence. For a considerable historical period, its focus fell on the illusory divine-human relationship, making superstitious faith and metaphysical speculation important spiritual levers driving Western cultural development [7]. After the 13th century, under humanism's influence and as the church proved helpless against the ravaging Black Death, people gradually grew skeptical of religious theology, replaced by desire for survival and pursuit of happiness in the present world. This shift led artists to turn their gaze toward secular life, making religious mythology no longer the only choice for artistic creation.

### 3.2 Transformation of Reading Subjects

Figures constitute an indispensable factor in painting creation. Reading subjects in Western reading images exhibit an evolution from elite to mass characteristics. Additionally, the popularization of female reader images since the 17th century is a noteworthy change.

**3.2.1 From Elite to Mass** The shift from elite to mass reading groups relates to two factors. First, in the first half of the 17th century, as public education systems continuously improved, ordinary people's literacy levels increased substantially, making reading common in real life. Second, Renaissance painters mainly relied on artistic patronage from civic corporations, religious groups, courts, and wealthy individuals, catering to these groups' preferences in content creation. By the late 16th century, the Dutch Revolution freed the Netherlands from Spanish rule, leading to rapid economic development and the rise of a new wealthy bourgeoisie. Art patrons shifted from nobility and church to the masses, transforming artworks into true cultural commodities. Simultaneously, the Dutch upheld relatively secular and diligent values, believing all professional labor had dignity, which gave the citizenry the impulse to express their personal life styles. Under these circumstances, ordinary people gradually became protagonists in portraits.

**3.2.2 Popularization of Female Reader Images** Since the 17th century, the popularization of female reader images results from the combined push of real-world factors and symbolic meaning. In reality, women's rising social status and educational popularization provided the foundation for the universalization of female reader images since the 17th century. In late ancient Rome, developing commodity economy allowed women to break through domestic labor limitations and participate in social wealth creation, gaining improved economic and social status [8]. The "Virgin Mary worship" prevalent in the Middle Ages reflected women's status improvement. During this period, besides a few aristocratic women who mastered literacy through private education, some women who wished to become nuns could also receive education in churches. Renaissance humanism's development increased societal emphasis on education, creating more opportunities for women's education and promoting female self-awareness awakening. Literary and artistic works of this period often took "praising women" as their theme [9]. The rise of the Reformation also profoundly

impacted Western European education dominated by Christian education, opening the curtain for Western education's nationalization, secularization, and popularization. Although Protestantism's attitude toward women was essentially no different from Catholicism, its need for evangelism promoted the development of female primary education, increasing female literacy rates to some extent. On this foundation, the 17th-century bourgeois revolution and capitalism's rapid development further elevated women's status.

Changes in reality laid the foundation for expanding female reading groups, while the symbolic fit between female images and reading behavior propelled the flourishing of female reader images in the visual domain. As carriers of aesthetic ideals, female images have always occupied important positions and roles in painting. Love, sexuality, and expression of female self-awareness are typical symbolic meanings of female images in Western painting history [10]. The symbolic fit between female images and reading manifests primarily in that female images symbolize physical beauty, while since the 17th century, people have fully recognized reading's importance for personal intellectual and cultural enhancement, viewing reading as symbolizing intellectual beauty. The unity of physical and intellectual beauty gives female reading images extremely high aesthetic value.

### 3.3 Symbolic Meaning of Reading

The symbolic meaning of reading in paintings divides into two types: one is the symbolic meaning of the reading act itself when no specific reading content is depicted; the other is the symbolic meaning of reading specific content when particular materials are shown. When specific reading content is depicted, the symbolic meaning of the content itself often outweighs that of the reading act and is relatively easier to identify. For example, in some Renaissance aristocratic and merchant portraits, identifiable phrases point to ancient Greek and Roman works, such as "aeneid" (the ancient Roman epic *Aeneid*), reflecting the Renaissance advocacy for reviving ancient Greek and Roman culture. This study does not extensively discuss such symbolic meanings but focuses on the meaning of the reading act itself.

From the symbolic meaning of reading acts in paintings, artist groups recognized reading's functional role since ancient Greece, though different eras' understandings of reading behavior led to variations in functional representation. Specifically, ancient Greek perception of reading's function was content recording and reproduction. In ancient Greek reading images, reading was closely linked to poetry recitation—reading often accompanied musical instrument performance. From a teleological perspective, ancient Greek poetry was largely a practical art concerned with moral education, using poetic forms to disseminate, communicate, remind, and educate others [11]. Combined with the realism of ancient Greek painting, reading's symbolism in this period mainly included two aspects: first, symbolizing the vocal nature of ancient Greek reading; second, symbolizing content expression and transmission.

Ancient Rome and the Middle Ages, to varying degrees, “divinized” reading, viewing it as a means of communicating with deities. In ancient Roman reading images, reading often appeared with the Muse goddess (representing wisdom) and poet figures like Virgil, Menander, and Sappho, carrying connotations of knowledge and wisdom. During the long Middle Ages under church domination, reading was subordinate to religion. In this period’ s reading images, books became carriers of religious faith and symbols of readers’ identities.

