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# Facsimiles, Artworks, and Real Things

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Facsimiles on paper became a ubiquitous part of museum collections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, largely due to developments in photomechanical print processes, and in keeping with the progressive mission assumed by museums in the United States and Europe after the First World War. At the same time, conservative criticism of that democratizing tendency in the arts fomented considerable controversy over the inclusion of facsimiles in exhibitions. In recent years, scholarly attention has been paid to the role of plaster casts in the formation of many of the museums of this period. Less examined are facsimile works on paper, which made up a significant portion of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's early collection, along with other reproductions of works that were unattainable in the

fig. 1 Nina de Garis Davies (Scottish, 1865–1941). *Thutmose I and His Mother Seniseneb*. Facsimile. Tempera and graphite on paper, 32 $\frac{1}{16}$  × 27 $\frac{15}{16}$  in. (81.5 × 71 cm), 1925. Original: from Egypt, Upper Egypt, Thebes, Deir el-Bahri, Temple of Hatshepsut. New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, Joint reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, ca. 1479–1458 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.4.137)

United States before the days of largesse from Gilded Age industrial and financial tycoons. Even as The Met began to acquire important original works of art, the curatorial and educational programs continued to exhibit and rely on facsimiles, especially those depicting wall paintings that remained in situ. The dual purpose of facsimiles—preservation and education—were missions at the core of the Museum upon its founding.

The formal inclusion of facsimiles in The Met’s collection was made in the decade after the Museum was founded. In 1886, under the direction of Luigi Palma di Cesnola, The Met’s first curatorial departments were established, and the reproductions in all mediums were held in the Department of Casts, where they remained until a reorganization in 1906. Copies of two-dimensional or low-relief works in the collection included prints using various print-making techniques, hand-drawn or painted copies on paper, rubbings, and eventually photographic and photomechanical reproductions. The facsimiles were

first exhibited in permanent galleries and later also loaned out as part of the Museum’s extensive educational program.

This article begins with a look at the history of facsimiles in The Met and contemporary institutions, and seeks to define them through a discussion of three different facets of their role in the museum: as objects of preservation and, as such, exemplars of the evolving and complex role of conservation in museums; as objects of art themselves; and as objects of progressive-minded education. The main categories under discussion are facsimiles of ancient Egyptian tomb paintings, executed primarily with tempera on paper; facsimiles of wall paintings from Athens and Crete, done in tempera and watercolor on paper; and Chinese rubbings representing stone stelae, in ink on paper. The handmade, rather than photomechanical, production of these objects is important in relating the works to one another, and to the practice of conservators.

The discussion then turns to a broader examination of critical attitudes toward facsimiles and art restoration from the perspectives of art history, conservation history and theory, and science, where the development of scientific atlas illustration is particularly relevant. Due to their liminal status between artwork and copy, as well as their identification with the working class through the mode of their production and an association with mass culture, facsimiles and art restoration in general were the focus of a political, class-based opposition that affected the development of conservation as a field increasingly grounded in scientific methodology. The controversy over facsimiles and restoration was expressed through questions of authenticity and objectivity, revealing class tensions inherent in the conflicting ideas of the museum as a space for elite guardianship of culture and also for popular enjoyment and edification.

#### NOMENCLATURE

The name for this category of works in museum collections should indicate their historical context, process of production, or function, but as we will see when we begin to look into these elements, the terminology falls short. Works executed by the Graphic Section of The Met’s Egyptian Expedition and similar Egyptian works in other institutions (fig. 1) have traditionally been called “facsimiles,” or “copies.” The watercolors and temperas of ancient Greek frescoes by Emile Gilliéron and his son were at times called “facsimiles,” “copies,” “reproductions,” and “watercolors” by Gilliéron and by Met curator Gisela Richter, who acquired them. They



are now simply referred to as “drawings” or “water-colors,” and sometimes “replicas.”<sup>1</sup>

The term “facsimile” generally indicates a simulacrum of the original object made with the intent of preservation and propagation, while a “copy” could be anything from an artist’s copy to a photocopy.<sup>2</sup> The terms “replica” and “reproduction” have more of a commercial connotation, and in addition have been applied more to three-dimensional copies of archaeological objects. Often, though, these terms were used interchangeably. In general, the argument against calling certain copies “facsimiles” was that the copies were not exact enough, in their color and contrast, materials used, or even accuracy of line and depiction.

The term “rubbing” is more straightforward, as it refers to the technique used to make the object rather

than its function. The traditional Chinese process of executing a rubbing, whereby a damp piece of paper meticulously applied to cover a carved surface is daubed vigorously with a flat brush coated with a heavy and somewhat dry black ink, creates a 1:1 representation of the original stone or brass object (fig. 2). The rubbing carries an imprint of that object as a matrix, in the same way that an etching is an imprint of the etched copperplate, for example. Through the process of direct transfer, a rubbing is closer to an exact copy than the hand-drawn Egyptian or Greek facsimiles. Although the nomenclature for this diverse group of hand-copied works on paper can be imprecise, identifying why and in what context these terms are used leads to an interesting discussion about the function and purpose of various kinds of facsimiles.

