



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

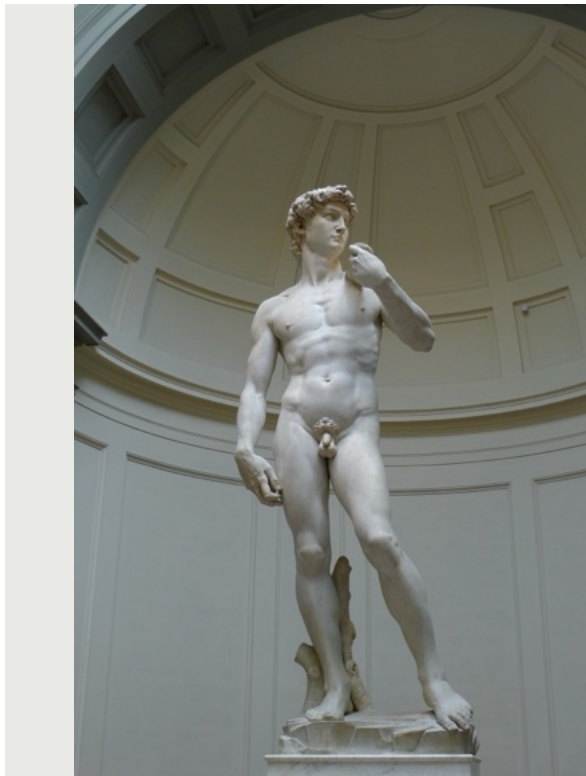
Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk



- Welcome. This is the very last of my 269 talks on the History of Western Art. It has been a five-year project with ups and downs on the way but I enjoyed the ride and I hope you did to. My other great lifetime love has been the study of artificial intelligence because I have always believed it will have a major positive impact in medicine, education and fundamental research. In other areas such as business, art and design it will have a major impact that will not be positive for many people. I wanted to step back and consider its impact on art from a historical perspective which gave rise to this talk.
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IS THIS THE END OF ART?

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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Michelangelo (1475–1564)
David, 1501–1504
Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

This question “Is This The End of Art?” sounds alarming: is it the end of art? Before we cancel our museum memberships, we need to decide what might be ending.

Michelangelo carved David from a block of marble that other sculptors had already worked on and abandoned. Completed in 1504, the statue became a public symbol of Florence. Its significance involved physical skill, certainly, but also a biblical story, civic politics and the ambitions of its patrons. Even this apparently straightforward example of artistic genius depended on much more than a gifted pair of hands.

Today, generative artificial intelligence allows people with little drawing experience to produce elaborate images from written instructions. That challenges the scarcity of certain skills. It also threatens particular kinds of paid work. Neither development automatically tells us whether art itself has finished.

We have been here before, although never in precisely the same circumstances. Photography challenged painting. Duchamp challenged the need to make the object. Warhol challenged the visible difference between art and ordinary merchandise.

I will follow those changes through Western art history. The question throughout is what people value in an artwork, and how those values change when its production becomes easier, stranger or less obviously human.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.galleriaaccademiafirenze.it/en/artworks/david-michelangelo/>

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 10-09

Michelangelo.pptx, slide 6.

When art had a job



Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516)
Adoration of the Magi Triptych, c.
1494
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Devotion, patronage
and remembrance



For much of European history, images worked within religious and social institutions. They supported worship, commemorated the dead and demonstrated the standing of those who commissioned them. This did not prevent invention or enjoyment. It gave those activities a setting.

Bosch's Adoration of the Magi makes that relationship visible. In the centre, the kings approach the infant Christ. On the wings, the donors kneel with their patron saints. The patrons have secured a place beside sacred history, although they remain respectfully outside its central scene. A commission could express devotion and family identity at the same time.

Bosch worked in the Netherlandish town of 's-Hertogenbosch, from which his professional name derives. He belonged to the local Brotherhood of Our Lady. His unfamiliar creatures can make him seem like an isolated eccentric, but he operated within a recognisable network of religious patrons and civic life.

