

# The Visual Foundation of Photography: Preparatory Exercises as a Tool for Image Design

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## Abstract

This article examines the use of visual references in photographic art specifically, reference images and mood boards as tools for conceptualization, planning, and improving the quality of the shooting process. It analyzes the functions of references during the pre-production, production, and post-production stages, as well as their impact on team communication and the artistic expressiveness of the image. Particular attention is paid to the methodological aspects of selecting and interpreting reference material, as well as to issues of authorship and originality in the context of contemporary visual culture. The study examines their functional differences, historical precedents in the practice of visual arts (studies, sketches, preparatory drawings, and studies), as well as theoretical foundations in the works of Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich, and Walter Benjamin.

Based on comparative and iconological analysis, the article substantiates the hypothesis that the integrative use of references and mood boards contributes to enhancing the conceptual integrity, visual coherence, and technical controllability of the photo shoot. Additionally, the cognitive and perceptual mechanisms of image perception that influence the effectiveness of preliminary visual modeling are examined. It is demonstrated that systematic work with visual sources reduces the level of uncertainty during the shooting process and increases the predictability of the result.

The conclusion is drawn that these tools should be considered elements of a professional methodology of visual thinking, facilitating the transition from intuitive practice to conscious image design, and that their systematic integration into a photographer's professional practice is advisable.

**Keywords:** reference, mood board, visual design, sketch, iconology, semiotic structure.

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary photography operates within a context of visual excess and a high degree of intertextuality, giving rise to a polyphony of interpretations. Images are created within the context of existing visual codes and cultural models. In professional pre-shoot preparation, references and mood boards, tools for preliminary visual modeling, are being used with increasing frequency. They serve as external reference points for the visual formulation of a concept and its consistent execution. These tools are embedded in the cultural context of broader practices for planning the creation of a

work, which were used by painters long before the advent of photography and digital design.

Historical studies of visual art emphasize that artists have traditionally used auxiliary elements: sketches, drafts, and studies, as a means of working out details, composition, and lighting, analogous to modern references and mood boards in photographic preparation.

Despite their prevalence in professional circles, these concepts have received virtually no systematic scholarly analysis in art history. The lack of a theoretical foundation gives rise to terminological uncertainty.

## 2. Methodology and Background

In traditional photographic theory, the image was viewed primarily as the result of a technical recording of reality. However, in contemporary visual culture, there has been a shift in emphasis toward understanding photography as a process of designing a visual statement.

The works of W. J. T. Mitchell and Gillian Rose demonstrate that an image is formed within the framework of cultural, cognitive, and methodological practices that precede the act of its creation. [1] In this context, there is a need to analyze the preparatory stage as a key component of the visual foundation of photography. [2]

The fundamentals of visual analysis are elaborated in detail in the works of E. Panofsky, who proposed a three-level model for interpreting images, and E. Hombrecht, who formulated the concept of “schema and correction” as the basis of artistic thinking. Meanwhile, in his work “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” W. Benjamin examined the changing status of the image in the context of mass reproduction, a topic particularly relevant to contemporary digital photography.

However, a direct examination of references and mood boards as tools of visual design in the context of photography is rarely found in the scientific literature, which defines the novelty of this study.

The research hypothesis is that the visual foundation of photography is formed during the preliminary design stage of the image, where references and mood boards perform the functions of analyzing and synthesizing visual structures, determining the composition, semantics, and perception of the final image.

This study aims to identify the functional differences and mechanisms of interaction between references and mood boards in contemporary photographic practice and to determine their methodological significance.

To achieve this goal, the following objectives have been set:

1. To trace the historical background of the use of similar tools in painting.
2. To analyze the theoretical foundations of working with visual schemes.
3. To identify the differences between a reference and a mood board.
4. To justify an integrative model for their combined use.

The study employs:

the historical-comparative method;

iconological analysis (according to Panofsky);

formal-stylistic analysis (according to Gombrich);

a cultural-philosophical approach (Benjamin).

The material for analysis consisted of contemporary photography practices and historical examples from 16th–19th-century painting.

### **3. Analysis and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Historical Background: The Sketch as a Prototype of Reference**

The practice of creating sketches - quick drawings of specific details or the entire composition of a future image-existed in the visual arts long before the advent of photography. As a preliminary reference, a sketch captures light, color, proportions, and movement, providing the artist with a visual foundation for working on the main artwork.

