

History: Multiple Versions of a Work of Art



Different versions of "The Scream" by Edvard Munch

Ask the Experts: "I just finished what I think is one of my better paintings, and I am tempted to do another copy of it, or at least a variation. I am just not ready to move on from this composition, and I think if I do more than one, they will all sell. Is this being "too commercial"?"

A: There is a long history of artists making multiple copies, or at least variations, of their most successful works, for various reasons. There can be financial motivation to duplicate the success of a popular image, to capture additional sales. In the case of formal portraiture, the ceremonial image of an important figure in government or enterprise, or a celebrated historical figure may be commissioned in multiples in order to display at several locations. Artists sometimes duplicate a painting to retain a copy for themselves, or at the request of a patron. Another important reason is exploration of a theme, subject or composition which is not fully satisfied with a single work or just one medium. In some cases, the artist may want to generate several works of art in different mediums using the same composition, just to work through all possibilities.



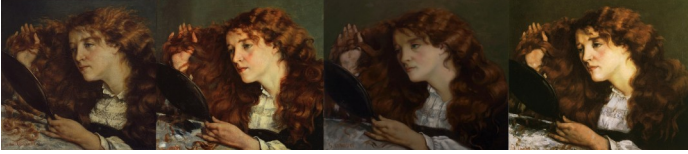
Two paintings by Caravaggio with the same subject, The Supper at Emmaus

Variations on a composition

Each version of a picture has differences from related companion pieces. If the paintings are based on the same topic but are compositionally different, the variations may be quite significant. Sometimes, the differences are just subtle, accidental variations of drawing and brushwork; other times, small details might be deliberately changed or inserted for symbolic or aesthetic reasons.



Leonardo's two versions of Virgin of the Rocks feature variations in color scheme, landscape and species of plants. In addition, there are distinct differences in the rendering of subjects, theorized to be due to the involvement of other artists in creating what is believed to be the later of the two pictures.



The “original” and the “copies”

Often, one painting among multiples can be identified as the original, and others as derivative, later works. When the chronology is not certain, however, as in Courbet’s “Jo, the Beautiful Irishwoman” ca. 1865, while the observer may have a hunch that one among the four is the “original”, one viewer’s guess may be as good as another.

Exploration of a Theme

An artist may become so involved with a single subject, topic or theme that they create a series of works to fully develop the concept. The series of works popularly known as “The Scream” executed by Norwegian Edvard Munch in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides a good example of the artist working through different mediums across multiple works of art with the same essential figure, composition and subject. Munch explored this enigmatic, anguished figure through oils, tempera, pastel, ink and lithography.

Changing Attitudes over Time

Centuries ago, it was common for leading artists to employ assistants in creating works of art, to copy master works by other artists, and to generate multiple works on a theme or subject. In the 20th century, the concept of “originality” became more important than in earlier centuries. By the 1960s, however, Pop Art embraced duplication, commercialization and repetition of an image. Artists never completely stopped creating suites of matching works, and this practice continues today for all the same reasons as with earlier generations.