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The Painter's Dilemma: Creative Destruction and Opportunity in the Age of AI

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the art world, raising both fears and hopes for the future of traditional painting. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities that AI presents to painters, using historical context to offer insight. By comparing the current AI revolution to the invention of photography in the 19th century, the study shows how artists in the past faced similar disruptions—and how many adapted and found new forms of expression. Using a descriptive method, the research highlights how painters today can position themselves to benefit from AI rather than be displaced by it. The findings suggest that with creativity and a willingness to evolve, painters can not only survive this wave of change but also shape the future of art.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Painter, Disruption, Photography, Adaptation, Creative Opportunity*

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Background to the Study

Creative destruction is a term used by Bani Rakesh (2023) to describe the massive changes that the growth of technology imposes on a society. The introduction of any technological advancement is often greeted by a mixed reaction, with camps of supporters, those against, and even the nonchalant. No matter these reactions, the impact of this disruptive technology force is always evident. Art generally is born out of a symbiotic relationship between a given culture and the technological capacity of that era. This relationship often shapes the acceptability of art in an era. Throughout Art history, there have been numerous inventions of technology that have shaped the way art is perceived and accepted some of which are the innovation of applied paint pigments, the print press, camera/photography and even the computer of which today's' term of Artificial intelligence is an offshoot of its technological advancement.

To properly understand the concept of Artificial Intelligence in Art, it is imperative to evaluate Vilem Flusser's (1983) definition, which states "Tools …are extensions of human organs: extended teeth, fingers, hands, arms, legs. The Preindustrial tool, like paintbrushes or pickaxes, extends the body's biomechanics, while more sophisticated machines extend prosthetically into the realm of information and thought. Hence, all apparatus (not just Computers) are 'artificial intelligence', the camera included." (Fusser, 1983) From Fussers' definition, any tool used by man in executing his task is a form of artificial intelligence. Artificial Intelligence is the mimicry of human intelligence in machines (simple or complex) that are made to execute tasks that were once exclusively typical of humans, e.g., solving problems, comprehending language, recognizing forms, and making decisions. As man has evolved, so have his tools advanced to become more complex and innovative, especially in an age of computer awareness.

Over time, the field of art has experienced its share of technological impact on different scales, each of which has had its fair share of public scrutiny. From the introduction of industrially produced paint pigments to the use of grid/ plumb lines and maulsticks to the introduction of computer-aided Designs (CAD), all of which had their impact on the artist and, by extension, the art scene, and also raised their form of societal debates. On this point, Benjamin (2017) points out Honkeny-Falco's position that "is (the use of Optics) so qualitatively different from the use of grids, plumb-lines and maulsticks? Yes, for those who regard these painters as a pantheon of mysterious demigods, more than men, if less than angels, anything which smacks of technical aid is blasphemy. It is akin to giving scientific explanations for miracles of saints". (Marr, 2000).

Interestingly, as Marr (2000) pointed out, this opinion still holds sway in major landmarks of art history. Especially among critics who champion the anti-technological concept of art, they believe that art is solely a product of humans, most often without technological support. Moreover, anything void of this breeds the argument if such could be classified as 'Art'. These critics seek answers to questions like: Can other animals produce art, and should such works be termed art? Recently, there has been the lingering question of whether Machines can produce art and whether such work should be accepted as art. Countless authors attempted to provide

answers to such questions available on the internet; This paper is, instead, focused on the impact of artificial intelligence in art, mainly on how it affects the painter.

The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Painter as an Artist

The painter in the 21st century has been greatly influenced by the tools of the AI family, whether we admit it or not, especially seeing that most of today's art is majorly created with photo references, with little contributions from life models and plein air sceneries. It is common today to see the painter working on a nature scene, relying on a photograph instead of going outdoors to work. Sometimes, these photos are obtained online from photographs made by other people, yet he combined them to form his masterpiece. The invention of the camera has dramatically impacted how images are captured. It is almost rare to see the artist moving about with a sketchpad capturing scenes as he goes. Instead, the sketchpad has been replaced by digital cameras, which now come in phones, tablets, laptops, and other portable computer devices, saving time and making image capturing, storing, and viewing much easier and enjoyable.

As stated earlier, 'as man evolves, so also his tools'. When the artist started experimenting with photos as a reference, it was a tedious process involving chemicals, the dark room process, and other technicalities attached. Today, this process has been bypassed by the invention of software programs, with which drastic changes can be made to an image at the click of a button. The artist can experiment using software like Photoshop, CorelDRAW, and many photo editing software to manipulate his images in different art media like pencil, watercolour, crayon, oils, collage, mosaic, and others, all of which inspire the artist. The artist can now transfer these images to his canvas or work directly digitally using the same software and programs that created his art form today, celebrated as Digital Art or Digital Painting. Some of these software programs are so advanced that they can mimic the styles and brushstrokes of notable art masters and movements on any image, making the creation of artistic work so easy as pushing a button.

