

# PRESIDENT'S REPORT MARCH 2025

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING



Vettriano, The Singing Butler



The recent death of Jack Vettriano at the age of 73 has brought the Scottish painter back into the spotlight. He enjoyed phenomenal success, earning millions with his obsessive exploration of a glamorous time that only ever existed in films of the 1930s and 40s. His characters smoke, drink, and drive classic cars. Each image implies a tense narrative that the viewer is permitted to glimpse. Vettriano said his work was autobiographical and was about sex.



Vettriano, Standing in the shadow of love



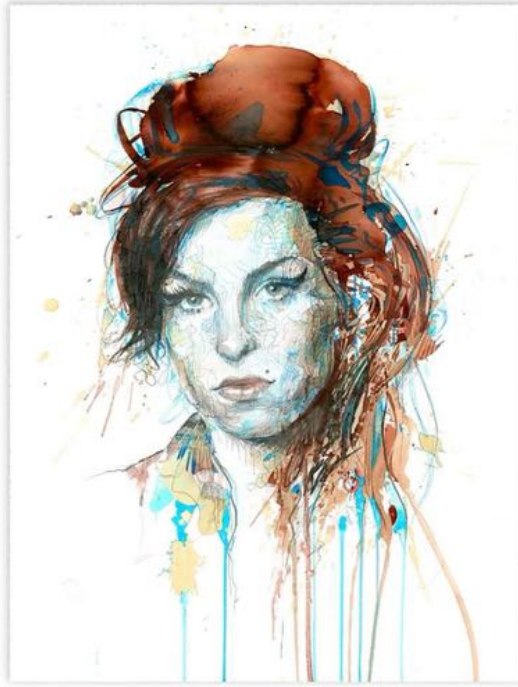
Vettriano, The Weight

Vettriano was self-taught, taking up painting at the age of 40. He bore a longstanding grudge against the art world which declined to take his work seriously, dismissing it as soft porn and sentimental voyeurism. He never forgave the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh for neither showing nor buying his work. It didn't count that he had enjoyed a huge retrospective show at the Kelvingrove art gallery and museum in 2013, an exhibition that I saw. It was difficult not to be impressed, if only by the sheer scale of the achievement. The Guardian called it 'a miserable, soulless show'. Reviews like that mattered to Vettriano.

Reading the obituaries clarified some matters relating to Vettriano's practice as a painter, and prompted reflection on similar strategies used by other artists.

Vettriano always copied. He taught himself to use watercolours to copy reproductions of Old Master paintings. The figures in his most famous work, 'The Singing Butler', were copied from The Illustrator's Figure Reference Manual. As he became successful he was able to organise elaborate photo shoots where models, costumes, props and lighting were meticulously arranged. The artist drew from the photographs, which were pinned adjacent to the painting on his easel, then essentially coloured in with oil paint. He faithfully copied the photographs rather than using them as inspiration, reference or part of a tool kit.

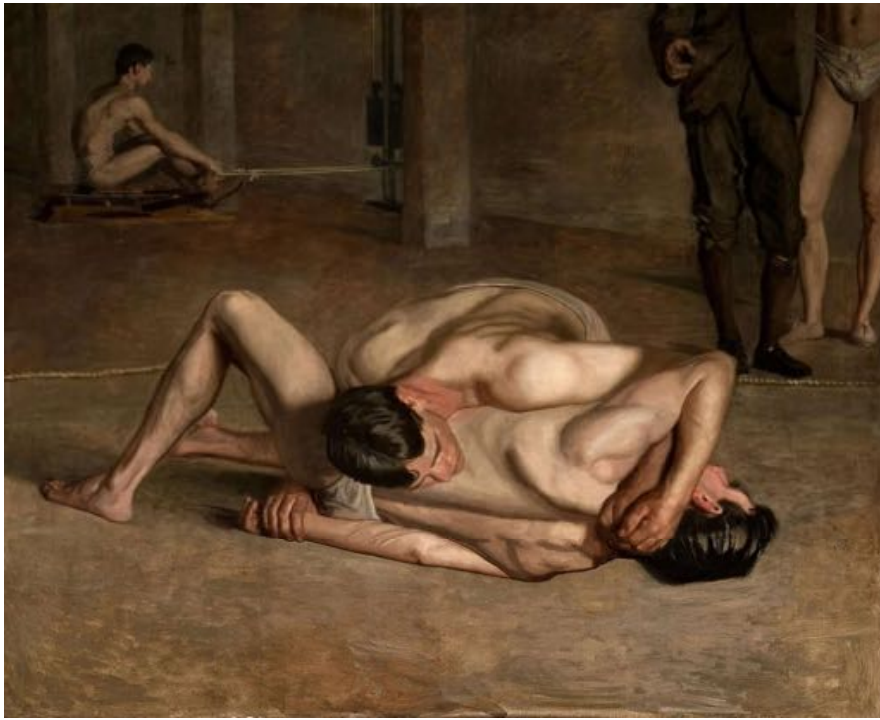
Painters have been using photographs since the invention of photography in 1829. Sometimes the photography was used openly and sometimes surreptitiously. The notion that copying photographs was somehow cheating was widespread. 'Done from a snap' allowed the critic to dismiss the work of art as a sort of cheap trick. This way of thinking is no longer prevalent.



Virtually all of the artists who do demonstrations at BDAG meetings on Saturdays use photographs. Carne Griffiths, who recently demonstrated his pen and wash technique, uses photographs downloaded from the internet. He works with a pen in his right hand and a photograph in his left hand. His subject matter is portraiture, chiefly celebrities or glamorous models. Like Vettriano, Griffiths markets his work in a variety of reproductive formats.