#### FACSIMILES AS OBJECTS OF PRESERVATION

Why argue that these objects from different art historical contexts—using different materials and techniques—are related in function? After all, the concerns and intentions of the artisan making the rubbing are distinct from that of epigraphists or artisans on an archaeological dig who must ask themselves, as did Charles K. Wilkinson, a curator of Egyptian art at The Met: “What are you copying? What it is like or what you think it was like?”<sup>3</sup> These varied works have a common purpose, however: preservation of the original object by allowing it to be seen and appreciated, regardless of the artists’ original intention. In their primary function as objects of preservation, facsimiles are best categorized as one of many approaches within museum conservation practices.

The transference of the image from stone carvings or painted walls to the portable and practical medium of ink or paint on paper confirms the prioritization of the picture over the materiality of the object as that which must be saved and studied.<sup>4</sup> This objective, somewhat counterintuitively, aligns the facsimile more with the interventive practice of restoration. Restoration seeks to halt the action of time on an object, or return the object to a previous, more “true” state. This approach is an alternative to more open or neutral conservation treatment options that allow for future change. When a facsimile is made, the original works are often presumed to be inaccessible, subject to degradation both natural and accelerated, including the human intervention that involved the copyists in the first place. The facsimiles are then presented in the museum setting as eternal images, preserved from the effects of time.<sup>5</sup>



*fig. 2* *Guanyin*. Rubbing, ink on paper, 20th century, depicting Qing dynasty stone carving of Guanyin based on painting by Zhou Xun. Original: Zhou Xun (Chinese, 1649–1729). Ink on paper, overall with mounting: 75 × 42 in. (190.5 × 106.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Miss H. C. Wagner, 1959 (59.195.2)

fig. 3 First chamber in the tomb of Nebamun and Ipuky, Thebes. Photographed by The Met's Graphic Section. Published in Wilkinson and Hill 1983, 19, fig. 12



fig. 4 Nina de Garis Davies. *Brickmakers Getting Water from a Pool, Tomb of Rekhmire*. Facsimile. Tempera and graphite on paper, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 17 $\frac{15}{16}$  in. (48.5 × 45.5 cm). 1925. Original: Egypt, Upper Egypt, Thebes, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100). New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Thutmose III–early Amenhotep II, ca. 1479–1425 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.4.89)

### *Facsimiles of Egyptian Tomb Paintings*

An article by curator Ambrose Lansing previewing the 1930 Met exhibition “Copies of Egyptian Wall Paintings” noted that while the original tomb paintings were “bound to fade” regardless of preservation efforts, The Met’s Egyptian Expedition had undertaken the “next best thing” in allowing the paintings to be studied by a widespread body of scholars via accurate copies on paper.<sup>6</sup> Still today, these painted facsimiles, many depicting scenes of everyday life and ritual in ancient Egypt that are not described in texts, are valued for what they can tell Egyptologists about the culture and practices of that civilization. Unlike The Met’s collection of facsimiles of wall paintings from Athens and Crete by Emile Gilliéron and his son, which were off view for many years, the Egyptian facsimiles have been displayed almost continuously since they came into the Museum. Another catalogue was published following the 1983 completion of a reinstallation of the collection that began in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

Nina de Garis Davies, epigraphist and artist of The Met’s Egyptian Expedition team along with her husband, Norman, who led the Graphic Section from 1907 to 1937, produced the largest percentage of the painted facsimiles of wall paintings in The Met’s collection. Davies was lauded as an expert copyist, so much so that when she passed away in 1965, a colleague lamented that a brilliant tradition of recording had “died with her, but in splendour.”<sup>8</sup> Aided by a system of mirrors to convey natural light into the tombs (fig. 3), Davies used a small amount of tracing on tracing paper to establish the basic outlines of the wall paintings, and then transferred the lines with carbon paper to the thick sheets of paper used for the finished drawing.<sup>9</sup> She went over these lines with graphite (any lines from the carbon transfer are too insignificant to be detected in visible or infrared light) and made the rest of the painting

by eye, applying colors in the same sequence as the tomb painter.

As Davies was perfecting her technique, she proceeded with trial and error to find the perfect medium to depict the tomb wall paintings. She was persuaded by a colleague to settle on tempera because it gave the best indication as to the wall surface, using pigments that she determined through experimentation were colorfast upon light exposure (fig. 4). She also developed her own method, using “indeterminate washes,” to depict damage and losses to the original wall paintings while not distracting the eye and still presenting a cohesive and clear image of the extant painting.<sup>10</sup> This artistic discernment was a significant advantage over photography, which could be harder to read due to its undifferentiated surface,<sup>11</sup> and would not have met the standards for scholarship established by the Graphic Section.<sup>12</sup>

Lansing’s article goes further than describing the facsimiles as a means to exhibit Egyptian wall paintings to a wider audience. It casts the facsimiles as the truest representation of the Egyptian artists’ original intent. Given that opened tombs were exposed to damage from the environment and human interaction, the facsimiles became the primary method of preservation of the paintings, in essence replacing them.<sup>13</sup> The makers of The Met’s Egyptian facsimiles deftly utilized their materials and artistic techniques to most accurately depict what they observed on the excavated tomb walls. They developed a method of illustration that could be easily read and interpreted by Museum scholars and visitors.



