

The Renaissance reborn: meet the man who recreates masterpieces

Adam Lowe's work is in demand around the globe. To his critics he is a master faker — but to his fans he is a genius transforming the worlds of art and heritage

[Isambard Wilkinson](#),

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Adam Lowe and his team at Factum Arte in Madrid recreate famous works of art for posterity

MARTA GONZALEZ DE LA PEÑA

Folds of robes swathe a recumbent Spanish cardinal who clasps a crozier to his chest, his forbidding face and half-closed eyes copied from a death mask.

The 16th-century marble sepulchre of Juan Pardo de Tavera by Alonso Berruguete is a Renaissance masterpiece with a long history. Chips and scars on its surface reflect damage inflicted during the Spanish civil war in the 1930s.

Yet, this monument did not survive the civil war, nor does it stand in a Spanish church, but rather in northern England. This is not the original creation of Berruguete, but the work of Adam Lowe.

Labelled a master faker by his critics, the British-born, Madrid-based artist insists his work is “verification rather than falsification.” To his many distinguished fans he is a genius of the facsimile who has transformed the worlds of art and heritage.

At the Spanish Gallery museum in Bishop Auckland, Co Durham, the cardinal’s tomb stands alongside other copies of works by artists such as El Greco and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo in rooms adorned with replicas of the rich ceramic tiles and plasterwork of Spain’s 16th and 17th-century Golden Age.

They add to a catalogue of epic “fakes” that Lowe has executed over the years, from Tutankhamun’s tomb and Raphael’s Sistine Chapel masterpieces to Assyrian sculptures smashed by jihadists and West African standing stones. Now he is eyeing the Elgin Marbles, expressing a hope that he will be given the chance to restore them to their polychromatic glory.

Commissioned by governments and museums around the world, Lowe’s latest work, a 13m-tall recreation of the Colossus of Constantine in Rome, has thrust him once again into the spotlight. Using nine original fragments dug up in 1486, digital wizardry and the knowledge of experts, he rebuilt the statue — thought to be a 4th-century re-carving of an earlier monument to Jupiter — with four tonnes of acrylic resin and powdered marble.



The recreation of the Colossus of Constantine was unveiled in Rome in February

AFP

The centre of Lowe’s empire is a workshop in a large former warehouse on the outskirts of Madrid. Inside, huge mouldings of busts and tombs jostle for space alongside “Caravaggios”. Some of Lowe’s 55 employees sit transfixed by their work amid piles of debris from experiments.

Lowe, 65, presides over it all from the old warehouse manager’s office, which, he quips, sits above the hive of industry like that of a Victorian mill owner. The state of his desk, buried under stacks of paper and dinosaur bones, reflects the number of ongoing projects — about one hundred — and his restless mind. “The bones are because we are working on a diplodocus for the Natural History Museum in London, which is being assembled as we talk,” he says.

Like Willy Wonka in a factory of marvels, Lowe, impassioned by all his projects, flits rapidly in conversation from one to the next, as he does physically, travelling from one site to another around the world. We first met by chance in

Lahore, Pakistan, where he had been invited to help the city's museum, the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's "Wonder House" in his novel *Kim*.

But his base in Spain is not by coincidence. "I have been in Madrid for 24 years ... and all the disasters and magic of working in Spain make it so alluring," he says. "The Spanish Gallery in Bishop Auckland is about my love affair with Spain." With casts and replicas of Spanish works inhabiting every corner of the warehouse, his operation is in part a homage to Spain.



Lowe recreates masterpieces by artists such as Caravaggio

Lowe, who was born in Oxford, founded Factum Arte, which makes pieces for contemporary artists, in 2001 in Madrid, and Factum Foundation in 2009, a not-for-profit organisation that "records" cultural heritage. The latter is responsible for projects such as the one at Bishop Auckland and the Constantine colossus and has developed ground-breaking laser and photometric stereo systems for the production of exact physical facsimiles. He has ongoing long-term projects with Oxford's Bodleian Library — where his scanners revealed

etching marks attributed to William Blake — and the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice.

