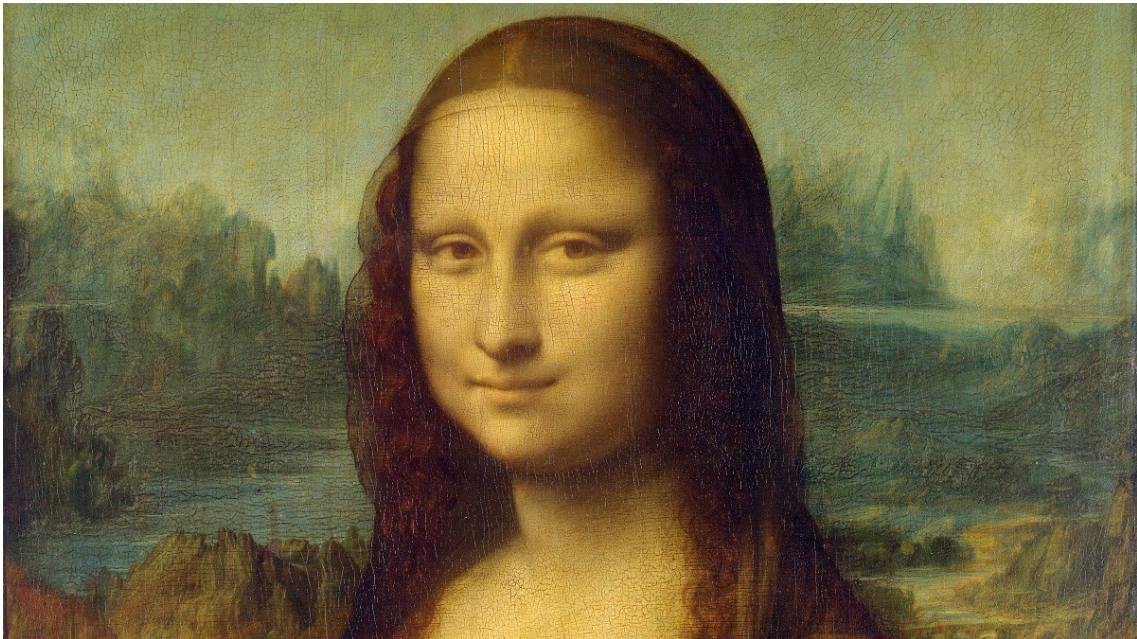


Could you spot a fake painting? Even experts are struggling

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WILL GOMPERTZ

Replicas of masterpieces are so good these days that it's difficult to see the difference. Here's why we should celebrate the fine art of high-tech fakery



Leonardo's Mona Lisa (detail)

I am standing with a small group in front of four gorgeous 18th-century Venetian paintings hanging on a gallery wall. We are there at the behest of their owner who has issued us a challenge. One of the four is a copy, he says, made to fill the gap up on his wall while the original is away on loan. "Which one is it?" he asks.

The answer is not immediately obvious. Nor is it obvious after a few minutes. We are way beyond colour photocopy quality here. Hmmm.

"It's this one," a more confident member of the group announces. "Wrong," our host says, drumming his fingers on the canvas of a painting to its side, the dull thudding sound giving it away as the copy. Well, yes ... of course ... it does lack ... err ... not much actually.



Perfect facsimile? The Adoration of the Kings (1510-15) by Jan Gossaert (it's the original)

Recent technological advances mean modern reproductions are so good that many could pass as the original to a casual viewer. Maybe you have already succumbed — there are more digitally created copies out there than you might think. The National Gallery used the latest high-tech kit to create an exhibition in Winchester Cathedral featuring a full-scale, high-resolution 3D colour replica of Jan Gossaert's early 16th-century masterpiece *The Adoration of the Kings*. It is not alone. The Royal Collection, the V&A and the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid have all commissioned similar projects. As have I, in my role as the director of the Sir John Soane's Museum in London.

Does this mean our museums and galleries will soon be full of fakes? No, it does not. The originals are materially different and unique. Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher,

argued in his 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, that originals have a distinctive “aura”. Maybe they do, but you don’t have to rely on a sixth sense to discover the difference between the original and today’s high-tech contemporary copy. All you have to do is look at the back of the replica and you’ll quickly realise it is made out of 21st-century polyurethane.

As objects, replicas are obviously reproductions that are not made from the same materials or in the same way. Artists tend to create their pictures with layers of paint building towards a final image: they are made inside out. The copy is purely superficial; it is a digitally photographed image 3D-printed on to a pre-moulded surface. You can quickly tell the difference by handling it, but not by viewing, as we found out. So, while nobody is trying to pull the wool over anybody’s eyes, the latest technology does create opportunities that will benefit museums and the public.



Larger than life: Factum Arte recreated the Colossus of Constantine for the Capitoline Museums in Rome. OAK TAYLOR-SMITH/FACTUM ARTE

Take, for example, museums sending their priceless artworks away on loan. It is always a fraught business and carries inherent risks, the upshot of which is that notable pieces are rarely lent and usually only for a once-in-a-lifetime exhibition.

Your local art teacher wanting students to study the *Mona Lisa* is unlikely to be successful should they have the audacity to request a loan from the Louvre. But the Louvre curators might very well respond positively if they had a copy to lend; a copy that captured every minute pictorial detail. The students could then touch the lightly contoured surface of the *Mona Lisa* and study the painting at length in a way that is impossible to do with the original, which is not only behind thick, bulletproof glass but also protected by a wooden barrier. Not to mention

the sea of heads to peer around to catch even a glimpse of that famous half-smile across a packed public gallery.

