

How to Get the Most From Copying a Masterpiece



Ann Block painting a replica of Sargent's *Head of an Italian Woman*.

Artists looking to paint in the manner of the Old Masters should consider copying masterpieces in museums or from reproductions, both of which offer invaluable lessons about the craft of painting.

by **JOHN A. PARKS**

There is no better way to get to know a painting than to copy it. Re-creating the process and following the technique of a great master allows a kind of intimacy and insight that is impossible to obtain otherwise. The value of this practice was something the Old Masters well understood themselves. Copying was part of studio training from the Italian Renaissance onward into the 19th century, when it formed an integral part of the academic curriculum. Copying was also a business in its own right. Studios often sold multiple versions of the same painting, and copies of popular pictures were routinely commissioned.

After being somewhat sidelined by the advent of Modernism, copying has now returned as a popular practice among a growing number of painters eager to plumb the secrets of the Old Masters. We recently talked to Nanette Fluhr and Adam Miller—painters who teach courses in copying through the Teaching Studios of Art—about the benefits of copying, the best methods for going about it, and the materials a copyist should use.

American Artist: How did you become interested in copying?

NANETTE FLUHR: After I graduated from the School of Visual Arts, I furthered my study of drawing, painting, and picture-making skills as they were developed by the Old Masters under the guidance of John Frederick Murray. I feel most fortunate to have found him, he was a wonderful teacher, and I am grateful to his guidance and insights to this day. He suggested that I go to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and copy directly from my favorite masterpieces.

ADAM MILLER: I began studying drawing when very young with the goal of becoming an illustrator. It was the discovery of Michelangelo's work that steered my course toward studying the Old Masters and trying to understand what made their work so miraculously beautiful. As part of that pursuit, studying their application of paint and use of materials was



very important. At 16 I attended art school in Florence, Italy, and realized that to see a great painting in person was a completely different experience from viewing it in a book. The Old Masters typically had an efficient and beautiful way of mixing colors and layering paint that allowed them to create incredibly complicated and naturalistic pictures.

to copy the specified painting for a certain period, usually one month. The painting gets stamped that it's a copy, and there are certain guidelines one needs to follow—it has to be at least 10 percent smaller or larger than the original, for example. Other museums have their own programs and guidelines and should be contacted directly.

AA: How does one go about copying at a museum?

NF: I became a copyist at The Met in the early 1990s when I painted replicas of works by Rembrandt, Velázquez, Van Dyck, Rubens, Lawrence, and Le Brun. The first step for copying there is to set up an interview with someone at the museum's copyist program. You then receive a permit that allows you

AA: What is the process by which you copy an Old Master painting?

NF: I do extensive research before I begin any of my copies. John Frederick Murray explained the importance of researching the original painting in the museum's library and finding out all you can before beginning. I want my process to be as authentic as possible so that I can understand how to achieve the results that the original obtained. I need to know what materials were used and how these materials affected the look of the paintings.



LEFT
Replica of Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja* by Nanette Fluhr, 1993, oil, 28 x 24. Collection the artist.

ABOVE
The Teaching Studios of Art's Brooklyn campus.



I also work out small value and color studies before proceeding with the final painting so that I understand why the painting works—what values, edges, and shapes hold the painting together. These masterpieces work because of the big idea; they pull you in because of the simple, powerful ideas.

Once all of this is done and understood, I begin preparing the ground for the final painting. I have to consider a variety of factors regarding the original: what support it was on, what painting techniques were used, and whether the ground was opaque or transparent. Different starts yield different results.

AM: I was lucky to be living near some great European museums when I began copying, so I would paint in my studio and walk back and forth to the museum to refresh my eye and make notes. I was always interested in understanding the reasons why a painter made the decisions he or she did in a painting, so I spent a lot of time just sitting and staring at the painting, doing nothing but thinking my way through the artist's process. This thinking is the most important part; it gives meaning to the act of copying and makes it more

than just matching colored spots on a canvas.

I would always try to go beyond the painting, as well, and study the artist's preparatory work. Making sketches and studies leading up to the finished painting is one more way to get into the artist's head. Then the real challenge

begins in bringing that knowledge back to your own painting process.

AA: Do you find you have to buy art materials that are different from those available now?

NF: The paints used by the Old Masters differed from modern tubed paints. They ground their own pigments and determined their own concentration of pigment in the paint. They didn't have all the stabilizers used today. The degree of transparency or opacity of pigment was common knowledge among painters of the past; artists understood the full potential of each pigment. Although we have many more colors available to us today, we should still understand the opacity and transparency of the pigments. It is remarkable what the Old Masters accomplished with limited palettes, and it's very useful to learn the results that can be obtained with limited colors.



TOP
Value and Color Study for Van Dyck's Study of an Old Man With a White Beard
by Nanette Fluhr, 1994, oil on wood, 20 x 16.
Collection the artist.

ABOVE
A student copied a Rembrandt painting from a reproduction at the Teaching Studios of Art.



The best oil-painting brushes have changed little over time. The two main types are still those made from stiff bristles—usually hog's hair—and from soft hair, such as sable. Artists of the past made their own brushes and taught their apprentices how to do it. They had flat tips and round brushes that formed a point. When I painted a copy of Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja*, I used rounded bristle brushes, because that is what Velázquez used.