**FACSIMILES AS ART OBJECTS: CONSIDERATIONS OF TIME, INTENTION, AND INTERPRETATION**

Facsimiles are objects of preservation, but they may also be considered works of art, especially when displayed in an art museum. Arthur C. Danto's incisive 1973 essay "Artworks and Real Things," from which the title of this article is derived, explores how the contextualization of a work of art, including time of creation, materiality, venue of display, and intention, informs whether or not we think of it as art. He resolves to "see whatever it is, which clearly does *not* meet the eye, which keeps art and reality from leaking hopelessly into one another's territory," and notes that the temporal context plays an essential role.<sup>14</sup> The age and historical importance of the group of facsimiles in The Met also affect how we characterize and value them today, leading to renewed interest. Facsimiles in recent years have been taken out of storage at The Met and other institutions for rediscovery through study and display.

In addition to getting the timing right, in order for the art world to accept a work of art, according to Danto, it needs to be subjectable to interpretation:

"It owes its existence as an artwork to this, and when its claim to art is defeated, it loses its interpretation and becomes a mere thing."<sup>15</sup> Using this framework, it is difficult to argue that a facsimile of a wall painting in a tomb from Thebes by Nina de Garis Davies could be open to an independent interpretation, and thus exist autonomously as a work of art.

But yet, especially when compared to photo-mechanical copies, the collections of facsimiles made by hand on paper, including the Egyptian and Greek facsimiles as well as the Chinese rubbings, have certain qualities that could be ascribed to artworks. They are often inextricably linked to the artisan who made them, implying an appreciation of artistic skill and intent. For example, the facsimiles by the Gilliérons were products of a successful business built on their names.<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, although the intention was to create an accurate copy of the original, the makers of the facsimiles employed interpretive artistic choices toward that end. Recognition of the creative and subjective nature of the facsimiles formed the basis of key arguments *against* their legitimacy as exhibition



*fig. 5* Met Cast Collection Galleries, Wing B, Gallery 34; view facing northeast, including, at top right, Emile Gilliéron père's watercolor of Herakles Wrestling Triton from the Hekatompedon pediment in the Acropolis of Athens. Photographed on June 14, 1927. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

fig. 6 Emile Gilliéron père (Swiss, 1850–1924). *Woman Carrying an Ivory Pyxis*, 1912. Facsimile of fresco from Knossos, Crete. Tempera and graphite on paper, 89 × 46 in. (226.1 × 116.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dodge Fund, 1912 (12.128.4)



objects, just as recognition of the subjective nature of restoration treatments was raised by critics seeking to invalidate the practice, as will be examined later in this article.

#### *The Gilliéron Facsimiles of Wall Paintings in Athens and Crete*

Artistic choices abound in the production of these works by father and son archaeological restorers. In 1883, early in his career, Emile Gilliéron père was hired to produce drawings of recently discovered sculptures from the Acropolis of Athens (fig. 5). Rather than emulating the surface of the original works, he used varying densities of washes in the transparent medium of watercolor to indicate not only the original artist's work but also the effects of light and shadow on

three-dimensional objects, and losses due to flaking and abrasion.<sup>17</sup> Gilliéron also made watercolor copies of the same sculptural groups in different scales for different clients.

Art historians have noted Emile Gilliéron père's excellent handling of watercolor and exuberant use of color, which was critical in interesting a popular audience in Greek polychromy.<sup>18</sup> His artistic technique extended beyond what would have been required of a copyist. One of his colleagues wrote that "Gilliéron's sense of line was surer than that of color and that his copies reveal a subjective quality of which he was both conscious and never capable of entirely overcoming."<sup>19</sup>

In the case of the later copies of Minoan wall paintings from Knossos, the creative role of the Gilliérons, along with archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, in discovering, reconstructing, and popularizing a Minoan aesthetic cannot be overstated (fig. 6). The replicas made during this period remain better known than original works from Knossos.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, scholarship has concluded that several of the Gilliérons' widely circulated reconstructions were well-intentioned misinterpretations of the original paintings. The Gilliérons imaginatively but inaccurately pieced together many of the fresco fragments found during the archaeological excavation.<sup>21</sup> Some of their more drastic restorations had a distinctive style influenced by the fashionable imagery of the day: as the writer Evelyn Waugh quipped in 1929, their aesthetic displayed a "somewhat inappropriate predilection for the covers of *Vogue*."<sup>22</sup> Part of what makes the Gilliéron facsimiles so compelling as objects of study and beautiful as works of art themselves is this mingling of copy and invention, delivered with great technical skill.

