The Art of the Copy

Owens Art Gallery, Oct-Dec 2009
Acknowledgements

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Front Cover, Photograph of copyists from the Ladies College in the Owens Gallery, c. 1890s, Mount Allison Archives, R.C. Archibald fonds, 5501/9/2/1
The Art of the Copy

Curated by Anne Koval
with Jane Tisdale and Adam Karpowicz
and the students of FINA 3141: Nineteenth Century Art, I

A good copy is better than a bad original.
- J. D. Ingres

This exhibition was organized to bring together a historical overview of the time-honoured tradition of copying with the early formation of the Owens Gallery collection and the fine arts teaching curriculum at the Ladies College and Mount Allison University.

Much of the Owens early collection was formed within the pedagogical context of the copy. Students were provided with original and facsimile paintings, drawings, prints and plaster casts to copy with the aim of improving painting and drawing skills. With the advent of modernism and the values of "originality" the copy gradually fell out of favour and was dropped from most progressive art schools, including Mount Allison.

An interactive element of the exhibition involves current Fine Arts students who revisit the practice of copying under the guidance of Adam Karpowicz (Fine Art Conservator for New Brunswick). For the duration of the exhibition these students will literally be performing the copy by producing their own copies after work from the Owens permanent collection.
History of the Collection

The gallery is furnished with casts from the antique, and in the collection of facsimile productions of sketches from the Old Masters there is an abundance of material for a solid foundation in the principles of drawing. The careful study of these sketches is most helpful to students in teaching the methods of those great masters, whose finished work is never seen here...

- "Distinguished Art Critic" Dr. S. E. Dawson, The Montreal Gazette, Sept. 1889, after a visit to the Owens Art Institute, St. John

The Owens Art Institute was founded by John Owens, a wealthy shipbuilder from Saint John who died in 1867, leaving funds 'for the purpose of establishing a gallery or school of art'. Under the executor John Reed, the formation of the Owens Art Institution began with the hiring of John Hammond as director, who was sent to Europe to amass a collection for the new gallery. The collection reflects not only the tastes and interests of Reed and Hammond, but also was formed with the traditional curriculum of copying after the plaster cast and from paintings, drawings and prints.
By 1885 the gallery and art school were open for public viewing and instruction. The first catalogue dates to June 1886 and included a partial inventory of the plaster cast teaching collection. The institute operated in Saint John for approximately a decade and was well attended as depicted in the photograph of the gallery from the eighties that shows both male and female students working making copies from the collection. Due to the combination of internal politics and a looming economic recession, the institute closed in 1893 and the collection was transferred to Mount Allison University, through the negotiations of Dr. Borden, principal of the Ladies College. By 1895 a new building, designed by the architect Edmund Burke, housed the collection and classes of the Art Department of the Ladies College.

**The Tradition of the Copy**

Go to the Old Masters, talk to them, they are still alive and will reply to you. They are your instructors; I am only an assistant in their school.

- J. D. Ingres

Since the Renaissance the training of the artist in the practice of copying was an integral part of the curriculum. The practice aimed at developing the pupil's power of invention by examining and replicating Old Master compositions and secondly, the practice familiarized the pupil with the specific techniques used by their predecessors. By the early nineteenth century most academies and art schools had copying as a central aspect of the curriculum.

Many students began their copies in the classroom working after drawings and prints by Old Master artists. Gradually they moved towards drawing after plaster casts from the antique and from original antique statuary in the galleries. As they grew accomplished in the art of the copy, they gradually moved toward drawing from the life model in poses, often borrowed from antique compositions. After several years of this preliminary training students were then permitted to paint and to produce copies after the Old Masters. In Paris, the private ateliers, like J.D. Ingres', encouraged students to paint after originals in the Louvre gallery as part of their daily practice. Students were provided with permits from the gallery and many produced a number of copies during this period of training.
Sarah Hart, After Michelangelo's Dying Slave, graphite drawing, shown on right the original (Louvre)

A wealth of nineteenth century artists copied after original works and made it part of their practice. Many artists also realized a lucrative career making copies for other galleries, patrons, or even the 'Museum of Copies' set up briefly in Paris during the 1870s.

The French artist Eduard Manet was a frequent copyist and many of his more radical paintings such as Dejeuner sur l’herbe and Olympia, are indebted to this practice. Both Paul Cézanne and Vincent Van Gogh made copies after Old Master paintings, although by this period the academic copy was in its demise and the advent of the creative copy was on the rise. The creative or interpretive copy was a quicker response to the Old Master painting, allowing for a personal intervention to come into play. These paintings tend to be sketchy and less finished and in some cases the artist has embellished the original to their own design. Often the colour isn't an accurate reproduction and many served as compositional aids. In the case of both Cezanne and Van Gogh these paintings started as copies and became unique compositions in stood on their own.
The Curriculum at Mount Allison

The Fine Arts curriculum at Mount Allison, which first began as the Wesleyan Ladies College followed the nineteenth-century European model. By 1869 the college had hired John Gray, who had trained at the South Kensington Schools in London where the curriculum advocated the practice of the copy. As the Professor of Painting and Drawing, Gray encouraged the practice as the academic calendar of that year advertised:

The method of instruction is that employed in the best European Schools. Copying under the eye of a skillful teacher, is regarded as the first means of acquiring correct ideas of the Art;...

