

RETURNING "LES NOCES DE CANA" BY PAOLO CALIARI

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On September 11th, 2007 a copy of Veronese's famous painting *Les Noces de Cana* was unveiled in its original position on the end wall of the Palladian refectory on the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. The copy, commissioned by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and made by Factum Arte, is an exact facsimile of the painting in its current condition in the Musée du Louvre.

The facsimile, even though it has been produced through the intermediary of digital techniques, appears as a painting on canvas, with such attention to detail that you can see the brush marks, the different reflectivity of the surface and the horizontal cuts that Napoleon's orderlies had to make in order to tear the painting from the wall, strip by strip, before rolling it like a carpet and sending it as a war booty to Paris in 1797 — a cultural rape very much in the mind of all Venetians, and one of the reasons for the emotional response that many had in front of the painting — it is also an important factor in the extraordinary press interest that followed the unveiling.

In Palladio's refectory, the painting has an altogether different impact and meaning from the way it is seen in the Louvre — there are obvious differences:

1. It is shown at the right height that makes sense in the room - the complex, theatrical composition has its own logic and a dramatic tension. The eye moves around the surface in a very different way. The bride and groom no longer feel squeezed into the left hand corner and the figures on the balcony have a natural presence above the table rather than feeling like a compositional conceit.
2. It is delicately lit by the natural light from huge East and West windows. Here in its original setting the light at about 5pm on a summer evening coincides exactly with the light and shadow in the painting.
3. It has no frame but fits the wall from edge to edge — top to bottom - without the frame Palladio's architecture merges with Veronese's painted architecture giving to the refectory of the Benedictine monks such a *trompe l'oeil* depth of vision that you do not stand still in front of it but walk slowly - back and forth, up and down the room to enter deeper and deeper into the mystery of the miracle.
4. The painting has returned to a 'living' room that is still used for dinners, conferences, intellectual discussions and is part of an important centre of art historical research. In this environment the painting has a new lease of life. With today's conservation standards it would be impossible to return the original without altering the character of the room.



It should be noted that in Paris the painting has a huge gilt frame, doors on both sides of the wall it hangs on, it is at 'normal' picture height with its bottom 80 cm from the floor, there is a uniform zenithal light, the walls are covered with a heavily trowelled dung brown polished plaster and the climate control ensures a constant temperature and humidity in the room. For the majority of the time the visitor cannot move without bumping into the crowds momentarily glued (queued) to the *Joconde* with their backs turned to the Veronese.

Before you enter the refectory on San Giorgio there is a room containing a selection of photographs taken of the building in 1950. The original floor was gone and another had been installed at the level of the windows –

The top was a theatre and the basement a wood workshop, the whole space, context, entrance and almost all the architectural details had been altered.

It was rebuilt (restored) in the 50's but in its stripped down state it resembles a high protestant church interior that almost seems to mock the absence of Veronese's counter reformation flourish. Many of the details of the restoration were speculative due to the absence of detailed plans. The stairs that were built from the entrance up into the refectory feel more Speer than Palladio.

The plaster on the walls was not the same as that used by Palladio. The floor was not a complex patterned red, black and white marble and the boiserie that surrounded the room was missing. The general character of the room is clearly visible in Coronelli's engraving.



As a result of the facsimile it has now become clear that many aspects of the restoration need to be reviewed and plans are now being drawn up by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini to undertake a new restoration, based on the Coronelli print and historical records held in the Monastery, that will restore the harmony of the building and painting. A facsimile of a heavily restored original returned to its original setting will soon result in new 'original' elements being added to an original building that is (in part) already a facsimile of itself.

Originality once seemed so simple.

A friend visited the facsimile soon after the unveiling and told an Art historian friend of theirs about the experience – The art historian replied: “Why waste your time with a fake Veronese, when there are so many true ones in Venice?!”

It seems that many are still wedded to a fixed idea of originality without considering that an original without reproduction is barren (in both human and artistic term). So I would like you to consider that originality is rooted in the trajectory or career of the object- it is not a fixed state of being but a process which changes and deepens with time. The importance of the work of art is revealed in its ability to reflect the changing ideas and values that condition both its appearance and the ways we respond to it.