#### *Chinese Rubbings*

As a prolific aspect of Chinese art and an essential mode of its traditional dissemination and appreciation, Chinese rubbings have their own story to tell about the interaction between the artisan copyist and the original work. The rubbing technique, which requires many choices to be made by the artisan, including the type of paper and sizing used; the degree of cleaning out the lines of the original carving; the dampness of the paper; the amount and consistency of ink used; the amount of pressure applied with a brush to force the paper into crevices; and the method of daubing the ink, is conducive to producing works of inconsistent quality, even between rubbings from the same carving.<sup>23</sup> Variations such as the unusually heavy and dense ink application that can be seen in the lustrous eighteenth-century



*fig. 7* Various artists. Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95), second half of the 18th century. China. Leaf from album in *Model Calligraphies from the “Hall of Three Rarities”* (Sanxitang) and the “Collected Treasures of the Stony Moat” (Shiqu Baoji). Set of rubbings mounted in thirty-two albums; ink on paper, each page: 11¼ × 7 in. (28.6 × 17.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Marie-Hélène and Guy Weill, 1984 (1984.496.1–32)

example shown in figure 7 individualize the rubbing as the work of a particular artisan, sometimes for a specific patron.

Rubbings were made to be collected from the time of their first production, as early as the sixth century,<sup>24</sup> by public and private collectors and institutions, but have not generally been deemed works of art in their own right. Connoisseurs and scholars would be steeped in the historicity of the rubbing, through which significant indications of the life of the original object could be deduced via the development of a new crack visible in a particular rubbing, or the gentle erosion of the edges of carved lines seen in another. As with the facsimiles of Egyptian tomb paintings, scholars have noted that a good rubbing will depict delicate markings and fine cracks or other damages more effectively than a photograph.<sup>25</sup> A rubbing could have special value due to its rarity or its placement in the timeline of the carving’s existence. The notion of the life of an object through time, and the expected degradation of the original work, is especially well appreciated in connoisseurship of Chinese rubbings.

A rubbing can be considered a kind of restoration, a truer, more authentic representation of a carving that has since been worn down and diminished. It should be noted that the process of creating a rubbing—acting vigorously on the stone carving by scraping dirt out of the lines and pounding it with brushes and daubers—wears down the original object. This fact even further illuminates the relationship between the rubbing and the carving; the copy represents both a perceptual and material challenge to the authenticity of the real object.<sup>26</sup>

Rubbings have not been traditionally considered exhibition objects by institutions such as The Met, although as with other facsimile types discussed here, there have been recent indications of reappraisal.<sup>27</sup> This shift requires collapsing some of the traditional hierarchies of art making, as well as an appreciation for the creative and subjective nature of their production and their value as autonomous authentic objects that also happen to be copies.

While we have determined that these derivative works on paper are not exactly artworks, we are also beginning to see arguments against considering them to be mere copies. Their status as copies is belied by the amount of subjectivity involved in their creation. And they are certainly not “real things” (to use Danto’s phrase), as a copy cannot be the real thing. The fact that such objects resist simple classification accounts in part, as we will see, for the intense debate surrounding their exhibition in museums. We will also find that critiques of the validity of art restoration treatments are based around the same framework, as the restorer’s subjectivity was seen as a challenge to the authenticity of the restored object.

In addition to their problematic indefinability, facsimiles represented a tension within the institution of The Met between its elite role as gatekeeper of culture and its democratizing role in educating and uplifting the citizenry. Facsimiles were instrumental to art education influenced by the genteel tradition<sup>28</sup>—the belief that exposure to high culture was essential for the betterment of the working classes—that greatly informed the early mission of The Met and persists to some extent today.

#### FACSIMILES AND ART EDUCATION

Easily portable, less precious than originals, and depicting important art forms that could not be seen by the vast majority of the public, reproductions were an essential part of the educational mission when The Met’s Lending Collection was formed. Established in



*fig. 8* Exhibition "Ancient Egypt: Its Life and Art," James Monroe High School, Bronx, New York. Photographed March 28, 1936. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

1907 under then Met president J. Pierpont Morgan, the Lending Collection included lantern slides, "photographs, color prints, facsimiles of engravings, etchings, and lithographs, and other reproductions"<sup>29</sup> as well as "duplicate pieces" of textiles and lace, casts, and stained-glass replicas of windows from Chartres Cathedral, initially for the purpose of aiding instructors in the Museum. Soon, however, the collection was lent out to lecturers, schools and other institutions, and United Service Organizations (USO) groups.<sup>30</sup> By 1941 the program was actively lending across the entire United States.

The Neighborhood Exhibitions program, which operated from 1934 to 1942 with participation from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), was another attempt to democratize access to the collection by sending small exhibitions to schools, churches, libraries, YMCA branches, and other venues around New York (fig. 8). Twenty-eight facsimiles of Egyptian wall paintings were featured in the Neighborhood Exhibition repertoire, as well as detailed drawings of arms and armor, and papier-mâché models of Egyptian

temples made by WPA artists. The exhibitions were deemed immensely successful in reaching "the crowded neighborhoods of the underprivileged portions of our population."<sup>31</sup> While the Museum was furthering the association of facsimiles with teaching and underserved community outreach, the public had become accustomed to having copies of artworks in their own homes, in part for the purposes of signaling a certain level of sophistication and middle-class status.

