



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: MARGARET DALIVALLE

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“Surrogates, stand-ins and charming imposters”: the status of copies in seventeenth-century England’

It's indisputable that the practice of copying from pictures was endemic in seventeenth-century England, the surviving quantity of copies by all ranks of artist attest to this fact. The persistent modern view that a copy is an *inferior* class of object, not worthy of critical attention, has led to the marginalisation of this period as derivative and inconsequential in art-historical terms. We assume the seventeenth-century reception of copies coincided with the modern attitude, but can we take this for granted? What was the status of copies – and originals – in seventeenth-century England? Why were they made and for whom?

From evidence in seventeenth-century inventories, letters, testimonials and sales catalogues, I will demonstrate the surprising range of types pictures copied, the diverse functions these objects were designed to perform, the status of the artists who made them, and the value – artistic and economic – accorded to them. I will also discuss the evolution of the ‘original’ as a class of object over the course of the seventeenth century, linking it to the emergence of a secondary market for art. This evidence points to both a careful ‘taxonomy of authenticity’, but conversely a greater pragmatism towards the acceptability of a copy, factors that chime with current revisions of our understanding of Renaissance workshop practice. The prolific reproduction of paintings by super-artists, in particular Titian, signals a rising awareness of authorship, but contemporary values accorded a sliding scale of copies present a complex calculus.

This is a topic riven with ambiguities and contradictions, but I propose we can no longer ‘retro-fit’ modern preoccupations and presumptions on the artistic production of this period, it's time for a clearer view.