

## Reimagining Aesthetic Value: Art in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The introduction of artificial intelligence has stirred controversy in many quarters; the art world is no exception. The revelation that machine learning models could generate art has caused great consternation. Apart from fears that these capabilities threaten the livelihoods of human creators,<sup>1</sup> some declare AI pieces to be simply “boring.”<sup>2</sup> At the heart of the debate about the use of AI in creative fields is the issue of whether it can produce art with the same aesthetic value as works created solely by humans. While some may doubt this, it is clear that machine-learning models can create art that is a form of expression as original, meaningful, and artistically valuable as its human-made counterparts.

Some critics argue that AI art is less worthy<sup>3</sup> than manmade art because it is unoriginal. They reason that because artificial intelligence does nothing more than collect human artists' pieces and modify and/or combine them so that they can be said to be “new” according to the user, intelligent machines are not actually “creating” new art at all; they are merely plagiarizing elements of “real” artists' works and merging them into large displays of creative piracy.<sup>4</sup>

By this logic, however, every artist is intrinsically a plagiarist. As virtually all creatives are naturally inspired by the works of their predecessors to some degree, they inevitably incorporate—whether consciously or subconsciously—the styles, ideas, and techniques of those who came before them; a portrait artist unavoidably integrates Rembrandt's treatment of light, Bacon's realism, or some other element from another origin; when a director shoots a scene, they

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<sup>1</sup>CBC News, “Vancouver Animation Professor Says Artists Are Fighting against Rising Threats of AI,” CBC, January 30, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-animation-professor-says-artists-are-fighting-against-rising-threats-of-ai-1.7098360#:~:text=The%20threat%20of%20what%20artificial.>

<sup>2</sup> Dani Di Placido, “The Problem with AI-Generated Art, Explained,” Forbes, December 30, 2023, [https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2023/12/30/ai-generated-art-was-a-mistake-and-heres-why/.](https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2023/12/30/ai-generated-art-was-a-mistake-and-heres-why/)

<sup>3</sup> “Value,” “worth,” etc. will hereon refer to aesthetic and artistic value, not monetary.

<sup>4</sup> University of Plymouth, “Is AI-Generated Art Actually Art?,” University of Plymouth, 2022, <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/discover/is-ai-generated-art-actually-art.>

inescapably reference the work of Kubrick, Tarantino, Spielberg or the like;<sup>5</sup> in writing a song, it is inevitable that some chord progressions emulate those of the Beatles, the Who, or some other musician that inspired them.<sup>6</sup> It would be wrong to denigrate an artist's talents and value as an originator of work merely because they borrow some artistic elements. To say otherwise would mean that throughout the thirty thousand-year history of human art,<sup>7</sup> each artist who drew inspiration from those who came before was no more than a copycat. Rather, just as in the case of AI, the imitation or borrowing of another's art or elements of it leads to the creation of some new form of artistic expression. While artificial intelligence's creative process is different from that of human artists, it is still as authentic as any man made art.

Another criticism of the value of art produced by machine learning about its value questions its ability to communicate meaning. One of the most important contributors to art's worth is its ability to express. Throughout human history, art has been a means to tell a story, convey a feeling, or communicate that which other means would not sufficiently allow. Even as new forms have emerged throughout the millennia, this characteristic of artistic expression has remained consistent. Some would argue that unlike manmade art, which is often inspired by human experiences and emotions, artificial intelligence cannot undergo such sensations and thus cannot incorporate its own "intrinsic ... meaning;"<sup>8</sup> accordingly, it has no merit.

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<sup>5</sup> Bright Side, "13 Scenes Directors Shamelessly 'Borrowed' from Other Movies," Bright Side — Inspiration. Creativity. Wonder., May 4, 2020, <https://brightside.me/articles/13-scenes-directors-shamelessly-borrowed-from-other-movies-796995/>.

<sup>6</sup> WatchMojo, "Top 20 Sound-Alike Songs," WatchMojo, accessed June 22, 2024, <https://www.watchmojo.com/articles/top-20-sound-alike-songs/metallica-sad-but-true-1993-vs-avenged-sevenfold-this-means-war-2014>.