During the Renaissance, under humanism’ s influence, reading returned to the secular world. With the emergence of printing and paper, people’ s recognition of reading’ s ability to enhance individual capabilities became clearer, though this understanding may have been limited to the upper classes. In Renaissance reading images, reading was no longer exclusive to religious figures; some nobles, merchants, and artists also frequently appeared in portraits holding books, though ordinary people’ s reading images remained rare. Books (specifically those with unidentifiable content) appearing in portraits often indicated that the depicted person possessed literacy skills and, to some extent, demonstrated their social status. In religious-themed paintings, religious faith remained an important symbolic meaning of reading.

Since the 17th-20th centuries, driven by scientific rationality, the general public widely recognized reading’ s importance. Simultaneously, as reading ability became universal, reading increasingly became part of daily life, and its symbolic meaning gradually returned to simplicity. In 17th-century reading images, reading was often associated with light, whose presence enhanced facial expressions, showing readers’ focused demeanor as if silently absorbing book content. During this period, reading returned to its most essential meaning—acquiring information and knowledge. In 18th-century Rococo paintings, reading became an ornament reflecting aristocrats’ erudition and refined image. The famous portrait of Madame de Pompadour depicts her beautiful appearance and gorgeous jewelry, but she holds a somewhat worn book to demonstrate her intellectual aspiration and learning. In 19th-century Romantic paintings, light tones and readers’ languid postures give a sense of reading’ s leisurely, pleasurable nature. In the 20th century, as industrial development brought enormous social changes, artists turned their gaze to new realities. Realist artists used their works to reveal social contradictions and express ordinary people’ s lives. 20th-century painters shifted from depicting objective material forms to pursuing expression of their own inner spirit. In this period’ s paintings, reading became a symbol of leisure and entertainment, with people reading on sofas, outdoor benches, or park lawns in relaxed, casual postures.

From the above analysis, the symbolic meaning of reading acts can be roughly divided into two levels: the first level indicates the relationship between the painting’ s subject and reading—often manifested as the subject’ s mastery of literacy; the second level extends from this foundation, combining information about reading objects, content, and forms to symbolize the subject’ s knowledge, wisdom, values, and social status.

## 4 Characteristics of Western Reading History from an Image Perspective

Both images and text are media or symbols for information transmission, with text emphasizing logic and rationality while images emphasize perceptual cognition. This makes reading history exhibit different characteristics from textual and image perspectives.

### 4.1 Character-Centered Narrative

In long-term coexistence and competition with words, images have always been in a derogatory position, making temporal logic adapted to words dominant in narrative thinking. This is reflected in narrative methods or structures with obvious linear causal characteristics [12]. Consequently, reading history from a textual perspective is a history with complete causal elements including figures, reading materials, time, place, and events. In contrast, images are frozen arts with spatialization and decontextualization characteristics, manifested in image-perspective reading history as a character-centered narrative approach—blurring reading content and spatiotemporal background while emphasizing reading figures.

This characteristic mainly manifests in two aspects: first, since most reading images belong to portraiture, readers' images occupy the primary space, with reading materials and backgrounds serving more as decorative elements; second, reading materials and spatiotemporal backgrounds become clues reflecting characters' identities. For a long period, literacy was mastered by upper-class elites, so reading in paintings became an important element for this group to display status. Influenced by this characteristic, Western reading history from an image perspective resembles a history of readers, clearly showing the evolution from religious figures to upper-class elites and finally to people from all social strata, while also revealing the continuous popularization of female readers since the 17th century.

### 4.2 Religious Reading Throughout

Despite differences in narrative logic between image-perspective and text-perspective reading histories, both share one common characteristic: religious reading runs throughout.

Religious-themed paintings in image-perspective reading history can be subdivided into two categories: one features mythological religious figures like saints and the Virgin Mary reading; the other depicts secular figures reading religious materials. The former declined significantly after 17th-century Baroque art, while the latter can still be found in 19th-century paintings.

The tenacious vitality of religious reading in image-perspective reading history may relate to several factors: first, the powerful reality of religious influence and the widespread practice of reading religious books provided realistic foundations

for painting creation; second, due to images' strong intuitiveness and relatively low reading threshold, they became important means for churches to spread faith in eras of generally low education levels, with church groups also being important sources of artistic patronage; finally, this may also relate to religious faith rooted in Western traditional culture, whose profound influence in the ideological and cultural domain determined religious themes' tenacious vitality in paintings, while the status of Bibles and other religious readings in religion made religious reading paintings enduring.

