

BETWEEN REPRODUCTION AND CREATION

The Intersection of AI and Art with Midjourney

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Abstract. This study examines the intersection of artificial intelligence and art through an analysis of Midjourney’s capabilities in interpreting and recreating artworks considered canonical in the western canon of art history. Using a mixed-method approach combining computational art analysis with qualitative comparative assessment, we investigated how AI-generated imagery challenges traditional notions of artistic authenticity, authorship, and originality. Five iconic works from the public domain—Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night,” Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl Earring,” Hokusai’s “The Great Wave off Kanagawa,” Wood’s “American Gothic,” and Munch’s “The Scream”—were analyzed using Midjourney’s describe function and subsequent image generation across technical, stylistic, and semantic dimensions. Findings reveal that prompt specificity critically shapes output fidelity: concise prompts tend to produce more faithful

reproductions, while elaborate, detail-rich prompts invite broader creative reinterpretation. The AI consistently demonstrated strong technical proficiency in replicating compositional elements and color palettes, while showing notable tendencies toward stylistic amplification and occasional semantic misinterpretation of cultural context. These results contribute to ongoing debates about AI’s role in artistic production, suggesting that Midjourney functions less as a precise replicator and more as an interpretive collaborator, generating hybrid works that exist in tension between reproduction and creation, fidelity and innovation, human intention and algorithmic pattern recognition.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Photographic Art; Midjourney; Creativity; Originality.

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into the creative sphere has significantly reshaped photography, transforming both artistic processes and conceptual approaches. One of the authors, Gross, drawing from his background in conceptual photography—where image production traditionally required extensive planning and post-processing—observed how this workflow could be compressed into seconds through prompt engineering. He first encountered AI-generated imagery after reading Vox’s coverage in 2022 and soon became an early user of DALL-E 2 (Fong, 2022). While such technologies enable complex projects to be realized quickly, their existence and proliferation remain contentious—a fact that must be acknowledged at the outset. The intersection of AI and photography marks not only a technological shift but also a redefinition of what it means to create images. Historically shaped by light and time, photography now finds itself in a moment where the boundary between imagination and realization is increasingly fluid. This shift compels reconsideration of concepts like artistic authenticity, the value of process over outcome, and the meaning of authorship in an era where creative execution occurs in seconds rather than hours. This contraction of so-called “creative time” raises broader questions about the evolving role of the artist, as algorithmic systems transition from tools to active collaborators.

A central debate in AI image creation concerns its ability to convincingly replicate established artistic styles. Tools like Midjourney allow users to emulate specific aesthetics—via its ‘/describe’ function—thereby expanding the boundaries of expression. Such capabilities challenge traditional definitions of originality and creative innovation (Elgammal et al., 2017). The emergence of AI-generated imagery has also reignited debates around intellectual property (Michael, 2023) and the ethics of machine-assisted creation (Eshraghian, 2020; Poland, 2023). This study engages with these tensions, positioning AI as both a facilitator and collaborator in contemporary photographic art. The capacity of AI to mimic artistic styles introduces both technical opportunities and ethical challenges. On one hand, it democratizes creative access by making sophis-

ticated visual tools more widely available. On the other, it raises serious questions about authorship, copyright, and the value of human creativity. This paper seeks to critically explore these dynamics, analyzing AI’s creative potential alongside its wider implications for the art world and society.

1.1 Historical context and evolution of AI art

Artistic experimentation at the intersection of creativity and computation began in the late 1960s. Vera Molnar pioneered the use of computer programs to generate geometric abstractions, showing how algorithmic logic could shape aesthetic composition (Roe-Dale, 2019, pp. 18-21). Her work helped lay the foundation for a new paradigm in which machines became more than mere tools—they emerged as creative collaborators. Similarly, Frieder Nake combined mathematical precision with visual expression, and by the 1970s, his algorithmic works demonstrated how computer code could function as a medium for artistic exploration (Nake, 2012, pp. 86-89). The evolution continued with Harold Cohen’s development of AARON, a program capable of autonomously generating drawings. Rather than automating production, Cohen sought to explore whether machines could develop a genuine understanding of form and composition (Cohen, 1995, p. 112). While AARON evolved over several decades, it raised enduring questions about authorship and creative agency. Despite such early advances, AI art remained peripheral until the 21st century. A major shift occurred in 2014 when Ian Goodfellow introduced Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs)—a deep learning model in which two neural networks generate and assess novel images through adversarial interaction (Goodfellow et al., 2014, p. 2672). This breakthrough enabled the creation of images that were not just reprocessed but genuinely new, challenging conventional distinctions between human and machine creativity.

