

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction by Karen Knorr



Description

This image centres on a man in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), engrossed in a large book, he seems oblivious of the works of art around him which is slightly unsettling.

I have analysed, in the diagram below, why the composition works so harmoniously for me. The eye is drawn repeatedly to the scholar from his positioning at the base of two triangles, the line formed by the exhibition case front left and his placement on the left third of the image.

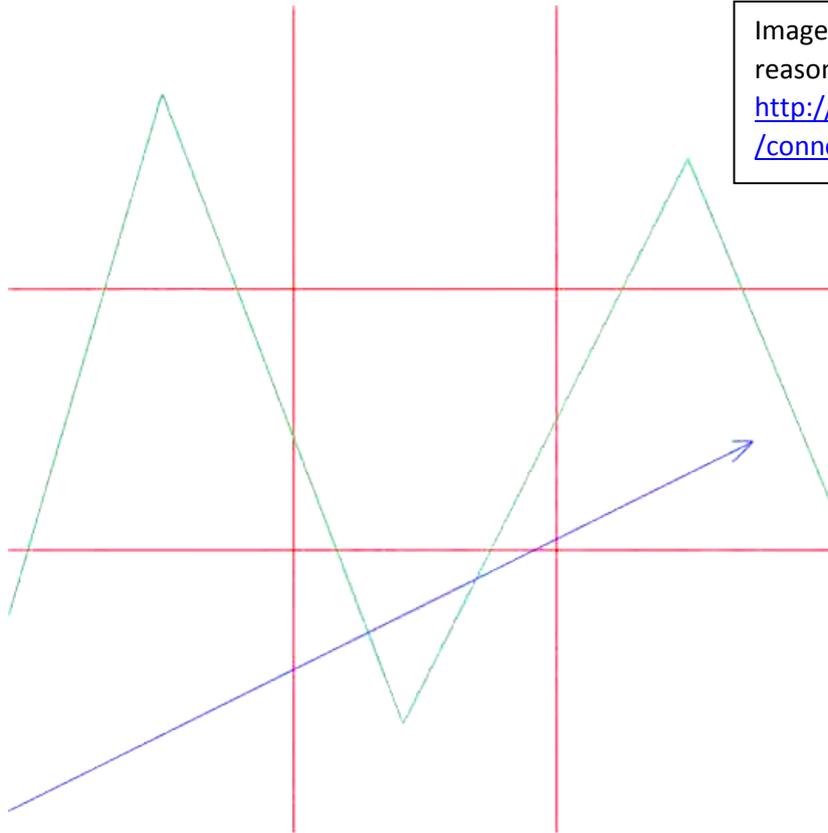


Image removed for copyright reasons. See the original image at <http://karenknorr.com/photography/connoisseurs/>

I do not know to what extent Knorr may have digitally manipulated the image, I visited the V&A and the current display differs greatly (see figure right).

Kubicki states in Bajac et al (2011 p39) that Knorr “spends many hours in her studio on the digital (post) production of a single image”. I think we can assume that everything in this image is where the photographer wanted it to be.

Analysis

The setting is a Cast Court at the V&A. Casts are plaster reproductions of original sculptures. Those in this image date from the late 19th century. I have identified the casts in this image and listed them in Annex 2.



The original sculptures date from the Italian High Renaissance and, with one exception, are copies of work by Michelangelo. The painting on the wall is a copy of a fresco “The School of Athens” by Raphael.

This is the ultimate image of a series of 17 called “Connoisseurs”¹. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990 p243) defines connoisseur as “an expert judge in matters of taste”. This appears to apply to the solitary figure in the photograph.

¹ Source: <http://karenknorr.com/photography/connoisseurs/>

Knorr studied under Victor Burgin who Bajac (2012 p16-17) states “stressed the importance of working both with images and with the texts that frame them”.

“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is the title of an essay by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. Benjamin proposed that original works of art had a ‘cultic’ value due to the way in which they were used (e.g. as with religious paintings) and an ‘exhibition’ value from their display. This constituted their ‘aura’ which was diminished by mass reproduction.

In an essay based on Benjamin’s work Berger (1972 p32) states “The real question is; to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? To those who can apply it to their own lives, or to a cultural hierarchy of relic specialists?”