We should therefore resist imagining all earlier artists as anonymous craftsmen awaiting liberation. Some enjoyed considerable fame. What differed was the relationship between making, use and status.

An altarpiece was not originally a painting waiting to enter a museum. Its doors, setting and devotional purpose mattered. When we discuss the end of art, we are already using a category whose boundaries have changed.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-adoration-of-the-magi-triptych/666788cc-c522-421b-83f0-5ad84b9377f7>

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 09-03 Hieronymus Bosch.pptx, slide 11.

The invention of the artist



Raphael (1483–1520)
The School of Athens, 1509–1511
Vatican Museums, Vatican City

The maker claims
intellectual status



Raphael painted The School of Athens for Pope Julius the Second's rooms in the Vatican. Ancient philosophers gather inside an immense classical building. Plato and Aristotle stand in the centre. Near the right edge, Raphael includes his own portrait among this distinguished company.

That small appearance makes a large claim. Painting belongs in the world of knowledge, alongside philosophy and mathematics. The painter has something to contribute beyond skilful decoration.

Renaissance artists increasingly promoted drawing as an intellectual activity. Perspective involved geometry. Anatomy demanded observation. Court employment and distinguished patrons could bring status beyond the workshop, although artists still depended on assistants, contracts and payment. Genius did not abolish the invoice.

Giorgio Vasari strengthened this account in his *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1550 and expanded in 1568. He organised artistic development as a story of recovery and improvement, with Michelangelo occupying its summit. Biography helped make the exceptional individual the organising unit of art history.

This was a gradual, uneven change, not the sudden birth of creativity. Earlier cultures had celebrated individual makers too. But the Renaissance supplied influential foundations for our modern expectation that an artwork expresses a distinctive mind. That expectation will become crucial when we reach machines capable of producing images.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/stanze-di-raffaello/stanza-della-segnatura/scuola-di-atene.html>

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1550 and 1568.

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 10-08

Raphael.pptx, slide 8.

Art as progress



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825)
The Oath of the Horatii, 1784–1785
Musée du Louvre, Paris

An academy defines
excellence



If artists could improve, someone needed to explain what improvement meant. European academies supplied training, exhibitions and standards. Drawing from the antique and the living model helped students learn an approved language of the human body.

David's Oath of the Horatii shows the result. Three brothers reach towards swords held by their father. Firm outlines and repeated arches organise the action. The women's curved, grieving bodies anticipate the human cost of public duty. The picture asks to be read as a moral drama.

David painted it in Rome for a royal commission before the French Revolution. Its later revolutionary associations should not make us forget that starting point. A language of civic virtue could serve changing political masters.

The academic hierarchy placed ambitious history painting above more everyday subjects. Joshua Reynolds, in his Discourses, urged students to study celebrated predecessors and seek general forms of beauty. Excellence involved selection and idealisation, rather than simply copying whatever stood in front of the easel.

This matters because the history of art could now look like an organised ascent. There were models to follow and recognised prizes at the summit. But those standards also excluded people and practices. When artists challenged the academy, they challenged who could define artistic achievement.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010062239>

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2176/2176-h/2176-h.htm>

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 20-04 Jacques-Louis David.pptx, slide 5.

Photography and the death of painting



Louis Daguerre (1787–1851)
Boulevard du Temple, Paris, 1838
Daguerreotype

A machine records
appearances



In 1839, the public announcement of photography made a new kind of image widely known. Here is Daguerre's earlier view of the Boulevard du Temple in Paris. Buildings register with remarkable detail, but most moving traffic has disappeared during the long exposure. Near the lower left, a man having his shoes cleaned remains still enough to leave a trace.

So the supposedly automatic image was selective from the beginning. Exposure time determined what the camera could show. Photography offered a different account of the world, rather than an entirely neutral one.

