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Generative AI as a New Painting Medium: A Re-examination of Creative Subject, Process and Aesthetic Value

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Abstract. Current discussions on generative AI painting mostly focus on the binary debate of "whether AI can create" and "who is the author", failing to fully pay attention to its ontological significance as a new painting medium. Taking the history of media evolution as the analytical framework, this study systematically investigates the reconstruction mechanism of generative AI on painting creation. The research finds that the subject of painting creation is transforming from "craftsman" to "curator", the creation process is shifting from linear progression to cyclical iteration, and the aesthetic value standard is turning from "technique priority" to "judgment priority". This perspective reveals the deep reshaping of AI on the internal structure of painting, and provides a new theoretical reference for painting practice and art education in the digital age.

Keywords: Generative AI, Painting Medium, Creative Subject, Aesthetic Value

1. Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence is profoundly changing the basic appearance of painting art. In 2022, Jason Allen won the gold medal in the digital art category of the Colorado State Fair with *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* generated by Midjourney. Since then, similar incidents have continued to occur — in 2023, the Beijing Internet Court heard the first domestic copyright case of AI-generated images, and the U.S. Copyright Office adopted a compromise strategy of partial protection for the AI-generated comic *Zarya of the Dawn*. All these debates revolve around a core issue: Is what AI generates creation? Can AI be regarded as the author [1]?

These two questions are certainly important, but their common presupposition is to examine AI from the position of "tool" or "agent author". This presupposition avoids a more fundamental question: AI is not simply "assisting" or "replacing" painters, but changing the structure of "painting" itself. In other words, instead of asking whether AI can create, it is better to first look at what AI has made painting become. This shift of questioning means that we no longer regard AI as a defendant to be judged, but as a new painting medium, and investigate how it has changed the creative subject, creation process and aesthetic value of painting from the inside. In the following text, the use of the term "medium" continues the academic tradition of media studies since Marshall McLuhan, referring to the technical conditions that not only transmit information but also shape the form of information.

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2. The media positioning of generative AI

Before carrying out the analysis, it is necessary to clarify a prerequisite question: What conceptual position should generative AI be placed in? At present, the mainstream academic discourses can be roughly classified into two orientations — "instrumentalism" and "authorism" — each with its own insights but also blind spots [2].

2.1. The limitations of instrumentalism

"Instrumentalism" is the most intuitive and easily accepted understanding by the public: AI is nothing more than an advanced brush for painters, just like from charcoal to oil paints and then to Photoshop. Tools are upgrading, but the subject of creation is always human. This understanding is not entirely unreasonable. AI indeed has no intention, no self-awareness, and cannot "choose" what to paint in the existential sense. However, "instrumentalism" obscures an essential difference between AI and traditional painting tools: a brush does not know what it is painting, but AI "knows" in a certain functional sense — based on massive training data, it can generate image combinations that humans have never seen before, and even to some extent understands the internal laws of the visual world better than humans. A person who has never learned anatomy can generate a human body with perfect proportions with the help of AI, which is unimaginable in traditional painting. This means that AI is not a passively executed tool, but a medium that actively participates in formal production [3].

2.2. The dilemma of authorism

"Authorism" goes to the other extreme. This orientation regards AI as a potential "author" or "collaborator", and asks whether AI can enjoy the right of authorship and be recognized as a creative subject in the legal sense. Such discussions are particularly active in the legal circle and have produced a lot of valuable work — from the proposal of "limited legal subject qualification" to the claim of "attributing tort liability to users", and so on. But the common limitation of these discussions is that they treat AI as a new "subject" that needs to be incorporated into the existing legal framework, while ignoring that AI is first and foremost a new "media condition" — before entering the debate on the "author" issue, it has already changed the ontological foundation of painting in advance.

2.3. The proposal of media theory

This paper advocates a third positioning: media theory. Based on the above media theory perspective, this chapter will focus on the transformation of the creative subject, which is the first dimension affected by media changes. This concept continues Marshall McLuhan's core idea of "the medium is the message", holding that media is not only a tool for transmitting content, but also shapes the environment and rules of artistic creation itself. Oil painting enabled painters to create more realistic works, and thus established the aesthetic standard of "realism"; the invention of the camera freed painting from the function of recording reality and forced it to find new development directions; digital image processing software has made "post-production" an indispensable and important link in creation. In the same sense, this paper argues that the true significance of generative AI lies not in "how well it paints", but in that it redefines the two fundamental questions of "what painting is" and "what counts as a good painting" [4].