<sup>7</sup> Gillian M. Morriss-Kay, "The Evolution of Human Artistic Creativity," *Journal of Anatomy* 216, no. 2 (February 2010): 158–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7580.2009.01160.x>.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Will Chambers, "Artificial Intelligence Agents Are Not Artists," Medium (Towards Data Science, December 27, 2020), <https://towardsdatascience.com/artificial-intelligence-agents-are-not-artists-9743d5dba2d0>.

This argument fails in two ways. First, it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the process through which machine learning models generate creative works. AI generators do not independently decide what to create and how to create it. Rather, they require user input to direct their generation; the user who inputs these instructions has great latitude in controlling the work.<sup>9, 10</sup> Using these abilities, the user can impart the desired sensation or message onto the piece with incredible precision, expressing themselves and giving the AI-generated art meaning.

Second, this argument incorrectly assumes that art requires inherent meaning to be aesthetically valuable. The most obvious refutation of this logic exists in abstract art, one of the most popular modes of artistic expression today;<sup>11</sup> abstract art's main purpose is said to encourage involvement and imagination in its viewers by providing them with an intangible experience unique to each observer, not express its creator's message or feeling.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, even if an AI-generated work of art does not have an explicit meaning, it still provides value by provoking a sentiment or sensation in the viewer.

Additionally, some argue that art produced by artificial intelligence is “lazy”<sup>13</sup> and requires less effort, making it less valuable than creative work done solely by humans. This position is invalid in modern society, as the emergence of new techniques has made creating art more effortless. For example, the invention of the first camera allowed artists to capture images

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<sup>9</sup> Terry Farris, “Mastering Query Language: Enhancing Accuracy in AI Generation Tools,” [www.linkedin.com \(LinkedIn, June 21, 2023\)](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/mastering-query-language-enhancing-accuracy-ai-tools-dr-terry-farris/), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/mastering-query-language-enhancing-accuracy-ai-tools-dr-terry-farris/>.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Urwin, “How Does AI-Generated Art Work?,” [builtin.com, October 31, 2023](https://builtin.com/artificial-intelligence/how-does-ai-generated-art-work#:~:text=AI%20art%20is%20any%20type.),

<https://builtin.com/artificial-intelligence/how-does-ai-generated-art-work#:~:text=AI%20art%20is%20any%20type.>

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Elgammal and Doug Woodham, “Is Figurative or Abstract Art More Popular Today?,” [Artsy, January 30, 2019](https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-instagrammed-artworks-art-basel-miami-beach), <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-instagrammed-artworks-art-basel-miami-beach>.

<sup>12</sup> Lobo, “Abstract Art! Definition, Types, Characteristics E Objective,” [Lobo Pop Art \(Artista, June 27, 2020\)](https://lobopopart.com.br/en/abstract-art/#:~:text=The%20main%20purpose%20of%20abstraction%20in%20art%20is%20not%20to.), <https://lobopopart.com.br/en/abstract-art/#:~:text=The%20main%20purpose%20of%20abstraction%20in%20art%20is%20not%20to.>

<sup>13</sup> Aaron Stump (@AaronWStump), “AI Art Is for Lazy People Who Don’t Want to Put in the Work to Be Good at the Craft,” [X, December 4, 2023](https://mobile.twitter.com/AaronWStump/status/1731861802743443479), <https://mobile.twitter.com/AaronWStump/status/1731861802743443479>.

with just the click of a button, as opposed to hours of drawing or painting. The popularization of electronic music made it far easier for musicians to create unique sounds and melodies. Are artists who use premixed paints less talented than those who blend their pigments by hand? Are stories written using word processors less important than those written by hand with a quill and ink? Should a sculptor's work be valued less because they used modern tools instead of traditional chisels and hammers? The value of art is not determined by the tools used or the effort required to produce it. Likewise, even if AI art may require less effort to produce, it still has worth.

The integration of artificial intelligence into the realm of art marks a significant evolution in creative expression. Nonetheless, the true worth of art remains in its ability to express and engage, regardless of the technique. While some critics argue that AI-generated art is less valuable as it lacks the originality, meaning, or effort associated with exclusively manmade works, it is evident that AI art has just as much aesthetic worth as human-made art.

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