#### **COPIES, CONSUMERISM, AND CLASS**

One cannot separate a consideration of facsimiles and copies in the context of the early decades of museum collecting from the larger cultural context in Europe and the United States—the explosion of reproduced images and subsequent rise of a modern mass culture.<sup>32</sup> The ubiquitous chromolithograph, popularized by publishers like Currier & Ives and Louis Prang & Co., was a type of semi-mechanized reproduction technology. It was one of many techniques that sprang from



fig. 9 Louis Prang & Co. (American, 19th century). Facsimile of a watercolor by Winslow Homer (American, 1836–1910). *The Eastern Shore*, 1896. Color lithograph. Image 14½ × 20% in. (36.8 × 52.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1927 (27.93.2)

developments such as the invention of the rotary offset press, chemical discoveries like those in the field of colorants, and most importantly in the mid- to late nineteenth century, the invention of photography. These new technologies greatly increased the ability to accurately reproduce two-dimensional works of art and produce massive runs for wide distribution to meet the new high demand for affordable prints (fig. 9). Reproductions and facsimiles therefore embody the tense relationship that persists to the present day between the elitist idealism inherent in the conceptualization of the first U.S. museums, which sought to elevate and educate through the influence of high culture, and the commercialism associated with the middle classes that was necessary to further those aims.

What followed the advancement of image reproducibility in the twentieth century was a crisis of authenticity that related not only to technology but also to class and political anxieties.<sup>33</sup> Within critical debates about the role of the facsimile in museum collections and exhibitions from the 1920s into the second half of the century, the main areas of contention were: 1. reproductions were of poor quality, insufficient as stand-ins for the original; 2. reproductions relied too much on the subjective decisions of the (working-class) printmaker or artisan; and 3. the availability of reproductions of art devalued and threatened the original art, particularly for people poorly educated or otherwise unable to differentiate between them.

One essay series in the pages of the Hamburg journal *Der Kreis* from 1929 to 1930, known as the “Facsimile Debate,” is particularly useful to illustrate

the various perspectives at play in criticism of the exhibition of facsimiles in the museum. What is truly striking, but not surprising given the connection we have established between facsimiles and the mission of preservation, is that the same arguments were put forth in criticism of facsimiles and criticism of restoration, and the same solutions were proposed in response.

### *The “Facsimile Debate” and the Problem of Subjectivity*

The essay series that came to be known as the “Facsimile Debate” was inspired by the May 1929 exhibition “Original und Reproduktion” at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover, where the most technologically advanced reproductions were hung next to original works, challenging viewers to discern the difference. Proponents of the inclusion of facsimiles in museum collections saw them as essential to the mission of the museum itself: not only to preserve access to works of art not available to the average citizen, but also as a form of preservation of the original objects themselves. Hannover’s Provinzialmuseum director Alexander Dorner’s contribution was perhaps the most emphatic in advocating for a role for facsimiles in the museum amid the acceleration of industrial modernization as a way to make art accessible to the largest audience.<sup>34</sup>

Within the anti-facsimile contingent, some participants in the *Kreis* debate argued against the promotion of facsimiles by taking revealingly political positions. Max Sauerlandt, director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, derided the “communist” spirit behind reproductions.<sup>35</sup> For critics such as Kurt Karl Eberlein, photoreproductive facsimiles were tantamount to forgeries, as was any form of restoration.<sup>36</sup>

There is a familiar thread of resistance on this side of the debate, to the democratizing of access to art via the argument that such access, in the form of facsimile production, essentially cheapened the original object. The devaluation was often explicitly associated with the class of the practitioner, in the case of restorers, or the audience, in the case of facsimiles. It is important to note that in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the occupation of conservator, traditionally called restorer, was largely held by working-class artisans. As we have seen, facsimiles, even those made for scholarly study, were associated with outreach to uninitiated museumgoers. Denigration based on class and standing did not form the entire critical basis for questioning the value of the facsimile, but it will be revisited in a discussion of the debate about the value of restoration as a whole.



### *Mechanization*

Erwin Panofsky's essay response to the "Facsimile Debate" draws upon a distinction that is enlightening with respect to a corresponding dialogue about different approaches to restoration. Panofsky writes that he is ultimately in favor of facsimiles, as they had allowed a "poor student" like himself to obtain a sense of the artist's original intent.<sup>37</sup> But he expresses discomfort with the idea of a facsimile when he notes the degree to which even photomechanical reproductions incorporate subjectivity into their creation.

By means of comparison, Panofsky distinguishes the somewhat subjective photoreproductive process from music recording technology, which he describes as a more self-contained system. Allowing that Panofsky may have underestimated the amount of artistry involved in sound recording, he argues that in contrast, "the incompleteness of color photography requires the *insertion of the human hand* in the making of *facsimile reproduction*. A human being needs to choose the printing colors that are applied to the printing plates and then modulate these until they reach the definitive tonal value."<sup>38</sup> He also notes the role of the human decision-maker in other technical aspects such as cropping and scaling, which have a great effect on the final work. He concludes that "therefore, the *complete mechanization* of the reproduction process would settle this objection."<sup>39</sup> Panofsky's solution implies, conveniently, that the question of *whose* subjectivity is more or less acceptable in the role of mediating the essential values of a work of art would thereby be rendered irrelevant.