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3. The role transformation of the creative subject

Based on the above media positioning, this chapter focuses on the dimension first touched by media changes: the creative subject. Under the condition of AI as a new medium, the old question of "who is creating" presents a completely new look, and the role of painters is undergoing a fundamental transformation [5].

3.1. The view of the author in traditional painting

In traditional painting, the identity of the creative subject is clear and single: the painter transforms the internal ideas from sketching, memory or imagination into the final visual work through his own trained skills. In this process, the first domestic copyright case of AI-generated images heard by the Beijing Internet Court in 2023 is a typical example. Although the court finally attributed the copyright to the human user, it carefully considered the degree of AI's participation in the creation in the reasoning process of the judgment, indicating that the legal circle has begun to take the issue of AI's creative participation seriously [6].

The execution of the "hand" is the key link: the painter's personal style, skills and emotions are all condensed on the canvas through the brushstrokes in his hand. It is this uniqueness of the "hand" that achieves the "aura" of painting works and provides a solid foundation for the correspondence between "author and work".

In contemporary painting practice, this traditional view of the author still largely determines people's value judgments and critical vocabulary of painting. A painter's style recognition is often first attributed to his perceptible formal characteristics such as brushstrokes, color blending and composition habits.

3.2. The deconstruction of author identity by AI practice

The emergence of AI has impacted this tradition. When a user inputs a prompt into Midjourney or Stable Diffusion, AI generates an image based on the prompt, and the user then selects a satisfactory one and further adjusts the prompt to optimize the result — it is difficult to clearly define every link in this process with the traditional concept of "author".

What is more complicated is that the current mainstream AI painting platforms are no longer limited to the single mode of "text-to-image": ControlNet allows users to upload line art or poses as composition constraints, Inpainting enables users to make local modifications on generated images, and various LoRA fine-tuning models allow users to customize styles according to their own training materials. The development of these technologies has made the process of AI painting increasingly complex and refined, and at the same time made the answer to the question of "who is creating" increasingly difficult. In this context, regarding AI as a pure "tool" or "author" seems too simplistic.

3.3. "Curator" — a new metaphor for the creative subject

Faced with this dilemma, this paper proposes an alternative metaphor: in the AI era, painters are increasingly like curators. The job of a curator is not to make works of art by hand, but to select, arrange and give contextual meaning to existing, possible and imaginable works. The creativity of a curator lies not in "making", but in "judging". Similarly, painters in the AI era are no longer direct producers of images, but selectors, organizers and meaning-givers of image possibilities. His

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creation lies not in "drawing" an image stroke by stroke with a brush, but in making a certain choice among the thousands of possibilities generated by AI, and conveying his aesthetic intention to the machine through repeated iterations. The significance of this transformation is that the subjectivity of creation is no longer attached to the visible link of "hand execution", but transferred to the invisible link of "eye choice". That is why the creative controversies in the AI era are so fierce — because the visibility of "choice" as a creative act is far lower than that of "drawing".

4. The reconstruction of the creation process

The transformation of the creative subject is inevitably accompanied by changes in the creation process itself. Before the intervention of AI, painting creation generally followed a path from the whole to the part and linear progression. The intervention of AI has fundamentally changed the structure of this process.

4.1. The linear characteristics of the traditional creation process

In traditional painting practice, the creation process is usually described as a linear progression from the whole to the part: sketching, laying out the overall relationship, detailed depiction, and final adjustment. Although there are many repeated revisions in actual creation, structurally, this process has a clear direction — starting from a blank canvas, through a series of sequential operations, to a relatively definite end point. This process characteristic is closely related to the material media nature of painting. Once the material is placed on the canvas, modification needs to be superimposed or covered on the existing material basis, which makes the trial and error cost of each step very high — an oil painter can hardly "undo" a large area of color that has been painted halfway. For this reason, each step of the traditional painting creation process has high requirements for certainty, and creators need to complete a lot of judgments and deliberations in their brains before putting pen to paper, which makes painting a highly "front-loaded" intellectual activity.

