

## “To Thine Own Self”

What’s the difference between an original and a counterfeit? Between authenticity and imposture? How do you differentiate a cheap knock-off from the real thing? Sometimes the telltale signs are so slight that even experts have trouble telling them apart.

That was true, for example, of the strange case that took place in Vermont a couple of years back when Don Trachte died. The people who remembered Don knew him as a cartoonist, the creator of the syndicated comic strip “Henry” which appeared in Sunday funnies back when I was a kid. But Trachte was also a member of a community of more serious artists who lived and worked near Arlington, in the southern part of the state, the best known member of the group being Norman Rockwell.

In 1960, Trachte bought a canvass from his friend called “Breaking Home Ties” that was destined to become one of the better known painter’s most iconic images. Originally created for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, it pictures a bright young man dressed in a brand new summer suit, a suitcase sporting a college pennant tucked between his legs as he sits on the running board of his dad’s model A Ford. His rancher father, haggard and dressed in faded overalls, sits to his right gazing downward, in contrast to the expectant, watchful expression on the boy’s face as he looks down the tracks awaiting the train that will take him away to university and a brand new future. The family Collie dog sits by the boy’s side, a picture of canine loyalty that adds poignancy to the separation soon to occur. Trachte paid \$900 for the painting and apparently liked it so well that he copied it.

The forgery didn’t come to light until 2006, when Don Trachte’s children began to clean house after their father’s death. In the living room, behind a paneled wall where the phoney had hung for decades before being placed in safekeeping, there was a secret compartment, and in that cubbyhole the *bona fide* artwork had been squirreled away. As a fellow illustrator, Trachte had numerous opportunities to spend time in Rockwell’s studio, watching him work. And at some point—probably during a messy divorce when he tried to hide the art collection that was becoming a valuable asset--Trachte decided to reproduce his prized painting, stroke for stroke. The counterfeit had traveled around the world, exhibited from Moscow to Cairo. Tens of thousands had seen the bogus picture at the Rockwell museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. But only a very few had questioned the authenticity of the piece, or noticed a slight variance between the cover of the *Post* that first appeared in 1954 and the expression on the boy’s face that Trachte had tried hard (but unsuccessfully) to mimic. Something was off about the eyes, a sparkle of vitality and exuberance that Rockwell had managed to capture but that, in the imitation, fell flat. Looking at the two pieces side by side, the contrast is undefinable but unmistakable. Whatever “it” is that makes a genuine work of art, one has it and one doesn’t.

What is that indefinable ingredient that gives life its verve and zest and flair? And when does existence become just a pale knock-off of the genuine article? The answer must have something to do with honesty, with integrity, with being yourself, with developing

your own individual talents rather than slouching into the lazy habits of the copyist.

For all of us start out life as imitators, first taking on the coloration of our families and parents, then trying on the style of peers and mass culture, sculpting our lives on others' expectations of who we are.

And there's nothing wrong with copying. Learning from the masters is a classical technique. I've tried to copy paintings by Edward Hopper and Thomas Eakins, for instance. And I'd like to be able to take my easel to the Shelburne Museum, to copy the Degas and Manets and even the Ogden Pleissners. But at some point,, as Emerson said, "imitation is suicide."

A few years ago, I was considering taking a pastel class from a local artist whose work I admired. "Careful," a friend warned me, "everyone who studies with that particular teacher winds up with stuff that looks just like hers." Bright, slick, polished, but definitely not me. As it ended up, I didn't take the course. Because that wasn't the goal I was after.

Reaching down inside ourselves, to that realm of deeply personal, interior vision, we curiously discover what's most human and universal. What's most intimate touches on what's what's most ultimate. No one would mistake a Van Gogh for a Vermeer, for example, yet each artist makes us see the world in ways we've never seen before. Being unique, they become transcendent.

Other spiritual traditions make the same point. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." And the Zen master warns, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" Your life is not meant to be a replica of someone else's. You're not here to think borrowed thoughts, or live in your parent's marriage, or follow a party line or trim your imagination to fit a corporate cubicle, or to be indistinguishable from the other gifted students in the class. Though the temptation is strong to follow a ready-made template, your job is not to color inside the lines, but to let your own light shimmer.

Which is to say, we're not all Norman Rockwell, and shouldn't try to be. The names of the painters that lived and worked in southern Vermont in the 30's and 40's have largely dropped out of popular memory. Yet they did great work in their time, like Mead Schaeffer, who died in 1980. He was one of Rockwell's nearby neighbors—his teenage daughters posed in Rockwell's studio on more than one occasion when a "peppy" good-looking girl was needed. Schaeffer's best known for illustrating adventure books like *Moby Dick* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Captain Blood*. But sometime in the 1940's, Schaeffer tired of painting buccaneers and fantasy figures. "I suddenly realized I was sick of painting dudes and dandies," he's quoted as saying. "I longed to do honest work, based on real places, real people and real things." Google Mead Schaeffer's name and dozens of beautiful images come up from a long, successful career, and the same is true of others in that southern Vermont circle, like Dean

Cornwell and Gene Pelham. You can see for yourself that these were talented men, gifted artists, serious hard-working professionals. Try googling Don Trachte, on the other hand, and one image comes up, over and over, *ad nauseum*--his famous fake of "Breaking Home Ties," with a smattering of old "Henry" cartoons. What a sad legacy for a man who could have done better.

Know thyself and to thy own self be true turn out to be mottoes for the artist and the spiritual seeker alike. And creative living means tapping into the power of the depths we share. For all the anguish and beauty of art and all the strength of faith live inside of you, as they live in us all.