

INTRODUCTION TO 'L'AUTENTICITÀ NELL'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA'

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Authentic or Original? What happens if we think of originality as a process rather than a state of being?

Originality and memory are two notoriously elusive concepts that have much in common. They both originate at relatively specific moments and locations, and they are both mediated and transformed by time. While we would like to think that they can be objectively shared, it must be acknowledged that they are also subjectively manipulated. Their importance lies in this mix of objectivity and subjectivity, and there is enough overlap that we can share, understand and communicate, but also sufficient separation for diversity and innovation to prevent stasis. Memory gives access to originality; authentic things allow us to share collective memories.

Once these *things* are housed in museums they are generally referred to as *objects*. But the museum object is actually a rich and complicated *subject*, complete with its own history and biography. Its story reveals both how it has been seen and valued over time and why it is (or is not) considered important and relevant now. For too long objects have been presented as matters of fact, but this is misleading: they are much more dynamic than that. They are matters of interest, perhaps even matters of concern. It has taken a great deal of work (collecting, classifying, cataloguing, and displaying) over the last three or four centuries to turn complicated subjects into stable objects.

When referring to 'original' objects in museums I prefer the term *artefact*, a word in which the evidence of the making and the *Art* are both present. The Greek root of the word for art is *techne* – art and technique were synonymous in antiquity. *Techne* places the emphasis on making, not on concepts or ideas (which are embedded in, or added onto the artefact). In science and technology *artefact* has a double meaning – it is both the object of reference and also an anomaly or process error. All artefacts in museums contain artefacts - artefacts acquired by time, through the process of aging, through the constant attempts to arrest decay and through the diverse stories they contain. All these things influence how we apprehend the object. Past and present are compressed in this act of understanding and are displayed openly for those who take the time to look. We need to understand these compressed layers and develop a way to both look at them and look through them. This activity is called *connoisseurship*.

The home of the Muses

If we had to date the gradual move from complex subjects to stable objects it would probably start in about 1682 with the opening of the Ashmolean Museum following Elias Ashmole's donation to Oxford University of Sir John Tradescant's Ark, a collection of 'naturalia' which Ashmole had acquired by dubious means. In the move from private to public the collection acquired the name museum (from the Greek *Mouseion*, 'the home of the muses'). The explicit aims of a museum are fourfold: public ownership, the advancement of knowledge, systematic schemes of classification and reasonable accessibility to the public. Our understanding of originality and the development of museums are intrinsically inter-woven.

In an age of mass tourism, museums and heritage sites are points of focus in most people's travel plans. They are busy, crowded places with ticket offices, shops and extensions. Ashmole's vision was more like a library, a focussed place containing objects that stimulate our thoughts. The objects were there to be seen, shared, discussed, and collectively agreed upon –not as permanent unchanging truths fixed in their glass cases but complex narratives to be unravelled. At the British Museum the objects have recently been given a new lease of life. In one of the most positive developments in many years Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum has produced a BBC 4 radio series and a book entitled *The History of the World in 100 Objects*. The series of 100 short biographies of different objects caught the imagination of the English public and demonstrated the relevance and importance of these objects as points of focus that allow us to understand ourselves and others better. In the introduction to the book he uses a series of revealing sub-headings: *The necessary poetry of things; the survival of things; the biographies of things; things across time and space; and the limits of things*. The introduction ends: 'All museums rest on the hope – the belief – that the study of things can lead to a truer understanding of the world.' But MacGregor manages to go one step further. In the opening biography he looks at the Mummy of Hornedjitef. Merging his childhood excitement with his role as museum director he writes, 'Their journeys are not yet finished and neither is our research, which is carried out with colleagues all over the world and which contributes all the time to our shared and growing understanding of the global past – our common heritage.' I would agree, and believe the time has now come for the British Museum to drop the 'British' and end a chapter of *national* collecting by re-branding itself as *A Museum of World Culture*. As MacGregor demonstrates so beautifully, our hold on things is provisional, full of unexpected surprises. Some of those surprises only become apparent in retrospect, and this is one element that makes objects so important.