The implications reached a global audience in 2018, when the AI-generated portrait Edmond de Belamy, created by the Paris-based collective Obvious, sold at Christie’s for \$432,500 (Quackenbush, 2018). Obvious—comprised of Gauthier Vernier, Hugo Caselles-

Dupré, and Pierre Fautrel—positions itself at the intersection of art and artificial intelligence, working primarily with GANs (Cohn, 2018). Their success illustrated the art market's growing recognition of AI-generated works. The British Museum's later collaboration with LaCollection.io, which included selling NFTs of 200 Hokusai works and planning NFTs of J.M.W. Turner's paintings, further reflected this trend (Harris, 2022). By the early 2020s, the emergence of diffusion models like Midjourney and Stable Diffusion made AI creativity more accessible. These platforms allow users to create complex visuals from simple text prompts, eliminating many technical barriers. However, this democratization intensified debates around originality and authorship (Elgammal, 2017). Prompt specificity plays a crucial role in shaping output, as Zhou et al. (2022, pp. 1, 9) argue: the phrasing and authorship of a prompt directly influence the model's performance. They define "prompt engineering" as the optimization of language to elicit the best possible results.

As AI-generated art gained traction, a distinct field known as AI Arts emerged. The rise of AI-generated art has catalyzed significant debate in both academic and artistic communities. Often referred to as AI Arts, this field diverges from traditional computer-generated art by relying on machine learning and neural networks rather than procedural coding. Lev Manovich (2019) defines AI Arts as the autonomous creation of artifacts that professionals in the art world recognize as either fitting within established historical styles or aligning with contemporary aesthetics. Although this definition highlights the distinctiveness of AI-driven creativity, it remains a contested concept, requiring ongoing refinement.

Historically, computer-generated art from the 1960s onward was based on explicit algorithms, such as fractals, cellular automata, and generative processes, guided by human input (Galanter, 2003). By contrast, AI Arts emerged in the 2010s with the advent of models trained on large datasets, capable of recognizing patterns and generating original content that could replicate or innovate upon traditional styles (Manovich, 2019). Manovich has long studied data's role in shaping digital creativity. In earlier work, he argued that any data visualization or project is inherently biased

due to selective representation (Manovich, 2015, p. 18). While certain biases can be corrected, he emphasizes that data is built upon foundational assumptions—such as defining finite sets of objects and their features—that shape what becomes analyzable. He identifies three key decisions in making data manageable: choosing which phenomena to treat as objects, selecting their relevant features, and determining how those features are encoded (Manovich, 2015, p. 18).

A central debate in AI Arts concerns the degree of machine autonomy. While AI systems can generate novel works, human oversight remains vital in training data selection, model tuning, and output curation. As Colson and Gross (2024) argue, AI's creativity is ultimately human-guided, complicating the idea of AI as an independent artist. Nonetheless, AI has reached a point where it can produce outputs that fool even expert art historians, resembling a visual "Turing Test" (Manovich, 2019).

One of AI's most distinctive strengths lies in its potential to transcend cultural and cognitive biases. By synthesizing elements from diverse artistic traditions, AI can produce hybrid aesthetics rarely conceived by humans. This data-driven logic introduces new systems for visual creation and interpretation (Colton et al., 2009). However, Sebastián Lozano (2017, p. 4) cautions that computational tools embed assumptions from the outset—predetermining what the system considers valuable or visible in a dataset. Thus, interpretation is never absent from AI analysis but is built into the infrastructure of the tools themselves. Contemporary AI tools such as Midjourney illustrate this evolving role of AI in creative practice. Unlike earlier models focused primarily on replicating existing styles, Midjourney actively integrates user prompts, enabling a collaborative process that merges human intent with machine execution. This dynamic interplay reaffirms that AI Arts exist at the intersection of machine learning, human curation, and artistic intent, producing works that challenge or expand conventional aesthetic frameworks. While Manovich (2019) provides a foundational perspective, additional scholarship highlights the hybrid nature of AI-driven creativity. As AI technology advances, so too will the theoretical frameworks that define its place within the broader art world.