With software programs like Dall.e 2, Nightcafe, Midjourney, Next Rembrandt, Stable Diffusion, Prisma Artisto, Art can now be created using neither a paintbrush nor a camera. Just by entering any description in AI software, as mentioned above, even a novice without any background in art can create a great masterpiece rich in all the vibrancy of visual appeal. The argument on the veracity of such works created using these software programs, especially in their raw form, if such should be termed art (especially as affected prints), is a debate for another paper. The emphasis here is that this technological evolution has dramatically impacted the artist, especially the painter. It allows room to experiment in various styles and methods. It offers a fresh perspective on artistic methods and practice, giving the painter enough means of inspiration and photo references. The fast development of these software packages is becoming a concern to a practicing painter, especially with the development of AI printing machines and 3D printers that can now print on canvas with substantial precision of brush strokes and palette Knife textures mimicking an actual artist.

This development begs answers to the artist's role and relevance in years to come, especially in the face of these inventions, where with little human effort, works of art are created and printed in different artistic media. Many fears this evolution may be the death of art and the annihilation of the artist, especially when references drawn from sci-fi movies like Terminator and Cyborg, where computers finally take charge and eliminate humanity. Interestingly, this is not the first time in art history that such a technological disruption has affected art's creation, production, and acceptance. One such notable moment is the invention of photography. Moreover, self-reinvention was the key to the artist's survival in this era. This paper will further examine the impact of photography on the Art landscape and how notable artists re-invented themselves to survive the technological disruption this new media brought to the art scene.

The Impact of Photography in Art And its Contribution to the Development of the Artist and Art Movements

The 1840s Industrial Revolution was a significant catalyst in the evolutionary trends in the history of man. It was a time when everything was moving from hand production methods to machines. So, it was common to see experiments in different fields that simplified the means of doing things. One such experimentation, especially as it affects the art, was the invention of the heliograph (i.e., sun-writing) by Joseph Nicephore Niepce in 1826, when he used a specially coated pewter plate on a camera obscura to record a fuzzy version from his window after an exposure of eight hours. This became the first permanent photograph, although his methods were impractical because they could not be replicated (Getlein, 1998). As years progressed, other researchers made breakthroughs in experiments that could be easily replicated. This includes the daguerreotype by Louis-Jacques Mende in 1839 and the Negative-positive process by William Henry Fox Talbot that same year. These became the first means of recording images besides painting. This photographic medium was a new, challenging medium that set new boundaries and benchmarks in artistic representation.

Before this time, the artist, especially the painter, had enjoyed the sole right of pictorial image creation, earning a living from producing pictorial portraits and pleasing scenery. Portraiture was a highly sought-after possession. This artist had to go through a rigorous process extracting his paints from raw materials. Models and clients had to pose for several days and weeks while the artist meticulously captured the moment. Paintings were the only way to see still images, and the process made the craft an expensive venture that only aristocrats and the wealthy could afford. Though many experimented with other cheaper alternatives like the silhouette, none could create that realistic look that could last until the late 1830s with the inventions of daguerreotype and the Negative-positive process. (Hertzmann, 2022).

It is at this point that the modern camera was created. This device could capture and produce realistic images at a much more efficient precision in a shorter time (minutes), and was cheaper and readily available for everyone compared to painting. The invention of the camera and photography raised a new challenge for the artist and sparked several scholarly debates. Many argued whether these images should even be classified as art. Moreover, what will the artist's role be amid this new trend?

Some welcomed the coming of photography as a blessing; others saw it as a degenerate form of mechanization that provided an artificial portrayal source (Spiteri, 2014). While many condemned the simplicity of photography and did not seem to accept it as an Art form, others embraced it in a different capacity. They saw it as a medium facilitating the painterly process and relieved the constant need for life models for study, leading to new vistas in forms and styles. There are many similarities between this technological advancement called AI and the invention of photography. One such similarity is the debates that ensued at the early stage of this innovation. Debates like: if these images of photography should be called Art. Second is the debate that if this image-making process, which was solely the role of the painter, could be in minute reduced to a simple machine process, what will then be the role of the artist?

Interestingly, this argument and divergent opinions drove a new boom in artistic expressions. While some painters moved from the visual realism they felt was taken over by photography, they strove to create works the camera could not do. These artists created works that were more abstract and Impressionist. Another artist who embraced these new photographs used them as references and was greatly inspired to beat the images created by this camera. This also gave rise to the Photorealism painting movement. Photography technology was a significant catalyst in the modern Art movement.

