

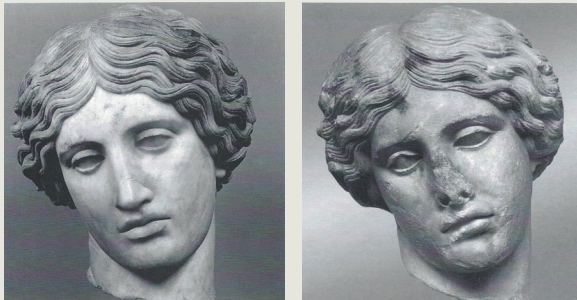
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Five Impossible Copies

Luis Martínez Santa-María

This article discusses, via five case studies, the improbability of copying in the art of painting. The five case studies consider accent, voice, process, truth and error. Considered from the perspective of accent, in other words from that of the distinctive tone that each author imposes on their work, there can be no such thing as a literal copy. Considering painting as non-voiced poetry, it would be difficult to find the same voice in the copy as in the original.

Considered from the perspective of process, every work is an unfinished act, ultimately making the concept of copying meaningless. Considered from the perspective of truth, truth is inexhaustible and unfathomable; it owes nothing nor is owned — there can be no copies. Finally, considered from the perspective of error, copy and original form part of a single, beautiful experiment. These same appreciations can be applied to architecture.



FIRST IMPOSSIBLE COPY: ACCENT

“Augustan-era copy of the head of a famous fifth-century B.C. statue of a fallen Amazon, usually ascribed to the sculptor Polykleitos.

Despite the subject's fatal wound, the face shows no sign of pain; only the slightly opened mouth indicates any emotion at all.

The extraordinarily high quality of this sculpture is especially clear from the refined detail and finish of the hair. Another copy of the same type. Although the heads are almost identical, they differ in a number of small details. Here, the eyelids are formed slightly differently, the hair has less detail but more texture, and the expression has been intensified.³⁸

While the calm gaze of the first head is introspective, creating distance by not looking at the spectator (fig. 01), the second is perceptibly more affected (fig. 02). The delicate weight of the expression created by the curvature of the arched and asymmetric eyelids is greater in the first of the two sculptures. Although both share a certain idealization and androgyny, the second has a more feminine air. The sense of hopelessness induced by the wound also manifests itself differently. The two heads are similar, however, in that they avoid frontality and invite the spectator to circle around them in search of what a stationary plane cannot offer. Despite the passing of time, the worn shine on their polished marble and their intrinsic material qualities, there are delicate variations in each psyche.

There is no need to elaborate on these descriptions. Each of these tiny differences is already definitive; they belong to what Tolstoy would call the “inner content” of each work. Each of these copies is a work in and of itself. It matters little whether the artist intended to produce an exact replica of the original, or even whether that attempt was successful. The influence of the material

used; the physical characteristics of the place where the work is exhibited and the light in that space that brings the sculpture to life; the age, talent and temperament of the author; and, of course, the discoveries instigated by the impetus common to these factors, not to mention a host of other imponderables, create unforeseen outcomes that differ with every instance. Even the passage of time introduces evocative values that distance these two works from one another and allow the spectator to appreciate what makes each of them unrepeatably. Careful observation of these two exquisitely beautiful faces reveals that each has its own unique accent, an essence that could never be duplicated and that resists the strict formality of the copy.

The fact that an artist both is and cannot ever be a copyist has been acknowledged by many authors. It is found in the Aristotelian notion that though we may use the same words, we cannot say that we speak of the same things. And in Le Corbusier's belief that sentiment cannot be copied. “I don't paint things. I only paint differences between things”, wrote Henri Matisse. In both philosophy and philosophy of art outstanding figures agree on the existence of a core, an enigma, an accent, a gesture, a displacement, a postponement, an impulse, an excess that can never be copied. In the purported accuracy of any copy there is a vital inaccuracy. This is what Auguste Rodin also paradoxically expresses when he declares himself a copyist and acknowledges the falseness of any claim to originality. “Originality is an empty word [...] It is impossible for us sculptors to have originality. We are copyists.”