This goal of the excision of the human hand was also applied to a range of conservation treatments over the last century as the field became increasingly professionalized and scientific<sup>40</sup>—whether or not such a goal is actually realistically attainable. It reached its apex, perhaps, in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then the attitude has gradually shifted in the other direction, with an appreciation of the subtle differences between works of art that require thoughtful human interpretation and a variation of approach to meet the object's individual needs. The evolution of this concept and how it has been applied to conservation and restoration can be related to a number of factors, including changing attitudes toward the concept of objectivity in the sciences, and issues of class and professionalism.

### *Parallel Historical Objections to Restoration*

The basic scholarly rationale for restoration of losses was developed by art historians and critics between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. As we have

seen, the facsimile could be considered an extreme kind of *total restoration*, where the original object is in effect lost to the viewer, and critiques of the validity of restoration have closely paralleled arguments against the display of facsimiles in a museum setting. The objections speak to anxieties about authenticity and authority, and specifically who is allowed to interpret and apply that authority.

Arguments acknowledging the value of restoration treatment have been largely based on the concept of the "unity of the whole" for a work of art, which is threatened when damages occur such as losses, abrasions, or drastic color shifts occur.<sup>41</sup> Despite some misgivings, curator and art historian Max J. Friedländer accepted that substantial losses in some artistic surfaces could "do away with the illusion of a spatial whole, and destroy the effect."<sup>42</sup> The conservator's goal and skill are to return the sense of unity to a work of art that may be fractured or obscured, and their practical work is invested with unique powers of mediation and revelation of the object's true aesthetic nature.

With this in mind, the responsibility imbued in the restorer or facsimile artisan can be understood as grave indeed, and the many historical objections to restoration that invoke issues of class, standing, and professionalism of its practitioners (and viewers) can be better understood in light of this challenge to the control over culture and its interpretation. Further, when combined with an underlying intent to make rarefied and inaccessible art available to a mass audience, tensions inherent between the ideas of the museum as cultural gatekeeper and as a democratic institution serving to benefit all people become readily apparent.

One of the earliest and most well-known examples of a reactionary perception of immorality in restoration (as distinct from the practice of preventative conservation) was that promoted by John Ruskin. Ruskin was inspired by the Romantic movement and a personal taste for moss-covered ruins to become an impassioned critic against the restoration of architecture. Rather than restore damaged architecture, Ruskin inveighed: "Accept it as such, pull the building down . . . but do it honestly, and do not set up a Lie in their place."<sup>43</sup> On reproductions of works of art, Ruskin was also critical, making clear his opinion of copying and the copyist:

A certain number of dull persons should always be employed by a Government in making the most accurate copies possible of all good pictures; these copies, though

fig. 10 Theodor Hartig  
(German, 1805–1880).  
Plate 52 from Hartig 1851.  
Collection of the Mertz  
Library, the New York  
Botanical Garden

artistically valueless, would be historically and documentarily valuable, in the event of the destruction of the original picture.<sup>44</sup>

This negative view persisted into the twentieth century, as even some defenders of restoration were wary about restorers using their skills in service of forgery.<sup>45</sup> Such questions tended to place the blame largely on the demands of the art market rather than a moral failing among restorers but invoked suspicion nonetheless. Important to this discussion, the connection between restoration and commerce, and dishonest commerce at that, is less about a philosophy of art and more about a social critique.

An even more skeptical view of the character of restorers was widely held. For example, in a 1928 questionnaire posed to experts by the German bulletin

*Die Kunstauktion (Art Auction)* about the value of art restoration, all respondents agreed that restorers themselves were disreputable, using terms such as “irresponsible, high-handed creators, washers, hacks, overpainters, forgers, scoundrels,” etcetera, despite their largely being in favor of common restoration practices.<sup>46</sup>

In the later twentieth century, James Beck, a Renaissance scholar and a sort of *bête noire* to conservators, often made this kind of point plainly. Writing about the idea of the “readability” of a work of art that could be compromised by damage or degradation, he jeered: “Behind the concept of readability, another factor appears: namely, the aura of democratization. After all, museums and restorers assume that the art object needs to be accessible to the lowest common denominator.”<sup>47</sup> These typical class-based objections to restoration and the arguments against the use of facsimiles exemplified in the “Facsimile Debate” were in alignment, and they demanded a response from the developing field of art conservation.

#### *Scientific Objectivity and the Class of Restorers*

Beginning in the post–World War II years, the de facto solution to criticism of this nature was to professionalize the field of conservation, including the adoption of scientific methods and apparatuses,<sup>48</sup> and a scientific approach emphasizing objectivity. In the practical sense, this meant attempting to emulate what Panofsky had prescribed in his ideal facsimile: complete mechanization, or in other words, reliance on technology and techniques that would efface the individualized hand and eye of the conservator. As the scholar of conservation theory Paul Philippot has remarked: “the expanding role of technological studies of works of art brought the practice of restoration and conservation from the level of traditional working-class artisanship to that of an exact science.”<sup>49</sup>

The use of scientific methodology allowed the expansion of conservation practice to include not only treatment but also research: of an object’s condition, materials and techniques, and the materials that may be used by conservators.<sup>50</sup> Also, crucially, through association with scientific practices used in fields of chemistry, biology, and medicine, the conservator would be uplifted from the ranks of mere workmen and craftswomen. In order to achieve this, the field tilted toward embracing a reliance on a regularized, objective approach to treatment through which the individual judgment of the conservator would be deemphasized.