Interpretation

Belsey (2002 p11) explains how meaning is interpreted by a *signifier* which is a visual clue and which leads to the *signified* which is its meaning.

I believe the signifiers in Knorr’s image are;

- Art works in the image are from the Italian High Renaissance, described by Gombrich (1989 p287) as “one of the greatest periods of all time”. With one exception the statues are by Michelangelo whose sculptures Stuart (2012 p186) describes as “breathtaking”. The casts and painting are copies of original works of art. Is this a reference to Benjamin’s loss of aura with reproduction?
- The man is reading a book, ignoring the statues. Does he prefer to get his views from the thoughts of others, rather than studying (copies of) original works? Is he a ‘relic specialist’?
- There are no other people in the image. Is this signifying exclusion?
- The “School of Athens” is cropped by the framing of the photograph. This excludes certain of the original characters and changes the central focus point of the painting. Haas (2012) notes that the philosophers are divided into the realists on the right and idealists on the left. The cropping has excluded most of the realists. The central focus has shifted from Aristotle and Plato to Heracleitus the pessimist philosopher. Are these references to a perceived lack of realism in Benjamin’s philosophy adding a note of pessimism?
- The camera viewpoint is raised, we look down on the scholar studying his book. Is Knorr metaphorically looking down on him and his kind?
- There are no women in the image other than in the case of three sculptures. Is this a reference to the exclusion of women as artists and critics/historians?

Guerin (2009) believes that the image contains a critique of the institution of the museum and states “Knorr cuttingly observes that today, it is not the photograph that removes the aura, it’s the museum that exhibits the sculptures that destroys their uniqueness”. She also writes that the photograph is a comment on gender imbalance in art.

Kingsley (2012 p194) describes “Knorr’s astute illustration of the division between the intellectual and visceral appreciation of art”.

I can see how these conclusions have been reached and agree with them. I think, however, that the series and image titles are key to understanding this photograph.

In my opinion the ‘connoisseur’ depicted in this photograph is the man studying the book, gaining his knowledge from reading rather than from appreciation of the copy art work surrounding him. I think it is significant he is placed next to the only cast not by Michelangelo, an effigy of Guidarello

Guidarelli, described by the V&A as “a mercenary leader”. By ‘looking down on him’ through the camera angle and placing him next to the mercenary, Knorr is making a scathing comment on those that mystify art.

The image title “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is intriguing. Benjamin’s hypothesis was that the aura of a work of art shrinks the more it is reproduced. Knorr has deliberately set this image in a museum displaying reproductions of works of art. Have they lost their aura and this is why the man shows no interest in them? The concept of originals losing their aura is a conundrum to photographers who make their living from selling images as original works of art. The series *Connoisseurs* is offered for sale in a limited edition of 5 copies, a single copy of one of the other images in *Connoisseurs* sold at auction in Paris last year for €2100². This suggests that its aura has not been diminished.

Howells and Negreiros (2012 p178) state “the ‘cult’ value or the ‘aura’ of the authentic original work of art has not been lost in the age of reproduction. Art historically we are still – perhaps even more so – obsessed with authenticity”. I think that the way that Raphael’s painting has been cropped is significant. The exclusion of a group of realist philosophers and the shifting of the centre of focus to Heracleitus suggests to me a comment that Benjamin’s philosophy is more idealistic than realistic.

I believe Knorr’s image is saying that authentic originals are not necessarily demeaned by limited copies of them, the beauty of Michelangelo’s *David* or Raphael’s fresco has not automatically been diminished by the copies in the V&A. The greatest threat is from the mystification of them by connoisseurs.

² Source: <http://www.artvalue.com>

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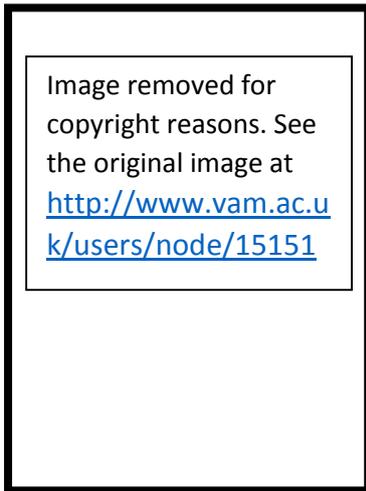
Annex 1 Technical Details

This is the final image in a series of 17 entitled 'Connoisseurs' which was produced between 1986 and 1990. According to Bajac et al (2011 p216) the series was limited to an edition of 5. Each image measured 86.36cm square (print) and 99.5cm square (framed). They were printed on Super Glossy Ilfochrome (Cibachrome) mounted on Aluminium, framed with a brass plaque.

