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Studio Craft: When Technology Changes Art



One of the first ever digitally scanned images, created in 1957 by Russell Kirsch (Image: National Institute of Standards and Technology)

Any time a new means of creating, capturing, or reproducing images has emerged, it's provoked discussion about the potential effect on artists and the art market. Continuing this tradition, AI art- imagery generated by artificial intelligence- is currently the subject of vigorous debate. Many are excited to think of the possibilities this technology presents, while others are worried about the impact AI-generated art could have on commercial demand for human-created original imagery, intellectual property protections, and the value of human artistic skill. Some have gone so far as to describe AI as an existential threat to art itself.

Artificial intelligence is far from the first emerging technology to be seen as disruptive, or even to be declared the "end of art". Lithography and photography both challenged artists and their audiences to reconsider the role of human skill in image-making, accessibility of original art, and the definition of art itself.

Photography

It's hard to overstate the impact that photography has had on art, both as a tool for traditional artists, and as a competitor for specialist skills. It's impossible for a modern person to see the world as it seemed before photography existed.



"The Artist's Studio", an 1837 daguerreotype by Louis Daguerre, inventor of the first commercially viable photography process

Aspects of photography like lens distortion, capturing events too fast for the human eye, and recording a subject in accurate, minute detail have all changed our perceptions of reality. Right or wrong, we consider photographs to be incontrovertible documentary evidence in a way that drawings and paintings can never be.

For more than a century, it's been possible for anyone with a compact camera to create realistic images without any specialist drawing skill. Far from replacing manual rendering, however, photography has provided tools which enhance drawing and painting. Photography also makes it possible for people anywhere to view, study, and enjoy artwork.

Photography was still in its infancy when artists adopted it experimentally. Artists including the French Impressionist Degas learned how to take photographs, which he used as the basis for some of his most famous later works. Photos have been identified as likely or verified reference material for works by Gauguin and Picasso. Photography became, and remains, an esteemed artistic process in its own right, developing a tradition and craft separate from manually-created imagery like painting and drawing.

Lithography also had a revolutionary impact on art. In earlier processes like intaglio and relief, unless an artist was also a trained printmaker, creating prints of artwork required line-for-line translation of an image by a separate artisan who placed cuts and grooves on a plate or block.



'Separation II' by Edvard Munch, 1896, lithograph

Lithography, which was a chemical process, allowed artists to draw directly with pencil and crayon onto smooth limestone by their own hand, after which the printmaker would fix the drawings to the stone, making the marks sensitive to oil while repelling water. The sensitized areas would attract oil-based ink to create a printed image, and the results would reproduce with the appearance of a drawing, with crisp detail, subtle gradients and tones.

Print publishers adopted lithography as a way of selling art at more accessible prices, with multiples of successful images available to more people, of more modest means. Over time, lithography developed into common offset printing, the type used for magazines, fliers, postcards, product packages, and just about every other mass imprinting of images and text. Fine art lithography is still practiced by specialist artisans who create prints as original art rather than reproductions. While fine art-quality offset printing is still available, most artists today use digital printing techniques to produce original editions.

Will technology be the “end of art”?

In the mid-19th century, when the painter Paul Delaroche first saw an early photograph, he famously said, “From today, painting is dead.” No technology has yet stopped people from creating art, though. In truth, the same innovations that people feared might end art have served to educate more artists and expose more people to art than at any time in history. Photography, digital imaging, file sharing, hosted video platforms, and other technologies have only made it easier for artists and audiences to connect.

The mediums artists still prefer to use are, for the most part, direct ancestors of the charcoal and ochre used in pre-history. People still feel compelled to express with their own hands, their internal thoughts and feelings, and to record the world as it is, and as they wish it could be. No matter how convincingly real, complex, or intriguing AI-generated content becomes, it seems extremely unlikely that people will ever stop responding in a special way to images and objects made by the eyes, minds, and hands of fellow human beings.

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