The creation of sketches and preparatory drawings in painting can be viewed as a precursor to the modern reference. Renaissance artists systematically created anatomical studies and compositional sketches, forming a visual archive of forms and movements. Drawings are not merely the result of vision, but a process of interaction between information (external reality), meaning (cultural evidence), and the gap between them (imagination), revealed in the course of translation or representation. [3]

A study is a preparatory sketch that originated in Italy in the 16th century and quickly spread throughout Europe. It was frequently used by artists in Italy and France, such as Rubens. From the mid-17th century onward, the study was employed as a crucial stage in the training of painters.

A sketch was small and quick to execute; it merely documented the initial idea of the composition and color scheme. Avoiding details, artists preferred loose forms and broad brushstrokes. Sketches are not paintings in the conventional sense; they served only as a guide when creating more complex and large-scale works.

In the academic tradition of the 19th century, the sketch served as a tool for studying light, color, and form. These preliminary works served to capture the visual concept before creating the final piece.

Thus, a sketch can be viewed as a historical analogue of a point reference, whereas the collection of preparatory materials for a large-scale painting served a function similar to that of a modern mood board. Creating sketches can help develop the ability to express design ideas. [4] Since the cognitive simplicity of image processing and their affective significance demonstrate the superiority of visual information in narrative processing, viewers quickly decipher and emotionally respond to a visual story [5]

Rembrandt treated his drawings much the same way he treated his engravings, viewing them as independent artistic mediums. For some drawings from his extensive body of work, it has been conclusively proven that they serve as preparatory studies for his paintings. In paintings such as "The

Night Watch”, Rembrandt applied a preliminary sketch to the canvas in brownish paint, outlining large areas of varying tones that would later emerge in the composition. In other cases, he used black charcoal for a preliminary sketch on the canvas. [6]

Therefore, the practice of working with references has deep historical roots and is present in various artistic cultures.

### **3.2 Theoretical Foundations of Artistic Expression**

In addition to its visual function, the role of reference is also intended to serve a theoretical purpose. In visual practices, reference functions not only as a tool for form-building but also as a mediator of theoretical knowledge, facilitating the interpretation, semiotic organization, and conceptualization of artistic expression. This kind of visual literacy presupposes an awareness of the artistic aspects of life experience; it requires an understanding of the poetic and creative dimensions of human experience; it involves recognizing the significance of visual form and structure in all spheres of everyday life. [7]

Several levels of theoretical justification for reference as the foundation of a visual artwork’s embodiment are distinguished.

- Iconology and levels of meaning; reference as a tool for interpretation.

Erwin Pafonsky’s theory asserts that visual material always possesses a multilayered structure of meaning. Pafonsky identified three levels of perception: primary (purely visual), secondary (linked to cultural and textual sources), and tertiary (deep symbolic meaning).

According to Pafonsky, the use of reference is already an act of theoretical interpretation (intertextual and cultural) - not merely an image to be copied, but a carrier of cultural codes that links the image to tradition, sets the interpretive framework, and participates in the reading of the image.

Art, however it is defined and from whatever perspective it is viewed, operates through the organization of sensibility. Works of art both preserve the authentic scope of sensory perception and subject it to organization; in this respect, they limit that scope.

In any work of art, there must be a certain reconciliation between volume and form as the two poles of a fundamental antithesis. [8]

- Formalism and pure visuality; reference as an analysis of form.

In the works of Heinrich Wölfflin, it is argued that art is understood through forms and modes of vision. He believed that the perception of art is historically conditioned, and that form possesses independent value and logic. The perception of art should not be based on such vulgar effects as the joy of recognition or other vestiges of the outdated theory of mimesis. [9] In this context, the reference serves as a model of visual thinking, allowing for the analysis of style, composition, and plastic solutions. That is, the reference is a tool for the theoretical analysis of form, not merely a visual guide. Photography, particularly the work of the shutter, offers the mechanics of the visual construction of the moment. [10]

- Semiotics and Visual Language: Reference as a System of Signs.

In the structuralist and poststructuralist traditions (Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin), the image is interpreted as a text, and visual elements as signs with multiple meanings. The image is viewed not only as a visual object, but as a carrier of cultural memory and a mechanism for the formation of meaning. Barthes and Benjamin view photography as a dual moment, simultaneously present and past. [11] Barthes explains that there is a third layer of meaning that goes beyond representation, while the first two layers are informational and symbolic. [3]

For Benjamin, it is more like a “spark of chance,” where the past flares up in the present. And for Barthes, it is “it was,” fixing the fact of real existence. This directly corresponds to the function of the referent, as a visual fragment of the past used to construct a new image, while the mood board is a system of such fragments assembled to design meaning.