Karen Knorr's website states that she was born in Frankfurt and raised in Puerto Rico in the 1960's and is currently Professor of Photography at the University of Creative Arts in Surrey.

Annex 2 – Description from the V&A website of the casts and painting featured in the photograph

Madonna and child: Bruges Madonna



Madonna and child: Bruges Madonna About 1872 Painted plaster Width 64 cm x height 128 cm x depth 63 cm 1872-62

Acquired in exchange from the Royal Belgian Commission in 1872 for £40

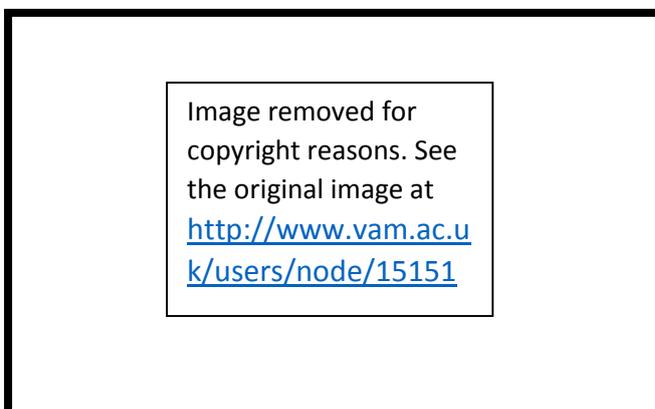
Original:

Madonna and child
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
1504-6
Marble
Church of Notre Dame, Bruges, Belgium

Purchased by Jean and Alexandre Mouscron, cloth merchants of Bruges with establishments in Rome and Florence. They shipped the Madonna to Bruges in 1506. There it was installed on an altar in the church of Notre Dame, and framed by a tabernacle of black and white marble designed by Jan de Heere of Ghent and his son Lucas and completed by 1571.

Effigy of Guidarello Guidarelli

Effigy of Guidarello Guidarelli About 1885 Plaster cast Width 53.5 cm x length 178 cm 1885-159



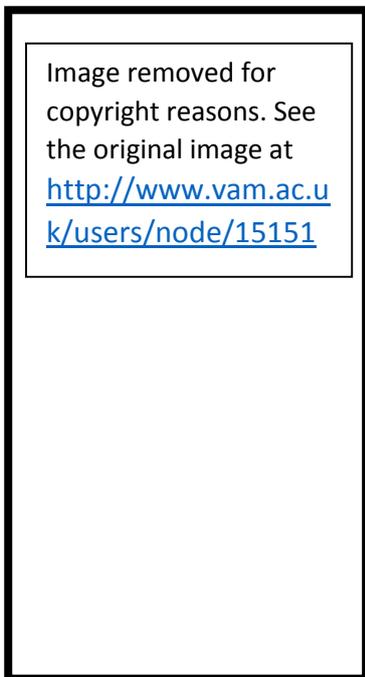
Presented by the Pinacoteca Comunale (Royal Academy of Fine Arts), Ravenna in 1885

Original:

Effigy of Guidarello Guidarelli
Tullio Lombardo (about 1455-1532)
Completed 1525
Marble
Galleria Nazionale, Ravenna, Italy

Guidanello Guidarelli (about 1455-1501) was a condottiere or mercenary leader who was fatally wounded in a quarrel over an elaborate shirt. In his will (1501) he stipulated the conditions for the execution of his tomb, naming a committee of Ravennate humanists to choose the best design from an artist from Florence or Venice on the basis of a preliminary model. It is uncertain when the commission was awarded to Tullio Lombardo, but a final payment was recorded in 1525. The effigy originally surmounted a recut early Christian sarcophagus and stood in the chapel of S. Liberio in the church of S. Francesco in Ravenna. By 1634, the effigy had been removed to the chapel of Braccioforte, and by 1707 the sarcophagus had been appropriated by the descendant of Guidarello, Bartolommeo del Sale, and is now in the left aisle of S. Francesco. Only parts of the architectural surround of the tomb remain in the chapel of S. Liberio, rededicated to the Immaculate Conception.

