

THE ONTOLOGY OF WATERCOLOUR PAINTING FROM A HEIDEGGERIAN PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY OF NANTONG CLOCK TOWER SQUARE

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Abstract: This paper approaches watercolour painting through a focused Heideggerian ontological framework, concentrating on the interrelated moments of material concealment, the establishment of the work, and the unconcealment of truth as articulated in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. These moments are treated not as an exhaustive metaphysical system, but as a structural logic through which an artwork comes into presence. Positioned at the level of medium rather than philosophy per se, the study examines how the interaction of paper, water, and pigment renders this ontological sequence experientially and medially legible within watercolour practice. Ontology is thus approached neither as a theoretical abstraction nor as a method to be applied, but as a visible and reconstructable order of pictorial events through which a work establishes itself as a site of truth.

Keywords: Watercolour painting; Heidegger; Ontology; Phenomenology; Mediality

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of the origin of art has long occupied a central position in aesthetics. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger argues that an artwork is not merely a thing, but a site in which truth sets itself into work (Heidegger, 2018, p. 64). Compared with discourse-centered oil painting, watercolour, due to its transparency, fluidity, and contingency, has often been reduced to a matter of technique or treated as a “light” medium (Shi & Liu, 2025; Zhao, 2010). Consequently, systematic accounts of its ontological weight and modes of appearance remain insufficient (Duan, 2004).

While existing scholarship has accumulated substantial insights into watercolour techniques, stylistic tendencies, and cultural contexts, it remains comparatively under-articulated at the ontological level, specifically regarding the question of how watercolour can function as a site of truth’s disclosure. Two limitations are particularly evident: first, the lack of a systematic interpretation of watercolour grounded in Heidegger’s framework of “thing, work, and truth” and the tension between world and earth (Young, 2001); second, insufficient attention to the hierarchical distinction between “perceptual reality” and “ontological truth,” often leading to the conflation of visual verisimilitude or sensory intensity with appearance itself (Crowther, 2009). In response, this paper returns to the site of the work and, through a case analysis of my watercolour Nantong Clock Tower Square, examines how material “concealment,” the “establishment” of the work, and the “flash” of truth form a progressive structure within watercolour. By exploring the dialogical space between *aletheia* (unconcealment) and artistic *yijing* (situational resonance, a term from Chinese aesthetic theory), the study aims to provide a more coherent and focused theoretical account of the origin of watercolour painting. Here, *yijing* does not function as a parallel ontology to Heidegger’s *aletheia*, but rather as an experiential vocabulary through which situational resonance becomes perceptible within artistic practice. The purpose is not to reinterpret Heidegger’s philosophy *per se*, but to demonstrate how its ontological structure may be rendered experiential and made legible at the medial level, without treating ontology as a method to be applied or verified through concrete watercolour practice.

2. MATERIAL CONCEALMENT AND THE CALLING FORTH OF WORLD

Heidegger understands the occurrence of art as a tension-event between world and earth (Heidegger, 2018): the world unfolds meaning and orientation, while the earth

withdraws through sheltering, opacity, and inexhaustibility. In the context of watercolour, “thingness” does not consist in a catalog of material properties such as water, paper, and pigment, but in the structure of refusal and allowance manifested through their temporal interaction and resistance. Paper fibers simultaneously absorb and repel; water disperses and recoils; pigment particles sediment, wash away, and crack, continuously rewriting boundaries. This resistance, experienced as “not fully penetrable” and “not arbitrarily controllable,” transforms material from a passive carrier into earth with ontological weight, laying the ground upon which a world can be established (Harries, 2009). Thus, watercolour’s apparent “lightness” and transparency do not diminish its ontological gravity; rather, low coverage and high sensitivity render material resistance more readily perceptible, making concealment accessible at the sensory threshold. Here, material concealment is not an aesthetic effect but an ontological condition for the work’s emergence.

In Nantong Clock Tower Square, this concealment first appears in the wet-laid skies, tree masses, and rooftops, where cycles of moisture return and evaporation leave subtle feathering and backflow traces, forming water rings and pigment aggregations. Roofs dissolve at wet edges instead of closing linearly; negative spaces at the junctions of tree canopies and the clock tower directly reveal the paper’s resistance to seepage; broad cool blue shadows in the square acquire texture and banding due to dry and wet disjunctions, transforming “shadow” from flat infill into an air-like volume borne by paper grain. These are not technical flaws but medial events, visible attestations of paper, water, and pigment letting themselves be felt at the pictorial scale (Elkins, 2000). Here, the “thing” is no longer a bearer of form but actively imposes limits through concealment, compelling the image to find its mode of emergence within constraint (Yao, 2006).