Paul Delaroche is often credited with announcing that painting was dead. The attribution is doubtful, and we should treat it as a memorable legend rather than a securely recorded verdict. Its survival tells us how readily a new technology produces a funeral announcement.

Photography did affect markets for likenesses and other forms of visual recording. Painters also used photographs as working material. Meanwhile, photographers made decisions about lighting, viewpoint and printing, developing their own artistic practices.

Painting survived because likeness was only one of its purposes but in little more than a decade it virtually destroyed the mass market for painted miniature portraits. Hundreds of photographic businesses appeared to replace it.

The useful parallel with artificial intelligence is therefore limited but important. The technology did not abolish art or even portrait painting. It automated the part of the market where customers principally wanted an accurate likeness, while leaving—and arguably increasing the premium on—what only a highly regarded artist could provide.

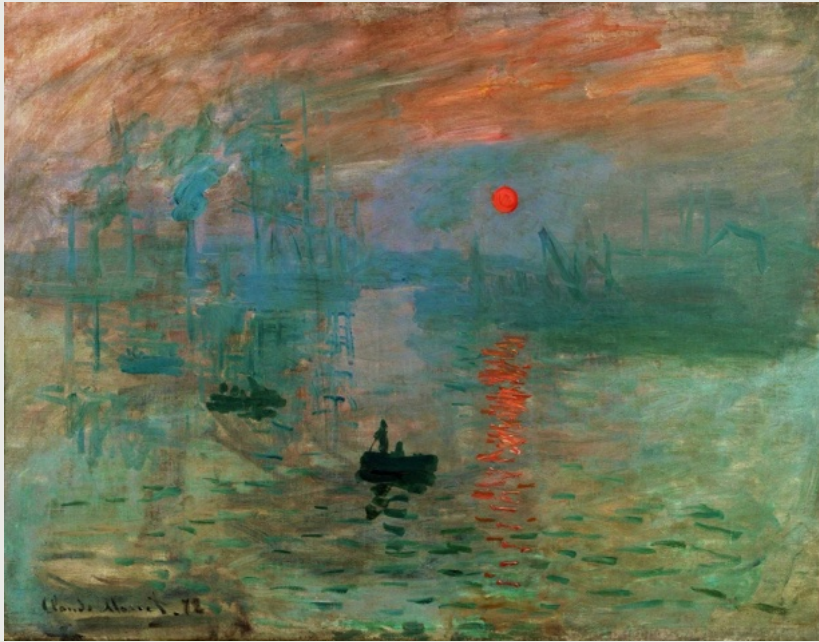
References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/es/essays/daguerre-1787-1851-and-the-invention-of-photography>

Image and historical context: Laurence Shafe, 24-01 Photography – The Art of Victorian Photography, slide 12. Delaroche quotation is treated as doubtful, not quoted as fact.

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 24-01 Photography - The Art of Victorian Photography.pptx, slide 12.

Impressionism and modern vision



Claude Monet (1840–1926)
Impression, Sunrise, 1872
Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

Colour, perception and
modern life



Monet painted this view of Le Havre in 1872. An orange sun hangs above a harbour whose cranes and ships remain partly concealed by atmospheric haze. The foreground boat is scarcely more than a dark arrangement of strokes. Yet the relationships between colours make the scene immediately legible.

When the picture appeared in the independent exhibition of 1874, its title helped Louis Leroy name the exhibitors Impressionists in a mocking review. What sounded like an accusation became a useful label. Art criticism occasionally provides a branding service without intending to.

Monet had grown up in Le Havre and began by selling caricatures. His painting retained a practical interest in how a few marks could establish a convincing visual effect. Here the subject includes a working commercial port, rather than untouched nature.

It is tempting to say that photography liberated painting from realism. That is too neat and simple. New markets, portable materials, Japanese prints and changing urban experience also contributed. Painters did not all deal with photography in the same way.

