

PROFILE

# Adam Lowe

Imagine being able to use laser technology and bespoke tools to create facsimiles of artworks and historic monuments. That's what Lowe's firm does, aiding in the preservation of the originals

STORY *Matthew Sturgis*

PHOTOGRAPHS *Ben Roberts*

**At around five o'clock** in the afternoon, the sunlight slants through the west window of Palladio's refectory in San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. For the past two hundred or so years it has illuminated a vast unadorned chamber. It was not always thus. In 1563, the Italian artist Paolo Veronese had created his masterpiece, *The Wedding at Cana* – a magnificent scene of feasting, revelry, and Biblical allusion – to fill the upper portion of the whole end wall. But the picture (along with a great deal of other Italian art) was plundered by Napoleon at the end of the eighteenth century and taken to the Louvre. Although much was returned after Napoleon met his Waterloo, *The Wedding*





Adam Lowe stands beside the facsimile sculpture of a human-headed winged lion from the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II in the ancient Iraqi city of Nimrud – just one example of the many projects that glide through Factum Arte's Madrid-based workshops



at Cana was deemed too fragile to travel. It remained in the Louvre, and was sometimes even looked at there by people hastening toward the *Mona Lisa* with their selfie sticks.

But in 2007, in a dazzling coup de théâtre, the picture made a triumphant return. Before a select audience, a curtain fell to reveal Veronese's wedding guests once more quaffing their miraculous wine, alive in every detail of brocaded silk and sparkling jewelry. It was not, however, the original painting but a meticulously created facsimile, rendered – like the original – on canvas, in carefully matched pigments. It was the work of Factum Arte, a groundbreaking company of artists, craftsmen, and technicians, a laboratory-cum-workshop assembled by the British artist Adam Lowe.

Installed in Palladio's great hall, the replica image re-enlivens the space: the picture makes sense of the architecture; the architecture makes sense of the picture. At five o'clock, the shadows falling across the room echo the shadows in the painting. Lowe is hugely gratified by the reaction. "It offers a different sort of authenticity," he suggests. "And people have responded to that." The Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* called it "a turning point in art," and tens of thousands come to view the picture each year.

Lowe, who is now in his 50s, retains an infectious enthusiasm, a constant curiosity about new ideas and challenges. He developed a fascination with early printing techniques while at the Royal College of Art in London during the 1980s. "The work of Gautier D'Agoty [the French anatomist and printmaker] was a real inspiration. The discovery of his life-size four-color mezzotints, done in the 1750s, blew my mind."

Excitement about the possibilities of technology informed Lowe's art, which includes a series of memorable prints made from images recorded on specially prepared etching plates that had been washed over by the tide after he fixed them onto the foreshore of London's River Thames. It also brought him into contact with the Spanish hyperrealist artist Manuel Franquelo, and it was their decision to "combine their skills," as Lowe puts it, and to develop new ways of recording and reproducing imagery

(initially for their own artistic work) that led to the creation of Factum Arte in 2001. The company has since grown considerably, now spread across three locations including a bustling warehouse with studios in Madrid. It has developed its own arsenal of hi-tech machinery, including printers and a high-resolution 3-D scanner called the Veronica.

Lowe now combines his skills with almost 60 other employees. They make works for many contemporary artists, including Anish Kapoor and Marc Quinn, and oversaw the production of Grayson Perry's tapestries. Lowe, when we meet, is particularly excited by "the great things" they are doing with Abdunnasser Gharem and Ahmed Mater, "two stars of the Saudi art scene."

But Factum Arte has become best known for its meticulous recreations of existing – and lost – artworks: paintings, drawings, sculpture, furniture, architecture, everything falls within its remit. This unexpected line

***New technologies have enabled exact recreations, but the human element is not lost: finishing is often done by hand***



Opposite: a table in Factum Arte's digital printing studio is surrounded by works in progress (left); color notes for use in creating the replica of *Polittico Griffoni*, a Renaissance masterpiece (right). Color matching is

an important and complex part of the development process – Factum Arte even devised its own color “sticks,” which are held up to the original to identify an exact color match. Left: these test pieces form part of the preparations for the

company's facsimile of Pharaoh Seti I's tomb. Below: designed in-house, the Veronica scanner enables the depiction of objects in 3-D form, on-screen or re-materialized via a range of 3-D printing and prototyping systems



of work began with a commission from the Egyptian authorities to record – and reproduce – a section of the wall decoration in the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I. The success of that venture has led to others, from the reproduction of a number of Caravaggio's works to the piece-by-piece recording of an ancient mosque in Daghestan, from the embodiment of Piranesi's furniture designs to the reconstruction of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II's throne room (drawing on items held in five museums).

Egypt remains an important area for the company's work. Factum's most ambitious scheme is an ongoing project to create complete one-to-one scale replicas of the three greatest tombs in the Theban Necropolis – those of Seti I, Nefertari, and Tutankhamun. As Lowe explains, “They may have been built to last forever, but they weren't built to be visited by tourists.” Changes in temperature, exposure to light, to movement, and the exhalations of visitors all take their toll on the painted surfaces. Exact replicas – installed on-site – could offer a chance for tourists to engage with the iconography and experience something of the mystery of these ancient burial chambers.

To undertake such work has required the development of new technology, first to

record data in the most exact and least obtrusive ways possible, and then to recreate it in the most accurate and convincing ways possible. Most of these tools – such as the Lucida 3-D laser scanner for recording low-relief surfaces – were devised by Factum Arte in collaboration with Manuel Franquelo, one of the company's founders.

But the human element is never lost. Finishing often has to be done by hand. “The eye is still the most accurate means of matching color,” Lowe explains. As a result, Factum has developed a system of carefully graded colored “sticks” that can be held up close to the surface of the original to achieve – and record – an exact match.

The whole venture is informed by Lowe's artistic sensibility, his deep understanding and respect for the objects with which he is dealing. Moreover, when talking about art, he seems always drawn toward its structure – to sketches, studies, ruins. “Amongst my favorite things in the whole world are the Michelangelo drawings at the Ashmolean museum,” he says. When he was a student at Oxford University, studying at the Ruskin, he had a studio in the museum and was able to pore over them at leisure. (In 2015, Factum Arte made high-quality scans of the collection.) Bringing together these strands

– technical, human, aesthetic – combined with fanatical attention to detail has secured the company's reputation.

Lowe, however, cheerily dismisses many replicas encountered in current culture. And although notions of “authenticity” dominate much contemporary discourse, they are hard to pin down. Both the classical and Renaissance periods abounded in copies and replicas, and in a world of change, decay, and iconoclastic destruction (and, sometimes, of over-restoration, too), no work of art remains forever as it was. Single works are broken up. Or removed to new locations. Lowe seeks to negotiate a space for Factum Arte's work within this flux.

The extraordinarily high resolution of the company's 3-D recordings can yield new insights. The scans of Tutankhamun's tomb revealed a previously unnoticed area of wall with different surface characteristics, suggesting to the British archaeologist Nicholas Reeves that it might conceal the entrance to a further chamber, perhaps even leading to the fabled tomb of Nefertiti. It is a theory that scholars are eager to explore. To assist in the discovery of a lost queen would be another new achievement for Factum Arte. ♣ For more on this subject, visit *Patek Philippe Magazine Extra* at [patek.com/owners](http://patek.com/owners)