As material refusal and pictorial intention press against one another, an order at the level of world begins to take shape. Sparse orange warmth in the clock tower’s doorway and upper windows contrasts with the dominant cool tonality, appearing as thresholds lit from within concealment (Gage, 1999). Directionality emerges through diagonal shadows and slender lamplight lines, not through perspectival construction but through the linkage of shadow, blankness, and hard/soft edges. Tree-trunk reserves are not voids but points where the paper’s resistance props brightness from within. Architecture thus ceases to be a depicted object and is instead installed at its proper place through the contest of paper, water, and pigment. Viewing shifts from verifying contour completeness to sensing how resistance constitutes presence, recognizing that clarity always exacts a cost from material silence.

Accordingly, the origin of watercolour painting lies not in representational abundance but in the manner by which material concealment calls forth a world. In Nantong Clock Tower Square, this call may be recognized through a constellation of medial events, including wet edge diffusion, backflow traces, pigment sedimentation, negative space reservation, alignment between hard and soft edges, dry brushed paper grain, and differences in warm and cool chromatic energy. These phenomena orient perceptual reality toward the threshold of ontological truth, where presence is experienced through impenetrability. Aletheia does not arise because a threshold is reached; rather, the threshold becomes recognizable only after unconcealment has already occurred; thereafter, material traces are recast as grounds of meaning, becoming visible testimony to how Dasein coexists with the world. In this recursive movement from concealment to establishment and from flash to recasting, watercolour, by the lightest means, bears the heaviest ground, transforming truth from abstraction into a visible, tangible, and traceable chain of material events.



Figure 1. Nantong Clock Tower Square (Watercolour on paper, July 2025)

3. THE WORK AS SITE OF TRUTH: WORLD ESTABLISHMENT

For Heidegger, an artwork does not report external facts but brings truth (*aletheia*) into presence (Heidegger, 2018). The work, as a site (*Stätte*), installs meaning for the first time through the strife of world and earth. This section therefore does not evaluate aesthetic effects but examines how the work functions as a site in which truth enters presence. Unlike propositional truth, artistic truth is an occurrence: appearance erupts as an event, later recognizable through the tension between material resistance and pictorial intention, compelling viewing to reconstruct its pathway, this is the moment when the work becomes a work (Thomson, 2011).

In *Nantong Clock Tower Square*, the establishment of world begins with directional orders: diagonal cool blue shadows intersect with vertical lamplight lines. Tree trunk reserves open near, middle, and far spatial layers in a single gesture. This is not geometrical proof but a habitable order twisted out of hard and soft edge alignment, shadow and blank linkage, and chromatic energy differentials. The clock tower and adjacent rooftops do not preexist as depicted objects; their stability and referentiality are set into place through the contest of paper, water, and pigment. Establishment here does not mean adding detail but allowing relations to self-disclose along material traces, distance through diffusion, climate through sedimentation, and time through wet and dry rhythm.

Truth's letting-appear may be retrospectively recognized through identifiable thresholds. Most critical are the small warm planes of orange in the doorway and upper windows: against expansive cool tonality and atmospheric diffusion, these are not color accents but threshold illuminations at the site of world and earth confrontation. They do not signify "there is light" but pierce thick concealment with minimal means, transforming architecture from image into place. The same mechanism operates at the interface of canopy and tower, where negative space tears branches free while preserving the paper's active resistance; at eaves, exposed paper grain and softened wet edges juxtapose clarity and obscurity as mutual conditions. Viewing thus relinquishes contour verification and endures opacity; in this endurance, unconcealment occurs as event (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). What is experienced is not merely an urban corner at dusk but "habitable openness" itself, an assemblage of human, thing, light, air, and time.

Through this distinction, perceptual reality and ontological truth are articulated rather than conflated. At the perceptual level, the work organizes light and air through volumetric cool shadows, soft transitions of roofs and canopies, and atmospheric

background compression. At the ontological level, warm apertures, trunk reserves, and threshold edge juxtapositions establish a world, not through additive information but through an opening of “how one dwells here.” The former answers how the scene is seen; the latter, how one coexists with it. Artistic truth is not “likeness” but the manner in which beings come to be what they are: the clock tower is experienced not as an image but as a place of gathering and shelter; shadows are not color blocks but cool rhythms guiding bodily movement; blank reserves are not technical omissions but existential supports propping light from within color.

In Heideggerian terms, the work’s “work-being” is the moment when truth is set into the world. In *Clock Tower Square*, this is not a single instant but a traceable constellation of thresholds, understood not as a causal sequence, but as a set of perceptible marks: wet-edge diffusion, shifts between hard and soft alignment, the holding open of negative space, warm and cool energy differentials, and the surfacing of paper texture. Appearance thus avoids empty epiphany, remaining hermeneutically confirmable through material events. Once named in the wake of unconcealment, these events shift status: water rings, pigment clusters, and exposed paper are read as testimonies of how *Dasein* coexists here. Appearance retroactively recasts material meaning, anticipating the next section in which material becomes ground after truth’s arrival.