1.2 The technical framework of AI in photography

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed photography by introducing new methods for image generation, enhancement, and analysis. A notable example is Midjourney's describe function, which analyzes uploaded images and generates textual prompts describing their style, composition, and content. This tool illustrates how AI fosters visual creativity—not by replicating images, but by inspiring new artistic outputs (Midjourney, 2023). AI's role in photography ranges from image recognition and resolution enhancement to fully generative art. Deep learning, particularly via convolutional neural networks (CNNs), enables object detection, image refinement, and automated editing (Goodfellow et al., 2016, p. 97). Tools like Adobe Sensei and Topaz Gigapixel AI apply these techniques to upscale and enhance images, paving the way for more advanced generative systems.

Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), introduced by Goodfellow in 2014, power many such systems. These models involve a generator and a discriminator in a feedback loop that produces increasingly realistic images (Goodfellow et al., 2014). Variational Autoencoders (VAEs) offer another approach by compressing images into latent space and reconstructing them into stylistically coherent variations (Kingma & Welling, 2013, p. 12). These technologies form the basis of tools like DALL-E, Stable Diffusion, and Midjourney. Midjourney's describe relies on vision–language models similar to OpenAI's CLIP, which align textual and visual data (Radford et al., 2021, p. 4). Rather than duplicating visuals, describe enables creative reinterpretation of images, reflecting a broader shift in AI's role: enhancing not just technical image quality, but also influencing the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of photography. As these tools advance, the boundary between human and machine creativity continues to blur. GANs, VAEs, and features like describe illustrate how AI contributes not only to image production, but also to the evolving language and meaning of photographic expression.

1.3 Authentication and originality discourse

The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is actively reshaping the art world and challenging

long-held notions of authorship and originality. Traditionally, authorship has been attributed to human creators who express personal intent through their work. AI's ability to produce art in human-like styles complicates this, raising questions about whether authorship belongs to the human guiding the AI, the AI itself, or both. The U.S. Copyright Office maintains that copyright protection requires “sufficient human authorship.” In a 2025 report, it argued that current legal frameworks are adequate for AI-related copyright issues. It concluded that many AI-assisted works could be partially or fully copyrightable if a human determines the expressive elements, but emphasized that prompts alone often don't meet this threshold (U.S. Copyright Office, 2025, p. 41). Tim Flach, president of the UK's Association of Photographers, has voiced concerns over AI tools mimicking artistic styles. Known for his wildlife photography, Flach discovered his photographic style labeled as a “style” in Midjourney. He argues that allowing tech companies to train models on creative work without consent or compensation is “highly problematical” (T. Flach, personal communication, February 2025). In a follow-up article, he warned, “If you are impersonating the style of artists, what does it leave when that technology gets a thousand times more powerful?” (Growcoot, 2024).

Alex Mahon, CEO of Channel 4, echoed these concerns, stating that AI companies are “scraping the value” out of the UK's £125 billion creative industries. Speaking to Parliament in April 2025, she warned that proposed legislation allowing AI access to copyrighted content unless creators opt out would endanger the industry. She emphasized that the creative sector, which contributes 6% to the UK's gross value added (GVA) and grows 1.5 times faster than other sectors, is at risk if large language models (LLMs) can scrape data without fair compensation (Sweney, 2025).

These positions underscore the importance of human involvement in defining authorship. While crafting prompts and curating outputs may involve creativity, the unpredictability of AI-generated content raises doubts about human control and intentionality. Some scholars argue that “the end user is the intellectual creator of the work,” highlighting the user's role in shaping outcomes (Caldwell, 2022).

Ethical issues also emerge around AI's replication of artistic styles. Platforms like PromptHero and PromptLibrary offer prompts specifically designed to emulate individual artists, blurring the line between inspiration and appropriation. This trend risks commodifying unique artistic voices. Concerns also extend to visual history. In the documentary *The Moment of Truth*, director David Baksh discusses with Flora Smith of TopFoto—the UK's historic, family-owned photo archive—the risk of AI-generated imagery contaminating archival authenticity. Smith noted that archives are taking active steps to preserve verified, human-created content (F. Smith, personal communication, February 2025).

"If we cannot trust what we're seeing, then we won't trust anything—and our sense of what is possible unravels." This quote captures the disorienting impact of AI-generated imagery, which increasingly blurs the line between real and fake and alters how we engage with reality.