Along with the copy students were able to draw from nature and make studies and sketches from natural forms. This formula persisted into the early nineties with curriculum descriptions further defining the practice of making pencil, charcoal and crayon drawings from flat copies, object drawing from Antique models, making enlarged copies from photographs, and making copies in oil paint.

*Wesleyan Ladies’ College Calendar, 1890-91 showing course of study with description of copying (Mount Allison Archives)*
Under the direction of John Hammond who was hired by 1893/4 an increasing professionalization of the school had begun. The description of the curriculum included drawing from the flat and antique, painting from the cast, as well as painting the still life, landscape, portrait, and life model. Further instruction included perspective composition, modelling, etching, and china painting. By 1904 a Teacher's Diploma for Drawing and Painting was being granted to graduates. With the advantage of copying from the original Owens collection, students now had a wide range of options, as seen in the photographs on the cover and in this detail from a photograph of the 1890s. Standing in profile instructing a student making a copy is the artist Ethel Ogden, a teacher employed with the college from 1894.

The curriculum at Mount Allison continued to allow students to make copies well into the twentieth century, despite the increasing demise of the practice. As late as 1977 students in first year drawing employed the plaster casts as models to copy from, despite the protest of a number of students, when in 1975 several of the casts were dropped out of the windows of the upper story of Flemington Hall (then a drawing studio).
Feminizing the Copy

The woman's power is not for rule, not for battle, her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision.
- John Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens", 1865

By the latter half of the nineteenth-century as the status of the copy and the practice of copying begins to decline, the feminization of the copy occurs. As an imitative activity society dictated that women were better suited to the act of copying as they lacked the originality to create new work. Not only were women at home relegated to their biologically reproductive role as mothers but also, culturally, the role of reproducing copies was seen as a natural occupation for the female artist as creativity was characteristically the domain of the male artist.

This illustration from George du Maurier's successful novel *Trilby*, published in 1894, depicts a woman copyist in the Louvre as seen by the male protagonists in the background.

Such depictions of the lone female were not usually accurate as most women artists were accompanied by a chaperon when out in public spaces.

Many, like du Maurier did not view the woman as a professional artist but rather regarded her as an amateur making a copy as part of her accomplishments.

For many women the copy became part of their training as amateur painters, one of their many accomplishments as middle-class females of nineteenth-century society, along with playing the piano and needlework. None of it meant to be taken too seriously, or regarded as a profession.

Nonetheless, the nineteenth-century woman artist benefited greatly from the practice of making copies from original works of art. Until the later part of the century their
academic training was curtailed due to gender restrictions, as women were not permitted to work from the nude model. Linda Nochlin notes that this limitation seriously hampered the education of the women artists, claiming:

It is rather as though a medical student were denied the opportunity to dissect or even examine the naked human body.

- "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists", 160

Without the opportunity to work from the nude, woman artists took advantage of the copy to improve their painting and drawing skills. A major part of the art school's curriculum was to work directly from drawings, prints and casts after the antique. For students training in Europe there was opportunity to work in the major galleries, such as the Louvre in Paris. Such galleries were full of young students, male and female who would work directly from paintings in the galleries.

An engraving after the American artist Winslow Homer published in the Harper's Weekly magazine in 1868 shows the prominence of women copyists in the Louvre. With few other opportunities, a number of women excelled at becoming professional copyists. Many of these works sold to other museums and galleries or private patrons who wanted a copy after a famous 'Old Master'.

Engraving after Winslow Homer, Copyists in the Louvre, for Harper's Weekly, Jan. 11, 1868
This legitimization of a career for women as professional copyists marks a paradox, in that as they gained an artistic career, the prominence of the copy and making copies began to decline. With the advent of modernism the copy gradually became devalued, and the copy was relegated to a secondary status, with the concept of originality and invention becoming more prominent. Artists like Edouard Manet mark the change between the more serious academic copy and the creative or interpretive copy as seen in the work of Vincent Van Gogh and other Post-Impressionists.

In contemporary art a number of women artists have explore this constriction within modernism as seen in the work of Sherry Levine, Dottie Attie and Cindy Sherman. Levine's work in particular plays on the gendered construction of originality by re-photographing and appropriating major male artists' work. Such acts of 'copying' begin to question the modernist canon and reposition the role of the woman artist within a larger postmodernist critique.
The Technique of the Copy

Until the Nineteenth Century the technique of painting had been fairly consistent through the centuries. It was first fully developed during Renaissance and had continued with modifications to form the basis of teaching in all art schools where the copying of old master paintings was essential in the curriculum. The technique allowed for a relatively small number of colours for the maximum effect and great variability.