SECOND IMPOSSIBLE COPY: VOICE

An original: by Andrea Mantegna (fig. 03), painted in 1454. A copy: by Giovanni Bellini (fig. 04), painted just over a decade later in 1465. But we could also consider them two similar originals. Because, once again, placing the two works side-by-side demon-

strates to the spectator precisely what makes Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna inimitable. Bellini showcases the full extent of his talent in the diffusion of the light and the tonal variation of the color, in the appropriate simplicity of the garments and accessories, in the softness of the facial features, and in his predilection for creating slightly out-of-focus areas. The option he grants the spectator to wander at liberty within the pictorial space is another of his hallmarks. His brother-in-law Mantegna, meanwhile, places his personal stamp on the picture in his mastery of detail and perspective. He does this in his representation of the garments, in the different textures of the fabrics, in the delicate patterns in the relief of the brocade, and through the precise capture of every last detail on the figures' hands or in the curls of their beards and hair. In this painting, as in many others, Mantegna's desire to guide the spectator's pictorial journey and force their gaze to stop and concentrate on certain fragments stands out.

It could also be said that if in Bellini the background —which represents and bears witness to everything— acts as a contrast, in Mantegna it is an atmosphere that permeates the figures. And it could also be said that although the copy by the Venetian painter (Bellini) was created several years after that of the Paduan artist (Mantegna), Bellini is not copying Mantegna but showing him — and everyone else, including himself— the bounds of the unoccupied pictorial space that he now intends to make his own.

As Brigit Blass-Simmen has rightly pointed out, two of the principal artistic devices found in the two works are the use of half figures, represented from the waist up, and the positioning of a false parapet or window to frame the scene. But neither device is original to either Giovanni Bellini or Andrea Mantegna; rather it is the invention of Jacopo Bellini, father of the former and father-in-law of the latter. And it is in all probability Jacopo Bellini who appears in the center of these two representations, in the role of Joseph, a figure upon whom falls a special beam of light, who looks straight at

the spectator, apostrophizing, providing the vanishing point for the perspective and giving the scene its three-dimensionality. If this man were Jacopo Bellini, the recognition shown him by the two artists — his son and son-in-law — by placing him in the center of the composition would be merited. Of course, Jacopo Bellini had used this effective compositional structure comprising half figures and a means of framing a long time before, in his *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. And it may be that he, in turn, was inspired by sculptural works of classical antiquity in which foregrounded figures were also depicted from the waist up and placed within fictional frames to achieve a syntactical and perceptual effect.

Use of the half figure allows the artist to draw the spectator's attention to the event taking place. This device means that the background is no longer an area that fully surrounds the figures but rather is positioned above their heads, intertwining with them like a meaning-laden sky. This close-up provides a sense of focus and introspection that, within a very limited area, permits the artist to evoke the idea of immensity. The representation of the parapet (fig. 05), in the case of Bellini, or that of the rectangular frame (fig. 06), in the case of Mantegna, produces two different possible readings: either the spectator opts to stand outside and gaze on the scene in the framed area, or the spectator positions themselves inside and gazes out through the frame on an exterior where the main figures and chorus are positioned.

In this latter case, it would be 'a window to heaven', a teleological periscope aligned to reveal an extraordinary distant scene, one later evoked in the oculus that Mantegna would paint in 1465 in the *Bridal Chamber* at the Ducal Palace in Mantua. If Giovanni Bellini's parapet could be considered a physical interruption that draws attention to what is happening inside the space, Andrea Mantegna's window could be viewed as a frame through which to observe events occurring on the outside, in a place outside the real time of the room and the physical limits of the space it occupies.