When it was unveiled the painting (facsimile) was accompanied by an exhibition that focused on its history and explained all aspects of the making of the facsimile (shown in great detail for maximum transparency). The exhibition was a biography of *Les Noces de Cana*. It contained the earliest copies, both painted and printed, the Le Brun painting given by the French when it was decided that the painting was too fragile to be returned to Venice after the fall of Napoleon, a series of texts by different authors of different nationalities describing the painting from 1565 till 1892, and a detailed study relating to the conservation history of the painting, focusing on the 1989-1991 cleaning that is always held up as an example of well funded and well executed restoration work carried out by one of the best restoration departments in the world. With regards to the making of the facsimile - all aspects of the scanning and colour recording were displayed. The colour matching system was explained in detail and samples of material tests shown to reveal all the layers of investigation that had gone on. The complex printing system was broken down into a ‘how it’s done’ display and a selection of heads from the painting were shown at a scale of 1:1 so the surface could be seen from close range.



The aim of the exhibition was to move the discourse from the question “Is it an original or merely a copy?” to another that seems to be decisive, especially in a world of increasing recording and

printing techniques that blur the division between 2 and 3 dimensions - “It is *well* or *badly* reproduced?”.

Why is this question so important?

For many reasons – one is that no-one wants to see Venice (or anywhere else) filled with thousands of inferior copies replacing missing bits (creating confusion between replication and restoration) and turning the city into a theme park like replica of itself - but equally because restoration is so problematic and to some degree turns the original into a replica of itself. – Look at the 3 panels of the Battle of San Romano by Uccello, look at the Ambassadors, or keep looking at the restoration history of Veronese’s Wedding at Cana. When the painting was cut and stripped from the wall it suffered significant paint loss, it was restored several times in the C18th and C19th but records of the interventions made are almost non-existent. A restoration in the 1850’s carried out under the supervision of M.Villot led to allegations that the painting had ‘been disfigured by excessive scrubbing and that it has lost its expression’. M. Planche, one of the critics, observed ‘that while Jesus is behind the table, he floats into the foreground plane due to the destruction of the aerial perspective’. Even Eugène Delacroix, once a friend of M. Villot, comments in his diary (12th October 1853) that; ‘the painting has been killed under the guidance of this unfortunate Villot’.

The 1989 -91 cleaning was also heavily criticized. Many things happened that are well documented but one change is of great interest. The attendant on the foreground – one of the most important figures in the composition was red but it was decided the ‘stupid rouge marron’ was a later addition as the cleaning revealed green paint under the red. Experts were called in and the addition was dated at some time between 1607 and the mid C19th. All the early copies show the figure in red and there is no evidence to suggest that anyone other than Veronese or one of his assistants made the change.

It is certain that the green was painted before the red. But it is also certain that the change was made before or soon after the painting was finished. To make the change after the painting was finished would have required scaffolding and a major disruption to the life in the monastery but there are no records of either the instruction to make the change, the reasons for the change or for the practical task of commissioning someone to carry out the repainting.

Orpiment (arsenic trisulphide, a yellow mineral) and realgar (arsenic disulphide, a bright orange mineral) were once widely used as pigments because of their bright rich colours- they were both used to over-paint the green. They are both toxic and unstable as they are known to react with copper pigments as well as some lead pigments. Both lead yellow and a copper green are present in the green paint layer. Orpiment is a poor drier when used with linseed oil and Véronèse is known to have mixed orpiment with red lead to accelerate the drying. It could be that the existence of lead in both the green and red layers and the presence of acidic oil could have influenced the condition of the red. The arsenical sulphides in the orpiment and realgar can easily lose sulphur through a chemical conversion of the sulphides or from the evolution of hydrogen sulphide in an acidic environment (that could be acidic air or an acidic environment caused by old linseed oil). This reaction could have turned the bright orange red into a dull brown. It could also be that the painting was cleaned in the C19th with an acidic compound that accelerated the change.

Interestingly the only bit of over-painting that does not cover the green has not discoloured.

Whatever the reasons for the ‘unsympathetic’ red it was removed and cannot be replaced. Would

it not make more sense - before removing it - to thoroughly document the area and produce several facsimiles that could show different alternatives, under the direction of different experts before acting on the original - Is it not our responsibility that the original that is handed on to future generations is not over-layered with subjective additions or subtractions. 'Has it been well or badly reproduced?' Is a question that equally applies to the original. How many originals with no restoration history still exist?

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.

Should originality be redefined as something that is fecund enough to produce an abundance of copies?

If so how will that effect the complex question of repatriation?