Kenney (2020) stated, "painters of the day were faced with three choices. The first was to continue on the path of faithful representation by direct observation. This practice continues today, as seen in the profusion of Atelier Schools. The second option was to reject faithful representation of nature. This ultimately led to the birth of Impressionism. The third alternative was to accept photography's new ways of capturing images and integrate these unique attributes into the picture-making process" (Kenny, 2020)

As affirmed by Alexi Worth (2014), "Truly, if a (painter) of genius should use the daguerreotype (today's photograph) as it ought to be used," Delacroix prophesized, "he will raise himself to heights unknown to us." (Worth, 2014). This height can be seen in the works of pioneering artists who used photography as a medium in art and whose contributions shaped the art scene. These include the likes of Thomas Eakins, Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp,

Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) was an American realistic painter, photographer, sculptor, and art educator. Spiteri (2014) attests that this artist was inspired by the motion photographs of Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904). Though most records document that Eakins often masked his use of photography for fear of rejection by the Art Academy, which at this time saw the use of photography as cheating in creating images, Spiteri (2014) documents Eakins' stand thus;

> *"Painters cannot cheat because the medium gives them no rule to break…the artist's way of looking into photography was mainly as a source of information and study". (Spiteri, 2014). The use of photographs helped Eakins study new forms and details that were not easily perceived by ordinary human eyes.*

Edouard Manet (1832-1883). Photography helped him closely study broken tones in colours, which he learnt to manipulate. To this, Lauren S. Weingarden (2006) attests, "Viewed in this context, we shall see that Manet exposed his photographic references at an extremely volatile moment in the history of the medium and that he did so to define himself as a Baudelairean painter of modern life.". (Weingarden, 2006).

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) was known for distorting forms and objects. Spiteri (2014) recalls that this quest for distorted forms was triggered when Picasso's friend Gino Severni (1883-1966) gave him a camera with a broken lens. Experimenting with images projected from this shattered lens, especially against a handheld prism, influenced his study of form distortion. It is these distorted forms that later led to cubism.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). He was a French painter influenced by Eadweard Muybridge's motion photography. He made several studies by trying to freeze these motions in a still frame, as seen in his study of a Naked Woman Ascending a Staircase.

Until the invention of photography, the concept of image capturing could only be expected from the artist, who was even attributed to divine beings. It was almost unthinkable to imagine that someday, with little or no input from man, machines/ artificial intelligence devices could create images, let alone art as it is today. Little wonder the likes of Benjamin Walter boldly asserted

> *"…man is made in the image of God, and any machine of human devising cannot capture God's image. The utmost the artist may venture, borne on the wings of divine inspiration, is to reproduce man's God-given features without the help of any machine, in the moment of highest dedication, at the higher bidding of his genius".(Benjamin, 1999)*

Interestingly, this argument and divergent opinions drove a new boom in artistic expressions and offshoots of several art movements. Before this time, the only notable art movements were Romanticism and Neoclassicism. Over time, most painters moved from creating works of visual realism to abstraction after realizing that it was futile to compete in rendering realistic scenes compared to the camera. Instead, they strove to create works that the camera could not do. These artists created works that were more of an abstraction and Impressionism. Other artists embraced this new photography, used it as a reference, and were greatly inspired to beat the images created by this camera. This also gave rise to the Photorealism painting movement. In general, photography technology was a significant catalyst in the development of the modern art movement, as we know it today. Notable among these movements are;

1. Impressionism: The artist focused more on colour, light, and movement in this period. These artists believed that rather than competing with photography, which was gaining ground in capturing realistic forms, painting and photography should complement each other. So, rather than focusing on the visible reality, the painter focused on transient and fleeting realities, which may be unclear and blurred to the untrained eye. This can be seen in the works of Edgar Degas, who was so intrigued with his new ability to capture and freeze time with photography, which helped him

investigate the motion of the legs of race horses in a rolling sequence, which he widely explored in most of his paintings. Deviating from the preconceived notion that explored the 'hobbyhorse pair leg motion'.(Carlos, 2022)

2. Fauvism: artists in this period were particularly drawn to the vibrant and saturated colors found in early coloured photographs. These vivid hues and bold contrasts highly inspired them, and they experimented with the same colour effect in their works, often using non-naturalistic colours (i.e., Colours which did not correspond with reality) to convey emotion and create a sense of dynamism. On accepting new media as an artist, Henry Matisse is credited to state" …an artist must never be a prisoner of himself, prisoner of a style, prisoner of a reputation, prisoner of success …" (Fulleylove, 2024)

   Painters, like Henri Matisse and André Derain, were interested in exploring photography's ability to freeze moments in time and the concept of capturing fleeting impressions rather than static scenes. This approach led to the development of techniques such as rapid brushwork and spontaneous application of color, allowing these artists to convey the energy and immediacy of their subjects.
3. Cubism: Pablo Picasso was the initiator of this art movement. From his several experimentations with his broken lens camera, as stated earlier, Picasso explored new ways of rendering 3-dimensional forms on a 2-dimensional plane in a search for ways to see more than one viewpoint at a time visually. Statton (2012) recounts that "Picasso took his first landscape photographs during the summer of 1909 at Horta de Ebro …These photographs directly led to Picasso's breakthrough in painting and to the subsequent development of the movement now known as Cubism".(Statton, 2012)

Conclusion

The advent of photography was a liberating moment for most artists, as it gave them the freedom to explore other forms of image-making that did not involve realistic expression. Today, like a déjà vu moment, the growth of Artificial Intelligence Software programs in the creation of art has come to stay, and this 21st-century painter must re-invent himself to find relevance in today's Art world. The adoption of AI heightens the painter's imagination as it presents limitless possibilities that the artist may not have easily conceived, saving both time and material costs for experimentation. It also allows the painter to experiment with new styles suggested in this software.

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