On Negotiating Between the Virtual and Material in Art Historical Reproduction

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On Negotiating Between the Virtual and Material in Art Historical Reproduction

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art
Hunter College of the City of New York

2016

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May 22, 2016
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May 22, 2016
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“The museum gives us a thieves’ conscience. We occasionally sense that these works were not intended to end up between these morose walls...we are well aware that something has been lost and that this meditative necropolis is not the true milieu of art” – Maurice Merleau-Ponty

1. **Bosch in TriBeCa**

![Bosch Windows, 2015. Pigmented inkjet print on Phototex on glass, pigmented wax on window frame.](image)

Fig. 1: Bosch Windows, 2015. Pigmented inkjet print on Phototex on glass, pigmented wax on window frame.

The image above documents my installation of a reproduction of Heironymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490-1510, Museo del

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Prado, Madrid), printed on Phototex (a translucent adhesive fabric) and fitted into my studio windows². Although Bosch’s landscape effectively covers the landscape of Canal Street outside, it does not replace it – due to its translucence, the outside weather and lighting conditions alter how the painting is seen. As the windows are opened, the population and landscape of Bosch’s creation is punctured by the landscape of TriBeCa behind it, with its own movement and populace. The two landscapes inform one another, despite their differences as historical fantasy and contemporary reality.

Fig. 2: Bosch Windows at night. Exterior view.

²Although the proportions of Bosch’s painting correspond to the windows, the image of the painting was enlarged by 10% in order to fit the windows.
At night, the Bosch reproduction is opaque from inside of the studio. However, the light from inside the studio renders the image visible from the street, thereby reversing the position of the viewer, who from this perspective is an inhabitant of the landscape. Here the Bosch is no longer pierced by the street and lit by the sky, but is instead itself a projection into the larger landscape.

Bosch’s image is thus presented in two distinct contexts for viewing, providing opportunities to reexamine *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as life is lived on a daily basis from the private solitude of the studio as well as in the public sphere. This recurring interaction with a painting so large, although in reproduction, allows for an intimacy unavailable when viewing the original in Madrid. This intimacy, perhaps, allows for an experience closer to the original relationship between the painting and Bosch’s patron as a singular viewer. As Merleau-Ponty observes above, the museum is not a neutral venue for viewing a work of art. The relocation of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* to a museum from its original site, despite providing access to the public, introduces the object into a specific ritual, in which one must become a tourist and join an international crowd simultaneously struggling to view a masterpiece. From the street, one may view *The Garden of Earthly Delights* without the constraints present in a museum. With this installation, I hope to issue a challenge to how works of art are distributed and contemplated.
2. **Museums and Photography: the Limitations of Viewing Sculptures as Images:**

Despite the supposed permanence of Greek sculpture, the contemporary viewer’s experience is not only mediated by historical distance between themselves and the artist, but by the museum itself. The source images for my sculptures dealing with the endurance of these objects have been provided by the J. Paul Getty Museum through its Open Content Program, which releases selected images of its collection into the public domain. These digital images, taken by anonymous and uncredited photographers, depict sculptures with similarly unknown authorship. According to the Getty Museum’s website “Open Content images are digital surrogates of works of art that are in the Getty’s collection,” implying the possibility of replacing one’s experience of the sculpture with the online viewing of photography. André Malraux’s *Le Musée Imaginaire* examines this possibility in the form of a book: in 1952-54 he published *Le Musee Imaginaire de la Sculpture Mondiale* – an encyclopedic record of sculptures, each of which is represented by a photograph (with occasional detail shots). Each object is depicted from a single viewpoint, thereby limiting the experience of the sculpture as a great deal of information is excluded. This resembles Cassiano del Pozzo’s *Museo Cartaceo*, which compressed its collection of objects into the virtual format of drawings, which shall be discussed later in this paper. Ultimately, what is available for the viewer in a photograph of a

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sculpture resembles the ruined state of the antiquities that are my subject: they barely remain, and communicate a fragmentary remnant of their original information. Furthermore, the transfer of the photograph is an imperfect process, introducing an additional element of deterioration.