Thus, the introduction of the framing device by Jacopo Bellini, who in turn took it from Roman-era archeological remains, decisively contributes to recognition of the profound difference between two later works that are superficially very similar. While in his representation Bellini approaches the characters, Mantegna distances himself from them. While Bellini does not especially emphasize the three-dimensional pictoriality of the image, Mantegna accentuates it in every last detail, from the precise representation of the relief on the brocade to the curls in the figures' hair. While the characters in the Bellini painting appear to be flesh and blood (fig. 05) and are slightly blurred and out of focus, in his picture Mantegna envelops them in history and distances them from the spectator through the perfection of their aureola (fig. 06). He also distances them through the expressive rigidity typically found in his human representations. Where is the copy? Once again, as was the case with the two Amazon heads from classical antiquity, viewing the two works side-by-side serves to highlight their subtle but exultant independence of one another.

On the visible plane both paintings are connected. But on the invisible one, viewed in terms of the enigma that painting always encapsulates, the two works are originals. But let us put it another way: if a writer had to convey the words that Mary and Simon are speaking, those words would not be an exact replica; the two representations would never share the same tone. This unknown voice belongs to painting and is worth examining, since painting is a silent poem in the same way that voice is a plastic material.

In *The Surrender of Breda* by Velázquez, the unique words of the battle's victor and vanquished echo in the pictorial space. How can we not hear them? How can we not see that the lances, the tips of those lances, the horses, the absent gazes of the soldiers, the sky, the trampled ground, and the mist spreading across the landscape paint one or two emotive words. With all the means available to it as visual art, painting has overcome the lack of sound,

the lack of that human ecstasy grounded in audiovisuality. Everyone is forever silent in painting; unless singing or lamenting, an open mouth is never seen. There is only silence. Painting can only depict words through the silence it creates. And those words are different every time. Mantegna is rigor, the abstract, the intellectual. Bellini is rhythm, proximity, mystery. John Berger said Andrea Mantegna's paintings always look like the work of an old man. Giovanni Bellini's look like those of someone about to begin a fresh and candid exploration. Despite their resemblance, these men and women do not utter, in the midst of the unrepeatability of the painting produces, the same words. And even if they were repeating the same words, they would not be doing so with the same modulation or the same cadence.

A critical comparison between the presumed copy and the presumed original would here examine coincidence and separation, personality and impersonality, audacity and prudence, and the jarring doses of arrogance and humility in the two authors. When the copy is magnificent, where is the copy? Who has copied whom? When the assumptions associated with copy and original are removed, Bellini becomes more Bellini and Mantegna more Mantegna. It could even be said that we too become more ourselves by having to initiate a way of seeing that pushes us to act and grow as translators and interpreters.

THIRD IMPOSSIBLE COPY: PROCESS

In contrast to a North American society steeped in the synthetic gloss and feigned colors of the big screen, advertising and consumer goods, Mark Rothko posited the eruption of color and its boundless potential if allowed to expand without restriction, diving within itself or straining against the limits imposed by the rectangular frame, advancing and retreating in the midst of closely watched self-gestation. Rothko had to wait until 1949, after a string of stylistic diversions that took him from expressionism to surrealism, before reaching that inflection point (figs. 07, 08). Finally, he had found something substantial. At last, we might say, he could imitate himself and, at the same time, be protected by his own inimitability. He did it with ectoplasm — which is how he chose to define it — in a process in which the dense, translucent, transparent, pure, and deep layers of paint culminated in what he called exhalations.

The similarity between many of his works demonstrates that Rothko never considered these paintings finished; as if the paint never reached an end in the painting, as if the paint needed to remain in a permanent alchemical state. For the 9 paintings commissioned by the *Four Seasons* restaurant in New York, Rothko produced 27 canvases, which he later replaced with the same number again when he decided to switch from vertical to horizontal format. Here what needs to be recognized is not so much an artist who copies or imitates himself, but an artist who continually surpasses himself. This going beyond oneself points to the value of artistic creation as the exaltation of a process and not as a quest for an end product. No work is ever finished. Its emotion and beauty lie in the value conveyed by the truth instituted by that permanent transit, by that unsatisfactory and empirical nature. It was for this reason that Rothko called museums mausoleums, because in their rooms the ethic inherent to this living process would come to a fatal halt. In any case, despite the instrumental, thematic and compositional insistence of his greatest works, there is no monotony. Because there can be no monotony in the inimitable. The magnificent legacy he left allows but one possibility: to admire that inexhaustible and crucial monotonous production of 'miraculous pictures', that incorruptible 'defense of the world'.

