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Projecting Photos: Shameful Shortcut or Not?

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Borrowed Suit (Conté crayon and pastel, 36x24) by Chris Rush.

Projector: useful tool or deceitful trick? Three artists take sides in this enduring debate.

projecting & art

BY DEBORAH CHRISTENSEN SECOR

Getting it right

Laurin McCracken took more than 150 photos (including the one at near right) for his painting *Silver, Crystal, Pears and Lemons* (far right; watercolor, 20x27). After manipulating the photo in a simple software program, he had a slide made and used the projected image for the drawing.

Is a slide projector simply a practical tool that artists use to record what is seen—or is it a slightly shady way of circumventing the need to draw? Throughout recent history artists have used different mechanical means to help them accurately see and record an image, yet the practice of projection elicits strong negative reactions among many artists today. Should projection be considered a useful tool or merely dismissed as a deceitful trick? Laurin McCracken, Frank Federico and Judith Carducci share their views about this simple method of transferring an image to the painting surface.

It's about the paint Laurin McCracken

"It's amazing that so many artists think of projection as cheating," says Laurin McCracken, of Fort Worth, Texas. McCracken projects



photographs onto paper as one of the early steps in painting his watercolors. "There's so much precedent for using tools to get to fine art. Look at paintings by Giovanni Antonio Canal Canaletto (1697-1768) and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1876). Canaletto used a large cart with a camera obscura on it to make accurate landscapes, and Ingres did paintings and small drawings with a camera lucida. Who can argue that they aren't fine art?" (See *Secrets of the Masters: Camera Obscura*, page 39.)

McCracken began drawing at age 5 during a battle with polio. "Today I always have a sketchbook with me, drawing with a fountain pen on watercolor paper. I've come to a high level of accuracy, so when I decided to learn to paint in watercolors, I used the projector as a way to speed the process of learning to paint."

After meticulously composing a still life and taking approximately 200 reference photos, McCracken manipulates the large-sized file in Photoshop and chooses one photo to be made into a 35 mm slide that he projects onto his paper. "I'd say that I'm 90 percent done by the time the slide is made. I may have turned an object by five degrees in five different pictures, and even then I discover things. Not long ago I had two slides that were almost identical, but in one you could see the tating on the edge of a cloth in a reflection. You simply can't see that in a viewfinder; you have to look at a slide."

Using a well-worn Kodak Carousel projector that he bought while in college, McCracken considers projection for the sake of efficiency. "I don't paint full-time yet, so time is important," he notes, adding that he's only been painting seriously for about four years. "I've



been a photographer for 40 years, so I use the projected image as a preliminary drawing but, even after hours of preparation, I'll rearrange things in the drawing. I'm composing every step of the way. For instance, I was doing a still life recently (See *Silver, Crystal, Pears and Lemons* on page 37) and, as I was drawing, I rearranged some walnuts. Then, I found that a piece of silver was tilted slightly, so I straightened it. You can't be an absolute slave to the photo, but just think how long it would take to draw every flute in crystal or every reflection on silver." After spending hundreds of hours composing his detailed paintings, McCracken notes that he's learned a great deal about how light is reflected and refracted. "I can see well enough to be able to fake it if I need to," he says.

McCracken believes that the projector is simply a vehicle to get to the important part of his art more quickly. "For me, it's not about the line; it's about the paint. What I do is not a graphite-and-watercolor painting, it's a watercolor painting. In the end, the drawing is not the painting."

Creative fooling Frank Federico

"Cheating is relative," remarks Frank Federico, of Goshen, Connecticut. "Projection is not something I generally use—maybe 1 or 2 percent of the time—but it can be a perfectly valid tool if it doesn't compromise your drawing ability."

Federico finds that tracing from a projected image, a process which he employed extensively during his 10 years as a commercial advertising artist, may result in a rigid exactitude. "Unless you draw from the projector in a happenstance way that creates interesting shapes, it can stiffen a painting. I don't use a projector rigidly, but rather for defining edges and finding the large shapes. Projection can also be an avenue for unique accidents. It's just another way to manipulate the image so that interesting things come out. I like to explore, losing form and finding it. I call it 'creative fooling,'" he adds.

"Before you use any tool creatively you should learn to draw with different lines. There's pure line, which is an unimaginative delineation of a shape that's stiff and uninteresting, and there are contour lines, in which the press and

Text continued on page 41.