The change concerns what an image can ask us to notice. Loose handling and unstable light become positive choices, rather than failures to finish properly. Technical skill remains essential, but its purpose and visible evidence have changed.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.marmottan.fr/notice/4014/>

<https://salons.musee-orsay.fr/Detail/objects/58022>

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 27-02 Claude Monet.pptx, slide 11.

Picasso and the broken viewpoint



Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)
Les Femmes d'Alger, 1935
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Representation
becomes a construction



These five figures do not occupy a comfortable, continuous space. Faces and bodies turn into angular planes. The crouching figure at the right presents a particularly awkward combination of viewpoints. The viewer cannot settle into the familiar position of looking through a window.

Picasso painted Les Femmes d'Alger in 1935, when he was twenty-five. The subject refers to a brothel. Its confrontational treatment disturbed even some of his artistic friends. This was a decisive precursor to Cubism, rather than a complete statement of the later movement.

Picasso and Georges Braque subsequently developed paintings in which objects and surrounding space break into interacting facets. They examined how a picture constructs recognition, using fragments and signs as well as likeness.

Picasso's sources included Iberian sculpture and African objects reaching Paris through colonial networks. A history that praises European innovation while leaving those makers unnamed gives us an incomplete account of originality.

The relevance to our argument is straightforward. Once the single, stable viewpoint loses its authority, resemblance becomes one artistic resource among others. Photographic accuracy cannot settle whether a painting succeeds. We must ask what kind of experience or understanding the artist has constructed. The standard has changed again, but there is still a standard to discuss.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766>

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 41-02 Pablo Plcasso.pptx, slide 8.

Duchamp and the chosen object



Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)
Fountain, 1917
Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz
Original object lost

Can choosing be an
artistic act?



In 1917, a urinal signed R. Mutt entered the story of modern art. Submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in New York, it failed to appear in an exhibition that had promised admission to all fee-paying artists without submission to a jury. The organisers discovered that independence had its limits.

This is Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of the original Fountain, which subsequently disappeared. The objects you may have seen in museums are later authorised replicas. That distinction matters for a work whose physical manufacture challenged ordinary ideas of authenticity.

Duchamp called such selected objects readymades. He had trained as a painter, but shifted attention towards naming, choosing and changing the context in which an object appeared. The urinal had required industrial skill to manufacture. The artistic claim did not depend on Duchamp personally supplying that skill.

Fountain therefore makes a particularly useful interruption in our story. More than a century before current image generators, an influential artwork separated artistic authorship from manual execution.

It does not follow that every object becomes interesting whenever someone calls it art. The question of artistic status and the question of artistic value remain different. Duchamp made that distinction difficult to ignore. A machine's involvement in production cannot, by itself, settle either question.

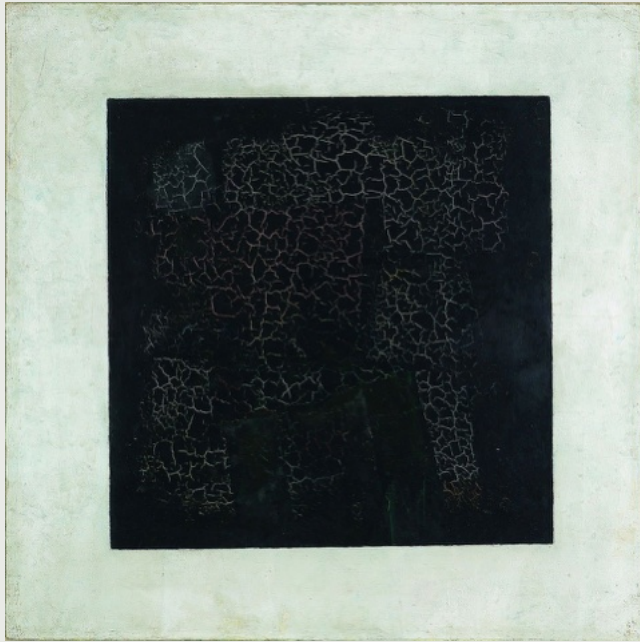
References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.philamuseum.org/objects/92488>

<https://press.philamuseum.org/marcel-duchamp-and-the-fountain-scandal/>

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 46-02 Marcel Duchamp.pptx, slide 7.

