



Painted Copies, Digital Reproductions, and Originals: A Case Study of Copying Frank Bowling's *Lent**

회화적 복제, 디지털 복제, 그리고 원본들에 대하여:
프랭크 볼링의 <렌트> 복제에 대한 사례 연구

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투고자 소개

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Painted Copies, Digital Reproductions, and Originals: A Case Study of Copying Frank Bowling's *Lent*

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This paper presents a case study of copying Frank Bowling's lost painting *Lent*(1963) with his permission to examine the relationship between physical copies and digital reproductions of a painting. The original painting was one of the most important of Bowling's early career paintings, but it no longer exists, having gone missing from his studio in the early 1980s. Consequently, the copy was made based on Bowling's description, his memory of his process, and through using (poor quality) digital reproductions of the painting. The paper focuses on the challenges in replicating texture, gesture, and colour from a limited reproduction, and raises questions about certain inherent characteristics of paintings that cannot easily be captured by reproductions, while also highlighting the ways in which digital reproductions can be manipulated to uncover new aspects of the original work. Drawing upon an agreement between Bowling and the author regarding the copy's destiny and the relationship to the original, the paper raises issues about the ontological status, function, and value of the painted copy and the digital reproductions in relation to the original painting.

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본 연구에서는 프랭크 볼링의 분실된 그림 <렌트*Lent*>(1963) 사례를 통해 한 그림의 실물 복제품과 디지털 복제품 사이의 관계를 조명하였다. 원본은 볼링의 초기 경력에서 가장 중요한 그림 중 하나였으나, 1980년대 초에 그의 작업실에서 사라져 버렸다. 따라서 <렌트>의 복제는 볼링의 기억과 프로세스에 대한 설명에 기초해서 원본에 대한 (낮은 해상도의) 디지털 복제물을 이용해 실행되었다. 필자는 이 연구에서 복제물과 함께 텍스처, 제스처, 색상의 복제에 대한 도전을 중점적으로 다루었으며, 복제물이 쉽게 포착할 수 없는 회화의 고유한 특징에 대한 문제도 살펴보고자 하였다. 또한 원래 작품의 새로운 측면을 드러내기 위해서 디지털 복제물을 조작하는 방법에 대해서도 모색해 보았다. 볼링의 동의하에 필자는 이 연구에서 복제품의 운명과 원작과의 관계를 고찰할 수 있었고, 이를 통해 원작과 관련된 회화 복제품과 디지털 복제품의 존재론적 상태, 기능, 가치에 대한 문제를 제기하고자 하였다.

주제어 Keywords

복제물(Copy), 회화(Painting), 프랭크 볼링(Frank Bowling), 디지털 복제(Digital Reproduction), 존재론적 상태(Ontological Status)

I . Introduction

The case study this paper presents is drawn from my practice-based research, which examines the process of copying the work of other artists. My focus was not only on the physical making of the copy itself, but also on the working relationship that I established with the artist, and how their involvement in the process impacted upon the perceived status and value of the copy I made.¹

The case-study describes my copying of the painting *Lent* (1963) by Frank Bowling, using digital reproductions and Bowling's description of the process of making his original painting. The process of copying the painting 'exactly' using digital reproductions — in this case several low-resolution images — posed questions about the relationship between the reproductions, the physical copy, and the original painting, as well as highlighting some of the aesthetic properties that paintings possess and that digital reproductions cannot replicate.

While the digital reproductions of *Lent* might be seen as providing faithful representations of the original, when making my painted copy it was important for me to consider what was left out or inaccurately depicted in the reproductions. In other words, what were the shortcomings of the digital reproductions that a physical painted copy must overcome? To copy the painting *Lent* required an understanding of the properties of physical paintings, specifically paintings made by Bowling, that were not fully captured by a digital reproduction. Compensating for these limitations became an integral part of the process of copying *Lent*.

1 Ana Teles, "Copying the work of other artists: Understanding artists' processes, intentions, and values from the act of copying their work with their permission" (PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2023).

