

QUOTATION

ADAM GOPNIK ON THE ROLE OF VARIATION AND SELECTION IN ART

. . . the whole point of the Renaissance theory of copying was to emphasize that making comes before meaning. Through the act of faithful copying, Renaissance shop practice suggested, the artist would produce small alterations that could yield new symbolic forms. And yet this process of variation through copying, far from leading only to small, incremental change, had revolutionary effects; a saint who was all feet could suddenly float on air. To call such an act of copying “creative” is, of course, accurate in one sense; but it is misleading if it suggests that, to be “good,” copying must be self-consciously interpretive, while faithful copying is merely servile, and therefore “bad.” For the show demonstrates with beautiful clarity that every copy, no matter how faithful, produces subtle variations, and that it is the readiness to take advantage of those variations, created in the act of making, which has been one engine of change in art. . . .

. . . Many art historians still offer “deep” explanations of the meanings of art by searching for works of art that seem “perfectly adapted,” whose forms seem determined by the ideology of the society in which they were made. It is the “why” that can often seem most profound—the ways in which a “mentality” or the material economy makes an artist do things—and the “how” (chalk or crayon, feet or no feet, head up or head down) that seems merely instrumental. But what is so striking about the images in the “Creative Copies” show is the way that each one represents not an isolated ideological position but something discovered in the latent possibilities of some other artist’s invention, and therefore still bears the traces of its quirky, unpredictable evolution. . . . These copies suggest that every “why” is just the accumulation of a thousand particular “how’s.” . . .

From: Gopnik, A. (1988, July 4). The Art World: St. Peter’s Feet and Rembrandt’s Fountain. The New Yorker, pp. 61–65.

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