

PHILOSOPHY OF ART IN THE 21ST CENTURY- AESTHETICS AND TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

Art is valued and influenced by many things. It's a widely held belief that art depends on not one but a combination of factors such as artists, originality and quality of art, technology, information dissemination and so on. What defines art is also constantly changing and various innovations also affect aspects of the art market. Our focus in this paper is to do two things. One, explore how technology and the internet have changed the definition of art and art markets. Here, we delve into the key stakeholders in the art market—artists, consumers of art and art itself. Secondly, we discuss the philosophy of aesthetics and art. Lastly, we explore the relationship between the value of art and artists.

Keywords: Art, Digital Art, Philosophy, Demand, Art Markets, Art History

Background

The art market, like any other market, also depends on forces of demand and the patrons of art are the main demanders of art.

Thus, to understand how art was created and valued historically, we need to primarily look into who were the patrons of art. This is important because patrons were the ones who financially supported artists and provided the needed job security to artists. Beyond financial security, they also give artists exposure and societal validation. Therefore, an artist and his art is linked to the kind of patrons they have. Patrons can be an individual or a group of people—like aristocracy or religious groups and the motives of these patrons influence the kind of art they commission.

For example, during the Renaissance, rulers of cities like the Medici in Florence and the Gonzaga in Mantua wanted to portray themselves and their families as successful and so they were keen to be associated with heroes of the past, real or mythological. Similarly, even the wealthy people were keen to show their power, “refined” taste and wealth to bolster their authority. This is why wealthy families like the Medici family of Florence (a wealthy family in the banking industry during the 15th century) commissioned renowned art like Sandro Botticelli’s Birth of Venus 6), Michelangelo’s Tomb of Lorenzo de Medici, Duke of Urbino and Donatello’s bronze David. Such art was purposely built to be showcased publicly, to show the family’s stature and “rightful” owners of wealth. Thus art was created to communicate a message and not merely for “art’s sake”.

The way the art is painted shows their political purpose. For example, when Bronzino, the

Italian painter, paints Cosimo I de Medici—he is portrayed as Orpheus, a figure from Greek mythology who used his music to quell all living things. This served a purpose i.e use of the Orpheus myth was meant to resonate with the current moment in Florence. In Orpheus, Bronzino wanted to draw parallels with Cosimo; like the ancient Greek character, Cosimo had to carefully dodge a crisis by pacifying people as he had come to power as Duke of Florence at 17 in 1537 after a tumultuous period. To promote stability, he wanted images such as this one to prove he was “right” for the job.

The materials used in art such as gold leaves, silver inlays etc were expensive and hence artists needed money. Thus, patrons provided money. Furthermore, if a patron liked an artist’s work, they would always be employed. The painting by Bronzino ended up making him the preferred artist of the Duke. Similarly, other rulers would keep artists they liked in their courts, providing them job security for long periods. Payments didn’t include just cash but also tax breaks and titles, which gave artists a position in society. So, artists had many incentives to seek such wealthy and powerful patrons.

To be clear, we aren't saying that art wasn’t produced for the common people. There did exist painters like Neri di Bicci (a minor Florentine painter) who created a retail market in ready-made religious images which had far more accessible prices and were thus accessible to lower-income individuals. But most art was produced on commission. There also existed art for special occasions like marriages where they employed an artist to decorate a chest, some parts of a room, or a fine item of furniture in their new home. Relief plaques for churches in gratitude for a happy occurrence in their lives was also common for lower-income individuals.

Even with this scrape of accessibility that the lower-income individuals received, the art market continued to be dominated by the rich. A great example of this can be found in art auctions. In their paper, ‘A history of the art market in 35 record-breaking sales^[6]’ Christophe Spaenjers, William N. Goetzmann and Elena Mamonova trace 35 record-breaking art auction sales.

