

## Original (and Reproduction) Thoughts

Choosing Caponigro over Van Gogh

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Bill Jay

In April 1987, Van Gogh's painting of "Sunflowers" sold at auction in London for 22.5 million pounds (plus 2.25 million pounds commission). That's nearly \$40 million.

The Art world will never be the same again.

Not that I care.

When art becomes a game which can only be played by mega-millionaires, you will excuse me if I decline to participate. Especially when I calculate that my total gross income for the whole of my working life would not be adequate to buy this single painting. In fact, it would not buy even one of the 15 sunflowers in the work. So, the deal has solved one of life's decisions: I am now resigned to never owning an original Van Gogh; sometimes one must make sacrifices in order to keep oneself in bathroom tissue.

Having excused myself from any personal involvement in this issue, I can still muse on the meaning of it all. And there are several issues which spring to mind.

The artist's sense of self-worth, for example. We hear so much about the gargantuan egos of artists it is refreshing to note that Van Gogh considered the painting to be worth \$40, at 1889 value of course. (In today's prices that would be about \$1,440) Needless to say, no buyer was available during Van Gogh's lifetime and he was condemned to a lifetime of frustration and poverty. Then, as now, if you want to be famous and increase the value of your art, it is good strategy to die.

Perhaps Van Gogh should have stuck to his original occupation: art dealer. For a few minutes of hammer holding and the ability to differentiate between a bid and a nose-pick, Christie's auction house picked up a cool \$4 million in fees.

An obvious reaction to such huge amounts spent on a painting is to speculate on what else could have been done with so much money, a figure which would make a healthy difference in the gross national product of several countries. It could have bought hospitals, schools and houses in abundance. But the problem, of course, is that people with \$40 million to blow on a single painting are not likely to dwell on the more essential elements of survival, such as health, education and shelter. They do not have to attend to the more prosaic details of life, such as taking out the trash, feeding the dog, or pushing a cart around a supermarket.

More puzzling is why such individuals do not buy thousands of paintings by aspiring artists around the world. This would increase the excitement of the game because there is a chance that among the collection would be works by a contemporary "Van Gogh", condemned to a life of penury until discovered by a megabuck patron. Perhaps such collectors do exist, but they do not receive the international media blitz which accompanied the Van Gogh sale.

What about photographs?

Let's assume that fine art prints by contemporary photographers have an average price-tag of \$400, although I am betting that this price will appear quaint within a few years. The price of "Sunflowers", therefore, would buy 100,000 photographs. That's a nifty collection. The only problem is that this would be more than the total production of worthy fine-art prints during the lifetime of every artist-photographer. I knew there was a snag somewhere in the scheme.

Perhaps it was not Van Gogh's art which was such an attraction. Perhaps the unknown buyer (reputedly a Japanese businessman) was crazy about sunflowers. Then my advice would be to buy an original print of every sunflower photograph made by Paul Caponigro in the late 1960s (Sunflower, Paul Caponigro, Filmhouse Inc., N.Y., 1974) - and get back more than \$39,950,000 in change. If given a choice between 50 sunflower prints by Caponigro or one painting by Van Gogh, I would plumb for the former with no hesitation whatsoever.

In case this remark is construed as an antipathy towards Van Gogh's painting, let me quickly add you are probably right. Well, not antipathy so much as a sort of take-it-or-leave-it indifference, bred by over familiarity. It is true that this familiarity has been gained from reproductions rather than from the painting itself. (It is, let's face it, one of the most reproduced paintings in the whole of art history). This makes a difference. But how much of a difference?

Undoubtedly, the original painting has a greater "presence" and provides, therefore, greater viewing pleasure than even the finest reproduction. But, with hand and heart, can I honestly say that the increase in satisfaction is worth \$40 million? Color reproduction techniques have become so sophisticated that a top quality reproduction of "Sunflower" (say, by Athena) means that you have to rub your fingers over the surface in order to tell that the brush strokes are not real.

If that is true with a painting, think of the reproduction fidelity possible with a photograph.

In a recent conversation, Eliot Porter was bemoaning the fugitive nature of dyes in color photography, the inconvenience of making color separation negatives and locking them away in a vault in order that quality prints could be made at a later date, and the expense and time involved in dye-transfers, and so on. So what's new? Then he dropped his own

version of "a bombshell dropped at a tea-party": that laser-scanned color reproductions of his photographs were not only more convenient, cheaper and permanent than the originals, but also of higher quality. This may have been an example of hyperbole, but I do not think so.

Where to draw the line between original and reproduction has always been a moot question in the history of photography. Early daguerreotypes were copied and issued as original albumen prints. Albumen prints were re-photographed and the copy prints sold as originals (often under the names of different photographers). Photographers sold carbon, woodburytype, collotype, photogravure, and a host of other reproductions as the "original" state -for precisely the same reason as Porter, because they were cheaper and more permanent than the silver prints. Julia Margaret Cameron albumens were reissued as carbon prints (often hand-colored) long after her death.

More recently, Ansel Adam's first book, *Making a Photograph*, 1935, included lacquered, tipped-in halftones which most reviewers thought were original prints. There are many other examples. Often, the reproduction was made for aesthetic reasons, because the printed image looked better than the silver image. The Photo-Secessionists, including Alfred Stieglitz and Alvin Langdon Coburn, issued photogravures as originals. Single pages of reproductions from *Camera Work* often sell for more money than most contemporary fine-art photographs. Even today the difference between an original print, a copy print and a reproduction is a hazy area.

The last exhibition of prints by Bill Brandt, which I saw shortly before his death, is a case in point. The gallery director proudly displayed them with the assurance that every print had been purchased directly from Brandt. As I was particularly interested in Brandt's work, I studied each print with care. I then casually remarked how interesting it was that Brandt was now issuing copy prints as signed originals. The gallery director screamed "What!" and threw a fit of pique, feeling that he had been cheated. To Brandt, I am sure, the making of copy negatives from master prints was merely an obvious solution to an otherwise lengthy and tedious printing problem.

Another anecdote. I visited a small college of photography and was delighted and astounded to find on the corridor walls an amazing collection of prints, all carefully matted and framed. There were images by Cartier-Bresson, Weston, Adams, Strand, Stieglitz, Cameron, Brandt et al. A veritable cornucopia of goodies, all hanging for the students' edification and inspiration. I collared the program's director and congratulated him on the quality of work, and asked him how he had managed to obtain such great prints on what was obviously a meager budget. He smiled and whispered in my ear. They were pages torn out of monographs! I rushed back to the exhibition - and still could not tell, in most cases, that they were reproductions.

Fair enough, there are. Some images in the history of the medium where such reproductions would not pass muster, but very, very few. With modern methods of superb reproduction and the nature of photography, I doubt if many viewers, if any, could

spot the difference between most originals and the best reproductions, especially when matted and under glass.

For dealers and hustlers, this issue must be a matter of concern. Let them squirm. For most of us, it merely means that we have more access to fine images at minimal cost. The fact that thousands of other viewers are getting the same pleasure from a reproduction of the identical image only increases my satisfaction in the ubiquitous and democratic nature of photography.

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