Flora Smith's concerns reflect a deeper issue: when data—images or otherwise—from distinct worldviews is repurposed, it's often misread through a Western lens. Instead, such data may be organized by coherent but different philosophical frameworks. Rodriguez-Ortega (2017), a digital art historian, observes: "We remain installed in the use of knowledge from the perspective of Western logic. However, is it possible to become estranged from ourselves and to re-position ourselves within other logics?" Importantly, the "Other" may not be a distant culture but past generations who created visual records through traditional means like painting.

Lev Manovich (2024) expands this dialogue through his idea of the "generative museum," where AI recreates artworks in diverse historical styles. He argues this could "re-imagine art history... as a speculative discipline," opening new avenues for creative exploration. However, such speculative reconstructions also challenge long-held ideas of authenticity and value. The accessibility of AI tools allows untrained users to create compelling works, democratizing creativity but also risking market saturation. As Verspecht (2023) warns, "AI art has the potential to revolutionize the art world, but it also poses a potential threat to human artists." The debate around AI's role in art calls for a reassessment of origi-

inality and authorship. Palmer and Sluis (2023) raise ethical concerns about proprietary algorithms trained on existing photographic datasets, especially given photography's nature as a "contingent encounter between a camera user and the world." These systems embed biases and complicate ideas of intentionality and authorship. While current legal frameworks provide some direction, they lag behind the pace of AI development. As AI-generated photos and videos become nearly indistinguishable from real ones, the need for continued ethical discourse grows. Balancing innovation with the preservation of human creativity remains a central challenge in this shifting landscape.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining computational art analysis with qualitative comparative assessment. It focuses on five canonical artworks processed through Midjourney's AI capabilities: Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889), Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665), Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1829–1833), Wood's *American Gothic* (1930), and Munch's *The Scream* (1893). These works, drawn from the public domain, represent a range of artistic styles and historical periods. High-resolution digital scans of each artwork were sourced from public repositories. Key visual and technical characteristics were documented before being uploaded to Midjourney, where the describe function generated prompts that guided the creation of AI-based variations. This methodological framework adapts the approach developed by Gross (2023) on artistic reproduction.

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: technical, stylistic, and semantic. The technical analysis evaluates how the AI interprets artistic techniques, color fidelity, and composition. The stylistic analysis examines how well the AI translates style, technique, and emotional tone. The semantic analysis assesses the AI's understanding of cultural and contextual elements expressed through the describe function. All AI-generated outputs, prompts, and metadata are systematically logged in a structured database, including original artwork specifications, AI-generated descriptions, and comparative notes.