Hanging on the wall of his small office is further evidence of his international reach — a replica of the Hereford Mappa Mundi, the largest medieval map known to exist, which the city asked to be a tactile version for the blind and partially sighted. He wants to investigate the DNA of the map's vellum "as it would be useful to know exactly which cow it came from".

This appetite for artistic sleuthing drives much of Factum's work and sprang from Lowe's earlier career as a painter. "I was determined to demonstrate that technology has the capacity to record the surface of objects so you could see everything from a painting to a book or a sculpture as material evidence and understand the transformation that it has undergone," he says.

The first project that drew attention to Factum was its recreation in 2007 of Paolo Veronese's 16th-century masterpiece *The Wedding at Cana*. It was commissioned by the Venice monastery that Napoleon stole it from in 1797. The original now hangs in the Louvre. "I was incredibly nervous then as nobody wants to see Venice filled with fakes. That's what everyone accuses us of," he says.

The Veronese commission embodied Lowe's mission to unveil the original meaning of objects. "Factum doesn't make fakes, we make verification rather than falsification," he says. "If I was going to do faking I'd fake pound coins because that's easy. Faking works of art is very difficult. We have totally changed the relationship between originality and authenticity."

He adds: "What we do is reveal the meaning of objects, so what happened when we unveiled *The Wedding at Cana* is that people said 'the version in the Louvre is definitely original but heavily restored, changed and not looking like it did when Veronese painted it'".



Factum Arte's facsimile of *The Wedding at Cana* now hangs in Venice, in the space for which the original was conceived and painted

FACTUM FOUNDATION

Lowe says the Louvre hangs the painting “at the wrong height, it’s framed, it’s against a shit-brown wall”. He adds: “The *Mona Lisa* is in front of it so you can’t see it [because of the crowds], it was painted to be contemplated day after day by monks, it was one of the most complex compositions in the Renaissance canon.”

Descending to tour the “factory floor”, Lowe points to two facsimiles of a 15th-century Gothic panel depicting the Crucifixion that was discovered in poor condition in the depot of Utrecht’s Museum Catharijneconvent. Lowe’s team digitally removed a blue-grey background added in the 18th century with striking results.

“The figures that we call the vampire-angels can suddenly be seen with startling clarity collecting blood that is spouting out of each of the wounds,” he enthuses. “You see the painting as it was intended — extraordinarily real.”

Factum’s work ranges far beyond dusty museum storerooms to the front line. In the Iraqi city of Mosul, huge Assyrian half-lion, half-bird sculptures known as lamassu, dating back thousands of years, were destroyed by jihadists who declared them works of the devil. Today, lamassu stand tall once again in the city, which was liberated from Isis in 2017, thanks to Factum’s precise recreations of similar sculptures in the British Museum.

In a similar project, Lowe’s team spent two years restoring artwork at Kamukuwaká, a sacred cave in the Amazon, after it was vandalised amid a row over access to timber. “We spent two years restoring it. Working with anthropologists, the local community and historical photographs, we rebuilt all of the petroglyphs, painstakingly piecing together the depth of each one,” said Lowe.



Lowe uses several practical and digital techniques to achieve the desired effect

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The recreation, which will be placed at a different site within the reserve, has been so faithfully reproduced that the indigenous communities say it will replace the original in their devotions.

Factum's projects are without end: he is working with the Prado Museum in Madrid to make facsimiles of Goya's Black Paintings; soon a second reconstruction of the Colossus of Constantine will stand at Bishop Auckland, a nod to Constantine's deployment to Hadrian's Wall and his proclamation as emperor in York; and he is in talks to scan a damaged lamassu that was recently unearthed in the ancient city of Khorsabad in Iraq.

Ushering me to the door, Lowe expresses a desire to get his hands on one more prize: the Elgin Marbles. "The obvious project that Factum would love to work on is the Parthenon Marbles and all the plaster casts made by Lord Elgin," he says.

"There is contemporary Greek polychrome stone carving and with that we could really put back the colour as it would have looked, not like some Warhammer thing that most repainted sculptures end up looking like."