Although the perception of a process that is “scientific” is often synonymous with a process that is



“objective,” it is important to recognize objectivity in scientific practice as a historical concept rather than a foundational one. The concept of scientific objectivity arose in the mid-nineteenth century and was accompanied by a fervor for an ethics of self-denial.<sup>51</sup> The field of atlas illustration, in which observed botanical and biological specimens are depicted for scientific reference, is particularly relevant to the discussion of facsimiles and restoration (fig. 10). Atlas illustration was similar to facsimile production in that the intent was to create an accurate representation of the original object. When objectivity in scientific practice became the rule, it resulted in rejecting the established eighteenth-century tendency to generalize or normalize illustrations of species as personally biased and overly interpretive. In pursuit of a moralized objectivity, atlas makers adopted a mechanical approach to the cataloging and illustration of species. They were aided by print-making techniques, where conventions regarding how to depict line, shadow, and texture have the tendency to impose a rationalizing language on image making.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, however, scientists began to reverse course and reevaluate the interpretive eye, recognizing that strict adherence to objectivity had produced new challenges, leaving a void of scientific guidance and understanding.<sup>52</sup> The problems faced by a scientific atlas illustrator may be seen as analogous to the conservator’s and the facsimile artisan’s approach to an object. A conservator evaluating damage or degradation of a work of art, due to natural aging or another external action, is similar to an atlas illustrator observing a scientific specimen’s deviation from the norm. Both depend on an ability to recognize change, pinpoint cause and effect, and assess difference from a larger set of comparable objects.

At some point, *someone* has to determine what that norm is in order to truly understand what we are looking at—in the case of an aged or damaged work of art, perhaps through elucidating the artist’s original intent through observation and interpretation of underdrawings and other subtle physical evidence, or through consultation with works by the same artist or of the same time. Returning to the handmade facsimiles on paper, we may recall that Nina de Garis Davies’s copies of wall paintings were perceived to be more legible than those made with the comparatively objective eye of the photograph, due to the differentiation between damaged and intact surfaces that she was able to portray. We find that subjectivity is not as dispensable as was once thought.

Wilkinson’s question regarding facsimiles in Egyptology—“what are you copying? What it is like or

what you think it was like?”—will remain key for both facsimile artisans and restorers, as well as within the realm of scientific observation. It is important to recognize objectivity as a construct and a choice when it comes to conservation, not necessarily a canonical rule. This is not to say that scientific methods of analysis and application of treatment in conservation are not useful or could reasonably be discarded. Rather, the goal is to arrive at a fuller appreciation of the varied reasons these methods were embraced, in order to use them as far as they can serve us and the art. Today’s more nuanced understanding of the dynamic role of conservation is best articulated as a kind of creative mediation that “reconciles change responsive to the historic context,” as architecture conservator Frank Matero puts it.<sup>53</sup> This stance was made possible, in part, when conservators became more equally incorporated into the institution of the museum: first through the establishment of media-based conservation departments independent of curatorial oversight in the 1970s, and solidified as teaching and research departments staffed by conservators with graduate degrees and commensurate salaries in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>54</sup> In the absence of class-based critiques, conservators became freer to exercise their valuable and unique skills of interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

In addition to locating the ambiguous territory that facsimiles occupy between a subjective work of art and an objective copy, it has become clear that class tensions have had an immense impact on the field of conservation, with regard to the changing approaches to restoration treatment and the reception of facsimiles. The class dimension has been understated in histories of conservation theory, which tend to tell a straightforward narrative of self-propelled progression toward better understanding of the works of art and improved treatment techniques. Similarly, the trajectory of the status of facsimiles in museums, now undergoing renewed interest and study, has been cast as a result of the expansion of museum collections of original objects and then a sort of organic rediscovery and appreciation, rather than as a reflection of the class implications of displaying such works.

In all, the role of facsimiles in the museum is both fundamental and representative of a tension that perhaps cannot be resolved without abandoning adherence to entrenched categories of image making—art *versus* copy—or at least accepting a high degree of nuance in these categories. At the same time, the history of conservation, which has been somewhat betwixt

and between in the museum, subject to class critique and overcompensation by way of overreliance on scientific technology, can be seen as embodying those unresolved tensions between who makes art, who interprets it, and who sees it.

Concurrently, and arguably underlying the renewed appreciation for facsimiles on paper, museums in general and The Met in particular have entered an introspective phase. The Met has become self-critical of its role in a deeply stratifying society, repenting for its shortcomings in welcoming a diverse audience representative of the city it inhabits, and desiring a return, perhaps, to the more democratic impulses that inspired the Neighborhood Exhibitions program. Strolling through the Egyptian galleries past the walls of facsimiles, often packed with school groups and visitors of highly varied backgrounds and origins, we can now

better appreciate the history the facsimiles represent: a continuing recalibration of our ideas about what a museum is and whom it is for, all the more important at this moment.