Copies have also become an important part of museum strategy for conserving the life of fragile works, particularly those made on paper, which can be irrevocably damaged by exposure to excessive light and changing atmospheric conditions. It is simply not possible to always have them on view, but high-quality copies can now be displayed while the originals are being “rested”. It means that not only are they safe for future generations to enjoy but that there is no blank space on the wall where the artworks hung. In my experience visitors are intrigued to see the facsimiles and hear about the vital conservation work they allow.

We have come a long way in a relatively short time. Up until recently basic print-on-demand technology seemed advanced. It enabled museums to sell ink-jet printed editions of their masterpieces on a canvas. They were quite good. My children grew up surrounded by several Cézannes, three Picassos, a small Frida Kahlo and a rather lovely Rembrandt, all of which I bought for under a hundred quid.



Original and facsimile: the portrait of Madame de Pompadour by Francois Boucher and its copy. But which is which? OAK TAYLOR-SMITH/ FACTUM ARTE

Nobody was going to be fooled into thinking they were the real deal, though. The scale, the not-quite-right colours and the lack of texture were all giveaways. An old-school art forger like John Myatt would not be impressed. He can spot a copy at 40ft — as I found out when we went fake art hunting at the Dulwich Picture Gallery a little while ago. The London venue had set its visitors a test: could they spot a £100 knock-off sharing prime gallery wall space with paintings by great masters such as Peter Paul Rubens? While the public scratched their collective heads, Myatt quickly spotted “Mr Dodgy”. Well, he would, wouldn’t he? This is a man who, having

served time in prison for flogging his own forgeries (Myatt is a trained artist), went legit and sold his copies as “genuine fakes”.

There is a fine line between a forgery and a facsimile. To an extent, it rests in the copyist’s intention. Are they trying to fool you and knowingly mis-sell their copy as an original, or are they openly presenting it as a replica? Myatt has walked on both sides of the divide, whereas Adam Lowe — another trained artist in the copying business — has kept strictly to the bona fide camp.

For nigh-on a quarter of a century Lowe has spent his considerable energy producing high-quality reproductions of paintings and sculptures for museums and galleries around the world. He describes his digital scanning technique as being more closely aligned to cartography than photography, as four cameras hover above a painting’s surface taking pictures from every conceivable angle to create a single composite image. From this data a precise mould of the contours of the picture surface is made, on to which the high-resolution digital photograph is then printed. This is both useful to curators, who learn about the painting’s condition and fabrication, and for museums looking for ways to engage audiences.

Take the Prado Museum in Madrid. It commissioned Lowe’s company, Factum Arte, to scan its collection of *Black Paintings* by Francisco de Goya as part of a piece of research into their condition. Lowe produced a high-resolution close-up crop of the Spanish artist’s famous *The Dog*, a framed copy of which you can buy in the museum’s shop for a fairly chunky €990. He has taken the idea of copying even further in Bishop Auckland through his Spanish Gallery where “nothing is real” — from the decorated ceiling to the paintings hanging on the walls. And the floor! He declares it his “greatest achievement”.



Adam Lowe in his studio near Madrid. MARTA GONZALEZ DE LA PEÑA/ FACTUM ARTE

I went to visit Lowe at his art-making HQ, located in a huge warehouse on a light-industrial estate on the edge of Madrid (Spain is the adopted country of the Oxford-born onetime figurative painter). Outside, huge containers full of scraps of cast-off replicas lead to a modest

entrance. Inside, things are more high-tech. Top-of-the-range digital printers, complex camera rigs and virtual reality headsets are scattered among the 3D-printed Greek sculptures and ancient Assyrian reliefs squeezed into every nook and cranny. An army of computer scientists and digital whizz-kids beaver away.

He picks up a rubbery white object that is the shape of a framed picture, telling me it is the mould of a “new” Caravaggio painting he is making. As we walk from studio to studio, Lowe casually waves towards other artworks he has produced, one moment pointing out an impressive copy of Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, the next Monet’s *Water Lilies*.

- [The Renaissance reborn: meet the man who recreates masterpieces](#)

The idea of replicas is not new, of course. The practice of copying started shortly after the first artwork was made millennia ago. The V&A in London has galleries dedicated to copies of great sculptures; in its famous Cast Courts you will find Michelangelo’s *David* and Ghiberti’s *Gates of Paradise*. Lowe sees his creations as the 21st-century version of those casts. He considers his work “cultural preservation” and thinks it ought to be funded by governments and universities. He has spoken to the mayor of Madrid about setting up a global arts centre for cutting-edge digital technologies, but that ambition remains in the hands of the politicians.

He says he doesn’t make much money from his activities, although he turns over millions of pounds a year. What he does generate goes back into the business. It’s a slog. As he sits down with a cool glass of early evening wine he seems worn down by decades of scepticism.

“People call us Factum, the factory of fakes,” he laments. “The fact that people don’t understand us makes me incredibly sad.” As do the snide asides calling him the Great Forger. “Factum doesn’t fake. Factum does the opposite — it verifies. What we are doing is scientific recording to give accurate information about the [artwork’s] surface that allows you to understand it better and more deeply.”

Suddenly he perks up, telling me about his latest project with the National Gallery in London, which involves making a copy of Samuel Dirksz van Hoogstraten’s 17th-century perspective box for an exhibition in Vienna. Then there is the Bodleian Library’s William Blake project and the creation of a virtual reality Egyptian tomb. Oh, and there’s the giant bronze replica he has made of Dippy the diplodocus, which has just arrived in the front garden of the Natural History Museum. All fascinating but I must go — unless he can quickly rustle up a 3D private jet to take me back to Gatwick.