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Art in the age of digital reproduction

One of the most remarkable museums to have opened in Britain in many years, the Spanish Gallery at Bishop Auckland, County Durham, is impressive in a number of ways over and above the fact that it is devoted to that seemingly most unEnglish of subjects: the art of Counter-Reformation Spain. As Isabelle Kent explains in her review on pp.276–83, it has been almost entirely funded by one man, the financier and philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer; it contains a fine collection of old-master paintings that he has formed in little more than a decade; it is part of an imaginative project to help revitalise the fortunes of a region badly affected by the end of coal mining; and it makes the most extensive use of three-dimensional replicas of works of art of any museum in the country. Almost all the exhibits on the museum's fourth floor have been made by the Madrid-based firm Factum Arte: for example, in the display dedicated to Cardinal Juan Pardo de Tavera, Inquisitor General and Archbishop of Toledo (1472–1545), both his portrait by El Greco and his tomb by Alonso Berruguete are shown in the form of copies of the originals in the Hospital de Tavera, Toledo. The quality of these replicas has disconcerted some visitors: writing in the *Art Newspaper* last month, Bendor Grosvenor commented of the tomb, 'if we can now so convincingly replicate an original then we must presumably change how we value it, whether for its material authenticity, or its historical or religious significance'.

For Ruffer, the value of these replicas is educational: they enable an audience in the north-east of England to experience treasures of art from far away. Such initiatives have a long history, as anybody who has visited the cast courts of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, will know. For art historians, debates about the relationship between an original work of art and its copy are likely to bring to

mind Walter Benjamin's celebrated 1936 essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'. Benjamin argued that 'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'. His word for this quality was 'aura'. Two forces, the art market and art history, which are more interlinked than is often admitted, have reinforced this idea of the unreproducible essence of a work of art. The premium that the market places on an original is exemplified by the familiar hierarchy of the auction catalogue: by; attributed to; studio of; circle of; style of; manner of; after. The impact of these distinctions on the monetary value of, for example, old-master paintings, can be traced back to the time when they were made. As Justin Davies and James Innes-Mulraine mention in their article in this issue (pp.254–59), Anthony van Dyck charged £80 for a fulllength portrait by his own hand but only £12 for a copy by his workshop. Yet it has too often been the case that a copy once identified is ignored by scholarship in its fixation on the aura of an original, with the result that we are still remarkably ignorant about the way that workshops operated even in the case of artists as famous as Leonardo.

In the twentieth century the distinction between original and copy was challenged by artists who saw the aura of a work of art as existing in their conception of it rather than in the physical object through which that conception is realised: one of the most famous works of modern times, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, exists only in the form of replicas, which he authorised. And, as Benjamin acknowledged, the concept of 'aura' becomes more elusive when the medium is one where reproducibility forms part of its essence, namely photography. He did not foresee the way that historians now treat photographic prints in the same way that scholars of Piranesi, for example, treat different impressions of a single print, each as a unique object.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the example of Duchamp, the 'aura' of an original work of art has been remarkably resilient. This is evident in the reaction to the application of digital technology, which has provided the greatest advance in accuracy in the reproduction of works of art since the invention of photography. All the objects by Factum Arte are made by digital-enabled means, such as three-dimensional printing. As far as digital works of art are concerned, the medium would seem to erode completely the distinction between original and copy, since any such work could in theory be reproduced limitless number of times with perfect accuracy. At least that would be the case had it not been for the invention of NFTs – non-fungible tokens, which by means of a certificate on a blockchain (technology that also supports digital currencies, such as Bitcoin) assigns sole proprietorship of a digital object, so potentially securing financial value for it. The ramifications of this have only just begun: as we went to press, the contemporary art gallery Unit London opened the exhibition *Eternalising Art History: From da Vinci to Modigliani* (to 19th March), which consists of blockchain-certified copies of celebrated paintings by Raphael, Caravaggio and others. Although reproductions, not replicas – since a screen does not look like the surface of a canvas – their certification makes them unique.

The sale of these works benefits the owners of the originals (such as the Uffizi), who are paid a royalty, and, in the words of Unit London, they 'bring these prized artistic masterpieces from the walls of Italian museums to the heart of London, exposing them to an entirely new audience'. As with the Spanish Gallery, reproduction is offered as a democratising process with an educational value. Reproductions also have a particular utilitarian value in cases where for conservation reasons access to originals must be restricted: since no public visits are permitted to the caves at Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc, where extensive Palaeolithic wall paintings were discovered in 1994, a complete replica was opened nearby in 2015. Convincingly faithful although this is, no visitors believe they are seeing the

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original, just as visitors to the Spanish Gallery quickly understand that they are seeing a replica of Tavera's tomb. The fact that the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, sells extremely convincing three-dimensional reproductions of paintings by Van Gogh has not dissuaded people from wanting to see the originals. There is a paradox here that was perhaps not predictable when Benjamin wrote his essay: for him, reproductions emancipated works of art from their traditional roles so that they become accessible and useful to all. That has indeed happened, as the example of the Spanish Gallery demonstrates, but Benjamin seemingly did not anticipate the way that the existence of those reproductions has had the effect of reinforcing the value placed on an original. To go to the trouble (and expense) of replicating a tomb in Toledo for an audience in Bishop Auckland is a potent statement of the significance of the original in not only material or historical but also aesthetic terms. The more a work of art is copied, the greater its cultural power.