

Su-Hun Ku: Light and Real. Lighting in Pictorial Spaces from Renaissance to  
Abstract Expressionism

“I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint.” When Alberti wrote this passage in *On Painting* (1435), the idea of painting was to represent the real world, namely to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space on the two-dimensional wall. In order to achieve the vividness of the illusion, the techniques of linear perspective and lighting or chiaroscuro play pivotal roles in the painting practice. For example, in the frescoes by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494) in Santa Maria Novella and San Marco in Florence, the artful dispositions of light and shade in the frescoes have unified the light in the real world and the illumination in the illusionistic pictorial space. This arrangement dimmed the boundary between reality and illusion. On the other hand, compared with medieval painting, the pursuit of the illusion of reality during the Renaissance also freed painting from its direct tie with the sacred world; this was the first wave of emancipation of art. In Ghirlandaio’s Santa Maria Novella frescoes, contemporary and biblical figures mix together in the same space.

Lighting in pictorial space served a representational function through several centuries, until the art was finally freed from the descriptive task by the birth of abstract art in the early years of the 20th century. A second wave of emancipation of art started when Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) regarded Monet’s *Haystacks* as paintings without any objects but light, when Robert Delaunay (1885-1941) painted his *Windows Open Simultaneously*, and when Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) published his theory of Neoplasticism and drew grid-based paintings. This time the pursuit of the Real focused on the essences of painting, on the material aspects of painting itself. As Hans Hofmann wrote in 1948: “In nature, light creates color; in painting color creates light.” It is cannot be doubted that the lighting in pictorial space belongs to this achievement of pictorial autonomy.