The reference and the mood board represent contemporary practices of visual thinking, based on the logic of montage and the historicity of the image in Benjamin, as well as on the semiotics of the image in Barthes, where the image functions simultaneously as a cultural code, an affective trigger, and an instrument of theoretical analysis.

Therefore, any reference is a semiotic structure; it carries not only form but also ideology, context, and the rhetoric of the image. Consequently, working with references involves analyzing codes, interpreting meanings, and constructing semantic connections.

- Conceptual Art and Image Theory.

Contemporary aesthetics demonstrate that the visual image is inseparable from the concept; artistic practice involves reflection on its own means. In this context, a reference becomes part of a project’s conceptual framework, serving as an argument or a theoretical marker. For example, the selection of references as the formation of a research position, and a mood board as a visualized theory of the project.

The key tenet of conceptual art is the priority of the idea over visual form. Conceptual art strives to possess cognitive value, not merely aesthetic value; a work is valuable insofar as it produces knowledge or understanding. [12] The visual object ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a vehicle for a concept; it does not merely show, but argues an idea through a visual example. Studies of conceptual art emphasize its key feature - intertextuality, where works are constructed through references to other images, ideas, and contexts. [13] Thus, a reference embodies an element of a network of meanings; it functions as a node in a knowledge system rather than as an isolated image. In turn, the mood board has become a general visualization of a concept. In design research, the moodboard is explicitly interpreted as a conceptualization tool. It presents a theme or idea through a selection of images, where they are gathered purposefully to express a concept, rather than merely aesthetics. [14] The selection of elements in this case is a cognitive process of choosing meanings, and the composition serves as the structuring of an idea.

Thus, the reference and the mood board perform three theoretical functions:

- a) Cognitive, producing understanding
- b) Representative, illustrating ideas through visual forms
- c) Discursive, embedding the work within a network of cultural and theoretical references

In the context of conceptual art and visual studies, the reference functions not only as a visual guide but also as a form of cognitive and discursive representation; it clarifies a general concept through examples, participates in the production of knowledge, and serves as an element of the textual interconnection within the structure of the artistic statement.

### 3.3 The Visual Foundation of Photography as a Cognitive-Aesthetic System

According to Luc Pauwels, visual materials used prior to a shoot serve as research tools that allow for the simulation of the final result. [15]

Pre-shoot preparation includes concept development, visual analysis, establishing a compositional structure, and creating references and mood boards.

This stage can be defined as the process of forming a visual hypothesis that is tested during the shoot.

In the digital age, access to an infinite number of images transforms the creative process. References become part of a visual archive, and their thoughtful selection turns into an act of cultural choice. Well-known styles typically exist along two dimensions: from active experimentation to reflective observation, and from abstract conceptualization to concrete experience. [16] The absence of a preliminary visual strategy often leads to stylistic fragmentation in a photo project. At the same time, excessive reliance on a single reference can lead to mechanical, mindless copying.

Based on theoretical knowledge and practical application, the analysis conducted allows us to identify the differences in visual support methods, as shown in Table 1.

Parameter	Reference	Mood Board
Level	Tactical	Strategic
Structure	Single image	Visual Identity System
Function	Technical specification	Conceptual Integration
Historical counterpart	Sketch	Set of Preparatory Materials

A reference is a specific visual point of reference that reflects a particular artistic choice (lighting, composition, pose, color, texture). Information is transformed into a visual expression. [17] The methods used to create it depend on the source and the task at hand.

The primary type used is the borrowed (archival) reference. The source of such references is the artistic heritage - painting, graphic art and etchings, cinema and film stills, and classical photography. An important advantage in this case is working with proven visual schemes, while among the risks is the possibility that the stylization may become derivative.

In addition to archival material, visual references are drawn from the contemporary visual environment, such as professional portfolios, fashion campaigns, and digital image archives. This is a current and trendy method; however, due to the abundance of digital images, the risk of formulaic work increases.

The author's reference is most effective when constructing a series and best preserves the author's style. The basis of this approach is the photographer's own archives. Previously shot works are used as a foundation for developing ideas.

A test shoot, where the photographer deliberately creates test shots to work out lighting or composi-

tion. This is historically similar to a sketch in painting.

An analytical reference differs fundamentally from the ones listed above. It is created not by copying an image, but by analyzing the composition, constructing a lighting diagram, a schematic sketch of the composition, a color palette in the form of gradients, and a posing scheme. This approach is particularly relevant in studio and advertising photography.

Text-based conceptual reference. A reference can be expressed not through an image, but through a description, such as a literary description of the atmosphere, a scene script, or a verbal mood description. This type is more commonly used during the conceptualization phase.

Table 2 presents a classification of references as types of visual cues.

