

# Sheep Aren't the Only Things Getting Cloned

by Joan Altabe



Why don't we just come out and call contemporary art what it is – a recycling. Painters and sculptors have been replicating themselves and each other for some years now. It's called post-modernism – a rehashing of images from the past.

In my town of Sarasota, known as the art center of the South East, recycling is everywhere.

Consider the Ringling Museum's life-size aluminum statue of Don Quixote on horseback by Izhar Patkin, purchased for \$100,000. There are five more exactly like it in other collections. The artist sculpted one in clay and a foundry cast it six times in aluminum. Talk about glittering generalities.

Consider Allan McCollum's colossal cement cookie jar, also in the Ringling Museum collection, one of sixteen duplicates that sell for \$18,000 each. A cookie-cutter cookie jar, if there ever was one.

Consider the mirror image of Michelangelo's statue David, which stands in the Ringling Museum. We covet this imitation so much that we've made it our city symbol. You see it everywhere: from street signs to garbage

trucks. An "art town" emblemized by imitation art.

Consider the work of artist Stanislaw Kostka, who takes the style of 17th-century Dutch still-life painters and sells it in a downtown gallery for tens of thousands of dollars. In some cases, the cost is more than the original Dutch art. Kostka's "Still Life With Fruit and Blue Porcelain" goes for \$30,000 while the old master work *Tulip, Roses Frittilaries and Other Flowers in a Stone Urn, With a Parrot Perched on a Sprig of Plums on a Stone Ledge* by Gasper Pieter Verbruggen has gone for \$12,075 at Christie's New York.

You might call Sarasota the Jurassic Park of art-making. Except, the only dinosaur in sight is original art.

This isn't to say that copycatting is the contemporary artists' realm alone.

Peter Paul Rubens copied from art of ancient Rome and from the Renaissance. And he often modeled the fleshy bodies he painted after antique marble statuary. In an *Art Times* review of a Rubens show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in '05, Raymond J. Steiner wrote openly about Ruben's copying. He said that copying was "almost a way of life with Rubens," that

he recycled figures “from a host of his predecessors and contemporaries.”

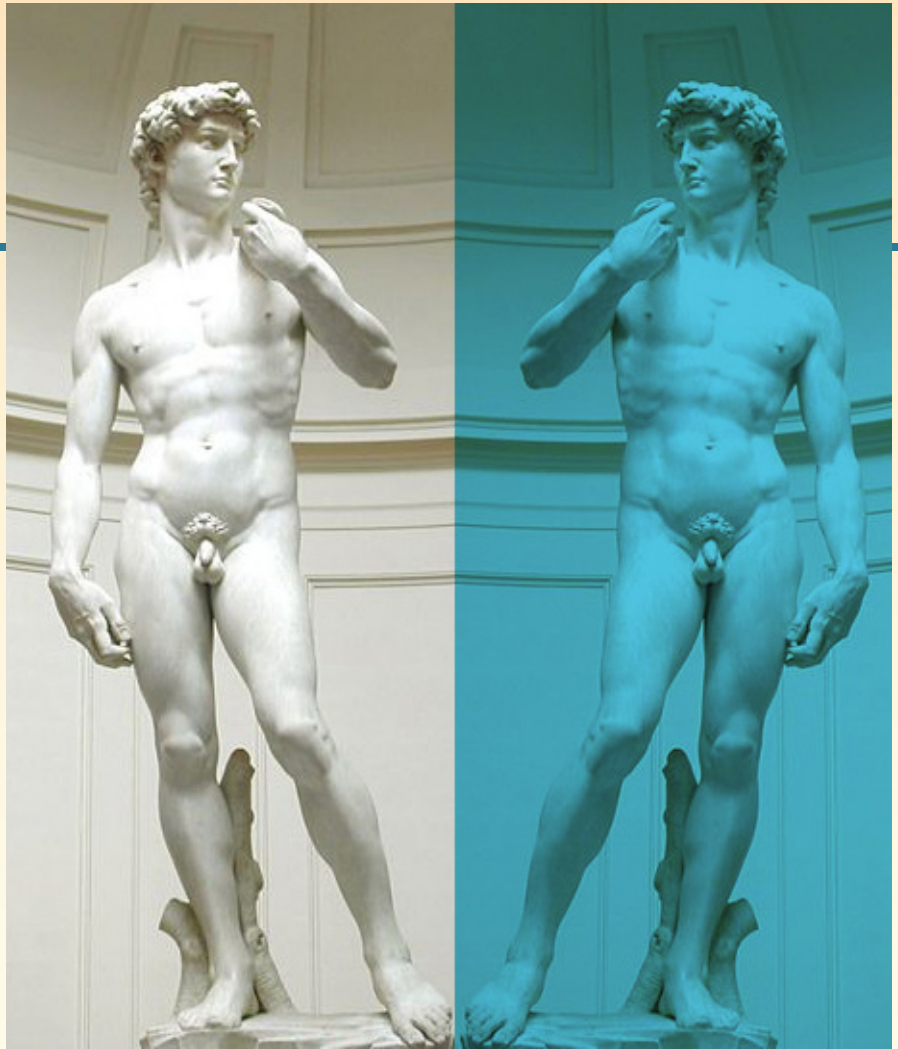
But Steiner seemed to be an apologist for the practice: “Though it may have a negative taint to a purist of today, such cribbing was not just a way of artistic practice, but a necessary step in the apprenticeship of any artists of the time...”

Balderdash. Way past his apprentice days, Rubens was in the habit of signing work that his stable of assistants executed and for which he only provided the finishing touches. This process was used for the making of his epic *The Triumph of Eucharist* series – the Ringling Museum’s most ballyhooed possession.

And while Rubens’ habit of putting his name to work made by his assistants doesn’t bother art experts like Steiner, it certainly bothered one of Rubens’ clients, Lord Ambassador Carleton. The artist was forced to write this letter to him:

Antwerp, Sept. 13, 1621

“I am quite willing that the picture painted for My Lord Ambassador Carleton be returned to me and that I should paint



another hunting piece...making rebate as is reasonable for the amount already paid, and the new picture to be entirely by my own hand without admixture of the work of anyone else, which on the word of a gentleman I will carry out.”

But get this. Rubens excused what he did by writing to a friend that Carleton “never gave me to understand clearly, though I often entreated him to do so, whether this picture was to be entirely original or merely touched by my own hand.”

He had to be asked!

I’m assuming I don’t have to tell y’all the moral of this story. 🐦