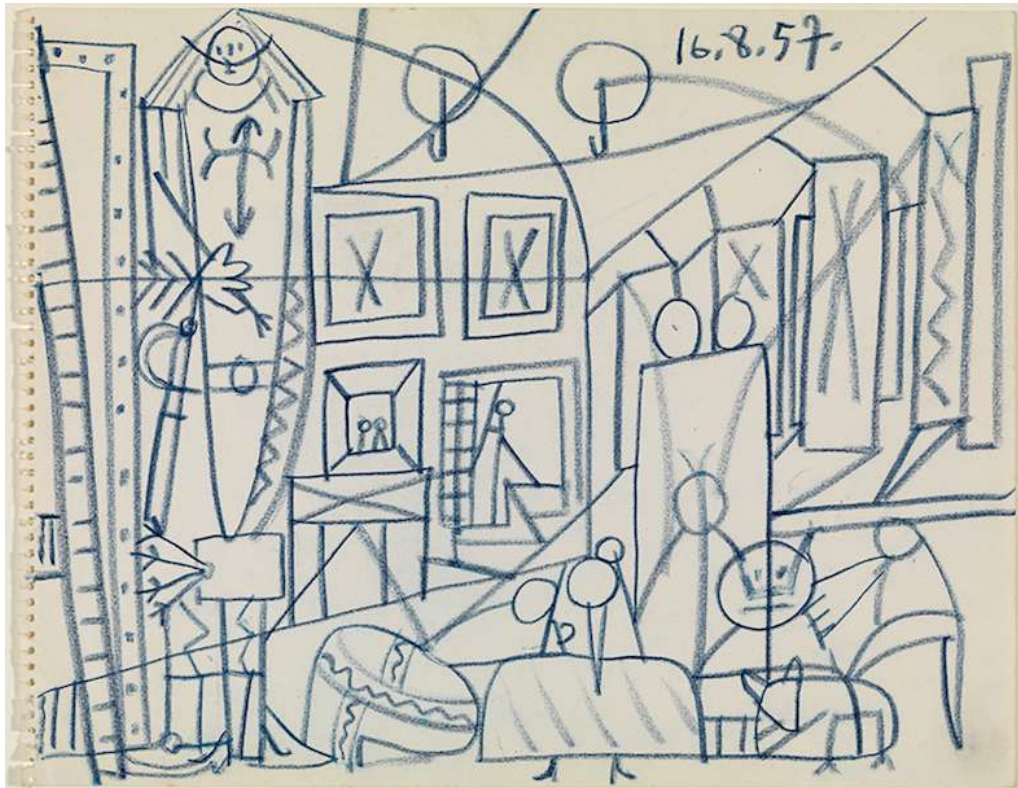


How to Steal like Picasso - in 7 Easy Steps.

Oil Painting Class Sadie Murdoch



Pablo Picasso, Pencil on paper, 1957

All artists borrow from each other. Pablo Picasso is widely quoted as having said “Good artists copy, great artists steal”. Whether he really said this or not is debatable. Nevertheless, all of us to some extent ‘steal’ or borrow elements from other artists work, and then use it to our own devices. As American artist Elaine Sturtevant once said, “Remake, reuse, reassemble, recombine - that’s the way to go.” We are going to do our own remake or ‘copy’ today too.

Questions of originality and what is termed ‘appropriation’ (taking without permission, essentially) have been a contentious issue in art history and criticism. However, ‘theft’ or copying, is a recurring theme in modern art, as we have seen in earlier classes, with Picasso and his mate Georges Braque, and their use of the visual structures of African masks and sculptures.

In 1957, Picasso also made not one, but 58 'copies' of Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas".



Pablo Picasso, Las Meninas, Oil on Canvas, 1957

He was very obsessed with this painting and here's why: "Las Meninas" (The Maids of Honour) painted in 1656, has been one of the most widely analysed works in Western art. The work's complex and rather mysterious composition raises questions about reality and illusion. It also creates an uncertain relationship between the viewer and the figures depicted.

