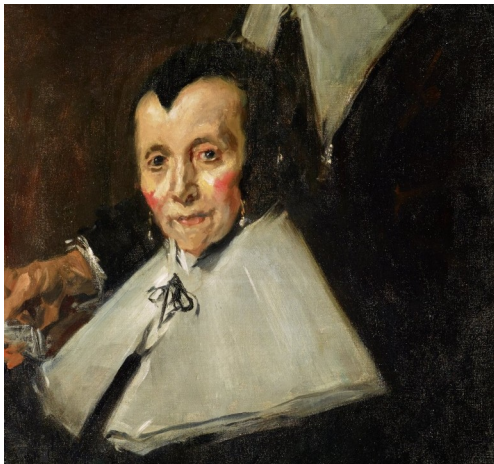


HANDCRAFTED
EST
1949
BROOKLYN·NY

Utrecht
ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Copying and Originality



Detail, Copy after Frans Hals, painted by John Singer Sargent, 1880

For centuries, continuing into the early 20th century, copying was the standard method for learning art. Artists-in-training copied from books, direct observation of paintings, and by drawing classical sculptures and plaster casts. Student artists were expected to defer their personal expression and style until after completing their training. This began to change in the 19th century, and by the mid-20th century, developing individualized themes and styles began to be considered important, even for students.

Originality and Skill

Through most of the history of art, originality was not considered an important concern for students. This began to change when French Impressionism, the first modern painting movement, placed focus on the paint itself, rather than just the represented image. In Impressionism, the brush stroke and paint surface demanded attention more than in previous historical styles. The idea of art as “revolutionary” became established, and there came to be an expectation that artists would be innovative and original, always producing something different from what had just come before, using distinctly individual methods, processes, and styles.

Self-conscious concern about creating “unoriginal” or derivative art sometimes makes artists reluctant to try copying or drawing from other artwork, but in truth, the majority of artists whose work is considered important have learned partly through copying. Artists who still

value originality but who also place a priority on skill and results, are rediscovering earlier learning methods, including older instructional books that encouraged copying.



Édouard Manet- copy after Velázquez, 1865

The Importance of Master Copies

For every artist there is at least one influential figure, a “master” whose accomplishments form the basis for their own work. The best way to understand, emulate, and absorb the methods of earlier artists is to make faithful copies of their work. To label a master copy as “unoriginal” is to miss the point of the exercise- some of the most innovative artists in history devoted time to copying the work of artists they admired. Baroque master Rubens made copies of works by Titian as he traveled as a diplomat. French Impressionist Manet made copies after the Spanish master Velázquez. Making a faithful copy after another artist not only allows us to expand our range of techniques and color mixtures; through copying, we train ourselves to produce and reproduce specific strokes, surfaces, and shapes that can later become the building blocks of original work.

Copies are not the same as forgeries

Sometimes, artists are concerned whether copies made for training or personal enjoyment could be considered “forgeries”, but aside from basing a work of art on an original, the two activities are very different. Forgers-criminals who deceive people into accepting copies as authentic originals- use techniques unknown to most artists in order to fool experts, and they may even alter records in order to make a convincing fake. Copies made for training purposes or personal enjoyment usually carry some obvious mark indicating that they are a copy, and artists are generally proud to sign and date the copy under their own name. Even when that is not the case, use of modern materials, individual artist’s technique, and size of artwork easily distinguish a copy from an original, even to an untrained viewer.



Joakim Skovgaard - Drawing after Cast. A Foot, 1870s

Drawing from Casts

Drawing from observation of marble sculptures and plaster casts is not only an excellent general drawing exercise, it also exposes us to balance, composition, and proportion. The matte, colorless surface of plaster helps place focus on line, shadow, and proportion by de-emphasizing color. When casts are rendered in full palette, these subjects allow the artist to concentrate on subtle ranges of warm and cool.

Today

Master copies and drawing from casts are still practiced today, but today very few artists are formally taught through copying from instructional books. In this century, however, more artists are actively seeking out earlier teaching systems in order to self-direct their training toward skill- and results-based goals. Innovation and revolution are still very much a part of the spirit of art, but in a way, a renewed interest in master copies and skill-based training as a push against originality for its own sake, could be seen as revolutionary, and original.

Ask the Experts is intended for entertainment and/or informational purposes only. Dick Blick Holdings/Utrecht Art Supplies makes no warranties of any kind with respect to the information or any use of the information provided herein, and is not responsible for any losses or damages of any kind incurred as a result of the use, misuse, or reliance upon the information and content herein. Any action taken in connection with or reliance upon the information provided is strictly at your own risk. Observe all product package instructions and warnings. © Copyright 2022 [Dick Blick Holdings Inc.](#) All rights reserved.