

## Daniel Graves, Copying the Masters

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Looking closely at the work of great masters is indispensable for the personal growth of an artist, and summer vacations are the perfect time for art students to explore museums and galleries and drink in the wealth of inspiration, technique and skill that they contain.

“Art begets art,” says Daniel Graves, painter and founder of the Florence Academy of Art, “and nothing is more useful for an art student than to copy a great master painting.”

Copying helps the student to acquire a deeper understanding of both aesthetics and technique, Daniel explains. “It’s not about making a forgery,” he insists. Only when the student has tried to paint like the great masters can he or she begin to really come to grips with their technique.

Copying obliges the student to reflect on how the painter went about producing the work, how he or she started to lay in, draw, hit the shadows, block in the colours and add more layers of paint or glaze over.

“You won’t begin to understand their technique until you try to paint like them,” Daniel says. “Often, you realise the simplicity with which they started, and the limited palette with which they managed to achieve such brilliant colours and subtle tones. You also realise how often they keyed their painting extremely low.”

If, as Daniel suggests, the museum is the second home of an artist, then it is natural that he should encourage all art students to spend a significant amount of time there.

“You don’t have a studio?” he asks rhetorically. “Then go knock on the door of an art museum.” Indeed, most museums are very accommodating to art students. Many will have special opening hours dedicated to those who wish to copy a painting and some even provide easels.

Daniel recommends that art students spend at least two to three days a week copying paintings in this way. “As you study the great masters, you will see your learning curve increase tremendously,” he promises.

Working in this way, the art student begins to understand better the various art materials, for instance how often bitumen was used as a glaze in paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or how some artists, while appearing to be painting very blue skies, actually had no blue paints on their palette.

Thanks to his own study of old master paintings, Daniel came to discover the richness of the colour ‘terre verte’, which is hardly used today but which was often an essential component of the palette of 17<sup>th</sup> century painters. “It’s a colour that has so much body, it’s great for making impastos,” he muses. “And used carefully, it can even be added to flesh tones.”

Daniel recalls how, when he was a student with Richard Lack in Minnesota, he would regularly go to the local museum to study its collection. He remembers notably copying works by Daubigny and Tintoretto. There were times, he says, when he would be approached by admiring visitors who would purchase his work on the spot – “a perfect way for an aspiring artist to sell his first paintings!” Today, if he had time, he says, he would copy paintings by Ribera, Bonnat and Rembrandt.

Daniel recommends that art students try and keep their first lay-in as simple as possible, beginning with a very limited palette, of maximum six colours. It is often advisable even to begin with just three colours. Gradually, the student can try out other colours as familiarity with the work grows. “If it doesn’t work out,” Daniel advises, “just scrape it off and start again. Keep things fresh. Think also about your brushwork, how while it might be correct, it may not be in the right place.” The student needs additionally to have a range of tones ready on the palette.

It is equally important to give thought to the colour and tone of the canvas’s imprimatura, as this has an effect on the quality of the values and colours painted on top. “Think of the paintings of Velasquez in the Pitti palace,” says Daniel. “All have a different imprimatura. Before setting to work, Velasquez gave enormous thought to what would be the unifying colour value for each painting, which then sets the mood for the whole picture.”

Finally, Daniel recommends that art students avoid concentrating on copying works by just one artist, but try out various approaches by different painters. “In this way,” he says, “you will begin to understand what works best for you.”