Fig 3: *Head of Diogenes*, inkjet pigment transfer on Carrara marble, 2016
Fig. 4: *Fragment of the Head of Alexander the Great*,
inkjet pigment transfer on Carrara marble, 2016

The objects illustrated above are transfers of digital photographs of ancient Roman sculptures onto Carrara marble, the gesture of which proposes a number of incongruities – the marble is three-dimensional, hefty, physical, and ultimately “haptic”, which is to say it relates to the sense of touch. The digital photograph, in contrast, is “optic” – two-dimensional (essentially virtual in comparison to the physicality of the stone), contemporary and ethereal against the agelessness of the stone and ancient subject matter.
In this case, my objects and their references share in common the fact that they are copies: all of the sculptures referenced are Roman copies of Greek originals. Michael Fried, in his essay on Winckelmann, proposed that Greek marble sculptures are themselves copies: Winckelmann’s text includes a section translated as “Workmanship in Sculpture,” in which the process of the Greek sculptors is described. Their “first models” were made in wax, which is to say as maquettes, the dimensions of which would then need to be transferred to marble. Imitation, therefore is part of the process of creation for Winckelmann’s fundamentally original Greek artists.

Documentation of these sculptures forces them to reenter the circulation of two-dimensional images. Presented with this opportunity to recompress these objects into a virtual format, I am able to explore the limitations inherent to documentation: the transfer itself does not reproduce the depicted sculpture in the round, but is limited to selected surfaces. In a documentation photograph, however, the demarcation between two-dimensional photographic depiction and genuine three-dimensional form is destabilized. This operation has been preceded historically by Medardo Rosso’s photographs, which simultaneously document his sculptures and become artworks of their own:

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4 Ibid., 93. Fried disagrees with this translation, but does not propose an alternative.
3. **Poussin’s Transference**

The act of artistic transference parallels the original’s translation from wax to marble and, for artists such as Poussin, assured their originality through imitation. Both instances are concerned with achieving permanence, ensuring the immutability of the wax maquette in the permanent medium of stone as well as
the legacy of the classicizing artist, who, absorbed into the canon of art history, becomes himself immutable.

Richard T. Neer, in his essay “Poussin and The Ethics of Imitation”, argues that for an interpretation of Poussin’s works that considers not only the literary or historical references made, but the value of quotation itself: “it would matter less which artworks Poussin was incorporating than that he was incorporating something.”5 He continues:

The reciprocity of the thematic of citation and the citational form itself is characteristic of Poussin’s paintings as well. The painter takes the relation of present practice to antique precedent as a significant issue. Indeed, citation – the routing of pictures through other, prior images – constitutes a central drama of his art. Regardless of the commission, Poussin returns continually to the question of how properly to acknowledge the past, and tradition – and, indeed, the given-ness of pictorial depiction itself. His programmatic and often polemical classicism needs to be seen in terms of an ongoing interrogation of depiction and citation, of depiction as citation.6

Nevertheless, the specificity of Poussin’s citation is of paramount importance. This is to say, not any reference to the antique will suffice. Although Poussin’s sources for his 1633-34 The Abduction of the Sabine Women were from


6 Ibid., p. 298.
disparate times and cultures, they all share a common quality that Poussin would have considered “Greek”, despite not all having been made by Greek artists. As Anthony Blunt observes, Poussin’s drawings after the antique indicate a preference in studying “classical” rather than the “baroque” Greek and Roman sculpture that attracted Rubens, such as the Belvedere Torso or Barberini Faun.7 Despite the fact that in Poussin’s time, Greek and Roman sculptures were collectively referred to as “antique”,8 the distinction between the preferences of Poussin and Rubens were understood as “Greek” versus “Latin” tastes.9 In the biography of François Duquesnoy, a contemporary of Poussin’s, Giovanni Battista Passeri demonstrates this difference:

He [Duquesnoy] wanted to prove himself a strict imitator of the Greek manner, which he called the real model for perfect work, because it combines grandeur, nobility, majesty, and beauty [grandezza, nobilità, maestà, e leggiadria], all qualities that it is hard to unite in a single work; and this love was strengthened by the comments of Poussin who wanted in every way to vilify the Latin manner, for reasons which will be told in his life.”10