The Five Stages for Making a Copy:

1. Priming the Canvas: Priming of the support, canvas or wood, is done either with the white ground (gesso) or with a coloured ground, usually grey or brown. A linear drawing of basic shapes can be done on top of the ground in charcoal or pencil.

2. Underdrawing: Drawing is executed with thinned black, brown or reddish-brown paint. The drawing is either very simple in the form of a rough sketch, or elaborated to the point of near finish when a monochromatic final effect is desired by the artist. The drawing establishes the areas of shade in the forms and darker fields of the composition, while the ground colour is left exposed where the brighter colours and highlights are expected. If the ground layer is white, it can be now coated with a wash of brown or grey called imprimatura. This tinted layer, to serve as the middle tone, can also be applied directly over the ground, prior to the drawing.

3. "Working Up" the Painting: On top of the drawing, pure white or lightly coloured paints are layered to develop the shading and modeling of all elements of the composition. This modeling was particularly apparent in the technique of Leonardo da Vinci in his unfinished paintings. The layering of white or light paint on top of the darker shadows of the drawing introduces new colours – the diffused bluish or purplish tones are sometimes referred to as the “turbid medium effect”. By layering or blending in with a brush, starting with paints of very thin consistency, it allows unbelievably smooth transitions, especially in the areas of flesh, so admired in the Old Masters. The darker shades of the underdrawing are not concealed with the light-coloured paint so the entire composition remains harmonized overall. The painting may be left relatively monochromatic at this stage or the colours, usually of a lighter shade, added on for more variability and texture for the painting to appear more finished.

4. Glazing: Glazes, the (semi) transparent paints are now applied over the underpaint to achieve the desired intensity. The glazes can be now used over the shadows at this point, as the brown or grey underdrawing will not be concealed by the transparent glaze, and a harmony is maintained.

5. Highlights: Finally, limited use of the denser, very light paint will help to develop the highlights.
It is a common misconception that the Old Master techniques were exceptionally laborious and time consuming. A well-executed drawing followed by the lighter, coloured or monochromatic modeling allowed for faster progression. Maintaining the unity of the composition and the smooth gradation of shade was easier to achieve when applying light over dark. This technique of painting by using a series of steps introduces discipline and organization to the creative effort, allowing the artist to work on the details without loosing sight of the final effect.

Adam Karpowicz, September 2009
Fine Art Conservator for New Brunswick
Performing the Copy

A copy has, perhaps, something of the performance of a piece of music about it. A pianist who studies a Beethoven sonata copies it in performance rather as a painter who studies Rembrandt might perform it in copying.

- Michael Ayrton, Themes and Variations by K.E. Maison

To complement this exhibition the practice of making a copy after a painting or plaster cast has been revised by Fine Arts students at Mount Allison. Under the supervision of Adam Karpowicz the students will be performing the copy for the duration of the exhibition. As part of a class project for the art history class, Nineteenth Century Art I, students will learn to paint after nineteenth century painters in the permanent collection. Several students will also be doing a series of drawings after the plaster casts in the gallery.

Although the practice is now regarded as outdated a number of contemporary artists still locate their own artistic practice in their earlier training from the copy.

Every intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head. It is his real subject, of which everything he paints is both homage and a critique.

- Robert Motherwell
List of Works

1. Small vitrine with archival material
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 1897-8 Ladies College Calendar pp. 36-7
   d. Photos...Ladies college... showing copyists...
   e. 
   f. small pen and ink drawing of copyist (Jean Dixon collection, archive)

2. 1 print

3. 1 drawing

4. watercolour

5. drawing

6. watercolour

7. Ethel Ogden, cameo

8. Head of Minerva, plaster cast, 19th century copy


10. Unknown, *Portrait*, Copy after Van Dyck


12. E. Ogden, *Venus copy* (oil)

13. Venus plaster, 19th century copy


15. Emma Moore, *The Shepherdess*, after Eaton


17. Amelia George, *The Departure*, after Hawkins (Dixon family)


23. I. Caliga, *Study of a Head*,


Select Bibliography

Biographies

Dr. Anne Koval, Art History Professor, Fine Arts Department, specialist in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture

Jane Tisdale, Fine Art Conservator for the Owens Art Gallery

Adam Karpowicz: Fine Art Conservator for New Brunswick

Rachel Dawson: BFA fourth year student, catalogue designer, technician of visual resources Fine Arts Department

The Copyists: BFA's Elizabeth Bissonnette, Katelyn Boyle, Nathan Cann, Jared Collett, Rachel Dawson, Gemma-Joanna Fiset-Cookshaw, Claire Gallant, Laura Hansen, Emily Jewer, Courtney Lord, Becky Martin and Nic Wilson

Jesse Corrigan, After.... 2005 (age 4)

A creative copy
Students copying from the Owens Art Gallery collection, c. 1927, Mount Allison University Archives, Phyllis Woods fonds, 8544/2