The painting, currently in the Museo del Prado, shows a large room in the Royal Alcazar of Madrid during the reign of King Philip IV of Spain. It presents several figures, 'frozen', in a particular moment as if in a photograph. This painting was made over a century before the invention of photography. Some of the figures look out of the canvas towards the viewer, while others interact amongst themselves. The young Infanta Margaret Theresa is surrounded by her entourage of maids of honour, chaperone, bodyguard, two dwarves and a dog. To the left, Velázquez portrays himself working at a large canvas. The artist looks outwards, beyond the picture surface to us, the audience. In the background there is a mirror that reflects the upper bodies of the king and queen. They appear to be placed outside the pictorial space in a position similar to that of the viewer, although some historians have speculated that their image is a reflection from the painting Velázquez is shown working on. Heading out through a door at the back of the room is Don José Nieto Velázquez. Nieto is shown pausing, with his right knee bent and



Diego Velázquez, Las Meninas, Oil on Canvas, 1656

his feet on different steps. Is he coming in or leaving? "Las Meninas" has been described as "Velázquez's supreme achievement, a highly self-conscious, calculated demonstration of what painting could achieve, and perhaps the most searching comment ever made on the possibilities of the easel painting". The painted surface is

divided up into quarters horizontally and sevenths vertically. Velázquez used this 'grid' device in order to organise the elaborate grouping of characters.



Pablo Picasso, Las Meninas, Oil on Canvas, 1957

Some of Picasso's copies were quite loose and free, like this one above, and others were more tightly structured. In the case of Picasso and Las Meninas, his 'copy' is really a transcription. So today we are going to look at how to make a transcription.

A transcription is when you take a master painting and draw from it to understand how it is made. It isn't copying because you are not replicating it verbatim. Instead, you are distilling the image, and taking from it what you want. It is a tool that artists have used for centuries. Picasso made drawings in pencil and ink in order to better understand the work. These drawings are analytical but also allow some space for interpretation.



Pablo Picasso, Las Meninas, Oil on Canvas, 1957



Pablo Picasso, Las Meninas, Oil on Canvas, 1957

In a transcription of a painting, you can ‘steal’ what the earlier artist did – get inside it, see what she/he was up to. You don’t simply reproduce the surface appearance. Transcription is useful for learning techniques, but it is also very useful for analysing composition and colour - and thinking about how other artists think.

OK let’s go!

1. A good way to start is to find a good photograph of the painting you want to make a transcription of. If you have any art books, choose an image printed large enough so you can see all the details clearly. You can work from an image on a computer phone or laptop but be careful not to spill paint on it!

Choose an image that is bold and has clearly defined forms.

2. Then take a piece of paper, and make sure it is the same proportions as the painting in question. This is important as you can better understand the relationship between the forms in the painting and the shape of the canvas.

3. Then using pencil or ink draw the shapes you can see - do this quickly and don't focus on the details too much - look for the main elements in the work and try to place them in the same way as the original. Do at least two of these sketches. Three is good, four even better!

4. Put the drawings to one side or better still - pin them up on the wall.

5. Prepare a canvas or paper for your transcription, again the same proportions as your chosen painting. You can do this by measuring the original and then scaling it down. Work in oils or acrylics if possible. Gouache is fine too.

6. With a broad brush, indicate on the surface all the dominant colours and forms. Then add in main areas of light and dark.

7. A good tip is to take a really long look at the original painting. And then put it to one side. Resist the temptation to peek! Then work on your painting, putting in what you remember, changing colours and adding whatever you like.

Ideally do like Picasso did - make a series of paintings, although you don't have to make 58! And then you can compare them, like different 'cover versions' that you have made of the same song. Whenever I do transcriptions, I like to listen to cover versions to get a sense how you can transform something, by changing the tempo, using different instruments, etc. What's your favourite cover version? Maybe play it while you paint.