4.2. The cyclical iteration mode under the intervention of AI

The intervention of AI has brought a fundamental change to the creation process. In AI painting, creators are no longer faced with a blank canvas waiting to be filled, but a digital space where images can be generated infinitely, parameters can be adjusted infinitely, and backtracking can be done infinitely.

This means that the creation process has shifted from "linear progression" to "cyclical iteration". In typical human-machine collaborative creation, the process is manifested as a reciprocating cycle of "prompt-generation-evaluation-adjustment-regeneration". The end of each cycle is the starting point of the next cycle. Today's Midjourney already supports local repainting and style preservation, making iteration no longer starting from the starting point, but a fine adjustment based on existing results. This makes AI painting more like a "dialogue" — creators and AI continuously express intentions and give visual responses, and each iteration adds new information layers to the final image. This creation mode is essentially different from the traditional "one-go" painting, and it is more like a process of "gradually approaching the ideal state in continuous dialogue with the machine" [7].

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4.3. The epistemological significance of the cyclical iteration mode

It should be pointed out that this cyclical iteration is not only an update of creation technology, but also contains a deep epistemological shift. In traditional painting, "composition idea → drawing a sketch → finding problems → re-conceiving" is also a cycle, but this cycle is slow, and each cycle may take hours or days. In AI painting, the same cycle can be completed in a few seconds. AI allows creators to test dozens or even hundreds of creative possibilities in a very short time, which directly changes the basic form of artistic exploration. More importantly, it turns "trial and error" from a risk in creation into an advantage. In traditional painting, a major directional error often requires starting over, with extremely high time and material costs; but in AI painting, trial and error has become an important way to obtain inspiration. Painters can freely try various unexpected element combinations and discover new visual possibilities from the results generated by AI, which is difficult to achieve in traditional painting creation modes.

5. The migration of aesthetic value standards

Changes in the creative subject and creation process will eventually be projected onto the changes in aesthetic value standards. If painters in the AI era are no longer direct producers of images, then the scale for measuring whether an AI painting work is "good" or "bad" cannot follow the standards of traditional painting.

5.1. The failure of the traditional aesthetic value system

The traditional painting evaluation system has always taken "technical skill" as the primary standard. The so-called "technical skill" refers to the professional skills mastered by painters through long-term systematic training, specifically including modeling ability, color control ability and composition ability and other technical level elements. This set of evaluation standards has been gradually fixed in the long process of painting development and has become the core content repeatedly emphasized in the education of fine arts academies. However, the emergence of AI has caused a fundamental impact on this evaluation system. When AI can generate images that are impeccable at the technical level, "painting beautifully" is no longer an effective distinguishing standard — a person can generate images with perfect proportions and exquisite color matching with the help of AI without years of sketch training, so what can "basic skills" explain for the value judgment of an AI-assisted painting?

5.2. "Judgment" — the new aesthetic anchor

In the AI era, the aesthetic evaluation standard of painting is undergoing a fundamental transformation: from valuing technical skills in the past to paying more attention to the creator's judgment. The judgment mentioned here continues the tradition of Kantian aesthetics, referring to the ability of people to make meaningful choices among multiple possibilities. In AI painting, judgment is reflected in three key links: what kind of prompts to use to determine the creation direction, which one to choose from the generated results for further deepening, and when to stop in the process of infinite optimization. These judgments are inseparable from human aesthetic intentions and cannot be replaced by AI.

Another important new value standard is "human touch". In traditional painting, "human touch" mainly refers to handcrafted texture, such as changes in brushstrokes and subtle differences in

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colors. But now AI can well simulate these effects. Midjourney can easily generate various hand-painted textures just by adjusting the stylization parameter. Therefore, the real human touch is no longer these superficial traces, but something that algorithms cannot replicate: unique aesthetic vision, personalized judgment methods, and human subjectivity in making the final choice among countless possibilities.

5.3. Enlightenment to the contemporary art evaluation system

The above value migration has direct practical significance for the evaluation system of contemporary painting. If "judgment" rather than "technique" is taken as the new aesthetic anchor, then art criticism and exhibition selection need to establish a set of evaluation languages matching the production mode of works when facing AI-assisted works. For example, in the selection criteria, it is necessary to introduce consideration of the creation process — what input strategy the creator used, how many iterations he experienced, and at which node of the iteration he made a key directional choice — rather than just watching the two-dimensional image finally presented in front of us. On a more macro level, this migration of aesthetic value also poses a challenge to the current fine arts academy education: when "painting accurately" is no longer the core competitive advantage, does fine arts education need to invest more resources in the cultivation of "judgment" — including aesthetic judgment, media selection and meaning giving — rather than blindly emphasizing technical training?