Year	£	Artist	Title	Auctioneer and location
1701	320	Dou	Interior with woman and child	Amsterdam
1713	1,095	Van Dyck	Rest on the flight into Egypt	Amsterdam
1733	1,105	Van Dyck	Rest on the flight into Egypt	Rotterdam
1771	1,410	Dou	Interior with woman and child	Amsterdam
1798	1,522	Rembrandt	The centurion	Coxe-Burrell-Foster, London
1804	1,680	Dou	Hermit in a cave	Paillet-Delaroche, Paris
1808	1,750	Dou	The evening class	Rotterdam
1811	5,250	Rembrandt	Shipwright and his wife	Christie's, London
1852	24,600	Murillo	Immaculate conception	Paris
1910	28,250	Hals	Portrait of a woman	Amer. Art Assoc., New York
1912	29,500	Mantegna	Holy family enthroned	Lepke's, Berlin
1913	44,000	Rembrandt	Bathsheba	Galerie Georges Petit, Paris
1919	54,600	Romney	The Misses Beckford	Christie's, London
1926	60,900	Romney	Mrs. Davenport	Christie's, London
1926	77,700	Lawrence	Pinkie	Hampton's, London
1957	104,630	Gauguin	Apples	Galerie Charpentier, Paris
1958	220,000	Cezanne	Garçon au gilet rouge	Sotheby's, London
1959	275,000	Rubens	The adoration of the magi	Sotheby's, London
1961	817,052	Rembrandt	Aristotle with a bust of Homer	Parke-Bernet, New York
1970	2,310,000	Velasquez	Portrait of Juan de Pareja	Christie's, London
1980	2,507,013	Van Gogh	Le jardin du poète, Arles	Christie's, New York
1980	2,997,403	Turner	Juliet and her nurse	Sotheby's, New York
1984	3,564,000	Raphael	Study of a man's head and hand	Christie's, London
1984	7,370,000	Turner	Seascape, Folkestone	Sotheby's, London
1985	8,100,000	Mantegna	Adoration of the magi	Christie's, London
1987	24,750,000	Van Gogh	Sunflowers	Christie's, London
1987	30,280,899	Van Gogh	Irises	Sotheby's, New York
1989	32,934,977	Picasso	Les noces de Pierrette	Binoche et Godeau, Paris
1990	49,121,762	Van Gogh	Portrait du Dr. Gachet	Christie's, New York
2002	49,506,650	Rubens	Massacre of the innocents	Sotheby's, London
2004	58,223,688	Picasso	Garçon à la pipe	Sotheby's, New York
2010	65,001,250	Giacometti	L'homme qui marche I	Sotheby's, London
2010	70,452,891	Picasso	Nude, green leaves, and bust	Christie's, New York
2012	74,003,394	Munch	The scream	Sotheby's, New York
2013	89,411,063	Bacon	Three studies of Lucian Freud	Christie's, New York

Their study reflects on the inseparability of art prices and tastes from wealth and power. They observe that the art market mirrors the output of alternation in the societal aura through economic transition. The effects of major historical events on the art market strive to strengthen their conclusion.

Unexpectedly, even The Great Depression and World War II influenced the art market and taste in their own ways. They brought the rise in popularity of various art styles like Impressionism—an art style which attempted to accurately record reality in terms of volatile effects of light and colour, and Post-Impression—which is both an extension and rejection of impressionism as it aimed to break free of its limitations of focusing on traditional ‘realistic’ subject matter but continued to adopt the pure, brilliant colours of impressionism. In this period, ‘exquisite’ taste begins to be characterised by an appreciation of complex and increasingly abstract images.

The period from 1957 to 2010 welcomed an astounding boom in art prices. As the interest of the public in art collection increased, art beat even the recovering equity markets in its valuation from mid-century forward. With a second wave of globalisation hitting the art market during the same period, Japanese buyers set three records for auction sales and art began to be recognized as a financial asset.