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#### REBECCA CAPUA

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#### NOTES

- 1 R[ichter] 1910; Mertens 2019.
- 2 The Met's Paper Conservation Department uses the term "facsimile" to denote photomechanically produced copies of works too vulnerable to be exhibited, and the term "exhibition copy" for duplicate copies of original printed works, such as loans of reprinted wallpapers by Andy Warhol, that are *not actually considered the original work* and are to be destroyed after exhibition to maintain the value of the original work.
- 3 Wilkinson 1978.
- 4 This approach is in contrast to a strategy of prioritizing the preservation of the original material of the object above all, regardless of how it has been compromised. See the discussion of "material fetishism" in Muñoz Viñas 2005, 82–87.
- 5 The objects are now 100 to 150 years old, with their own rich histories, often requiring conservation themselves.
- 6 Lansing 1929, 321.
- 7 Wilkinson and Hill 1983.
- 8 Egyptologist and Met curator Cyril Aldred quoted in Caminos 1976, 22n60.
- 9 Strudwick 2004, 199.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 11 Brock 2000, 131.
- 12 Wilkinson and Hill 1983, 10.
- 13 Lansing's article previewing the 1930 exhibition (1929, 321) leans into the implication that in the making of facsimiles, not only the original wall paintings "may be preserved under more auspicious conditions" but that through this intervention, whereby tombs that were meant to be sealed for all time were entered and interfered with, the society and culture of ancient Egypt itself has been preserved. There are certain white supremacist underpinnings of this formative view of preservation within U.S. and European museums, particularly when it comes to collections from historicized nonwhite cultures, that should be duly noted here. Indeed it is one of the major indicators that the museum's role is deeply rooted in service of colonialism engendered by capitalism. The class tensions that are examined later in this article should be seen in light of this incontrovertible aspect of museum collecting, conservation, and mission.
- 14 Danto 1973, 6. In Danto's essay reality is the thing being depicted in an artwork, which the artwork needs to define itself against. Danto's primary purpose in the essay is to champion the work of Robert Rauschenberg as transcending the apparent dilemma between mimeticism and completely abstracted and nonimitative art that tends toward becoming "real things."
- 15 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 16 Hemingway 2011.
- 17 This technique is in contrast to the later tempera paintings on paper, employing broad, flat areas of matte color that Gilliéron and his son used to depict Minoan wall paintings found in Knossos, Crete, beginning in 1900.
- 18 Mertens 2019, 24.
- 19 *Ibid.*, referring to observations made by German archaeologist Gerhart Rodenwaldt.
- 20 Lapatin 2017, 83.
- 21 Herschman 2017, 26.
- 22 Quoted in Lapatin 2017, 79.
- 23 See Starr 2008.
- 24 Wu 2003, 30.
- 25 Sickman 1937, 10.
- 26 As Wu explains: "Compared to its rubbings, a stone carving is always both too old and too new. It is too old because it has long lost its original appearance and is no longer useful for an empirical, scientific observation. It is too new because it is still changing: one must always assume that it has deteriorated further since the last rubbing was taken from it." Wu 2003, 58.
- 27 See Pesenti 2015.
- 28 Stankiewicz 1999, 101–2.
- 29 Howe 1946, 206.

- 30 *MMAB* 1918, 205.
- 31 Bach 1938, 249.
- 32 See Orvell 1989.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 34 Uchill 2015, 25.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 14. Regarding the use of facsimiles in the short-lived Spanish Communist government's efforts to educate the rural citizenry, see Otero-Urtaza 2011.
- 36 Uchill 2015, 23–24.
- 37 Panofsky (1930) 2010, 334.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 333.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 334.
- 40 For a discussion of “scientific conservation,” see Muñoz Viñas 2005, 74–78.
- 41 Brandi (1963) 1996, 340.
- 42 Friedländer (1942) 1996, 334.
- 43 Ruskin (1849) 1996, 322.
- 44 Ruskin 1906, 106–7.
- 45 Friedländer (1942) 1996, 334.
- 46 See Goltz 1999, 201.
- 47 Beck 2001, 2.
- 48 Including such structures as “examination verified by instrumentation, technical publications, the institution of academic training and societies, conferences, associations and journals with an international reach.” Cohn (2001) 2014, 487. Lawrence Becker and Deborah Schorsch (2010, 22) note that scientific methods and analysis first came into use at The Met, at least in objects conservation, during the directorship of Edward Robinson (1910–31).
- 49 Philippot (1989) 1996, 217.
- 50 Muñoz Viñas 2005, 70–71.
- 51 Daston and Galison 2007, 34.
- 52 “The rise of mechanical objectivity produced new kinds of instabilities. The triumph of the individual over the generic avoided the problems associated with spurious idealizations, but depictions of individuals made it much harder to handle (that is, identify or teach) the ‘normal variations’ that could arise in a species.” *Ibid.*, 317.
- 53 Matero 2013, 95.
- 54 See Deborah Schorsch, “Caring for The Met: 150 Years of Conservation,” accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/conservation-and-scientific-research/conservation-stories/history-of-conservation>.

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