II. Frank Bowling

Frank Bowling is a British artist of Guyanese origin, who has been actively engaged in painting for over 60 years. Bowling, who has lived and worked in London and New York, is renowned for his experimental approach towards materials, painting processes and colour. Bowling's oeuvre is diverse, reflecting his transition from figurative expressionism to pop art and map paintings, and finally towards abstraction and colour-field painting. Bowling's work has earned him the reputation of being one of the most influential colour-field painters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Bowling was the subject of a major retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain in 2019.

III. *Lent*

In 2018, I sent Bowling a letter explaining why I wanted to copy his work. He accepted my proposal of copying his work and suggested that I copy his lost painting *Lent*, made in 1963, but which disappeared in the early 1980s. Bowling and his partner, Rachel Scott, suspected that local council workers decided that the painting should be thrown into a skip to clear out his studio when Bowling went to New York.² Both Bowling and Scott expressed regret over the loss of *Lent*, and often questioned what might have happened to the painting. In an interview for the Financial Times

2 Frank Bowling, Interview by Ana Teles, 7 July 2018.

in 2021, Bowling was asked to name the lost object that he most wished he still had, to which he replied that it was *Lent*.³ Possibly, Bowling saw my proposal as an opportunity for him to ‘see’ *Lent* once again, which — along with *Mirror* (1964-66) — he considers to be one of his most important paintings.⁴

Lent is one of Bowling’s most fully resolved paintings of this period — if not the most — and seems to epitomise certain of his thematic and aesthetic preoccupations. *Lent* is an example of Bowling’s work from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, a period when his political, social, and personal interests were very evident in his paintings. During this time, he created a variety of paintings depicting scenes from his own life, including childbirth, beggars, war, and violence. *Lent* is



Figure 1 Frank Bowling looking at right side panel of ‘*Lent*’, 1963. Photo: Unknown. Courtesy Frank Bowling Archive.

a political and personal commentary on the disasters of war, which incorporates structures and imagery from the Catholic church alongside images from contemporary political events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of October of 1962.

Lent is an oil painting on linen, in the form of a diptych, 180cm × 360cm in size, and was the largest painting he made during this period with the exception of *The Execution of Mary*

3 Hester Lacey, “Frank Bowling: ‘I want to Make the Best Painting in the World Ever’,” *Financial Times* (3 July, 2021); <https://www.ft.com/content/d4bdb2ee-e2c4-43cf-b571-61f44ae1fa08> (accessed 31 October 2023).

4 Frank Bowling, personal communication with the author, 7 July 2018.

Queen of Scots (1963), which was made as an outdoor painting for the festival to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, in 1964. *Lent* seemed to mark the conclusion of one stage of Bowling's painting career. Soon after *Lent* was completed, Bowling started his move towards a less expressionist and more abstract stage known as 'pop paintings', among which are the iconic *Mirror* (1966) and *Cover Girl* (1966), painted three years after *Lent*.

IV. Reference to the Original

The copies of works by other artists that I had made previously were either made directly from the original work itself or from recent digital reproductions and were therefore relatively consistent with how the work appeared in-person. However, copying Frank Bowling's *Lent* was a different challenge. I wanted to make a close copy of the original work by following the same steps and using the same materials as Bowling to achieve a close resemblance with the original. But, since there is no longer a physical original work, after the painting disappeared from Bowling's studio in the early 1980s, my reference to the original painting was Frank Bowling himself, together with five digital reproductions of *Lent*, all taken more than 40 years ago. Since none of those reproductions offered a satisfactory equivalent of the original physical work, I decided to study the other paintings Bowling made around the same period: *Fishperson* (1962-1963), *Hanging Man* (1961), and *Mirror* (1964-1966), to which I had in-person access in London.

V. Copying *Lent*

The process of copying *Lent* could be divided into two moments. The first pertained to the search for certain compositional elements, such as the overall structure of the painting, the shapes of the figures and objects, and the colour. The second concerned the surface of the painting and involved focusing on the texture and the gestural characteristics of the original work.