Improving on nature

For *Magnolia Trio* (watercolor, 22x30), McCracken used a projected image, as he usually does, to shorten the drawing and painting process. In this case, it helped him capture the curves and the volume of the flowers. He also simplified the leaves and background.



Making it your own

Frank Federico considers *San Diego Fantasy* (pastel, 30x40) the most “technological” painting he’s ever done. He simplified the colors of a photograph in Photoshop, added brightness and contrast, then projected the printout and blocked in the shapes. “I also altered, shifted and refined things without the projector or other devices,” he says.

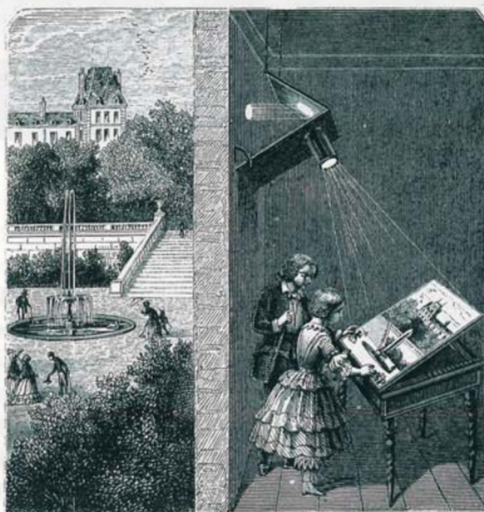
Secrets of the Masters

Camera obscura

Artists have always been a secretive lot, not given to sharing their methods, so the uses of the camera obscura and later of the camera lucida were classified studio secrets. The camera obscura (Latin for “room” + “dark”) is based on an optical phenomenon that occurs when a darkened tent or room with a small hole pierced in one wall allows the scene outside to be viewed upside down on the opposite wall. The camera lucida (Latin for “room” + “light”) is a portable device using a prism to project a reflection onto paper.

Although the camera obscura is recorded by many early cultures and is described in Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks, it isn’t until Daniel Barbaro’s 1568 book, *La Practica della Perspettiva*, that we find written evidence of a camera obscura used for tracing. During the mid-1500s, the introduction of the concave mirror clarified the projected image, allowing the artist to make a drawing via advanced technology. By the late 1600s, artists had developed a darkened tent or carriage, essentially a large transportable camera obscura, and by the 18th century, artists used a box model (the forerunner of the photographic camera we know today).

Among the most notable proponents of using the



Children watching an outdoor scene through a camera obscura, 1887. From *Natural Philosophy* by A. Ganot (London, 1887).

HIP/ART Resource, NY, Oxford Science Archive, Oxford, Great Britain.

camera obscura for drawing were Canaletto and Francesco Guardi, as well as Sir Joshua Reynolds, who used a small, portable version. In his book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (Viking Studio, 2001), David Hockney purports that such a technologi-

cal breakthrough is evident as early as 1430, confirmed by the almost photographic likenesses found in portraits that suddenly burst onto the scene. By the 19th century, the camera obscura, modified to project an image onto light-sensitive film, became the photographic camera.

Technology is always suspect in the creative process, as if using a tool somehow violates the intrinsic humanness of art making. Yet such things have no doubt been put to use by artists in every era, precisely because of the human proclivity to invent and use tools. At one point in time, someone picked up a feather and discovered the expressive freedom of using a new tool to create a painting on a cave wall. Perhaps this artist was criticized for relying on new equipment to do what only the hand had done before?



Why Feel Shame?

Adapting to the times

Many contemporary artists questioned for this article were reluctant to admit that they ever used a slide projector. In the 21st century such slavish copying is thought to be a form of cheating, a way to duplicitously trace a photograph in order to cover up missing drawing skills, despite the long history of such technological assistance used by some of the great artists throughout history. Oddly, when a few artists finally admitted, *sotto voce*, to occasionally using a projector, it was obvious that they were skilled, capable artists who did not lack drawing ability.

No one was reluctant, however, to mention using a computer, a further technological breakthrough. Why is there such scathing criticism of projection yet widespread acceptance of the computer? I believe the answer lies once again with the almost

mystical process of human creativity. While a projector may be used creatively, its use is relegated to doing only one thing well—projecting an image that is then copied. The computer, on the other hand, a tool that's so versatile that it cannot be pigeonholed as having only one mission, has become an extension of the artist's hand. Unlike the slide projector, the computer truly gives the artist more expressive freedom predicated on the creative inclinations of the individual. It's a technological marvel—not only does it enhance the touch of the artist in many different ways, but it does not violate the humanness of art making.