AM: I have made my own materials in the past and occasionally do now. But I believe that the top-quality materials available today are as good as almost anything from the past.

AA: What is the value to the student or professional in copying an Old Master painting? How big a part of an artist's training and practice should it be?

AM: Copying is incredibly important. If done with a guide who really understands how and why different painters used light or dark grounds and why they layered paint in different ways, it gives you a map for how to succeed in making different kinds of paintings and opens up new horizons of artistic expression. I find, these days, mostly postimpressionist painting approaches are taught, and that is a very small slice of the cake, historically speaking. Many artists struggle precisely because they are trying to do paintings that look a certain way but are using a technique that is working against them and making it almost impossible.

The real value of copying is educational. You need to understand what the purposes are behind certain technical choices, such as why you would use a warm or cool underpainting and what

LEFT
A grisaille (above) and the final copy (below) of Rembrandt's Self-Portrait, by William Borman.



**Replica of
Ingres'
Princesse de
Broglie**

by Nanette Fluhr,
1993, oil, 32 x 24.
Collection the
artist.

and procedures that gave them flexibility and control. The different stages of the painting were separated and broken down. A line drawing was followed by laying in the main tonal values in the underpainting. Colors were first applied thinly on top, in glazes. Often only small areas of the painting were built up. In other areas, more of the underpainting remains exposed. Part of what I get students to realize is that the mindset of Old Master painters was not like ours. We often have the idea of seeking "truth" in a painting. But they were after making the most impressive images they could make.

NF: Art is a visual language, and one must learn to express oneself visually. Artists need to learn their craft, and they also have to have something to say. They must balance technique and intuition. Without proper technique, the most passionate artist cannot express his ideas.

To quote Renoir: "It is in the museum that one learns to paint." There is no finer teacher than the Old Masters. The purpose of copying is to gain a deeper, more insightful understanding so that one can apply it to one's own work. In my own portrait of my grandfather, for instance, I was greatly influenced by Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro. Study paintings you like and see why they work; what strong value and color patterns hold the painting together. Usually it's just two or three values and colors—strong and simple.

The original artist has already solved everything for you. For example, Ingres' *Princesse de Broglie* contains dazzling rendering of various materials—satin, velvet, and skin. In a way, that's the easy part—the work of the technician. The reason the painting is in a museum is because

kinds of results they offer. A darkly contrasted painting by Caravaggio is built on a different underpainting from a lighter, more delicate painting by Rubens. As a teacher, my approach to the copying process is that you are going to be doing your own paintings eventually and you are going to learn from these Old Masters.

A lot of copying is approached a little too uniformly. Too often, the idea is to get the most accurate copy possible.

When the Old Masters themselves copied, it wasn't about total accuracy. It was about learning to work in the style of the particular painter. It was about trying to figure out how they managed to get this or that effect.

Part of understanding Old Master technique is understanding the kind of business they were in. Painters such as Rubens or Van Dyck were obliged to produce very complicated paintings in short spaces of time. They found techniques



of the way Ingres designed it. A blue triangle overlapped by a yellow triangle, against the background of the two colors mixed. When people say they love modern art, nothing is more abstract than the design of the Old Masters.

AA: What is the best way for someone to get involved in making Old Master copies?

NF: I would highly recommend taking a course with someone knowledgeable who will guide you. So many people just want to begin in the way they already work, but the whole idea is to learn how the masters worked. To just get a superficial likeness is missing the larger lesson. One should learn how to achieve those results ... really learn what the paints are capable of.

AM: I think, like all things in life, you find someone who both understands a technique and is able to produce somewhat comparable results. The history of a painting begins with the first mark in the first sketch and finishes with the varnish. A good teacher should understand how to make all of these things support one another and facilitate the process.

The Teaching Studios of Art has campuses in Oyster Bay, on Long Island; and in Brooklyn. It focuses on training students in traditional artistic techniques. For more information, visit www.teachingstudios.com.



BELOW
Miller teaching at the Teaching Studios of Art.



ABOVE
Color Glaze of Self-Portrait
by Adam Miller, oil, 18 x 24.
Collection Brian Wannamaker.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Nanette Fluhr studied at the School of Visual Arts and with John Frederick Murray. She is a member of the Portrait Society of America. She teaches a course in copying Old Master paintings at the Teaching Studios of Art at its campus in Oyster Bay, on Long Island, New York. For more information, visit www.nanettefluhr.com.

Adam Miller studied at The Florence Academy of Art, in Italy. He teaches a course in copying Old Master paintings at the Teaching Studios of Art at its campus in Brooklyn. For more information, visit www.adammillerart.com.

I like to have my students copy a few different artists so that they get an overview of the most popular historical painting techniques and begin to understand why you would choose one of them over another. I encourage them to follow up by making their own painting in the same style. This means understanding how to light the model, make studies, prepare the surface, draw, begin, and layer the paint. The goal is always to understand how to get the most of out your own work. **W**

John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and is a frequent contributor to American Artist, Drawing, and Watercolor magazines.