The true eliteness of art auctions began in the late 20th century when auctions became glamorous events for high society, while in the decades before they were rather dull events for art market professionals. This was a significant evolution that turned the auction room into an arena for one-upmanship. Auction houses started working towards being recognised as luxury goods companies rather than a simple middle man in the art market. Some of the record auction sales of this period testify to the rise of social aspiration; wealthy people often used their acquisition of an ‘exquisite’ piece as social entrée. As records were set with increasing frequency, most museums were also priced out of the market.^[5]

As fine art grew more valuable, it was recognized as a highly portable store of value—and the auction as a public means of creating that value. In this process, the record-breaking auction prices started to have much broader economic consequences—increasing personal asset value through a ripple effect. For example, when a van Gogh painting sells for a record price, all van Gogh collectors mark up their personal asset value, making art a great investment in simple monetary terms.

Essentially, in economic terms, art is a multifaceted good. It can be classified as an ‘experience good’ that has to be tried and tested before its true quality is revealed, an ‘information good’ whose value is tied to an idea of its worth and even a ‘consumption good’ that adds to the consumer’s social capital. To delve deeper into the concept of art and its valuation, we must not isolate art to just be an economic good and the definition of art beyond its economic characteristics can only be understood through aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art

‘Aesthetics’ is known to be the philosophical study of beauty and taste. This definition of aesthetics might mislead you into thinking that aesthetics is the same concept as the philosophy of art. However, they’re just closely related, not the same. Philosophy of art is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated.

The concept of aesthetics and art first originated in the eighteenth century. During this period, the study of the beautiful and the sublime in nature, art, and other human artefacts became a distinct philosophical topic, written about in works wholly devoted to that subject matter. These works focused not only on the features of objects that make them beautiful (sublime), but also on our reaction to these features and the properties of the human mind that make these reactions possible. They attempted to characterise the judgments that an object is beautiful and the kind of value being ascribed to objects by such judgments. The philosophical topic came to be called “aesthetics” in the eighteenth century, courtesy of Alexander Baumgarten in 1735. But writings on distinctly aesthetic topics go back to the beginning of the century. The system of fine arts also came into existence during this period and thus, art began to be valued explicitly in aesthetic terms.^[14]

One interpretation of the concept of aesthetics would be to stick as close to the eighteenth-century definition—to confine art to be as ‘beautiful’ and ‘sublime’—as possible. However, the decades of changes in art have made it impossible to stick to that narrative. Art can be characterised as grotesque and morbid and appreciated and art can also be found in mundane things like everyday items that aren’t necessarily attractive. There is no uniquely correct conception of the aesthetic. Like art, it is truly an abstract concept that depends on experience and interpretation.

Philosophy of art deals with more constitutional art questions—What is art? What kinds of objects are artworks? Do artworks have meanings, and are these determined by the artist's intentions? In line with this line of thinking of philosophy of art, in the later sections of this paper, we try to unravel how technology has changed what art is.

Present

It's evident that art has no meaning as the definition itself is constantly changing over time. We'll see how the internet and technology have upended what's considered art and enabled democratisation of art. It's important to talk about technology because newer technology is making us question the ethics of art creation and the philosophy behind it.

The art world has always had debates about digital art and whether it's true art or not. In many ways, digital art challenges the underlying philosophy of traditional art. Computer art users differ from the audiences of traditional art, members of these audiences experience and interpret stories, images, and songs, but computer art users do more- they appreciate works by generating their displays.

Next is the interaction. People appreciate a famous artist's presence in addition to the performance itself. For example, people like the theatrics and fashion of Freddie Mercury in addition to his singing. However, in digital art, the artist is not part of the interactive experience. Here, the interaction is between the display and the audience. Further differences are that a performer uses his knowledge of work to generate a performance out of it whereas a computer automates display for audiences where they can discover work by interacting with the display. Digital art is said to be “more forgiving” to the artists as mistakes can be undone quickly which is virtually impossible in a painting or theatre performance. Conversely, artists say that mistakes

and blunders actually add unique appeal to the art and convey the artist's creativity. However, the process can become part of the appeal of traditional artwork. The layers used to cover mistakes seen in older oil paintings, for example, provide a certain quality that has collector appeal. Another difference between traditional and digital art is the ability to make multiple reproductions. The ability to easily mass-produce digital art is in contrast to the rarity that has impacted the price of fine artwork. Of course, this does not make digital art less creative but certainly impacts pricing and demand.