6. Generative AI from the perspective of the history of media evolution

After the analysis of the above three dimensions, it is necessary to put generative AI back into the evolution history of painting media, so as to more clearly observe its position and significance in the long term.

The evolution of painting media is not a linear history of technological progress, but a history of repeated "rupture and reconstruction". Every major media change is not only an upgrade of tools, but also accompanied by a redefinition of the fundamental question of "what is painting": the emergence of oil painting declared the end of tempera and also created a brand-new aesthetic paradigm of "realism"; the invention of the camera forced painting to be liberated from the reproduction function and gave birth to Impressionism and the entire modernist movement; digital image processing software has opened up a brand-new artistic dimension of "post-creation". In each of the above turning points, the definition of "painting" has experienced violent shocks and gained new connotations after the shocks.

In the coordinate system of the history of media evolution, the particularity of generative AI lies in that it does not change the interaction mode between painters and materials at the front end (such as oil painting), nor does it add the dimension of image processing at the back end (such as Photoshop), but is embedded in every link of creation — from the generation of intention to the execution of form and then to aesthetic judgment. Its subversiveness lies in that AI does not "replace" a specific step in image production, but "reshapes" the entire logic of an image from nothing to something. In this sense, it marks the fourth profound media transformation in the history of painting after the invention of oil painting, the birth of photography and the popularization of digital technology. Of course, media transformation is a slow process, and the reshaping of AI on the deep creation logic will take longer to fully manifest. The analysis of this paper is only a starting point.

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From the long-term perspective of the history of media evolution, painting has never been a static thing, and its boundaries have been redrawn in every media change. Generative AI is just the latest chapter in this long sequence. It is not "replacing" painting, but "reshaping" painting — what it touches is not the survival of the painter profession, but the connotation of the concept of "painting" itself.

This transformation of aesthetic standards has two important implications for contemporary painting practice. First, the source of painters' irreplaceability has changed: in the past, it depended on who painted well, but now it depends more on whose aesthetic judgment is more acute and unique. Second, the content of fine arts education needs to be adjusted: traditional education takes technical training as the core, but in the AI era, teaching students how to make valuable judgments among countless possibilities, that is, training "vision", may be more important than simply practicing basic skills. Avoiding or resisting AI will not make the problem disappear. Only through serious theoretical analysis can we truly understand this ongoing change and find the position of painting in the digital age.

7. Conclusion

This study avoids the either-or debate of "whether AI can create", and systematically analyzes the three profound influences of generative AI on painting art from the perspective of media ontology: the creative subject has changed from "craftsman" to "curator", the creation process has changed from linear progression to cyclical iteration, and the aesthetic standard has also shifted from valuing technique to valuing judgment and subjectivity.

The research shows that generative AI is the fourth profound media transformation in the history of painting after the invention of oil painting, the birth of photography and the popularization of digital technology. It has not replaced painting, but fundamentally reconstructed the ontological foundation of painting. This conclusion has important enlightenment for contemporary painting practice: the core competitiveness of painters will shift from "hand skills" to "aesthetic vision", and fine arts education should also adjust the focus accordingly to strengthen the cultivation of students' aesthetic judgment, media integration ability and meaning-giving ability.

This study still has certain limitations. It mainly focuses on the macro analysis at the theoretical level, insufficiently discusses the differentiated impacts of different types of AI painting practices, and does not deeply involve issues such as copyright ethics and cultural bias in generative AI painting. Follow-up research can be systematically deepened along three dimensions: first, select representative AI painting practitioners at home and abroad, and carefully disassemble the operation logic and internal mechanism of human-machine collaboration through creation process tracking, iterative file analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews; second, classify and investigate the differentiated impacts of generative AI on different painting schools such as realism, abstract expressionism and contemporary ink painting, as well as different application scenarios such as commercial illustration, contemporary art creation and public art design; third, carry out interdisciplinary research in conjunction with law, ethics, communication and other disciplines, systematically respond to core issues in the field of AI art such as copyright ownership, training data ethics and algorithmic cultural bias, and build a more solid theoretical support for the healthy development of painting art in the digital age.

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