Although Passeri does not address this in his later biography of Poussin, Blunt’s account of Poussin’s art considers the “solemnity and grandeur” of the artist’s

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9 Ibid., p. 27.
10 Blunt, p. 232.
paintings as the manifestation of his “Greek” taste, despite Poussin’s attraction to Roman and Renaissance sculpture.¹¹

4. Further Thoughts on Poussin

Poussin’s involvement with art historical research for his own paintings is highly relevant to my practice. For both Poussin and myself, art historical references are the result of an appreciative study, which become subjects of subsequent artworks.

Upon Poussin’s arrival in Rome in 1624, he found patronage from Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657), secretary to Cardinal Francesco Barberini and a collector of paintings. In addition to commissioning numerous paintings from Poussin, Cassiano involved him in the creation of his Museo Cartaceo (“Paper Museum”), a collection of over 7,000 watercolors, drawings, and prints, from a variety of artists and on the subjects of antiquities, architecture and natural history specimens.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., p. 233

For Poussin, commissioned drawings like the *Two Views of a Samnite Triple-Disc Breast Plate* were a firsthand introduction to the study of objects of antiquity, which would contribute to his quest for precision in his depiction of ancient events. Here, Poussin’s images are the result of his close contact with an object. Furthermore, Poussin’s study of antiquity had epistemic stakes – the accuracy of his references entailed a notion of historical exactitude, the knowledge of which was to be transferred to both artist and viewer. As we will see in Poussin’s later works, however, this faithfulness to historical events is overridden by his desire to quote notable artworks from past centuries.
In his *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1633-34), Poussin employs two strategies to connect the depicted scene to antiquity with regard to accuracy. The first is literary: having read Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*, Poussin would have known of the Roman practice of holding games in the forum. Vitruvius’ account of this tradition is accompanied by a description of the surrounding buildings, including the basilica: its central hall, flat roofs and balconies, all of which Poussin includes.\(^\text{13}\)

According to Livy and Plutarch, the scene itself takes place at the Consualia, a commemoration of the discovery of an altar to the god Consus (Neptunus Equestris), which was ultimately a ruse concocted by Romulus to lure the Sabines and other neighboring people into Rome.\textsuperscript{14} Romulus, at left in a red mantle, is therefore placed at the steps on a temple.

In addition to guiding the construction of the picture with literary sources, Poussin also uses several visual quotations. From antiquity, he takes the poses of Agasias of Ephesus’ \textit{Borghese Gladiator}, the \textit{Head of a Horse of Selene} from the east pediment of the Parthenon, and Epigonos’ \textit{Ludovisi Gaul}. From the sixteenth century he borrows from Vincenzo de Rossi’s \textit{Hercules and Antaeus} and from the seventeenth century, Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s \textit{Rape of Proserpina}, both of which depict scenes from ancient mythology.

\textsuperscript{14} ibid, p. 200.
Fig 9: Right: Detail of Poussin, *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*.

Fig. 10: Left: Detail of Poussin, *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*. 
Fig. 11: Right: Vincenzo de Rossi, *Hercules and Antaeus*. 1560s. Marble, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.
Fig. 12: Left: Detail of Poussin, *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*.
Fig. 13: Right: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Rape of Proserpina*, 1621-22. 
Marble, Galeria Borghese, Rome.

Fig. 14: Left: Detail of Poussin, *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*.
Fig. 15: Right: *Head of a Horse of Selene*, from the east pediment of the 
In Poussin’s own words, the ancient Greeks deserved exclusive credit for all things beautiful – “Nos braves anciens grecs, inventeurs de toutes les belles choses.”\textsuperscript{15} Johann Joachim Winckelmann, in his 1763 \textit{Geschichte der Kunst des Alterums}, agrees with this sentiment. In this text, he divides the art of antiquity into five stages, from the archaic period to the Sublime Style of Phidias, the Beautiful Style from Praxiteles to Lysippus, The Imitative Style of the Romans, and ultimately a phase of decay.\textsuperscript{16} For Winckelmann, The “Beautiful Style”, validated by the subsequent period of Roman imitation, represented a pinnacle of artistic achievement for all time. The sculptor Orfeo Boselli, writing in Rome in 1657, records in an unpublished treatise on sculpture a similar opinion which Poussin would have shared:

> The marvelous in art derives from a perfect understanding of all the beauties pertaining to our condition, from the least to the best, and since the ancients availed themselves of this sort of imitation their works are therefore the most marvelous.\textsuperscript{17}

This logic, which allows Boselli to consider the present in terms of the past, establishes a canon of antique instances of human form and emotion that are exemplary, both in the sense of being the best as well as examples for imitation:

> “Who will ever find a more beautiful youth that the Belvedere \textit{Antinous}? a more beautiful woman than the Medici \textit{Venus}? a stronger old man than the Farnese \textit{Hercules}? a more beautiful

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 227

\textsuperscript{16} Cropper and Dempsey, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 43.
horse than that [of Marcus Aurelius] on the Capitoline? a more robust youth than the Borghese *Gladiator*? more grave propriety than in the River Gods [the *Nile* and *Tiber*]? more tenderness than in the *Fauns* and *Orestes and Pylades* of the Ludovisi? more masterfulness than in the Orsini *Pasquino*? an excellence greater than in the Colonna *Deification of Homer*? more expression than in the *Laocoon* group? greater softness than in the Caetani *Graces*? more decorum than in the histories on the Capitoline, the Arch of Constantine, and the Trajanic and Antonine columns? greater artifice than in the *Ara [di Bacco]* owned by Martino Longhi? a more beautiful head and drapery than in the Cesi *Juno*?\(^{18}\)

Like Winckelmann, Boselli’s admiration for the ancients entails the belief that their art is unsurpassable – a problem for any artist desiring to be seen as original. In Winckelmann’s 1755 “Reflections on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Ancient Greeks”, the greatness of ancient Greek artists is sharply contrasted against the moderns, who in Winckelmann’s view are inferior. Winckelmann echoes Boselli, encouraging imitation: “the only way for us to become great and even, if possible, inimitable, is through the imitation of the ancients.”\(^{19}\) As Michael Fried observes, this passage presents a contradiction regarding imitation and originality. If we aspire to originality, how is the only means of achieving this goal the abandonment of originality in the first place?

\(^{18}\) Cropper and Dempsey, pp. 43.

\(^{19}\) Michael Fried, “Antiquity Now: Reading Winckelmann on Imitation”. *October* 37 (1986), pp. 89
Fried adds, “if they are imitable, what hope have we of successfully imitating them so as to become inimitable too?” For Winckelmann the possibility of achieving originality through imitation had been achieved by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Poussin, all of who as great classicizing artists become intermediaries between the ancients and moderns. For the contemporary reader, Winckelmann’s call to imitation is problematic, as it appears not only doomed to failure but unable to get started.”

5. Conclusion

For Winckelmann, the beauty of a work of art is located on its surface, often comparing the surface to that of a mirror or of the sea. In two-dimensional images, this importance of surface is manifested as the contours of depicted forms. In my sculptures, both of these premises are applied to the more recent notions of documentation as stand-ins for sculpture proposed by the Getty Museum and André Malraux. As the photographic image is transformed into an object, it does so at the surface of the stone, while the contours of the stone delineate both the boundaries of the image and the object itself. This reciprocal relationship between image and stone occurs not only formally, but also in their

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 90
reference to history. The photograph itself is not ancient, but as a document of antiquity, it provides access to masterworks of the past as discussed in section 1.

For my own practice, I am attracted to the endurance of the art historical canon perpetuated through reproduction, as discussed in relation to Poussin’s attraction to antiquity. As Poussin strove to become original through imitation, my sculptures attempt to create a unique object from the fount of art history, providing a material presence to the otherwise virtual.
Works Cited


List of Works Exhibited


Images of Works Exhibited

Detail of *The Last Day of Pompeii*.
Detail of *The Last Day of Pompeii.*
Installation of Thesis Exhibition.
Installation of Thesis Exhibition.