### 4.3 Three-Dimensional Presentation of Reading History

Reading is a process of mutual influence between reading subjects and texts, representing both practical and spiritual activities of reading subjects. Readers' emotions and attitudes constitute an inseparable part of reading history. The high abstraction of text systems makes their narrative logic, while highlighting rational characteristics, unconsciously ignore some perceptual cognition. Images, as non-rational media, carry creators' perceptual understanding of the world. Reading images in Western paintings can three-dimensionally present painters' and reading subjects' perceptual cognition, making reading history more vivid and lively.

Medieval reading images extensively used gold as the primary color tone, creating a sacred, solemn atmosphere that, combined with figures' rigid, solemn expressions, gave reading an authoritative feeling. Religious figures holding books seemed like deities holding order while patrolling the human world, matching the high-pressure religious rule of the Middle Ages. Renaissance painters applied geometry, perspective, and anatomy to painting creation, making figures lifelike, while oil painting materials made works more delicate. Readers depicted during this period were mainly nobles and merchants from upper classes. As readers, their gazes rarely focused on books but looked beyond the paintings, creating a somewhat performative quality.

In 17th-century Baroque reading images, readers often sat in darkness, reading by candlelight or natural light, with overall dark tones that didn't create oppression but instead highlighted the quiet reading environment and readers' concentration. In 18th-century Rococo's bright, gorgeous style, court figures in magnificent dresses holding books conveyed reading's noble elegance. In 19th-century Romantic paintings, light tones and readers' languid postures gave a sense of reading's leisurely pleasure. In the 20th century, as industrial development brought enormous social changes, artists turned to new realities. Realist artists used works to reveal social contradictions and express ordinary people's lives. 20th-century painters shifted from depicting objective forms to pursuing expression of their own inner spirit. In this period's paintings, reading became a symbol of leisure and entertainment.

Western reading history from an image perspective compensates for the perceptual cognition and experiential feedback missing in rational descriptions of

textual reading history, making reading history' s evolution no longer a cold logical 拼接 of readers, reading materials, media, and education levels, but more three-dimensionally presenting reading' s styles across different historical periods and conveying reading' s emotions and humanistic spirit.

As Peter Burke pointed out in his work *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, we risk misunderstanding if we ignore images, artists, images' uses, and people' s vastly different attitudes toward images across historical periods. In attempting to reproduce reading' s development and evolution through reading images in Western paintings, we deeply realize the following factors' influence on "using images to prove history" : (1) **Temporal factors.** Materially, different eras' painting techniques and tools differ, directly affecting final forms. Spiritually, painting expresses creators' world cognition, which largely derives from the era' s intellectual soil. (2) **Painting purposes.** Besides expressing painters' thoughts and emotions, artworks are also means of livelihood for many. For a long time, painting patrons belonged to upper classes, and works largely reflected this group' s preferences. By the 17th century, patrons shifted from nobility and church to the masses, making artworks true cultural commodities, with creation then heavily influenced by market preferences. (3) **Degree of artistic processing.** The process from what painters see or imagine to final presentation involves varying degrees of artistic processing, influenced by multiple factors including themes and personal styles, resulting in different elements' varying degrees of detail and abstraction. This differential processing affects paintings' realism to some extent, requiring discernment of presented content before using them to argue certain viewpoints or facts. Therefore, reading history presented through images itself represents a reality of superimposed multiple temporal perspectives subjectively reproduced by painters: all reading history is not only encounters between texts and readers but also encounters between past and present.

## References

- [1] Guglielmo C, Roger C. *A History of Reading in the West* [M]. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.
- [2] Fischer. *The History of Reading* [M]. Translated by Li Ruilin. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2009.
- [3] Wang Long. An Exploration of Reading History Research [J]. *Library Theory and Practice*, 2001(1): 17-18.
- [4] Peter Burke. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* [M]. Translated by Yang Yu. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008.
- [5] Haskell. *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* [M]. Translated by Kong Lingwei. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2018.
- [6] Wang Bo. A Preliminary Study of Reading Pictures in Ancient Chinese Paintings [J]. *Library*, 2015(2): 10-16.
- [7] Zhao Lin. *Western Religious Culture* [M]. Wuhan: Yangtze Literature and Art Press, 1997.
- [8] Li Li. A Brief Discussion on the Status of Roman Women [D]. Qufu: Qufu Normal University, 2011.
- [9] Wang Zhen. A Comparative Analysis of Women' s Status in East and West from the 14th-17th Centuries—Taking the Ming Dynasty and Italian Re-

naissance as Examples [J]. *Short Story (Original Edition)*, 2018(5): 85-86. [10] Lei Canming. On the Development and Symbolic Meaning of Female Images in Western Painting [D]. Beijing: Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2012. [11] Wang Keping. *Greek Legacy: Art Education and Civic Virtue* [M]. Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House, 2014. [12] Long Diyong. Image Narrative and Text Narrative—Images and Texts in Story Paintings [J]. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, 2008(3): 28-43.

### Author Contributions

Xu Huan: Proposed research ideas and outline, finalized manuscript; Luo Yonghang: Collected and analyzed data, wrote and revised initial draft.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.*