Museums respond to the changing world

I first visited the Museo del Prado, Madrid in 1980. I was deeply moved by what I saw and by the fact that I could spend hours undisturbed in an environment that seemed overlooked and almost neglected (but this too was an illusion—it was being looked after and cared for with deep love and respect with very little money). Velasquez, the painter who I admire above all others, could speak clearly. Goya in all his moods was also articulate, especially the *Colossus*, which appealed to my love of awkwardness, surface and over-painting. Recently, I chanced upon a small display by Manuela Mena re-attributing the painting to a follower of Goya: even Goya with his relatively uncomplicated provenance is open to re-attribution.

I have been a regular visitor to the Prado since 2000 and have watched it grow and change. The space is still more or less as it appears in my memory, but it is now full of people and infused with freshness and light – many of the paintings have been cleaned. I am not sure exactly when I spent time looking at the heavily restored *Pieta* by Sebastiano del Piombo, a great painting I had the privilege to know intimately when it was in Casa de Pilatos in Seville. The natural aging of oil over slate had created a strange white bloom over some of the colours while the blues seemed to glow with an internal light. The painting had a melancholic air of death and decay completely fitting the subject. It had aged but it had aged well. In the Prado it was bright and fresh. Was it really the same painting that I had carried in my memory for many years? If Sebastiano del Piombo was here now which version would he prefer? It was while looking at this painting that a series of interconnected thoughts came to mind (I like to think it was the muse speaking). Could it be that originality is a process and not a state of being? Does restoration turn a painting into a reproduction of itself? Is it possible to document the changes caused by time? What technologies would be required to record the changes to the surface and reflectivity that happen when something is cleaned? Is it possible to

accurately and objectively document both human and natural changes? What impact would this type of documentation have on our understanding of originality? Why do we have no shared sense of good or bad interventions? Why has so little work been done on a subject of such importance? What would happen to our understanding if everything that was known about the history of a painting were assembled together into one multi-layered digital archive?

Recording and archiving

For over ten years I have been involved in an obsessive quest to perfect recording systems to document these changes and to develop archiving protocols so that the data can be stored in multi-layered archives that facilitate a deep intimacy with the painting. New technologies make new insights possible: Aby Warburg and Andre Malreaux had black and white photographs, we now have x-ray, 3D scans and multi-spectral photography. Digital technologies can reveal the transformations but digitality is not a rupture, still less a revolution, rather it is an evolution. Digital mediation is only one skill and one activity among the many types of mediation that have been developed over time and that are indispensable today to preserve and understand a shared cultural heritage.

I have had the privilege to spend each night for five weeks looking at Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* in the Louvre while the 3D scanners and cameras were busy recording (and the chance to look quietly at the Mona Lisa when I needed a rest from Veronese's composition). This time, and the many hours spent working on the facsimile, are necessary to understand why the painting looks as it does and to gain an insight into what has happened to its surface. I have spent a similar amount of time with Caravaggio's paintings of St Matthew in San Luigi de Francesi thinking about how they were painted and why they look like they do. The activity is a mix of intuition and forensic study. The same has happened with the Dama De Elche and the tomb of Tutankhamun – I am sure all of these things hold many secrets – we know so little about them.

The Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice is at the forefront of the use of new technologies to keep our relationship with the culture of the past alive and relevant. In 2007 they commissioned my workshop, Factum Arte, to make a facsimile of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* to fill the empty wall in Palladio's refectory that had been left when Napoleon's troops removed the painting and took it in sections to Paris, where it can be seen to this day in the Musée du Louvre. Nobody questions that the heavily restored painting in the Louvre is more original than the facsimile now on the island of San Giorgio. But many have claimed that the experience of seeing a facsimile of such accuracy in its intended environment is more authentic. The refectory is now being restored and a sensitive re-interpretation by Michele de Lucchi will add a new chapter to the dialogue between the building and the painting.