What's important to note is that digital art has democratised art which critics say augurs well for art itself. Art classes are more easily accessible by being cheaper. Tools are cheaper i.e a one-time purchase of a tablet is better than continuous purchases of art supplies (paints, brushes and canvases). This kind of art can also be marketed and shared easily. Thus, artists overcome traditional elite spaces of art galleries and art collectors.

A widely agreed definition of art is "works produced by human creative skill and imagination". Art was supposed to show the skills of humans, things like brush strokes, the ability to mix and create colour palettes and so on. However, the coming of digital art has changed everything- from who's an artist, to what is art and the question of skill. This is where it's apt to talk about artificial intelligence and art.

Artificial Intelligence Art

Christie's made history when it auctioned a portrait in a gold frame. It was expected to fetch a modest price, somewhere between \$7,000 and \$10,000 but ended up being sold for a whopping \$432,500.^[15] What distinguished this artwork from others at Christie's is that this was the first art piece sold that was created by an algorithm. Christie's also became the first auction house to offer a work of art created by an algorithm.

Artificial Intelligence art refers to any artwork created with the assistance of AI. It can be a work created autonomously by AI systems or a work that is created as a collaboration between a human and an AI system. AI-generated art can include fully autonomous works—where people explore whether AI can be creative without human intervention—as well as human-AI collaboration. Such a technology has blurred the lines of creator and "what is art". Some even argue that AI must not be viewed simply as a collaborator but a creator in its own right.

This form of art has become popular over the years. In 2018, at Rutgers University's Art & AI Lab, a team created AICAN, which is a programme that is a nearly autonomous artist which knows existing styles and aesthetics and can generate innovative images of its own. The algorithm is fed 8000 images and at a click of a button, it will produce an image. The art created by AICAN became popular quickly around the world and its first piece offered for sale sold for a massive \$16,000^[7] at an auction in New York. The work by AICAN was exhibited in venues like Frankfurt, Los Angeles, New York City and San Francisco, with a different set of images for each show.^[7] People who saw the artwork at these auctions couldn't tell the difference- 75% couldn't. The creator of AICAN, professor Ahmed Elgammal wrote in an article "They(people) didn't simply have a tough time distinguishing between the two. They genuinely enjoyed the computer-generated art, using words like "having visual structure," "inspiring" and "communicative" when describing AICAN's work."^[7] This makes it clear that art generated by AI is good on quality but forms questions on who's the artist and so on.

So what's the philosophy behind why such artwork is popular? AICAN's creator feels that it can be explained by a theory proposed by psychologist Colin Martindale. The theory goes that many artists seek to make their works appealing by rejecting existing forms, subjects and styles that the public has become accustomed to. Artists seem to understand that they're more likely to arouse viewers and capture their attention by doing something new. Basically, the theory says that new things are interesting which is what makes such art popular.

Similarly, like Artificial Intelligence art, many other art forms like Cyborg art (an art movement that creates and adds new senses to the body via cybernetic implants to create artworks) have brought many questions about the art world.

Next, we delve into how new technologies have also transformed art and the art world. Here, we talk about Non-Fungible Tokens which are popularly known as NFT's.

Non-Fungible Tokens

Perhaps, the biggest way that NFTs have changed the art world is art ownership. Since NFTs are financial instruments, you can divide an NFT into fractions and sell it as shares. If it goes up in value, so will the shares. Many companies already doing this say it is a way to democratise art ownership and investment. For example, in a complex, incentivized sale that happened in early December, more than 28,000 buyers spent a total of \$91.8 million to acquire 266,445 "shares" of a digital work called "The Merge".^[11] You can also mint physical works as art. Anyone around the globe can access this art as opposed to traditional markets.

NFT's also make the artwork more accessible as compared to traditional art markets. This accessibility is not only for art buyers (as mentioned above) but also for art creators. Many NFT artists are children who have earned thousands of dollars from creating this art. This world also facilitates easier selling for artists.