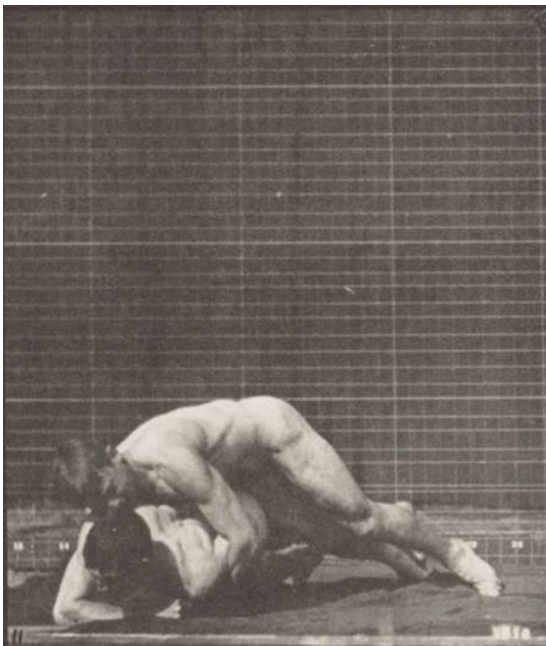
Thomas Eakins, Photograph of Wrestlers





Thomas Eakins, Painting of Wrestlers

An early practitioner of copying photographs was the American painter Thomas Eakins (1844-1916). Eakins was a photographic pioneer with a particular interest in the scientific study of movement, a passion he shared with the better-known photographer Edward Muybridge, who he knew. Many of Eakins's paintings are careful transcriptions of his own photographs. 'The Wrestlers' is a good example.



Muybridge, Wrestlers



Bacon, Wrestlers

Coincidentally, Muybridge also produced photographic sequences of wrestlers. This work and other photographs by Muybridge came to the attention of the painter Francis Bacon, who based several series of paintings on a number of Muybridge photographs. Bacon's interest in wrestlers was rather more complex than Eakins's. (Vettriano revealed that he found an exhibition of Bacon's paintings so overwhelming that he was unable to paint for a time. Interesting parallels between the two artists, including the umbrella motif, are extensive.)



Still from The Battleship Potemkin



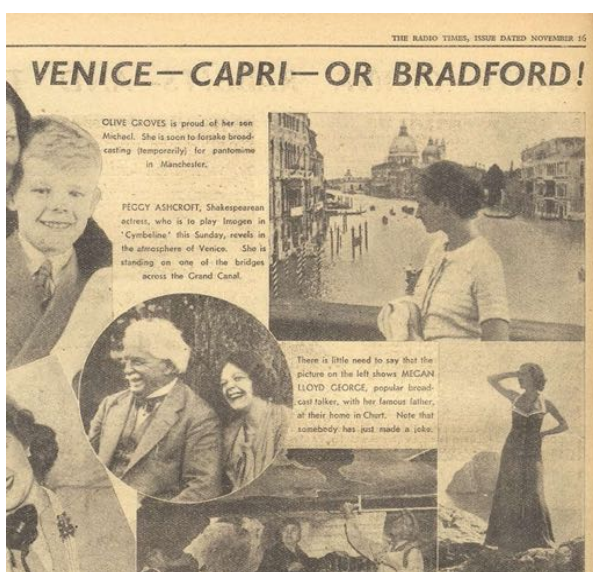
Bacon, Screaming Pope

Bacon, Screaming Pope Bacon used other photographic sources, including film stills and, like Vettriano, reproductions of Old Masters such as Velasquez.

A brief examination of the relationship between art and photography reveals other intriguing ways of working.



Walter Sickert. High Steppers (Based on a newspaper photograph)



Newspaper page



Sickert, Peggy Ashcroft in Venice



Richter, Reader



Richter, Skull and Candle

Walter Sickert, perhaps anticipating Pop Art, used anonymous newspaper photographs as source material. If an image caught his eye, he would square it up and copy it onto canvas quite mechanically, using his signature coarse brushy style. No one seems quite sure why he did this.

Gerhard Richter is an extraordinary artist who many people regard as the greatest living painter. He continues to work on an ambitious scale well into his nineties. He has painted in a variety of genres but the one that concerns us here is based on photography. In this work Richter uses his own photographs of his family or friends. He projects the image onto canvas, drawing with a pencil. He then paints in imitation of the photograph. Finally he softens the image while the paint is still wet, using a badger blender. The effect is of an image slightly out of focus. Some are virtually indecipherable. His methods are very similar to those of Vettriano.



George Shaw



George Shaw



George Shaw paints using slides. His subject matter is his childhood home in Tile Hill, a suburb of Coventry. The images are projected, drawn out in pencil, then coloured using Humbrol model paints. They amount to a bleak vision of suburban Britain. There are no people.



Malcolm Morley, SS Rotterdam

Malcolm Morley had an intriguing method which he developed as a pioneering photorealist. He used postcards or other advertising material as a starting point. The source material was overlaid with a grid, which was enlarged in proportion on canvas. He then masked out all but one rectangle on the original, then meticulously copied that into the corresponding rectangle on the painting, which was similarly masked. To make things more interesting, the original image was turned upside down, with the painting inverted in the same way. The complete image would only be revealed when all the rectangles had been filled and the painting was turned the right way round. Morley was fascinated by the tiny unintended discontinuities and discrepancies in the finished work. Morley was the first winner of the Turner prize.



Banksy, Crude Oil

Returning to Vettriano, we can note that his most famous work, 'The Singing Butler', was sold at auction in 2004 for £744,800. A reimagined copy of the painting, with a wreck and hazardous chemical workers, by Banksy, just sold for £4.3 million pounds. A copy of a copy of a copy.