Reduction and the last painting



Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935)
Black Square, 1915
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

How much can painting
remove?



At first glance, Malevich seems to have removed almost everything. Black Square gives us a dark form within a pale border. There is no landscape, no portrait and no incident to identify. Even so, this is a material painting, note however, that the uneven surface and cracks have developed over time.

Malevich exhibited the work in Petrograd in 1915, high across a corner traditionally associated with religious icons. Its position helped announce a new beginning for his Suprematist art. His approach was revolutionary, he wanted to art back to its most basic forms and begin again. The removal of recognisable objects also carried an ambitious claim about a reality beyond ordinary appearances.

Decades later, Ad Reinhardt pursued another kind of reduction. His black paintings contain subtle differences that emerge through sustained looking. He wanted painting freed from external reference and expressive display. What looks like nothing may demand quite a lot of attention.

These projects can sound like proposals for a final painting. Once colour, objects and gesture have been stripped away, what remains to do? Yet the two artists attached different purposes to reduction, and

other painters continued along other paths.

The apparent endpoint belongs to a particular definition of painting. It becomes the end of art only if we assume that every artist must travel along the same road.

References and image credits (not for narration)

https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19_20/zh_9484/index.php?lang=en

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78976>

Image: 1915 Tretyakov version, reproduced from Laurence Shafe, 41-01 Cubism Abstraction and the British Avant Garde. Russian Museum source discusses another version and the 1915 exhibition.

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 41-01 Cubism Abstraction and the British Avant Garde.pptx, slide 18.

Warhol and Danto's end of art



Andy Warhol (1928–1987)
Brillo Box (Soap Pads), 1964
Museum of Modern Art, New York

The end of one
compulsory direction



Warhol's Brillo boxes look like commercial packaging. In fact, the 1964 sculptures were fabricated in wood and printed to resemble supermarket cartons. Their appearance deliberately unsettles the distinction between an artwork and something that might arrive with the groceries.

The philosopher Arthur Danto saw Warhol's exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York. It sharpened a question: if an artwork and an ordinary object can look alike, what makes one art? Visual inspection alone could not provide the whole answer. Meaning and historical context had become essential.

Danto later developed his argument about the end of art. He did not mean that artists would stop working or that worthwhile objects would cease to appear. He meant that the grand narrative directing Western art towards a single historical destination had reached its limit. It was the end of art as it had been understood up till then.

Naturalism had once supplied that destination. Some modernists replaced it with the discovery of each medium's essential properties. Warhol helped Danto see a situation in which no single style could claim to be the necessary next stage.

Artists could continue painting, borrowing, performing or making objects. History continued, but it no longer issued one compulsory set of marching orders. That is a philosophical claim about art's direction, quite different from a prediction that machines will eliminate artists.

References and image credits (not for narration)

Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964), pp. 571–584.

Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

https://www.nga.gov/sites/default/files/migrate_images/content/dam/ngaweb/education/learning-resources/teaching-packets/pdfs/artsince1950.pdf

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 58-02 Pop Art - Andy Warhol and David Hockney.pptx, slide 17.

Postmodern pluralism



Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988)
Untitled, 1981
Often called Untitled (Skull)
The Broad, Los Angeles

Many practices share
the present



Basquiat's head seems both solid and taken apart. Painted areas, scratched lines and exposed structures compete for attention. We can recognise a face without resolving every mark into an anatomical explanation. Painting has survived the supposed arrival of its final black square rather energetically.