Reference type	Source	Advantages	Limitations	Category
Archival	Painting, film, fine art photography	Proven design solutions	Repetitive	Art Photography
Contemporary Original	Portfolio, fashion campaigns, digital archives Works by the author	Relevance and alignment with current trends Preserving the author's style	Formulaic Limited availability of materials	Commercial Photography Series Projects
Test shoot	Test shots	Practical testing of solutions	Resource costs	Pre-shoot Preparation
Analytical	Schemes, diagrams, color palettes	Accuracy and quality control	Requires preparation	Studio Photography
Text-based and conceptual	Texts, scripts	Developing the overall concept	Lack of visual appeal	Concept Development

Within the framework of visual culture theory, Nicholas Mirzoeff views images as elements of an intertextual network, where each new image relates to existing ones. [18] Thus, reference serves as a tool for decomposing visual experience. [19] A moodboard, by contrast, functions as a mechanism for visual synthesis.

A moodboard is a structured visual composition that brings together various elements of a future image. Such constructions reflect the principles of digital culture, where new images are created through the combination and reworking of visual elements. [20]

A moodboard is designed to create visual unity, set an emotional tone, define a style, and shape the viewer's perception. It is a synthetic model of an image that integrates the results of analysis.

A mood board is a systematized collection of visual elements that forms a cohesive concept. It can be presented as a classic collage, i.e., an analog method. Often, this is a paper collage: printed images, magazine clippings, fabric samples, color swatches, or even hand-drawn sketches. A distinctive feature of this concept is its tactility and the spatial perception of the composition. It is used in art and fashion projects. A digital mood board, on the other hand, is characterized by a simple visual collection where images are gathered in a single file, though there may also be tables with sections (light, color, poses, locations).

A structured conceptual mood board most fully reflects the essence of the photographer's vision. It consists of several blocks, including not only light, color, body language, and location, but also

texture, costume style, and atmosphere. This format is used in commercial and brand photography.

A narrative mood board is created as a sequence of frames that simulates the future story of the shoot and is more like a film storyboard; it is most commonly used in fashion projects and advertising campaigns.

A color mood board focuses exclusively on the color palette, where extracted color codes, gradients, and the juxtaposition of cool and warm tones form the basis of the photographer's concept. This is particularly important in projects involving heavy post-processing.

A material mood board is used in complex staged shoots. Fabrics, texture samples, props, and decorative elements play a key role in advertising and product photography.

In art photography and personal projects, the conceptual and theoretical mood board takes center stage. It may be based on quotes from philosophers, text excerpts, historical works of art, or visual archetypes. Here, color, texture, and props are almost insignificant compared to the overall concept of the shoot.

The hybrid model is considered the most productive: it involves creating a general conceptual mood board with specific references selected for particular shots, shooting test frames, and further refining the mood board's structure.

When creating your mood board project, it is essential to consider the number of images and avoid an excess of them. A lack of structure, copying instead of analysis, stylistic inconsistency, and a failure to adapt to a specific team also have a detrimental effect on the final visual product.

Thus, references can be created through borrowing, original development, analytical schematization, or textual conceptualization, while mood boards, in turn, can be collage-based, digital, structured, narrative, or physical.

The optimal professional approach involves combining both tools, taking into account the project's scale, the degree of conceptualization, and the team's composition. Integrating these two tools allows for a balance between the designer's individuality and cultural continuity.

Contemporary research in the arts and visual analysis seeks to formalize visual concepts by linking them to style, emotions, and the semantic characteristics of works. For example, studies on the quantitative analysis of emotions and color in painting demonstrate how visual elements can correlate with cultural trends, which serves as an important guide when selecting visual references and moods for a photography project. [21]

It has been found that the most effective approach is an integrative model, in which the mood board forms the conceptual framework, while references provide its detailed implementation.

References, individual images. Images may seem limited in conveying narrative meaning, as they are static by nature and unable to convey the flow of events. [22]

## 4. Results

In order to test the hypothesis that the visual foundation of a photograph is formed during the preliminary design phase, it is necessary to reconstruct and theoretically analyze a typical model

of photographic project preparation. This model is viewed as a sequence of interconnected stages, each of which performs a specific cognitive and design function.

Stage 1. Collection and analysis of references as a procedure of visual decomposition.

The initial stage of preparation involves the formation of a corpus of visual sources, including photographs, film stills, paintings, and other visual materials. This process is not a mechanical accumulation of images, but rather an analytical procedure for decomposing visual experience.

