ALMINE RECH

Copyists

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From 14 June 2025 to 2 February 2026, in an exceptional collaboration with the Musée du Louvre, the Centre Pompidou-Metz will be presenting an unprecedented exhibition dedicated to the creativity of copyists. Copying was central to the classical tradition. Copying the works of great artists is a tool for learning about the canons, techniques and stories. Absorbing their expertise and adopting their mastery is a pathway to knowledge and artistic creation, from the most academic to the most contemporary.

The artists have received the following invitation from the two curators: 'Imagine a copy of a work of your choosing from the collections of the Musée du Louvre.'

All eras, from antiquity to the 19th century, mingle in a fluid layout, whose exhibition design refers to classic forms of museum display with a scenography inspired by Carlo Scarpa, revealing how many different periods coexist at the Louvre.

Even though many great artists, from Matisse to Picasso, copied the works of past artists, modern art seems to have preferred an approach in which the copy was devalued and continuity was replaced by rupture, figuration by abstraction, freehand painting and sketching by an increase in the number of forms possible.

Today, however, it would seem that the question of the copying is topical once again. Firstly, there has been a return to figuration in contemporary painting and many painters, some of them young, are borrowing figures from ancient works and giving them new life. Secondly, the nature of the copy is being transformed by digital technology: the multiplication of images and their availability, its abstraction and the absence of a physical medium is a vehicle for copying. Finally, the increase in the creative methods now available have extended the meaning of the copy, ranging from 3D scanning in sculpture, which allows for more precise copies, to video games and the copying of life in the digital world.

The Musée du Louvre and its collections have played a key role in this history of copying, which spans centuries and is also a history of art in the modern period (from the 15th century onwards). The Louvre, 'a huge book in which we learn to read,' as Paul Cézanne put it, is the last museum to have a copyists' bureau, which has been in existence since the institution was created in 1793. It has been and remains central to the practice of copying in France and the West. To mark its two hundredth anniversary, the museum organised a famous exhibition, 'Copier-Créer', which highlighted the important role of copying at a time when it was being ideologically called into question.

'Copyists' was born of a different era, and is an entirely different project : about a hundred of contemporary artists have been invited to make copies at the Musée du Louvre, following the footsteps of many of their predecessors, both famous and little known. The guests invited to perform this act of decoding, investigating and understanding, juggling old forms and new, include painters, draughtsmen sculptors, video artists, designers and writers. They offer different ways of copying and different conceptions of the copy and of the status of the works exhibited, in a tension between originality and duplication.

This exhibition brings together this form of artistic creation and this heritage, revealing them in a fresh light. Contemporary art does not necessarily seek to break with history but, on the contrary, to draw on it and be enriched by it, to understand it and understand itself. This project, which is both a continuation of history (in the copy's very form) and radically new (through the works created), is also a meditation on the current state of life. At the same time, it is a mediation on creation, in this 'unseparated' world, in which the power of works must contend with the power of images.

A catalog designed by M/M (Paris) will accompany the exhibition. Introduced by an essay from the curators, the book gives a voice to art historian Jean-Pierre Cuzin, as well as to all the artists who share their vision of copying.

The 'Copyists' exhibition was conceived and organized by the Centre Pompidou-Metz in exceptional collaboration with the Musée du Louvre.