Born in Brooklyn in 1960, Basquiat first attracted attention through the language and public presence of SAMO, the graffiti project he developed with Al Diaz. His later paintings drew on art history, music and written references, while addressing Black experience and the distribution of cultural authority.

Postmodernism is a broad and disputed label. Here its useful meaning is pluralism: different media, styles and relationships to the past operate alongside one another. Quotation and borrowing become explicit strategies. An artist need not pretend that everything began in an empty studio.

Pluralism also makes the old survey of successive movements less convincing. Painting does not disappear when performance arrives. Nor does the recognition of new practices guarantee equal access to museums, markets or critical attention.

Danto's recognition of freedom from a single historical direction leaves us with more work as viewers. We have to understand the particular claim each artwork makes and judge how successfully it makes it. The disappearance of a universal ladder does not make every achievement equivalent.

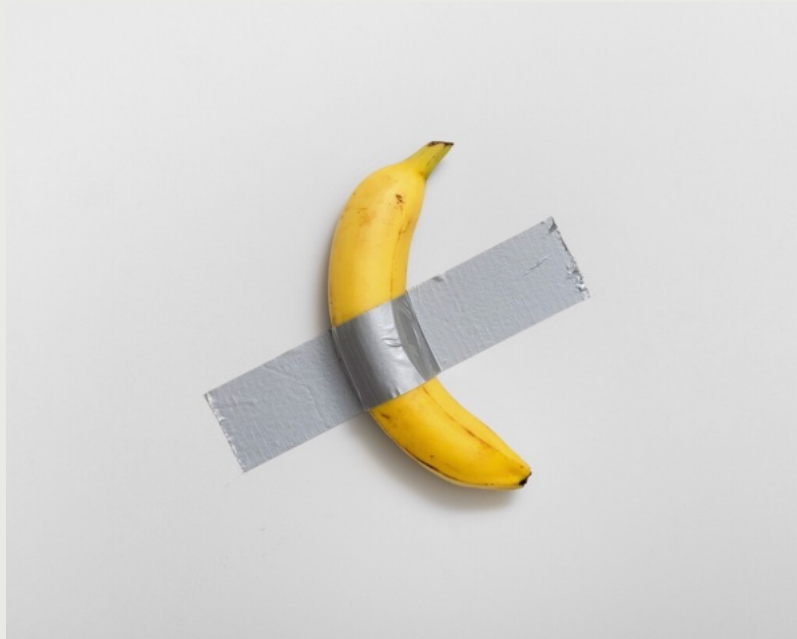
References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.thebroad.org/art/jean-michel-basquiat/untitled>

Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 1997.

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 60-03 Postmodern Art 1980-2000.pptx, slide 3.

Cattelan and manufactured scarcity



Maurizio Cattelan (b. 1960)
Comedian, 2019
Banana and duct tape
Image courtesy of Sotheby's

The fruit is replaceable.
The edition is limited.



A banana fixed to a wall with duct tape is an efficient way to start an argument. Maurizio Cattelan presented *Comedian* at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2019. Its materials were ordinary and perishable. Its status in the art market depended on something less visible.

The work comes with a certificate and instructions. The banana can be replaced. Ownership concerns an authorised instance of Cattelan's work, rather than the preservation of one particular piece of fruit. Conservation, in this case, involves an unusually accessible shopping list, "One banana, please."

Cattelan has repeatedly tested the behaviour of institutions and audiences. *Comedian* makes the art fair itself part of the subject. It exposes the distance between the cost of materials and the value assigned to an artist's name, a limited edition and a recognised transaction.