David



David About 1857 Plaster cast Width 213.5 cm x height 541.5 cm 1857-161

Given by Leopold II, Grand Duke of Tuscany to Queen Victoria in 1857

Original:

David
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
1501-4
Marble
Accademia di Belle Arti, Florence, Italy

Michelangelo carved the David from a block which had already been started by AGOSTINO DI DUCCIO (1418-before 1498). The David was installed in place of Donatello's Judith and Holofernes, outside the Palazzo Vecchio, in 1504. It was removed to the Accademia di Belle Arti in 1873, and replaced

by a copy. The cast belonging to the Victoria and Albert Museum was presented to Queen Victoria by Grand Duke Ferdinand III of Tuscany, in 1856.

Pitti Tondo: The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist

Pitti Tondo: The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist About 1876 Plaster cast Width 84.5 cm x height 96.5 cm 1876-106

Purchased from Oronzio Lelli in 1876 (sum unrecorded)



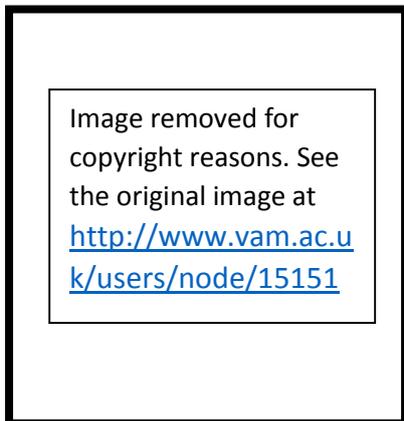
Original:

Pitti Tondo: The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
1501-6
Marble
Museo Nazionale (Bargello), Florence, Italy

This unfinished relief is one of two tondi which Vasari (1550) states that Michelangelo blocked out, but did not complete, while working on the David (1501-4) in Florence. It was executed for Bartolommeo Pitti, nephew of the Florentine chancellor, Luca Pitti (1395-1472).

Taddei Tondo: The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist

Taddei Tondo: The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist About 1902 Plaster cast
Diameter 104 cm 1902-98



Details of acquisition unrecorded, accessioned in 1902

Original:

Taddei Tondo: The Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
1501-6
Marble
Royal Academy, London, England

This unfinished relief is one of two tondi which Vasari (1550) states that Michelangelo blocked out, but did not complete, while working on the David (1501-4) in Florence. It was executed for Taddeo Taddei (1470-1528), a patron of both Michelangelo and Raphael, and was originally in his house.

Rebellious Slave

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See the original image at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/15151>

Rebellious Slave About 1863 Plaster cast Width 82 cm x height 229 cm 1863-16

Purchased from Monsieur Toquiere in 1863 (sum unrecorded)

Original:

The Rebellious Slave
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
About 1513
Marble
Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

One of a series of six 'slaves' executed by Michelangelo for the tomb of Pope Julius II (Pope 1503-13), of which two are now in the Louvre and four are in the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. This figure, together with the Dying Slave (V&A cast museum no. 1863-15), was executed for the second project (1513) for the tomb. In this scheme, Michelangelo planned to place them on either side of the Moses (V&A cast museum no. 1858-278). The project was never completed in this form. Around 1546, Michelangelo gave these two statues to Ruberto Strozzi, a Florentine exile in Lyon, who in turn presented them to King Francois I of France. They were given by King Francois I to Conétable Anne de Montmorency and thereafter passed through the hands of several members of the Montmorency and Richelieu families. In 1794, the Rebellious and Dying Slaves were purchased for the French state, and have been preserved in the Musée du Louvre ever since.