It also creates new streams of income for digital artists in the following ways.

- By creating a digital copyright, artists can now track their distribution and viewership. For example, if it's an image on google, you can receive money for the number of views it makes. Similar to a youtube video but think of it extending to the entire internet. This is because no matter how many copies of that image are available on the internet, if you own the NFT for it, it's certified as yours.
- Because of complete ownership, artists reap the full benefits of their labour.
- Artists can surpass traditional markets and sell directly to buyers, without paying any remuneration/commission to art museums or art dealers. You don't have to build relationships amongst the art worlds but can sell directly.

Therefore, we see the ways newer, emerging technologies democratise the art world and remove monopolies with each new invention.

Accessibility and Technology

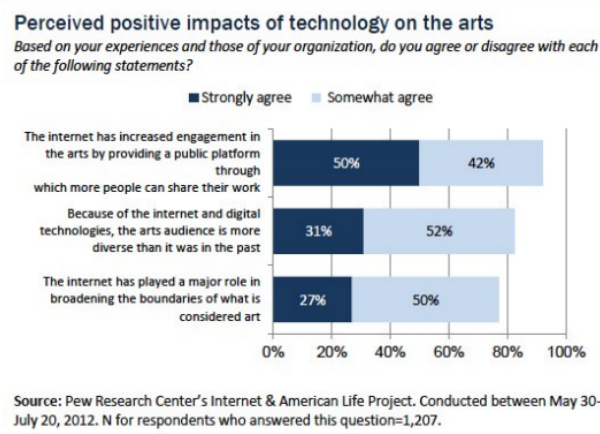
It's no doubt that the internet and technology have improved the accessibility of art; like many other things have been accessible as well. While we touched upon this idea in the previous section, we'll briefly go through how technology has impacted art accessibility.

The art market has changed due to technology and the internet. Art is being sold on sites like Etsy or artists can even be contacted directly through Instagram and Facebook, instead of going through an art dealer or art gallery. Certain innovative startups also have the Try Before You Buy option which lets you try or rent art before you buy. Social media sites are particularly helpful for newer artists and artists belonging to minority backgrounds.

Museums, art galleries etc also have visual tours which are helpful for buyers who cannot necessarily visit the museums physically or don't have an understanding of art. For example, Google Arts and Culture- has content from over 2000 leading museums and archives. It's an interactive website by Google that features 360 videos for viewing where you can virtually visit any gallery/museum partnered with Google. Many famous galleries and artists are partnered with Google. Therefore users have a plethora of collections. Anyone can set up a virtual tour of their gallery. A virtual presentation of art also allow users to experience art in different formats- video art, a livestream, a painting, a play etc.

Technology has also helped art lovers with disabilities to experience art. While museums allowed blind people to touch/feel sculptures, technology has taken this a step further through a variation of 3-D printing. The process involves a computer program converting the 2-D image of the painting into 3-D data where a machine sculpts a bas-relief of the image into a 5-by-10 feet substrate. The digital image is printed on top of the relief. The 3-D painting now enables people with sight impairments to experience it.^[12] Even when it comes to creating art, technology has helped artists with disabilities. For example, the University of Regina created a digital device that tracks eye movements and can use those movements to create drawings. This technology is currently being used to help empower children with disabilities.

Many stakeholders feel that overall, technology and the internet has been a good impact on art accessibility. In a Pew research study conducted in 2012, the arts organisations represented in the survey agreed with the notions that the internet and social media have “increased engagement” and made art a more participatory experience, and that they have helped make “arts audiences more diverse.” They also tend to agree that the internet has “played a major role in broadening the boundaries of what is considered art.”



How much of the value of art is related to the artist?

Art has been known to spark emotions and display unspeakable nuances of everyday life that leave the audience irrevocably touched. A lot of credit behind this evocation of sentimentality can be attributed to the artist behind the piece of art. Several parallels have been made about artists being ‘parents’ of their artwork.