During the first stage, to begin the process of copying *Lent*, I first squared the printed image, transferred it, and traced the outlines of the figures and the main structure onto the canvas. One of the advantages of having a digital reproduction of the painting was my ability to manipulate it digitally to enhance certain characteristics of the image and isolate specific details that would not have been possible with the physical original. For instance, I printed a black and white version to better understand the tonality. Additionally, to identify any imperfections in the copy, I photographed it and superimposed it on the digital reproduction. This allowed me to have a direct comparison between the original and the copy-in-process, both side-by-side in the same format, providing me with a clearer perspective. I also used the inverse approach, printing a 1:1 scale reproduction of one of the digital images to assist me during the application of paint and drawing of figures. This provided a helpful reference to ensure accuracy in my work.

Whilst the correction of the drawing occurred organically during the copying process, the colours, texture, 'expression' and other details of the painting were addressed in the second stage. During this phase, the digital reproduction was of limited assistance. This

was partly due to the poor quality of the digital reproductions, but also because they did not capture the textural complexity and variations that Bowling used in his work at this time. This lack of detail hindered my ability to imagine how *Lent* had looked.

The challenge I faced when copying *Lent* was primarily rooted in the inherent difficulty of copying a painting, such as replicating certain aspects of the work that were specific to another time and another person's performative actions. To aggravate this impossibility of making a wholly faithful copy, the digital reproductions of *Lent* did not offer the same clues to help me visualise how the paint had been applied and to understand the presence of the original in the same way that a physical painting might have.

VI. Colour

To make the copy of *Lent*, I used the only colour photograph that is known to exist of *Lent* in its entirety. However, that photograph had three different digital versions, each with different tones. It was difficult for me to determine which one most closely matched the colours of the original painting. One image was a scan of a photograph with little or no editing (a), another had been edited in Photoshop (b) to match Bowling's memory of the painting, and the third was a mix of the two (c), which was also closer to the version selected by Tate Britain for Bowling's retrospective in 2019, which was included in the room 'Lost and Destroyed Pictures'. During the three years I worked on the copy, I based my colour choices on the latter two images (b and c),

ultimately using the brightest one (b), which corresponded to Bowling's recollection of the painting, making a conscious decision to deviate from the version 'validated' by Tate Britain.

Another point to consider regarding the veracity of these three images is that, even though the brightest image (b) might correspond to how the painting looked when Bowling finished it, the darkest image (a) might be closer to how the painting looked on the day it disappeared. It might also be closer to how it would look now if Bowling still had it, since the painting was created in 1963 and would probably have darkened with age.

To transfer the figures and structure of the original painting accurately onto the canvas, I scaled the image to match the true size of *Lent*, which I placed next to my canvas. However, this scaling process resulted in computer-generated colour compensations, which might have led me to paint specific colours that would not have matched those in the lost original.

As the photographic image of *Lent* that Bowling gave me was not a perfect square—the height was slightly longer than the width, when squaring and projecting the image onto the canvases, around three centimetres had to be compensated for. I chose to eliminate those centimetres from the bottom as I thought it would cause less disruption, which meant that the copy became even more imperfect as compared to the lost original.

VII. Texture

One of the most complex challenges I encountered was understanding

the texture of the original painting and the painting process Bowling might have undertaken. This challenge revolved around distinguishing between the multiple layers of paint, including those that are visible and those that were superimposed and are no longer visible. These layers collectively contribute to achieving various qualities of the existing surface, such as transparency, mass, and paint thickness.

This challenge emerged from the lack of a reliable and detailed reproduction of the original painting that supplied clear information about the surface of the painting, and therefore it was difficult to decide whether what I had painted was close to the original work. For this reason, I had to find a balance between the textures of *Lent*'s immediately antecedent and subsequent works: Bowling's heavily textured paintings of the early 1960s and his flat paintings, such as *Mirror*, of the mid-1960s.

VIII. Gestures

The way that Bowling's original gestures were executed was also one of the most difficult aspects to replicate. The act of copying follows a different logic from that of making one's own painting, so too the way I applied paint on the canvas, in the later stages, had to be premeditated, often rehearsed, and done more slowly than Bowling's painting of the original work. With a higher quality image, such as those found on contemporary museum and gallery websites, the texture and brush strokes might become visible, enhancing the connection between gesture and expression. However,

the scale and presence of the artist are intrinsic to the physical painting's phenomenological impact, and reproductions often struggle to convey this. While reproductions allow for closer inspection — indeed, for a fetishisation of the details — they can also distract from the overall experience of the painting and lead to exaggeration.