A few other examples of facsimile projects carried out by Factum Arte are worth considering in the context of rethinking issues relating to repatriation.

In 1958, Andraux Malraux declared during a lecture in San Giorgio that if he was ever in a position of power the first thing he would do is ensure that the Veronese was returned to its original location. Soon after, when he was Minister of Culture in France, Vittorio Cini requested the return of the painting and was told that while intellectually the painting belonged in the refectory – politically it could never be returned – too much was at stake. Issues of repatriation are always political – and often nationalistic.

Another interesting case involving the Louvre is that of the Dama De Elche.



One of the most reproduced images in the history of Spanish culture – Discovered in 1897, sold to the Louvre two weeks later, returned to Spain in 1941 after an exchange of goods between the Vichy government and Franco's Spain, first housed in the Prado and now in the Museum of Archaeology in Madrid. Many experts question its date with estimates varying between 4th century BC and 1876. Since 1976, when Spain divided into 18 autonomous communities there have been repeated requests to return the sculpture to Alicante. The facsimile was made at the request of the Archaeological museum in Alicante who have not given up hope of securing the return of the original.

A thorough recording was undertaken that included comparative testing of different 3D scanning systems so that an accurate comparison could be made of the quality of each used under the same conditions. The aim was to produce a facsimile that was as close to the original as possible - but to do this without ever touching the original. The result was considered by experts from both museums to be identical when shown under museum conditions.

As with the Veronese, the press response was extraordinary with heated editorial comment for and against the cloning of culture. The obsession with clones is curious— the facsimile is not a clone in any literal sense, and certainly not in any sense dogged by the same moral issues that surround the cloning of cells. In this case cloning refers to ‘a good facsimile’- one that cannot be easily distinguished from the original – that allows you to see the object first and think about the fact that it is a facsimile second - It is a process of copying for the purposes of studying and deepening understanding - a process of verification not one of falsification.

Soon after the facsimile was finished the original was lent to an exhibition at the Museum of Archaeology in Alicante.

Availability

What annoys visitors in Le Louvre is that you cannot actually scan visually the Nozze without bumping into Mona Lisa addicts. The Veronese is so full of incident and detail that it cannot be seen without time to contemplate its meaning, implications and the reasons for its continued importance. What does it mean to enshrine an original, if the contemplation of its ‘auratic’ quality is impossible?



While the return of Les Noces de Cana establishes one way facsimiles can be used in issues of repatriation the facsimile of Thutmose III demonstrates how they can be used to protect the original while keeping it accessible.

The facsimile of the burial chamber from the Tomb of Thutmosis III in the Valley of the Kings contains the first complete text of the Amduat to be used in a pharaonic tomb. The Amduat is a complex narrative mixing art, poetry, science and religion to provide a coherent account of life in the afterworld. The tomb was never made to be visited and the physical and climatic conditions inside the tomb are incompatible with both mass tourism and detailed study. The humidity levels are high, the temperature is almost unbearable, the smell produced by millions of tourists is overwhelming. As a direct result of the visitor numbers the tomb is deteriorating rapidly.

To limit this kind of damage - which in this case is caused by tour guides tapping the wall with sticks or umbrellas to point out this important scene - glass panels have been installed to protect the walls. However this totally changes the nature and character of the space.



A series of exhibitions have displayed the facsimile and contextualized the text. These have now been visited by millions of people in North America and Europe.

The delocalized facsimile has established the reasons for the continued importance of the burial chamber and at the same time money generated by the exhibition has been used by the Supreme Council of Antiquities to help preserve Egypt's heritage – effectively turning the visitors into a proactive force in the conservation of the tomb – an approach that could become part of a long term policy that will keep the original version safe but accessible to the small number of specialists who require access for continued study and monitoring – while providing access to those wishing to experience and learn from the tomb and text. This model has been very successfully used in Altamira, northern Spain where a replica of the painted cave gets about 400,000 visitors a year.

To accompany the exhibition a 25 minute film was made inside the facsimile following the narrative of the text as the Pharaoh passed through the twelve hours of the night. Erik Hornung- the leading Egyptologist who has spent a great deal of his professional life working on the Amduat text and Theodor Abt a Jungian Psychologist interpret the symbolism and meaning of the text.



The popularity of these exhibitions led to a more ambitious project- An exhibition built around the throne-room of Ashurnasirpal II from the North West Palace in Nimrud.

