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For art's true colours, just copy and paste

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Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana* is scanned in a process that some curators believe recreates the original experience

FACTUM ARTE

For George Wallis, a 19th century art teacher who became Keeper of Fine Art at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the rationale for showing visitors reproductions of the great masterpieces was simple.

It was vulgar to put original artworks on display, said the man in charge of the collections from 1863 to 1891, adding that visitors should be showed reproductions to take away the fascination of the cost, and let them appreciate the aesthetic quality unencumbered by any distractions.

His suggestion in the 19th century did not take off as museums across the world engaged in an arms race to buy the most expensive and most sought-after objects humanity had created. Now, however, leading figures in the museum world have suggested that perhaps Mr Wallis had a point.

Technological advances mean facsimiles of Renaissance masterpieces would recreate the artist's original intended experience, they said, which is now missing because of deterioration and security conditions.

Mark Jones, the former director of the Victoria & Albert Museum and National Museums Scotland, said copies in museums would “help us to understand and enjoy the art of the past free from the constraints imposed by conservation and security”.

Sir Neil MacGregor the former director of the British Museum and the National Gallery, said that through modern reproduction techniques people could see, for example, the gallery’s *The Family of Darius* by Veronese with its true, unfaded colours.

“We could recover completely the balance [of colours], the image and the brilliance the artist wanted us to see. Technology could give us for the first time the experience the artist intended us to have,” Sir Neil said. “I would like to see *The Family of Darius* as it left the studio.”

Charles Saumarez Smith, the former chief executive of the Royal Academy, said that the “extraordinary” Raphael cartoons on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum had never elicited the expected “aura” due to the restrictive display conditions. “Visitors very seldom look up at them, maybe because they are behind thick glass and high up,” he added.



Christ's Charge to Peter, a 1515 work by Raphael, is one of the cartoons at the V&A that could be reproduced
ALAMY

On a webinar hosted by the Factum Foundation, which has used its innovative 3D scanning techniques to produce precise reproductions of various cultural objects, its founder Adam Lowe said they were making a facsimile of one of the cartoons which they would show “at eye level without the glass”.

The organisation has already produced a facsimile of Veronese’s *Marriage at Cana* – the original of which is in the same room at the Louvre as *Mona Lisa* – which has been placed in Venice’s Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore which originally commissioned the work.

Mr Lowe said he was confident that in 100 years in time this reproduction – using the same pigments and canvas as Veronese and in a Venice room exposed to the elements – would not be “significantly different”.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/for-arts-true-colours-just-copy-and-paste-g0q0c75gg>

Mr Saumarez Smith said that because the original was in the same room as the *Mona Lisa* “nobody pays any attention to it whatsoever ... the reproduction has a standing which in a curious way the original lacks”.

Britain’s museums spent millions of pounds of public money each decade on buying works of art and other cultural objects, many of which then need expensive conservation work, and can find themselves in bidding wars with well-funded overseas institutions.

Sir Neil said that it was only in modern times that “we have come to attach particular importance to the role of the original”. Mr Jones said that museum visitors were often “seeking that direct connection” with the original creator.

He added however: “What copies can do brilliantly is they can recreate the original experience intended by the maker and that is what we are missing a lot of the time.

“Museums have to put objects in low light levels and in glass cases and that of course deprives you of a real direct experience of the objects in the way that was originally intended.”

Mr Jones said that it was perhaps time to realise Mr Wallis’s “logical, economical ... and great idea”.

How it works



The painting, in this case Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana*, is scanned by museum staff FACTUM ARTE



A colour-matching device is used to reveal the original shade
FACTUM ARTE



Sections of the work are printed off in their original splendour
FACTUM ARTE



Finally the reproduction painting is presented in Venice as it would have looked to viewers in the 16th century
FACTUM FOUNDATION