In *What Painting Is* (1999), James Elkins describes how he and some of his students copied a painting by Claude Monet. He considered that gesture and texture were the most important aspects when trying to copy a painting.⁵ Elkins reports that once he had finally built the background with 'texture strokes', the next step would be to imitate the 'exact' brush marks of the original. Elkins recognises that paintings and drawings are unique because brush marks cannot be reproduced: "if [a brush mark] is painted over, it is gone [...] Every mark is a different beginning: one, one, one [...] and so on forever."⁶ Elkins explains that, despite Monet's paintings being multi-directional and looking easy to copy, it is in practice very difficult to achieve "real directionless". He suggests that repeating gestures in line with one another naturally is difficult and that artists need to work against their own anatomy.⁷

There seems to be something in the act of attempting to imitate another person's gesture that is closely connected to our identity, or rather our individuality, that might suggest that the gesture is impossible to reenact precisely. Giorgio Agamben defines gesture as an endless and un-compromised mediality. Gesture, in his sense, does not intend to communicate anything, nor is it a

5 James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 41.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 11.

means to an end. Instead, Giorgio Agamben says it exposes our “being-in language”, it is “pure gesturality”.⁸ His example is drawn from dance, but we can also consider painting to be a form of gesture because it involves the ‘endurance and the exhibition’ of the action of applying paint on the canvas. Since this aspect of the gesture is so intertwined with our identities, it suggests that the gestural element of the painting is also impossible to copy with exactitude.

Echoing Elkins’s and Agamben’s observations, I found it challenging to comprehend and then re-enact the movements Frank Bowling had made while creating the painting. This difficulty arose from my inability to track and imagine Bowling’s hand movements across the canvas, as well as his body’s scale in relation to the painting without seeing the original painting in its entire size. Without understanding the painting’s texture and scale, I could not discern the ‘time of the painting’ or the relationship between Bowling’s body and the canvas, which, for me, in my attempt to re-produce the work, was important to comprehend.

IX. The Relationship Between the Digital Reproductions, the Painted Copy, and the Original

After finalising the copy, a further part of my research project was to make an agreement with Frank Bowling about the ontological status of the copy I had made of his work. ‘Ontological status’ refers to the ways in which a copy exists and, in this context, implies

8 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 58–60.

a relationship of subordination to the original work. To determine what the copy was – if it was a copy at all – it was important to obtain Bowling's perspective, since his validation, as the original work's creator, was crucial to define the identity of the copy. This process involved understanding how successful he thought the copy was in relation to his original, and what he would decide regarding the destination of the copy.

Bowling saw my finished painting when it was exhibited at The Florence Trust (14–21 August 2021). Bowling was complimentary about the work I had done and seemed to approve the final result of the copy: "I suppose you worked it out!"⁹ One feature of the copy that he was particularly positive about was the "space" I had created in the right panel at the bottom with red and orange. He also observed that the figures with the faces on the left panel at the bottom were well resolved: in the original they were more complexly painted, whereas in the copy they had been simplified. Although I would rather have painted the faces with a similar complexity, Bowling seemed to judge the way I did them in a positive light. When asked what other noticeable differences between the copy and the original painting Bowling could identify, he compared the white paint and wax of the figures in the copy with the flesh pink colour of the original painting. He also mentioned that the overall tonality was a little high.¹⁰

After the exhibition ended, and according to the agreement we made, Bowling took my copy of *Lent* into storage as part of his archive.

9 Frank Bowling, personal communication with the author in 14 August 2021.

10 Bowling, personal communication with the author in 14 August 2021.

One aspect that stands out when considering the resemblance and relationship of the copy to the original is the fact that there is no longer a physical original *Lent*. There are, however, images of *Lent*, other paintings from that time, and finally Bowling's memory, each of which provide evidential testimony to the veracity of the copy of *Lent* I had made. For *Lent*, there is a meta-original comprised of the multiple reproductions of the original painting, which together recreate the work.

Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote (1939) is a short story by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. It is a fictional account of a writer named Pierre Menard, who attempts to write *Don Quixote* (1605) word-for-word, as if he were the original author, Miguel de Cervantes.¹¹ Drawing on his theory of notation, the philosopher Nelson Goodman proposed that if Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote* is a different inscription, or representation, from the one written by Cervantes, it is nonetheless an instance of the same work.¹² According to this way of thinking, my copy of *Lent* can be considered as both a different 'inscription' and a different 'instance' of the original painting, as it does not perfectly imitate the original gestures or surface 'word for word'. It is in this sense an original work. By contrast, the digital reproductions, like my copy, can be seen as different inscriptions of the original work—using a different language—but unlike my copy, these digital reproductions are all instances of the original painting.

The digital reproductions of *Lent* and my copy might also serve different purposes in remembering the original painting. One

11 Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in *Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Classics), 2000.

12 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976); Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. Co., 1978).

purpose is to document the painting for an archive or catalogue, while another is to remember the experience of seeing the original work. In an exhibition of Bowling's work, such as his retrospective at Tate Britain in 2019, a photographic reproduction of the original painting would likely continue to be the preferred reference to *Lent*, rather than my copy, as the latter is a separate instance of the original painting.

When it comes to remembering the original painting considered as a historical object, a photographic reproduction of the original is also the most viable choice, in the same way that a photograph of a particular person of historical interest would be preferred to the physical presence of someone who resembles that person in some way. Photographic reproductions of the original can be manipulated to 'correct' the colour and tones, thus matching Bowling's visual memory of the lost painting.

That said, it is also clear that Bowling valued the opportunity to 'see' his lost painting once again.

X. Conclusion

When I started to copy *Lent*, my intention was to make a 'faithful' copy, that is, not only a painting that resembled the surface of the original painting, with similar colours and accurately drawn structures and figures, but also a painting that would somehow embody the energy and the expressive power of the original.

The challenges of making such a copy stemmed not only from the technical difficulties of copying a painting, but also from the

limitation of digital reproductions, in the absence of the original, in offering something that seems inherent to any painting: the gesture, texture, scale, materiality, colour and time of painting as an entirety.

Even if the digital reproductions provided me some aid accurately to draw the structure and the figures, by allowing me to manipulate them in all sorts of formats, and to transfer and compare them with the copy, they also demonstrated their limitations in providing satisfactory information to understand and visualise certain aesthetically significant features of the original painting.

While reproductions can serve as a helpful tool for preserving the memory of a work, they cannot replace the phenomenological presence of the original. My copy of *Lent* seems to make a unique and important contribution to the replacement of the original painting, when considering certain aspects such as the scale, the painted colours, the textures, and the smell. Together with the digital reproductions of the original, the copy contributes to the living memory of the painting.

Fort Comme la Mort (Like Death, 1888), by French author Guy de Maupassant, tells the story of the celebrated painter Olivier Bertin, who has a twenty-year affair with Anne de Guilleroy. When Anne's daughter is brought to Paris to be presented to society, Olivier is struck by her close resemblance to her mother in her youth, and he falls in love with this 'duplicate' of the woman whom he has loved for decades.¹³ Here, the biological reproductive process has created a copy that evokes in memory the phenomenological experience of the encounter with the original.

13 Guy de Maupassant, *Like Death* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017).

My physical copy of *Lent* might also evoke memories and emotions associated with the time when Bowling painted *Lent*. The copy is, like Anne's daughter, distinct from the original—in Goodman's language, a separate inscription—but nonetheless the phenomenological presence of the physical painting creates an aesthetic experience that is distinct from, and in certain important respects superior to, that supplied by a digital reproduction.



Figure 2 Still from video by Frederik Bowling, Frank Bowling looking at 'Lent Resurrected' by Ana Teles, a copy of 'Lent' by Frank Bowling, London, 2021. Cinematographer: Frederik Bowling. ©Ana Teles ©Frank Bowling. Courtesy Frank Bowling Archive

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