Within the framework of visual methodology, Gillian Rose emphasizes that any image can be examined through the prism of its formal and semiotic characteristics. [2]

Accordingly, working with references includes:

compositional analysis (frame structure, distribution of masses, directionality of lines);

lighting analysis (type of lighting, contrast, direction of light);

color analysis (palette, dominant colors, color accents);

textural analysis (materiality of objects, visual density of the image).

From a cognitive perspective, this stage activates the mechanisms of visual recognition and categorization described in perception studies (Gestalt, eye-tracking). [23] Thus, the referent functions as a tool for structuring visual experience, translating it from an intuitive to an analytical form.

Stage 2. Creating a mood board as a process of visual synthesis.

The second stage involves the transition from analysis to synthesis. Based on the selected references, a mood board is created - a cohesive visual composition that reflects the key parameters of the future image.

From the perspective of digital visibility theory, such practices correspond to the logic of modular image assembly. The final visual form emerges through the combination of individual elements. The mood board performs a number of functions. The main ones are: 1) integrative - uniting disparate visual elements; 2) prognostic - modeling the future visual result; 3) regulative - setting the parameters of the shooting process; 4) communicative - aligning the visual language among project participants.

Unlike a reference, which is focused on analysis, a moodboard forms a predictive visual model that defines the nature of light, the color scheme, the spatial organization of the frame, and the emotional and semantic tone.

Stage 3. Shooting design as the translation of the visual model into practice.

The third stage represents the transition from visual modeling to its practical implementation. Here, the parameters defined in the mood board are translated into specific decisions for the shooting process.

From the perspective of the design approach described by T. Mitchell, this stage can be interpreted as the process of materializing the visual concept, where the abstract model takes on a concrete form. [1] At this stage, the location is selected as the spatial equivalent of the visual model; lighting is set up in accordance with the specified lighting scheme; the model is directed (pose, body language, facial expressions) as an element of the compositional structure; and props and costumes are selected

that correspond to the chosen textures and color schemes.

#### Stage 4. Execution as the Reproduction of a Visual Model

The actual shooting is the final stage. Within this model, it is viewed not as an act of spontaneous creativity, but as a process of reproducing a pre-constructed visual system. This fundamentally changes our understanding of the photographic act. Thus, photography ceases to be merely a fixation of reality and becomes the result of the realization of a project model, where the act of shooting itself serves as a stage for testing a visual hypothesis.

## 5. Discussion

A comparison of projects implemented with and without preparatory practices reveals consistent differences.

When visual references and mood boards are used, a general compositional coherence is observed, and the image demonstrates structural harmony among its elements, which corresponds to the concept of visual rightness. Likewise, the targeted predictability of the result reduces the level of randomness, since key parameters are set in advance. Conceptual coherence stands out in particular, and the final image corresponds to the original concept, indicating the presence of a consistent visual model.

From a cognitive perspective, this is explained by the fact that preliminary modeling reduces uncertainty and optimizes the decision-making process. The data obtained allow us to interpret photographic practice as a type of design-based activity, within which the image is created according to design logic. The time spent on the most costly process - directly on the set - is reduced. The team's work becomes more coordinated, as a visual justification for the intended final result emerges.

Thus, preparatory materials should be viewed not as auxiliary elements, but as an integral part of the visual foundation of photography.

The analysis confirms the hypothesis that, in most scenarios, the visual foundation of a photograph is formed primarily during the pre-shoot preparation phase.

## 6. Conclusion

An art-historical analysis has revealed that references and mood boards serve as key tools in visual design within contemporary photographic practice, facilitating the creation of a cohesive visual model of the image during the pre-shoot preparation phase.

It is shown that these practices are not exclusively a product of the digital age, but represent a natural continuation of historically established artistic methods. Their functional analogues can be found in the traditions of classical art, including preparatory drawings, studies, and compositional sketches. This attests to the continuity of the principles of visual thinking, based on sequential procedures of observation, recording, analysis, and synthesis of visual material.

It has been established that references perform a predominantly analytical function, serving as specific

visual reference points that allow for the identification and examination of individual elements of the image, composition, light, color, and texture. In turn, the mood board performs a synthetic function, integrating disparate visual components into a unified conceptual and aesthetic system that defines the parameters of the future image.

It has been proven that their combined use contributes to enhancing the compositional integrity, visual coherence, and conceptual clarity of the photographic result. This allows us to view the preparatory stage not as auxiliary, but as decisive within the structure of the photographic process.

Thus, the hypothesis that the visual foundation of a photograph is formed primarily during the preliminary design stage has been confirmed. References and mood boards serve as the structuring elements of this process, facilitating the transition from the empirical perception of visual material to its meaningful artistic construction.

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