For Mark Rothko, it was equally essential that the spectator participate in the painting, that they fully immerse themselves in the interior of the pictorial space in the same way as the author. And for this, the relatively large formats of the canvases help to make that jump from the static exterior of reality to the magmatic

interior of the painting. The spectator has to take an unrepeatable 'topographic tour', a sensorial adventure in the endless interior of the picture because the work, as its author intended, incites them, enraptures them and takes them out of themselves. The painter's creation thus provides a foretaste of a second creation that belongs to and engages each subject. Within each painting, the spectator must be able to take different journeys, discontinuous, long or short, under and above, diagonally and horizontally, curving around spheres and "even entering into mysterious recesses", startlingly transmuted each painting and transforming the work on each contemplation.

There is an art within the art that means no painting by Rothko could be understood as unique. Each picture is permanent creation. It is a creation when it is created, but it is also a creation every time it is discovered, every time that the spectator experiences it. For Rothko, there could be no creation without that unpredictable, mutual and continual creative process involving both him and everyone else, without that legitimate re-humanization of the world.

**FOURTH IMPOSSIBLE
COPY: TRUTH**

At a key moment in his career Rothko discovered the backgrounds in several paintings by Giotto and Fra Angelico (figs. 09, 10). In these, the vivid brushstroke of the painter combines with the patina of time and, from its deep interior, tonal and chromatic aureola emerge that seem to break the two-dimensionality of the medium. The figurative and the abstract combine as if they were joyful comrades, in crowds and vigils full of jubilation and authenticity, so that each painting carries within it a record of many other paintings. Some of the atmospheres created by Matisse, Turner or Rembrandt hint at the expansive halos that Rothko also has eyes to recognize. But despite how many antecedents can be mentioned here, no trace of copy appears in the work of the North American painter. There is only beauty. A strange, extraordinary, hard beauty. A beauty that, by its very indefinableness, cannot be copied. An illiterate, insecure, aphasic beauty, the visceral opposite to that overly self-assured and erudite condition that usually accompanies ugliness. Referring to the copyist, Rothko says, "skill in itself is but a sleight of hand." He continues, "Among those who decorate our banks and hotels you will find many who can imitate the manner of any master, living or dead, far better than the master could imitate himself. But they have no more knowledge of his soul than they have knowledge of their own." It is a clear condemnation. The greatest works cannot be copies because the greatest works do not produce other works; the greatest works produce artists. It is the soul of the artist that is transformed.

Because although the relationship between a copy and the original could be accepted, it should immediately be added that the original could also be a copy of an earlier work. Questioning the legitimacy of the copy would lead us to question the legitimacy of the original copied. Could an even more original even exist? Of course it could. Every original has its roots in an earlier source; every original comes from past experiments, is inspired by analogous fragments, repeats searches and discoveries that have become blurred or invisible, and incorporates either obliquely or directly instruments, tactics, themes and iconography that have been felicitous in past interpretation and representation. Although artists may believe that they discover, advance and transgress, they mostly cut, paste, assume, reopen and recycle, whether aware of it or not. There can be no original because there is no origin, because nothing can ever start from zero. Dozens of preparatory sketches by Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo —who both insisted that to create was to copy— prove it. There are no creators, only unrelenting combiners. The copy is always a copy of another copy. The original is the startling copy of another copy, or of many other heterogeneous copies, superimposed, hybridized and blended together, perhaps spoiled or plundered, who knows if submerged at the bottom of the sea or

buried beneath a pile of dated criticism, of apparently sterile fictions, of superstitions or of debris and ruins ... The original becomes lost in an anonymous time and forgotten space, in a realm that belongs to nothing and nobody, in a retro-progressive rhythm that plays in the midst of confused memory. And all this even though the uncertainty and inaccuracy associated with the origin, which does so much to hide itself, coexists with the longing of each work for the longing of the others.

