

COPYING OR INFLUENCE?

By Maxine Wade



Over the years, I have had many discussions with both my students and other artists re the difference between copying and being influenced by the work of another artist. One is permissible and the other is not; one is to even be encouraged and the other is to be dismissed as weak. Let's look at the differences.....

We have all heard of instances where there has been a call for a re-judging of a show because of a discovery that an awarded work was “a copy” that we have actually seen - either at an art show or amongst our students or colleagues – a copy of an image or another artwork that we have seen somewhere...perhaps in print in a catalogue, on the internet, in a magazine. We are all bombarded with visual images that are either wonderful compositions/your perfect subject/the way YOU wish you could paint. Many student artists fall under this spell and this is breaking copyright! Without the express permission (usually written) from the owner of the image (perhaps a photographer or artist) you may **not** copy the image. Even if the image is copied with permission, it must be acknowledged. e.g “*..this image is a permitted copy of “Mornington Peninsula View” by Jill Smith....*”

When painting exercises in a tutored class, if working from say, the tutor's painting as an example to “copy” – then it is the tutor's responsibility to TELL their students that they are not permitted to exhibit or sell it UNLESS it is noted in the catalogue as a copy “after (your name)”. But this is not a wise practice and is definitely not to be encouraged. The same applies to exercises they might do from printed images – they must not be exhibited/sold. They must be treated exactly as they are: EXERCISES and nothing else. It should be pointed out that it is then up to the student to take what they have learned and APPLY it to their own subject matter.

A thoughtful quote: **“A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops”** (Henry Brooks Adams American historian/author 1838-1918)

If you attended AGRA'S copyright forum in 2004, you would have gleaned much more information and detail about this vexing issue. You have to tread very warily when handling copyright as there are laws that must be adhered to – otherwise you may find yourself on the end of a lawsuit!

Conversely, being influenced by another artist's work – subject, palette, technique, format – is to be encouraged. There are many instances of this occurring throughout the history of art...look in any art history book and you will find it all documented. For example, Cezanne was a major influence on Picasso's cubist paintings; Modigliani's portraits were influenced by Iberian masks; the nudes of Ingres and David were influenced by the current interest in the newly discovered ruins of Herculaneum. In addition, we can all see influences on and between our contemporary artists – look for yourself, and most of these artists will acknowledge influences on their work. BUT THEY DON'T COPY EACH OTHERS' WORK PER SE – that is the difference. By all means, look at other artists' work – even copy their work BUT AS AN EXERCISE ONLY to learn from them (after all, the apprentice system is a time-honoured one – common practice in the Renaissance, where pupils of Leonardo often finished his paintings). Your job then as an artist, is to take what you have learnt and practised – and develop it into your own style, add your own mark, make it unique. The implementation of these aspects is perfectly acceptable and acknowledges a likeness or similarity to another's art, and indeed an admiration – but not a copy.

Once you understand the crucial difference between copying and influence, you can only benefit from it. We are all still on a learning curve – no matter how long you've been an artist. It is very difficult to be original in the art world – the trick is to take what you need from all the options available to you – and keep looking for new options as this will surely keep your work fresh. Be open to contemporary art, go to as many exhibitions as you can and look at other artists' websites.