In common parlance, artists may speak of their creations, artistic or otherwise, as ‘my baby’ and may experience loss or relief when these art pieces reach their final and complete state, as if the ‘baby’ has matured and left home. It is this great emotional significance of art—for both the consumer and the creator—that uncannily affects its valuation and makes it a unique good.

Emotions are an essential element of philosophical theories. Over the years, various philosophers have debated about the sort of thinking and mindsets emotions reflect. However, all of them have agreed on the fact that emotions are motivators for actions. Behavioural Economists have taken this insight into consideration and released several theories about how consumers buy products based on their emotions and not ‘rationality.’ The same can be said for art pieces.

Consumers all over the world find eclectic pieces of art valuable because they find some emotional attachment to them which transgresses any monetary rationale they might have for making (or not making) that purchase. In a way, this emotion-related monetary value (which can’t be estimated precisely because of its subjective nature) can sometimes be attributed to the creator of the art piece as they pour so much of their emotions into their art which the audience can relate with. We see this as one of the ways in which an artist contributes to the valuation of their art piece but is it the only way?

Some other ways in which artists contribute to the valuation of their art pieces are peak periods and direct association.

Peak periods are when the artist is experiencing high success in the market. Works curated in this particular period could possess a greater value than the works produced during the rest of their career. “So, say a Raza of the late 80s and 90s might be the most valued because that was his golden period whereas a Souza of the 60s/70s might be much more valuable than a later Souza. Artists eventually have a golden period within their own trajectory which might mark their best period,”^[8] explained Shireen Gandhy, Director of Chemould Prescott Road to Architectural Digest.

Direct associations refer to both the reputation of the artists and the past sales of their work. The reputation of the artist—their name being attached to the piece—makes the piece more attractive and accessible to interpret to the public. Moreover, auction houses work closely with the artist and take into consideration past prices, the new work and its physical attributes and then put together a valuation for every single piece in the exhibition.

Let's talk of the famously anonymous graffiti artist, Banksy. After his steady claim to success over the past decade, Banksy's auction market has exploded over the past year. His top three auction prices have all been set in 2021. In the first seven months of the year, his work generated \$125.5 million on the block, making him the fifth best-selling artist, according to the Artnet Price Database. Notably, that total is almost as much as his work has generated at auction in all previous years combined. Can you believe this same artist sold his painting for \$60 dollars on the streets of New York in 2013? In 2013, Banksy began an experiment: he set up a stall in Central Park, New York and got a person to sell his original, signed artwork to passers-by in the park. Unsurprisingly, the passers-by didn't recognise the value of what was on offer, unaware of his reputation or success. Ultimately, only eight paintings were sold for a total of £263 – but their value is estimated at £140,000.^[10]

Rightfully, Gareth Williams, head of contemporary art at Bonham's, said the Central Park stall was a coup. "The fact that his paintings were original and were being offered at a tiny fraction of their true retail value, raises real questions about the perception of worth and the nature of art as commodity within the marketplace – something that the artist must be acutely aware of."^[10]

Therefore, the artist contributes to the valuation of art in many intangible ways that don't necessarily have an economic rationale but do have a philosophical significance.

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to dissect the valuation of art in the 21st century both philosophically and economically. At first, we explored the demand for art and how it has changed over the past decades. In this section, we discerned that even as it has been influenced by multiple historical events, the art market has had people of the higher class as its loyal patrons but they aren't the only consumers of art. As much as art is valued as a 'good investment' in monetary terms, the consumption of art is also influenced by emotions, political motives and trends. We distinguished that the characteristics of art are not just limited to its 'beauty'. In later sections, we delved deeper into the philosophy of art and the state of art in the 21st century. To answer the question of how the internet and latest technology are modifying the philosophy of art we explored several different art forms—from NFTs to AI Art—and came to the conclusion that digital art is breaking the monopoly in the art market and democratising the art world. Lastly, as we head towards a future where art could be produced without any human input at all, we shed some light on the relationship between art and artists.

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