It should also be said, however, that when a work of art ascends to position itself as truth, when it reaches the very top of that high plateau where truth is found, the original or originals from which it may have stemmed no longer matter. The truth has no owner, nor is indebted to anyone; it belongs to everyone. It is universal, it is "transpersonal turbulence". A truth has no author. Nor are there any new truths. The origin of a truth is unknown. Nobody knows. It is simple. It is marvelous. It is unearthly. It disarms you. Like a proverb, it has no author. It is a creation and it is a copy, it is a copy and it is a creation, a duality that never ceases, and that will never end.

**FIFTH IMPOSSIBLE
COPY: ERROR**

The airplane's two black boxes (fig. 11) recorded the flight history, the technical data, the cabin sounds and the transmissions and pilots' communications before the accident. Although they are indubitably the copy of an actual event they are, most

of all, the copy of a fatal one. The name 'black box' given to these red flight recorders evokes that connotation. The last voices recorded on them are profoundly moving. The aircraft and the lives lost are transubstantiated in the system messages and the pilots' voices. The entire plane, its entire meaning as an object incomprehensibly capable of flight, along with each and every one of the passengers, is encapsulated in that "Stay airborne! Stay airborne! ..." that could be heard in each of the two black boxes that recorded the final cabin transmissions in a recent air disaster at Madrid-Barajas airport. The black box does not copy words. Its copy is much more jarring: it copies last words. Where Egyptian and Roman death masks perpetuated the face, copying it forever, black boxes perpetuate the trail leading to catastrophe. They first perpetuate the poor choice of maneuver, the missing data, the lack of understanding, the mechanical failure. But then there is silence. The recording always ends with silence. And recorded silence perpetuates pain.

Black boxes are all but indestructible. They are designed to withstand decelerating from 500 km/h to 0 km/h in fewer than five seconds, exposure to temperatures of 1100 °C for up to an hour, and pressure at depths as deep as 6000 m below the sea for as long as a month. But despite their indestructibility, they are only ever called upon to give up their information once — they embody the recording of something, not the desire to remember or revisit it. The undeniable implication of art in the potential the copy offers becomes, in the realm of air navigation, the aversion to what the copy means. Because if for the poetic soul "Error is the necessary instrument of truth. With error I make truth. Complete use of error — complete possession of truth", in scientific investigation the only admissible truth will only ever be the one able to "lessen the error". And if for the scientific spirit a new experience will always necessarily negate the one before, in the artistic approach every experience will always affirm all the previous ones, erroneous or not. Moreover, while the artist will make things by disassembling them, as Giacometti desired, the scientific spirit will make things in the desire to do them once and for all. None of the above can be written without drawing attention to how many times "the before" in art, constructed with no fear of error, has intuited "the after" that prudently distanced itself from it. The phenomena in Turner's skies invoke thermodynamics, while the beautiful endless horizons in the backgrounds of many Renaissance paintings intimate the discovery of a new continent.

The error is stored in a rigid black box that must be opened before it can be closed once more. But it is also in a resplendent pliable box that will need to be opened time and again. Both artistic creation and scientific investigation must respond to the challenge of error. But while the indestructible recording in the black box copies a specific and reprehensible error that must never be recorded again, art believes in the anomaly and indefiniteness of the error because it senses that it is precisely in the face of that danger that it can grow to the extent necessary to achieve salvation. All this is also applicable to architecture and becomes clearly understood in the lengthy process of designing the building and preparing its construction. Drawings, models and plans are recurring cycles of trial and error, of copying and creation; audacious attempts full of surrender and subversion. Here lies the gap between the operational strategies of the aeronautical engineer and those of the architect, or between the sealed black box of aviation and the permeable dialectic box of all artistic endeavor; a distance that it is not only desirable but indispensable to maintain. Because it is one thing to create and another to invent. Because it is one thing to celebrate life and quite another to protect and preserve it. And because it is one thing to dream, as occurs with houses, sculptures or paintings, and another to take off, fly and land safely, as aircraft must always do.