Guiliano de Medici, Duke of Nemours

Image removed for copyright reasons. See the original image at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/15151>

Guiliano de Medici, Duke of Nemours About 1881 Plaster cast Width 77 cm x height 183 cm 1881-10

Purchased from Oronzio Lelli in 1881 for £50

Original:Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours

Michelangelo (1475-1564)
About 1526-34
Marble
The Medici Chapel (the New Sacristy) in the church of S. Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

The decoration of the Medici funerary chapel was commissioned from Michelangelo in 1520 by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, afterwards Pope Clement VII (1478-1534). The figure of Giuliano (1479-1516) is seated in a niche above his tomb on which recline allegorical figures of Night and Day. On the opposite wall is the companion figure of Giuliano's nephew, Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino (1492-1519), with Dawn and Dusk on his tomb.

Brutus



Brutus About 1864 Plaster cast Width 66.5 cm x height 96.5 cm 1864-14

Purchased from Signor Stiattesi in 1864 for £1 4s (30 francs)

Original:

Brutus
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
After 1539
Marble

Museo Nazionale (Bargello), Florence, Italy

According to Vasari (1550), Michelangelo executed the bust for Cardinal Niccolo Ridolfi, at the request of Donato Gianotti who entered Ridolfi's service in 1539.

Lorenzo de'Medici, Duke of Urbino



Lorenzo de'Medici, Duke of Urbino About 1881 Plaster cast Width 77 cm x height 183 cm 1881-9

Purchased from Oronzio Lelli, Florence in 1881 for £50

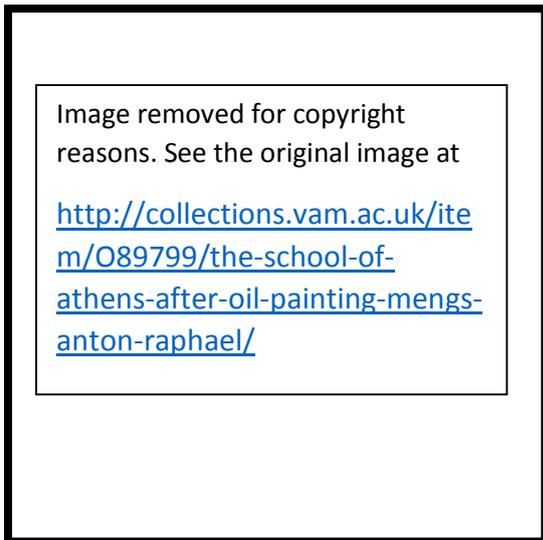
Original:

Lorenzo de'Medici, Duke of Urbino
Michelangelo (1475-1564)
1526-34
Marble

The Medici Chapel (the New Sacristy) in the church of S. Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

The decoration of the Medici funerary chapel was commissioned from Michelangelo in 1520 by Cardinal Giulio de'Medici, afterwards Pope Clement VII (1478-1534). The figure of Lorenzo (1492-1519) is seated in a niche above his tomb on which recline allegorical figures of Dawn and Dusk. On the opposite wall is the companion figure of Lorenzo's uncle, Giuliano de'Medici, Duke of Nemours (1478-1516), with Night and Day on his tomb.

The School of Athens (after Raphael)



Object: Oil painting

Place of origin: Rome, Italy (painted)

Date: 1752-1755 (painted)

Artist/Maker: Anton Raphael Mengs, born 1728 - died 1779 (artist)
Raphael, born 1483 - died 1520 (after, artist)

Materials and Techniques: oil on canvas

Given by the Duke of Northumberland, 1926

Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779) was born in Bohemia now Czech Republic. He accompanied his father, who was a painter, in Rome and Dresden where he became a successful portrait painter. Having been appointed Hofmaler in March 1751, he left Dresden the following September, eventually spending the next ten years in Italy and never returning to Dresden again. In Rome and Naples, Mengs produced classical and religious scenes. He also wrote some theoretical texts under the influence of Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

This painting is a full-size copy of the famous fresco the School of Athens painted by Raphael in 1508 in the Vatican. This copy was commissioned by the Duke of Northumberland in 1749 and represents the ancient knowledge of the most famous philosophers with in the centre Plato and Aristotle whose doctrines would dominate the Western thought from Antiquity up to the late 17th century. The painting was originally on display in the long gallery of Northumberland House in London. Destroyed in 1874, the painting was transferred in his new residence, 2 Grosvenor Place, before being given to the museum in 1926.

All details of casts taken from:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/15151>

Details of The School of Athens from:

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O89799/the-school-of-athens-after-oil-painting-mengs-anton-raphael/>