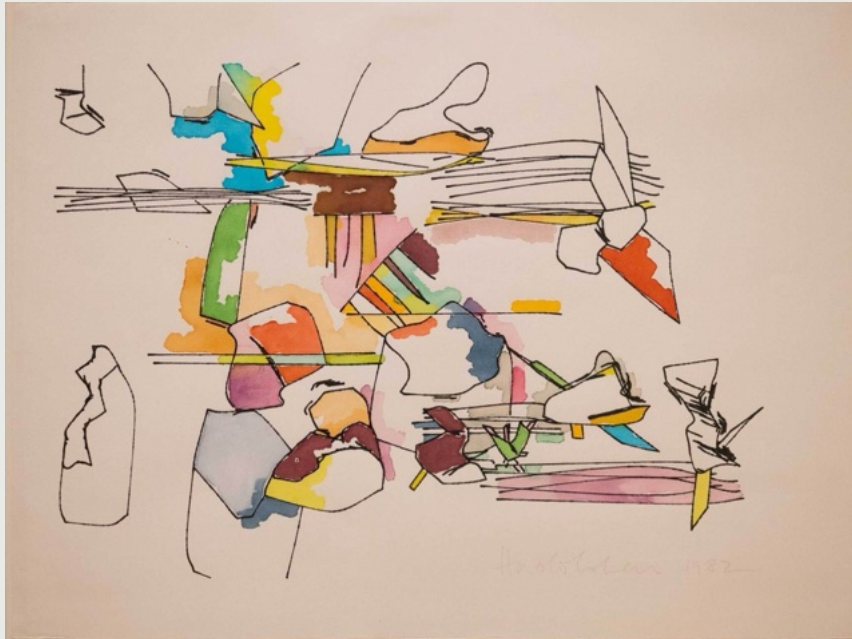
That need not make us admire it. We can question the quality of the joke, its dependence on publicity or its relationship to wealth. Those are more precise criticisms than simply observing that bananas are cheap.

The connection with artificial intelligence is the organisation of scarcity. When an image or object is easy to reproduce, markets can attach value to provenance, authorisation and reputation. Abundant production may alter the location of scarcity without making scarcity disappear.

References and image credits (not for narration)

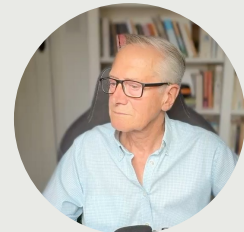
<https://www.sothebys.com/buy/3a28252d-165d-4e58-9898-e628fc4322e2/lots/04c7dbdd-01dc-4179-a52f-814ea48eb835>

AARON and contemporary AI



Harold Cohen (1928–2016)
Untitled, 1982
Watercolour and plotter pen on
paper
Whitney Museum of American Art
© Harold Cohen Trust

Rules written by an
artist; patterns learned
from data



Computer art did not begin with a box into which we type a prompt. Harold Cohen, an established British painter, began developing AARON in the late nineteen-sixties. Over decades, he used the program to investigate how a system of marks becomes a convincing image.

AARON generated drawings using rules Cohen developed about forms and their relationships. In this 1982 work, the plotter supplied the drawn structure and Cohen added watercolour. Later versions could handle colour themselves. The division of labour changed as he changed the system.

Contemporary generative models generally learn statistical relationships from large datasets, rather than relying on a painter to specify comparable drawing rules. Many image systems learn to transform noise into images under the guidance of text or other inputs. Their results can be unfamiliar combinations, although they can also reproduce existing material.

The contrast is useful, but neither process begins outside human culture. Cohen supplied his program's knowledge. Contemporary systems depend on collected material, engineering decisions and the

choices of their users.

Producing a persuasive image demonstrates a capability. It does not establish that a system experiences its subject or independently cares about its meaning. Meanwhile, people can use such systems with substantial artistic intention. We need to examine the actual process.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://whitney.org/exhibitions/harold-cohen-aaron/art>

Robin Rombach et al., “High-Resolution Image Synthesis with Latent Diffusion Models”, CVPR 2022, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2112.10752>

Authorship and copyright



Sherrie Levine (b. 1947)
Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp:
A.P.), 1991
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Artistic authorship and
legal rights are different
questions



Sherrie Levine's bronze Fountain returns us to Duchamp, with a conspicuously different material and another artist's name. Borrowing can itself be the subject of an artwork. It can also raise legal questions. Those two discussions overlap without becoming identical.