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Notes

01. ZANKER, Paul. *Arte romana*. Editori Laterza, Rome, 2008. p. 43.

02. TOLSTOY, Leon. *Anna Karenina*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2019.

03. These two copies neither resemble each other nor necessarily have to resemble the Hellenic model on which they were based. The appropriation of Greek art by Roman authors did not lead to the creation of works supposedly similar to the originals; rather the Roman sculptors freely drew on the broad repertoire of past forms at their disposal. The Roman patrons commissioning works from artists even went so far as to specifically demand output noteworthy for its variation and figurative innovation. In this regard, see Zanker, P. *op.cit.*

04. RODIN, Auguste. *Las catedrales de Francia*. Abada Editores, Madrid, 2014. p. 118.

05. BEMBO, Pietro. Quoted by Caroline Campbell in "Diventare Bellini conservando Mantegna: l'arte della ripetizione". Various authors. *Bellini-Mantegna. Capolavori a confronto*. Silvana Editore, Milan, 2018. p.18.

06. Born in Padua in 1430 or 1431, Andrea Mantegna learned his craft at the Paduan workshop of Francesco Squarcione before moving to Venice and entering northern Italian artistic society, in 1453 marrying Nicolosa Bellini, daughter of Jacopo Bellini and sister of Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, all painters. Nicolosa and Andrea had several children who also devoted their lives to painting, although none became distinguished artists. See GARAVAGLIA, Niny. "Biografía y estudios críticos". Various authors. *La obra pictórica de Mantegna*. Editorial Noguer, Barcelona, 1970.

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15. ROTHKO, M. *op. cit.* p.114.

16. BARTHES, Roland. *Ensayos críticos*. Seix Barral, Buenos Aires, 2003.

17. SLOTERDIJK, P. *op. cit.*

18. FRECHILLA, Javier. Lecture at the ETSAM, 25 October 2021.

19. MATISSE, H. *op. cit.*

20. ELIADE, Mircea. *Oceanografía*. Hermida Editores, Madrid, 2020.

21. NOVALIS. *La enciclopedia*. Editorial Fundamentos, Madrid, 1976. p. 447.

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23. DEBRAY, Régis. *Vida y muerte de la imagen*. Editorial Paidós, Barcelona, 1994.

01. "If aeronautical engineers approached aircraft design in the same spirit as architects approach housebuilding, planes would not fly." PROUVÉ Jean. Quoted by De la Sota, Alejandro. In *Alejandro de la Sota. Escritos*. Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002. p. 118.

Images

01. Head of an Amazon. Augustan-era copy of a famous statue of an Amazon dating from the 5th century B.C. Museo Capitolini, Rome. Credit: Rome. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI). In: ZANKER, Paul. *Arte romana*. Editori Laterza, Rome, 2008.

02. Head of an Amazon. Augustan-era copy of a famous statue of an Amazon dating from the 5th century B.C., from Baia. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Credit: Rome. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI). In: ZANKER, Paul. *Arte romana*. Editori Laterza, Rome, 2008.

03. Andrea Mantegna. Presentation at the Temple. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. Credit: Fondazione Querini Stampalia. In: *Bellini-Mantegna. Capolavori a confronto*. Silvana Editore, Milan, 2018.

04. Giovanni Bellini. Presentation at the Temple. Fondazione Querini Stampalia. Venice. Credit: Fondazione Querini Stampalia. In: *Bellini-Mantegna. Capolavori a confronto*. Silvana Editore, Milan, 2018.

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08. Mark Rothko. Untitled, 1968. Oil on paper on canvas, 99 x 65.1 cm. Waddington Galleries, London. Credit: Waddington Galleries, London. In: BAAL-TESHUVA, Jacob. *Rothko*. Taschen, Cologne, 2009.

09. Fra Angelico. Detail from The Crucifixion. Museo di San Marco, Florence. Credit: Photograph: Nicolò Orsi Battaglini. In: HOOD, William. *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993.

10. Fra Angelico. Detail of Crucifixion with St. Dominic. Claustro di San Marco, Florence. Credit: Photograph: Nicolò Orsi Battaglini. In: HOOD, William. *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993.

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