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Art

Melissa Baksh

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Want to buy a Da Vinci? I can get you nine! Eternalising Art History - review



▶ Digital double ... a reproduction of Portrait of a Musician, by Leonardo da Vinci, available in an edition of nine. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

Unit London

Using blockchain technology, this fascinating show displays perfect digital copies of works by old masters - and they're for sale, with proceeds going to museums devastated by Covid

How do you feel when you encounter a masterpiece? Humble? Overawed? As well as being cultural havens, historically, museums have had a didactic purpose, encouraging us to think, feel and move around them in a particular way. For example, the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery in London was built to resemble a 15th-century Florentine chapel. To this effect, it reconstructs the original context of the early Renaissance works it houses, which adds to the sense of awe.

This is not the experience you get seeing *Eternalising Art History* at Unit London. For the first time, using blockchain technology, Unit and the digital art platform Cinello have created digital counterparts of six Italian masterpieces by blockbuster names such as Leonardo, Raphael and Caravaggio. The digital images are presented on screens, encased by identical reproductions of their original wooden frames, handcrafted by artisans in Poggibonsi, Tuscany. And, since this is a commercial gallery, they're for sale, in editions of nine (a number that mirrors the production of sculptures, where often nine were produced: two as tests, and seven as the finished pieces).

Each digital doppelganger hangs against its own dark wall. The first and earliest work, Leonardo da Vinci's *Head of a Woman*, is displayed in plexiglass - exactly as it appeared in the Louvre's blockbuster exhibition in 2019. A highlight is Francesco Hayez's *The Kiss*; whose passion charges an exhibition that is not united by a specific time period or theme. As a viewer

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of Caravaggio's Basket of Fruit, or Raphael's Madonna of the Goldfinch, you are not intimidated by the grandeur attached to a masterpiece in a pseudo-sacred space. The exchange feels more like an intimate conversation. The walls are devoid of explanatory text, supporting the idea that no prior art historical knowledge is needed to enjoy art - but you can also access the information on your phone via a QR code, if you feel inclined.



Enticing a new audience? ... a copy of Madonna of the Goldfinch by Raphael, with NFT authentication document. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

So can replicas compete with the real deal? Can the indescribable but tangible "aura" of the original ever be replicated? In short - no. When your eyes scan the surface of a picture to scout out *impasto* - heavier layers of paint built up on the surface - or areas where a varnish has significantly darkened over time - you get a sense of access to the past that is absent here.

Yet the point of these digital replicas is not to re-create or compete with the original, but instead, to get new - and possibly younger - audiences to engage with masterpieces in a world where contemporary art gets all the attention. In 2020 for instance, Tate Modern was the UK's most visited museum, whereas the National Gallery, with its collection of old masters, was ranked fourth.

Part of the reason why old masters may turn gallery-goers off is because art history is steeped in tradition and exclusivity. This unusual exhibition disrupts, challenges and enriches it. What is refreshing - particularly for a commercial art gallery - is the potential for education. Where non-fungible tokens (NFTs) alone are not democratising the art world as once promised, this marriage of digital technology with a physical counterpart creates digital permanence and increases accessibility to historical art.



Modigliani's Head of a Young Lady. Photograph: Courtesy of Pinacoteca di Brera (Milan) and Cinello

Fifty per cent of revenue generated from sales of these digital versions will go back to the museums who own the original works - much needed in the wake of Covid, which saw, on average, visitor numbers of Italian museums fall by a staggering 70%. At present, institutions worldwide are under huge pressure to embrace new innovations in technology or face difficult choices - such as deaccessioning - to make ends meet. The show offers an alternative, and these masterpieces would otherwise be inaccessible to international audiences - they are all too fragile to travel.

For me, the collective ritual of making a pilgrimage to a much-loved museum cannot be beaten. But the harsh reality is that we simply cannot move around in the same way as we did pre-pandemic. In the (very near) future, exhibitions could include both original artworks and digital replicas, allowing for broader curatorial themes at a fraction of the cost and ecological impact. In this way, the exhibition is a nod towards what is to come.

Of course, an exhibition of digital artworks is bound to polarise opinion; that Unit has chosen to reproduce some of the most significant works in western art may just be salt in the wound. However, love it or loathe it, the digital art revolution has arrived; and the gap between the physical and virtual has been well and truly bridged.

- Eternalising Art History: From Da Vinci to Modigliani is at Unit London until 19 March.

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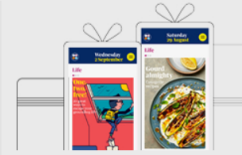
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