

At the National Gallery
Peter Campbell

A few years ago a friend spent some weeks making a copy of Raeburn's *The Archers*: the double portrait had recently been acquired by the National Gallery, their first painting by a Scottish artist. She began work at Christie's, but the gallery wanted the picture on the wall and she had to finish her copy there. Public confrontation of picture and replica made comment inevitable. The pleasantries were repetitive - 'You'll be able to hang it on the wall and sneak off with the real one' - and followed no national boundaries. Children generally made the most intelligent remarks: two shaven-headed boys looked for a long time, then one pointed out a fault in a shadow. The man who said that what she would need to match one area was red lead brought some in the following day. It was clear that many people found watching a copy being made more interesting than looking at the pictures they had come to see.

People habitually watch other people at work - men working in holes in the road as well as copyists in the Louvre or the National Gallery. But painters are usually unwilling public performers and it is more than idle curiosity that makes one wonder how pictures were made. It is, after all, what a lot of art history is about. Given that we can't watch Rubens and Raeburn at work (Rubens held open house in his studio), even seeing someone redo a brush stroke is an education. At the very least it makes you pay attention to the picture that is being copied.

For a couple of centuries making copies was a significant part of art education, while making replicas of masterpieces for collectors (Grand Tourists, for example) and copying royal portraits was the basis of a regular trade. Some copies read as duets; in those Rubens made after Titian and Caravaggio one powerful voice sings along with another. Rubens's copies never quite lose their Flemish accent but are often splendid in their own right. Like many translations, they show that the felicities a second language makes possible, however brilliant, can come only at some cost to the first author's meaning. Other copies seem almost surreptitious, like jotted notes about overheard conversations. At the far end of the spectrum which begins with perfect replicas are free translations such as Picasso's variations on *Las Meninas*, versions that are more like caricatures than copies. Yet their savaging of the original is also a homage. Sargent and Manet copied Velázquez because they wanted to make portraits as miraculously direct in their register of tone as his are. Picasso's versions of Velázquez announce the death of that kind of imitation, but at the same time claim a place in Western tradition and suggest that it continues despite ever changing destinations. Until 1 July at the National Gallery you can see some other free translations: drawings and prints by Leon Kossoff, made from paintings in the collection (From Rembrandt: *The Blinding of Samson* is shown here). While Kossoff doesn't scrunch and chop and rescale parts the way Picasso does, his versions are free enough to fall at the same end of the array.

Nineteenth-century novels describe galleries thronging with emulative copyists. Early on in *Trilby* Little Billee visits the Louvre: 'He looked at the people who looked at the pictures, instead of at the pictures themselves; especially at the people who copied them, the sometimes charming young lady painters.' Du Maurier offered the plot of *Trilby* to Henry James, who didn't take it up but who had, in *The American*, already noted the same class of Louvre lady painter: Christopher Newman looked 'not only at all the pictures, but at all the copies that were going forward around them, in the hands of those innumerable young women in irreproachable toilets who devote themselves, in France, to the propagation of masterpieces, and if the truth must be told, he had often admired the copy much more than the original.'

The 'propagation of masterpieces' can be done more or less mechanically, but alongside the lady copyists aspiring to that competence, were French painters who were among the last both to participate as students in a full-blown academic tradition and to reject the conventions and skills it taught. Hilary Spurling, in her biography of Matisse, describes his attempt to copy Chardin's work:

He began with *The Pipe*, which was the first painting he ever copied in the Louvre, and which baffled him with an elusive blue on the padded lid of the box in the middle of the canvas: a blue that could look pink one day, green the next. Matisse tried everything he could think of to pin down the secret of this painting, using a magnifying glass, studying the texture, the grain of the canvas, the glazes, the objects themselves and the transitions from light to shade . . . He even cut up his own preparatory oil sketch and stuck bits of it onto Chardin's canvas, where each separate section was a perfect match, but when he put them together, there was no longer any correspondence at all. 'It is a truly magical painting,' he said, adding that this was the only copy he had in the end to abandon.

Gustave Moreau (Matisse's teacher) said a painting had to be 'thought out, dreamed over, reflected on, produced from the mind'. This, according to Spurling, 'was the great lesson Matisse learned by precept from Moreau, and in practice from Chardin'. Manet and Sargent had copied Velázquez because they wanted to paint in the way he did. Matisse, who finished up doing things Chardin would hardly have recognised as painting, still had to touch base before setting out on a journey during which he would, to all appearances, abandon most of what he had seemed to be taking on board.

In 1890, the last year of his life, Van Gogh made a copy of Doré's illustration of prisoners exercising. On the whole Van Gogh painted what he saw. Perhaps it was because in this case Doré too had recorded what he had seen that Van Gogh wanted to make his own version. In it brush marks, stabs as much as strokes, replace the engraver's fine hatching. Doré is an observer who, like Dickens, draws on the miseries of London for theatrical effect. In Van Gogh's recension the pains of incarceration are felt more directly. In this case the copy is a better work, or at least a more powerful one. This is unusual. Even in Rubens's version of Caravaggio's *Entombment*, where his genius for drawing with paint enlivens the surface, some of the force of the original composition is lost, as if Caravaggio's plainer and in many ways less attractive handling, his anonymity, were necessary for the painting to make its effect.

Copies done as substitutes for originals are now quite rare and the reference material artists assemble is generally photographic. Making copies is no longer a regular part of art education. But the desire to draw or paint pictures of other painters' pictures has not been quenched. Some derived works, like Picasso's, are the equivalent of the variations composers make on borrowed themes. There are also copies that seem to record the path of the eye over the surface of a painting - to reinvent looking through drawing. Kossoff's work in the National Gallery falls into that category. It brings to mind not the pictures themselves but studies the painters of the originals might have made - something matching the abbreviation of Rembrandt's compositional studies in pen and wash. I admire Kossoff's appetite and tenacity, I'm impressed by the urgency with which charcoal and etching needle strike out across the surface. I also quite quickly felt I should turn back to the galleries and look at the pictures themselves.

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