

Copying Master Paintings Part 2, a conversation with Daniel Graves

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Continuing on from our conversation with Daniel Graves last September on the value for art students to copy old master paintings, we provide further practical information for anyone wishing to take on the enterprise. Most art museums cater to artists wishing to make frequent visits to copy in situ. Some museums are better organised than others. But Daniel insists that we ‘remind museum directors that they are the custodians of public heritage, and so have a duty to make their collections accessible to us.’ Daniel also points out that the relationship between museums and copyists is not necessarily a passive one where copyists expect services from museums, but copyists also contribute to museums’ education of the public by demonstrating the painting process.

There are various practical points that art students need to consider before embarking on copying in museums.

1. Choose a museum that not only has a good offer of quality works, but that is not overly crowded and badly lit. The best way to check whether there is enough light both on the painting and your canvas is to hold up a sheet of white paper. Some museums also oblige you to use their easels that are not of the kind used at the Florence Academy, such as too slanted or not high enough. Find out also about the museum’s security system, whether they have alarms or barriers which prevent you from getting close enough to the painting. Also avoid paintings that are hung too high.

We list information for anyone wishing to copy in some of the world’s most reputed museums. But art students might well find it as interesting and more practical to knock on the door of a provincial museum which may provide better conditions and easier access. FAA students in Sweden have already been enjoying the welcome of directors at the museum of art in Gothenburg. In the States, Daniel recalls fondly the museum close to his hometown, the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, and the museums of Minneapolis and Cleveland where he also copied paintings. Usually information about copying in their premises is available on their websites. Most museums will only accept an application in written format, either as a personal letter or in an official application form, as in the case of London’s National Gallery.

2. Being in a public place, students must be prepared to be disturbed by curious onlookers. While it is agreeable to exchange ideas with passers-by, it does get tricky to concentrate on one’s task for any adequate length of time. You are therefore recommended to come equipped with headphones. Also plan ahead: think how many days it may take you and how often does the museum permit you to come.

3. How do you choose what to paint? Start simple and choose big. Avoid paintings that are too detailed or too small. Daniel recalls copying a Meissonier which ended up being too tedious: concentrating on so many details consumes the process of learning to paint. Painting small is particularly not advised if your aim is eventually to paint from nature and life-size portraits.

Use a canvas that is bigger than the painting you wish to copy, so that you can let your painting ‘bleed’, and eventually choose your own cropping. While museums usually allow copyists to paint to the same size as the original, the size of the canvas is required to be different.

Daniel advises beginner students to start with 19th century paintings. This is because these were produced along similar methods to the Florence Academy’s, from direct observation of nature and *alla prima*, without glazes and multiple layers as did more ancient masters. The works of Sargent, Zorn, Sorolla, Kroyer, Bunker, and Paxton are relevant here, but also those of their older peers, Laurence, Reynolds, Raeburn and Romney. We know more about their materials than that of earlier painters. On the other hand, Fantin-Latour’s portraits are best avoided as they are too laboured.

Slightly more advanced students can go on to copy more subtle painters of the 19th century. These are for instance Bouguereau and Bonnat. They are slightly more challenging because of their fine drawing and use of a much larger range of values. Works by Velasquez and Hals can also be tackled at this point. While they are still very much direct painting, their exact procedure is less clear. We don’t know for instance whether they produced their paintings over the course of many days or succeeded in one or two shots.

More advanced students can then go on to tackle the yet more tricky masters, such as Rembrandt, Ribera or Titian. There is a lot of speculation about how these artists painted. Few of their paintings appear painted the same way, with the painters' methods seemingly changing with time, mood and project. The aim of copying these works is to learn how they went about achieving the sense of light in their painting. Try at that point experimenting with the materials which could possibly give this effect. Try also to give your paint body, using different types of oil, such as sun-thickened or stand oil, and see how these can also give shine to paint. These oils enable brushstrokes to stay as the paint becomes more viscous. For this you have to prepare your mixtures at least a day ahead of time.

4. Once you have chosen the painting you wish to copy, and before setting up your easel, assess the painting: the size and texture of the canvas, the imprimatura, the palette. You can know quite a bit just by looking closely at a painting. Doing some background research of the painting in question also helps. But do not forget that the main point of the exercise of copying a painting is to go through the procedure of producing a painting; to understand how the painter went about his or her work. Usually painters only used between five and eight colours. Zorn for instance said he only used four including white, a blend of titanium and lead.

It is likely you will not be able to rely on the sight-size method in order to examine your progress placing your canvas directly alongside the painting. Daniel insists that you do not opt for the easy shortcuts like tracing a blown-up photo of the painting. That is one of the challenges and interests of copying, to train your eye. You can eventually use calibres to get the precise proportions. The drawing in the process of copying is very important. You are best off starting by blocking in the drawing in charcoal. Then start laying the first basic colours and values. Get the big effect of what you're painting. This will keep you from being too precise or too concentrated on small areas. What you want is breadth. Look at the brushwork in the painting, and go for the energy that you see in it. Do things in stages so as to not get discouraged.

Remember the point of copying a master painting is not to make a forgery but to understand the painters' interpretation or translation of nature, how they went about producing a 2 dimensional image from a 3d view. The interpretation has already been done for you, and so it is like playing already written musical notes.

It is also helpful to copy landscape paintings before going out to paint yourself. Looking at the work of Innes, Corot, Daubigny is very useful; you can see how they keyed their values, and how they selected a small range of paints to make their mixtures, often just five colours – black, lead white, light yellow ochre, cinnabar and cobalt blue.

Finally, think of the old masters' own copies of each other, for instance Rubens' copy of Titian, Van Dyck's also of Titian, Sargent's of Velasquez. We know that Sargent only spent a few days to produce his copy of Velasquez, while we have no idea how long Velasquez took. In their copies we can also observe how the painters not only learnt and built on the approach of their peers but, taking on the spirit of the work, contributed their own interpretation.