The "partial repatriation" of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* to the Palladian refectory on San Giorgio Maggiore is a dramatic example of the use of new technology which has already had an impact the debates about originality, monitoring and the ways in which we value and care for works of art. Once every work of art is seen as part of a trajectory of transformations it is possible to assess the difference between "good" and "bad" transformations (both past and present). This is where digitality has an important role as a medium of analysis. The factual data gathered with these new technologies allows us to appreciate more nuances and to see the subtle differences: it allows us to compare and discuss.

Things are preserved differently in different places

Every intervention and change to a work says as much about the values prevailing at the time and the place they were carried out as they do about the work itself.

If the Veronese painting had another history and had been taken to England rather than France, it would certainly look very different from the way it looks today. You need only compare the three panels of the *Battle of San Romano* by Uccello that went to the Musée du Louvre (Paris), the National Gallery (London) and the Galleria degli Uffizi (Florence) to see how dramatically different interventions can be. The transformations of *The Wedding at Cana* have now become a part of its personality, and are a reflection of its continued importance. Who knows where the painting will be in one hundred years time and what it will look like.

Today we are faced with some exciting questions about objects and artefacts, art and technology, about originality, reproduction and repatriation, about preservation and conservation, transformation and mediation – and about ‘things’ in general, both human and natural. We might not agree on what makes something original or what makes an important work of art. But I hope that we can all agree that it is our collective responsibility to ensure that we act as responsible guardians of our shared cultural heritage. We need to protect it (without imposing our values on it) and pass it on to the next generations for them to look after it, engage with, and learn from it.

Sometimes it is amazing how slowly ideas develop. At the start of the twentieth century Walter Benjamin was performing intellectual somersaults in his attempt to isolate the artistic ‘aura’ of originality. At the start of the 21st century, with cosmetic surgery and anti-aging treatments endemic we are still trying to grasp what makes something intrinsically what it is. We need to give up on the obsession with originality and enjoy the vast and constantly mutating array of things that are all around us. Originality does not exist in a quasi-religious notion of “aura”; it lies in an active and changing physicality, in the intrinsic qualities of the object. It is not fixed and it can be bestowed and removed (just as a work of art is neither a fixed object during its production or during its lifetime). Every work has a complex history and its function, values, and properties change. Its location can change too, demonstrated by Veronese’s *Wedding at Cana*. Mapping these movements allows us to construct a biography of the object.

Getting back to Techne

The mix of technology and art can offer some innovative solutions and a growing number of people are starting to articulate the radical and dramatic potential disclosed by uniting high-resolution digital recording with new conceptions of ‘originality’. The proposition is both urgent and simple: can these tools be put to good use? Can the data be stored safely and made accessible to those who want to see it? And most importantly, can tourists become a proactive and powerful lobby contributing to the preservation of the past, to ensure that collectively we can hand on something meaningful to future generations?

Sir John Tradescant’s Ark is where these thoughts began. His collection of natural and man-made objects formed the basis of the first museum. Over recent years museums have thrived as a result of the rapid growth of tourism while Zoos were struggling, and increasingly being seen as ideologically unsound prisons for animals. Zoos have managed to reinvent themselves (at least in the public perception) as an important element in the fight to breed and save endangered species. It is now the task of the cultural community to realise what is important about the objects they

protect. For our cultural heritage to live it must be accessible to those who really value it. For it to be valued people must understand the conditions necessary to sustain its existence.

Originality was once an *aura*, a singular whisp on the edge of nothingness. Facsimile was a dirty word associated with fakes and falsification – The perception is shifting. Facsimiles in the 21st century are opening the door to truth and verification. The word “copy” does not need to be derogative. It comes from the same etymology as “copious”, and thus designates a source of *abundance*, a proof of fecundity. If originality is redefined as something that is fecund enough to produce an abundance of copies the future for our shared cultural heritage is very bright. It may even survive.