Altering a photo

I didn't use a projector for *Smoldering Moment* (above; pastel, 11x23) or *Sunstruck City* (bottom; pastel, 6x17); however, I did use Photoshop to crop, increase contrast or enhance the colors in the original photos. For *Sunstruck City*, I printed out a grayscale copy to see the values clearly.



release of the pencil provides the delineation between negative and positive shapes. When you're drawing by hand, a line comes from emotion or from serendipity. It's gestural or personal, compared to the simple carved-out line blocking in a box with a ruler."

Federico views a projector as a means to an end. "Projection should be employed judiciously. I'll sometimes use projection as an 'exploratory' tool or to expedite a basic road map," he remarks. The projected image allows him to lay in the simplified, fundamental structure of the painting, loosely defining the positive and negative shapes. "I might be doing a lot of figures and use the slide to get the energy flow, just to set up the gestures. It makes the process quicker, and it's another way to get there instead of using academic systems such as the Golden Mean, which I find somewhat stultifying. Blurring a slide can be very interesting—that's another approach." Federico echoes McCracken, "Frankly, I think the essence of the artwork is achieved in the process of painting."

A dead giveaway Judith Carducci

"Drawing is much more than rendering something photorealistically," says Judith Carducci, of Hudson, Ohio. "It's the quality of line, its direction, texture, pattern, speed, sensuousness, and boldness, location in the space, crispness or softness. One never learns to draw from copying photos. If the beginning artist is using the projector as a shortcut, he'll never learn to draw and the resulting work will betray him. Photos hugely distort perspective, values, edges, and color. The artist must already know how to translate these factors into art, making important adjustments."

In critiquing portfolios for the Portrait Society of America, as well as judging various shows, Carducci sees paintings that are clearly copied from photos. "It's a big problem in the field of portraiture. I frequently see paintings that are dead giveaways. It's true that a portrait



Diverging paths

For his painting, *On Sixth Avenue, N.Y.* (above; pastel, 48x60), Frank Federico projected photos and drawings onto a surface and fused the shapes together to reflect the energy and angst of the street.

In *Tom With Cue* (at left; pastel, 30x24), Judith Carducci painted her subject in the studio using artificial lighting—"hence the drama," she says. "The painting was done purely for fun. Tom claims to have supported himself in his youth with his pool-playing skills."

*"The time a beginner spends
copying photos is time taken
from learning to draw."*

—Judith Carducci

demands a certain amount of accuracy in addition to expressiveness but, if the artist only traces, drawing skills suffer. The time a beginner spends copying photos is time taken from learning to draw, whereas an experienced artist can use a photo as a jumping-off point to create something of his own. Recently there was a hubbub about the discovery that Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) used photos, as if he had somehow committed a sin. He made them his own and created masterpieces very different from the photos. I challenge anybody to take those photos and paint them into an Eakins.”

An artistically talented youngster, Carducci

took life-drawing lessons from an early age. “I still hear Blanche Whiting Plimpton’s voice in my ear saying, ‘Look for the lost and found.’ I’ll always be deeply grateful for that wonderful early training in drawing. It was classical and intense, and it’s rare and difficult to find now. I’ve never used a projector, just as I don’t make thumbnail sketches, although I recognize their efficacy. It has to do with my personality and the pleasure I take in composing freehand right on the painting or drawing surface. It’s not a moral issue, but one of style.”

Carducci points out that the painted portrait exceeds mere correctness, which is only the starting point for an experienced artist. “Drawing encompasses the entire creative process: choosing what to paint, composing the space, values, quality and speed of line, pattern, texture, mood, drama, color—the whole work of art. Projecting to make an under-drawing isn’t cheating, because there’s more to it than the under-drawing,” she states, adding, “We have to ask what gives fine art intrinsic aesthetic value. If the artist has vision, he’ll use any tool creatively.” ♦

 To see more work from these artists, click on **Gallery** at www.artistsmagazine.com.

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Before it's gone

“This scuzzy sink, with its broken pipes and badly repaired soap holder, is in the studio of the Akron Society of Artists, and I’ve long wanted to paint it,” says Carducci, of *Studio Sink With Lava Soap* (pastel, 20x16). “The ASA artists will be moving to grander quarters soon, so we’re feeling nostalgic.”