With artificial intelligence, we should separate three issues. Who made the expressive decisions in the output? What rights applied to material used in training? And does a particular result reproduce protected expression? Calling something art does not answer any of them.

The United States Copyright Office's 2025 report maintains the requirement for human authorship. Human selection, arrangement or modification may qualify for protection. Merely providing prompts generally does not establish sufficient control over the resulting expression under current systems.

The United Kingdom has a different statutory provision for certain computer-generated works, assigning authorship to the person undertaking the necessary arrangements. Its application to modern generative systems is uncertain. The government's March 2026 report discusses that uncertainty. There is no single worldwide answer.

For our historical argument, the distinction matters. An artwork can communicate meaning without satisfying a particular copyright rule. Equally, legal ownership does not demonstrate artistic value. We should describe the human contribution, disclose the process where relevant and examine rights separately, rather than letting the word creativity do every job. Creativity is not an exclusively human activity. AI systems have demonstrated that they can be very creative but currently they lack initiative. They respond to human prompts. But this will change.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://www.copyright.gov/newsnet/2025/1060.html>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-and-impact-assessment-on-copyright-and-artificial-intelligence/report-on-copyright-and-artificial-intelligence>

Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, sections 9(3), 12(7) and 178:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/48/section/9>

Legal context checked 10 September 2026.

Image: Laurence Shafe, 60-03 Postmodern Art 1980-2000, slide 9.

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 60-03 Postmodern Art 1980-2000.pptx, slide 9.

What might actually be ending?



Animal paintings, Lascaux, France
Upper Palaeolithic

Image-making skill may become less scarce
Human execution may become optional
Art still requires reasons to matter



These animals at Lascaux remind us how long people have made images. Their precise purposes remain debated. We should not turn that uncertainty into a convenient story about our ancestors. What survives is evidence of sustained attention, material knowledge and decisions about how living creatures could be represented.

Our journey has followed several supposed endings. Photography weakened the monopoly of hand-made likenesses. Duchamp separated artistic authorship from manufacture. Abstraction tested how much a painting could remove. Danto questioned the expectation of a single historical destination.

Artificial intelligence adds a new pressure. Some forms of polished image-making skill are becoming less scarce, and human execution can be optional at more stages of production. This can expand participation while damaging particular livelihoods. The survival of art offers no automatic reassurance to someone losing paid commissions.

But plentiful images do not produce plentiful reasons to care about them. Attention, judgement, trust and an understanding of context still matter. Human experience can matter too, especially when we value a work as something a particular person chose to make. I think that is a

key point.

So I do not see evidence that art has reached its conclusion. I see another change in the relationship between making and meaning. The question for an image is increasingly, does it deserve our attention. Is it entertaining, meaningful, full of emotion and was it produced solely or partly by a human? The art world is changing fundamentally but art has a habit of surviving but in a completely new form and it is too soon to say what that will be.

References and image credits (not for narration)

<https://archeologie.culture.gouv.fr/lascaux/en>

Conclusion is the lecturer's historical argument, not a prediction established by a benchmark.

Image reproduced from Laurence Shafe's existing lecture: 01-01 The Earliest Art.pptx, slide 10.



IS THIS THE END OF ART?

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.CO.UK



That brings me to the very end of my now six-year project summarising the whole history of Western Art as a series of 269 lectures. I hope you have enjoyed the ride.

I now have a new project to put down my thoughts on AI in a series of articles on my Substack channel “laurenceshafe”. I hope you will join me there.

I have enjoyed the journey through western art and I hope you have to. I would like to thank you all for your time and your supportive comments.

Goodbye for now.



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk

LUDASO, ME PREDER DUS : BOTTERS