The palace was discovered in 1848 by Austin Henry Layard and the carved polychrome friezes were removed with the majority being sent to the British Museum in London. In the C19th there was as much interest in the Assyrian Culture as there was in Egypt and these works were of great importance to the museum as it built its collection. The panels have a complex biography and some

were sold to the Pergamon, others, not wanted by the British Museum were allowed to go elsewhere. Layard, annoyed by the museum also gave some away. As a result a once coherent narrative cycle ended up in museums around the world.



In June 2004 Factum Arte began work in the British Museum documenting the relief panels and two colossal human headed winged lions (3.5 (high) x 5.8 (long) x 1.5 (wide) meters) in 3 dimensions and colour.

This work was followed by 3D scanning and photographing related panels in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden, The Sackler Collection at Harvard University and The Art Museum at Princeton University. A trip to record the fragments left on site in Nimrud and other known fragments in Mosul and Baghdad had to be postponed.

The result of this work is a large-scale facsimile accurate to a fraction of a millimetre and resembling the original fragments in their current condition.

Some of the recording systems were specially designed for the work and have major implications for the study of relief surfaces – particularly the merging of 3D information with high resolution photography which means that both colour and detail can be studied at the same time. Traditionally photographs of these carvings either show the colour at the expense of the relief or they are shot with raking light to maximize the relief thus creating strong shadow and losing colour information. The ability to render the 3D data with different light sources also has major implications for the study and dissemination of cuniform tablets.

The work was carried out in conjunction with the Ministry of Culture of Iraq and is still ongoing.

At the end of the exhibition the whole facsimile will be donated to the National Museum in Baghdad where the works can be seen in context.

Conclusion

Facsimiles have a bad reputation —people assimilate them with a photographic rendering of the original— and digital technology is associated with an increase in virtuality. So, when we speak of “digital facsimiles” we are certainly looking for trouble. And yet we claim that, contrary to common presuppositions, digital facsimiles are introducing many new twists in the century old trajectory of works of art.

Digital techniques are only one *moment* in the move from one material entity — Veronese’s *Nozze* ‘version n’ in Le Louvre— to another equally material entity —version n + 1 in San Giorgio.

At the time of mass tourism, increasingly vocal campaigns for the repatriation of spoils of wars or commerce, when so many restorations are akin to iconoclasm, it does not require excessive foresight to maintain that digital facsimiles offer a remarkable new handle to facilitate and rejuvenate our appreciation of the complexity of art. Since all originals have to be reproduced anyway, simply to survive, it is crucial to be able to discriminate between good and bad reproductions.

It is to be hoped that facsimile of Veronese’s *Noces de Cana* has restored the magnificence of the refectory and now scholars and tourists alike will be able to see the effect of the painting in its proper context, at the right height and without a frame. If the first thing one notices, is that the painting is a copy, the facsimile has failed. If one first engages with the space and then starts to unravel the history and transformations of the painting, then the facsimile has succeeded. The aim is not falsification - it is in line with all study before the C20th in which the role of the copy was to deepen understanding of specific works within the canon of accepted masterpieces.

In commissioning the facsimile, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini demonstrated its presence at the forefront of the use of new technologies to promote and nurture our understanding of art history. Most now acknowledge that the removal of the painting was a mistake but both the painting and its reputation have been well served by its time in the Louvre. The life of *Les Noces de Cana* in France has become part of its biography. At some time in the future, there may be commercial or political pressures for it to move to another location – perhaps Abu Dhabi, but hopefully the debates around repatriation have moved on from local nationalistic claims to a greater awareness that the world’s cultural heritage is a shared one – and a shared responsibility.

Véronèse might be alarmed by some of the transformations that his masterpiece has undergone. The colour harmonies and the general contrast of the painting have changed and it seems likely that the red on the figure of the attendant was painted before the end of the 16th century, probably by Véronèse himself in 1563. However I am sure he would be satisfied that a painting to which his name is attached has continued to be studied, shared and discussed and appreciate the fact that the qualities that make *Les Noces de Cana* specifically what it is continue to be valued. When it was first unveiled in the refectory, it received so many visitors and artists wanting to copy the composition that on 17th December 1705, the monks decided to limit any further copying of the work to royal requests only. Véronèse could hardly have imagined that now an estimated nine million people every year visit the room where it hangs, although a significant percentage of these hardly notice this vast work as they stream in to see the *Mona Lisa*.