4. TRUTH RECASTING MATERIAL AND GROUNDING

Extending the discussion of unconcealment, this section argues that appearance does not end with the momentary event but retroactively restructures the grounding role of material. The analysis proceeds not from authorial intention but from the work’s standing presence, treating the painting as an autonomous site of disclosure. In *Nantong Clock Tower Square*, this recasting first manifests as a change in viewing trajectory: instead of verifying representational completeness, viewers confirm how the world is sustained through identifiable material traces. Warm apertures persist as threshold lights; diagonal shadows gain volume through paper grain; wet-edge diffusion, negative space, and uncovered paper continuously present impenetrable resistance at the visual plane. Once unconcealment occurs, these traces, formerly dismissible as technical byproducts, are recognized as grounds and testimonies of how the world is installed (Dreyfus, 1991).

Temporally, material traces are reinterpreted as generative trajectories. Atmospheric diffusion, soft wet edges, backflow rings, and pigment sedimentation infuse the present with layered pasts; color is no longer static coverage but residue of repeated evaporation, return, and deposition (Si, 2019). The urban corner thus appears not as

a captured instant but as a place temporalized through material rhythm, with air density, light delay, and shadow pace negotiated slowly by paper, water, and pigment. Time, though not thematic, lingers materially; concealment becomes the medium through which temporality is seen.

Grounding shifts as overlooked zones assume argumentative weight. Tree-trunk and eave reserves, once “unpainted,” become supports propping light; exposed paper grain within shadow converts it from color block to habitable coolness; warm apertures open thick concealment with minimal means, turning image into place. In each case, earth’s concealment transforms from obstacle into ground. Because paper’s resistance cannot be smoothed away, appearance gains foothold; because edges are rewritten by material, order emerges not geometrically but along material traces. Recasting thus does not attach meaning to material but recognizes material as meaning-bearing.

Co-presence further clarifies this repositioning. The work gathers sky, earth, human, and the clearing light of unconcealment into one site: atmospheric gradients introduce climate; grain and blankness anchor earth’s depth; lamplight lines, branch gestures, and shadow organization register human movement; warm apertures release a presence that may be termed “sacral,” not as transcendent symbolism but as immediate habitability. These elements do not accumulate sequentially; they mutually define one another. When viewers recognize habitability at a lit aperture, paper grain and wet edges are simultaneously acknowledged as conditions; when viewers step into shadow volume, climate and time co-presence materialize. Recasting thus affirms that world establishment and truth’s flash arise not after material but with it, grounded in concealment.

In sum, repositioning is not an added interpretive layer but the inevitable trajectory of viewing after unconcealment. Through resistance and shelter, material installs a habitable openness; once truth occurs, every trace becomes irreplaceable testimony. *Nantong Clock Tower Square* succeeds not through representational sufficiency but by revealing that without these constraints and traces left by paper, water, and pigment, the world could not be installed. Through a recursive movement in which concealment gives way to establishment, flashes forth as truth, and is subsequently recast, the work translates abstract ontology into visible and revisitable pictorial facts: truth is not outside the image, but set firmly in place within each wet edge, blank reserve, paper grain, and threshold illumination.

5. CONCLUSION

Using the paper-based watercolour *Nantong Clock Tower Square* as a case study, this paper situates “thing, work, and truth” within Heidegger’s world and earth horizon as a hermeneutically reconstructable chain of medial traces. The analysis demonstrates that material concealment in watercolour is not an impediment to appearance but a prerequisite for world establishment and truth’s unconcealment. Truth enters presence as an event, retrospectively recognizable through the tension between materiality and pictoriality; subsequently, appearance retroactively recasts material from background into the ground of the work’s standing.

At the pictorial level, medial events such as wet edge diffusion, negative space reservation, paper texture emergence, and differences in warm and cool chromatic energy differentials form a visible and revisitable chain of thresholds, rendering abstract ontological propositions perceptible as concrete pictorial facts. By articulating perceptual reality and ontological truth, the study argues that watercolour’s transparency, contingency, and partial uncontrollability are precisely the conditions that enable it to bear ontological weight.

The contribution of this paper lies in transforming specific watercolour operations into discussable ontological traces (Nelson, 2013), offering a clarificatory pathway for practice-based reflection rather than an operational method or practice-based art research (Borgdorff, 2012). Limited by scope, the study focuses on presence and medial evidence; the influence of socio-historical context and representational conditions remains to be addressed in future research. That watercolour can bear ontological weight does not mean that it always does; unconcealment remains an event that can neither be compelled nor secured.

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