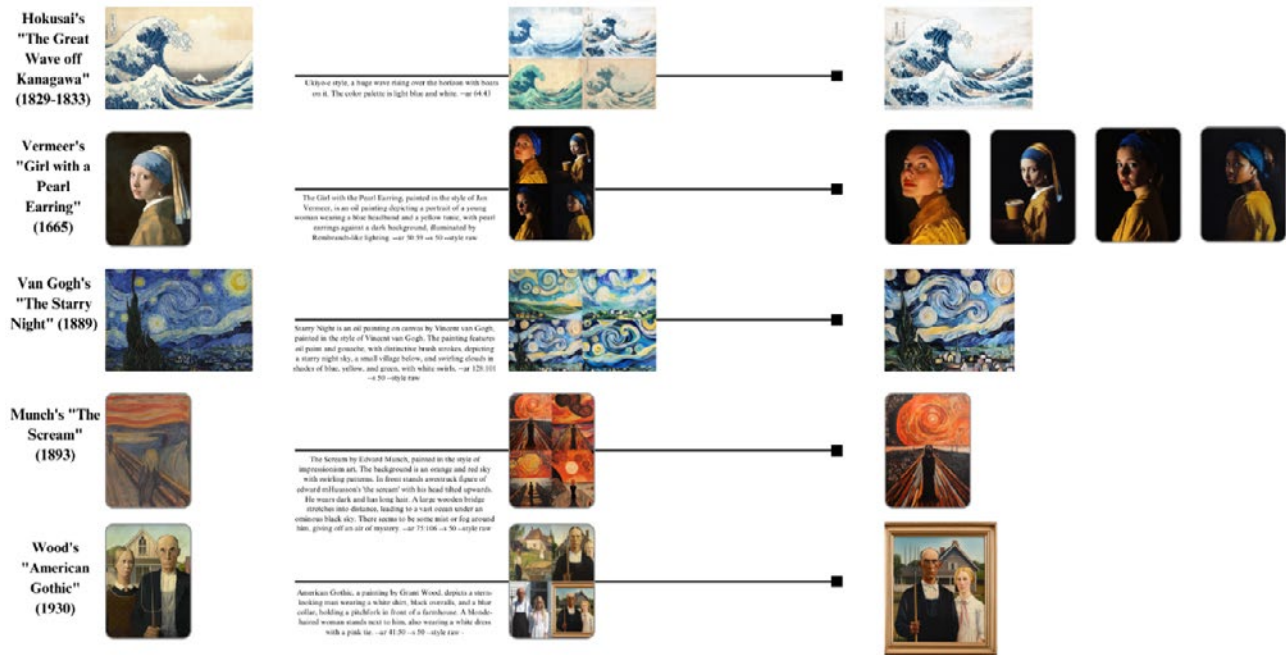


Figure 1. Original depictions versus Midjourney results.

The research acknowledges several methodological limitations that may influence the results. These include variations in Midjourney's version updates during the study period, the inherent randomness in AI generation processes, technical limitations in reproducing certain artistic techniques, and the subjective nature of qualitative analysis in artistic interpretation. This comprehensive methodology enables a systematic examination of AI's capabilities in interpreting and recreating classical artworks, while maintaining academic rigor through structured comparative analysis. The approach provides valuable insights into both the potential and limitations of current AI art generation systems, contributing to our understanding of the intersection between traditional artistic expression and artificial intelligence.

3. Analysis

3.1 AI depictions of Grant Wood's American Gothic

The analysis of Midjourney's reinterpretations of American Gothic reveals how AI identifies and reproduces iconic artworks. The generated variations highlight both

the system's strengths in preserving key elements and its limitations in interpreting complex compositions. They also introduce creative divergences that merit scholarly attention. Among the four versions, the bottom-right image most closely aligns with Wood's original. It preserves defining features: the Gothic Revival house, the rigid, frontal pose of the figures, and the detailed style typical of Wood. This suggests Midjourney successfully prioritized the painting's visual markers.

The other variations offer noteworthy deviations. The top-left image replaces the backdrop with a pastoral landscape and separates the figures, echoing themes from American rural painting. This indicates that Midjourney synthesizes broader artistic references from its training data rather than merely replicating the original.

The top-right version exaggerates Gothic features in facial expressions and tonal contrast. The prominence of the word "Gothic" in both title and setting likely influenced this stylistic shift, illustrating how language in prompts can cause semantic overcorrections. The bottom-left variation reimagines the painting in a photographic style. Though the composition remains intact, the change in medium showcases Midjourney's

capacity to adapt artistic formats, raising questions about its understanding of technique and context. Together, these variations underscore the dynamic relationship between prompt specificity and AI-generated outcomes. While prompts help retain key visual elements, they also open space for creative reinterpretation. This duality positions AI as both a replicator of existing works and a collaborator in artistic reimagining.

3.2 AI depictions of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

Midjourney's reinterpretations of Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* illustrate both the capabilities and limitations of AI in analyzing classical artworks. The variations of *The Great Wave* demonstrate Midjourney's grasp of Japanese woodblock printing techniques. The top-left version simplifies details while preserving composition, emphasizing the wave's form in a more contemporary style. The top-right, most faithful to Hokusai's original, captures intricate foam patterns and the dynamic relationship between the wave and Mount Fuji. The bottom-left, with a turquoise palette, reflects modern aesthetic preferences while maintaining structure, whereas the bottom-right emphasizes traditional textural qualities.

Girl with a Pearl Earring showcases Midjourney's ability to adapt Vermeer's lighting across stylistic contexts. Each version preserves the three-quarter pose and chiaroscuro, though notable changes appear. The top-left intensifies contrast and saturation for a modern look, while the top-right introduces a coffee cup, playfully updating the scene. The bottom variations explore diverse facial features and skin tones while retaining Vermeer's signature use of light and shadow.

Prompt specificity played a critical role in shaping results. The concise prompt for *The Great Wave* ("Ukiyo-e style, a huge wave rising over the horizon with boats on it") yielded consistent outputs, indicating that simple, direct prompts support faithful reproduction. In contrast, the more detailed prompt for *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, referencing Vermeer and Rembrandt-like lighting, led to greater variation—suggesting that complex prompts allow broader interpretive outcomes.

3.3 AI depictions of *The Scream* and *The Starry Night*

Variations of *The Scream* demonstrate AI's responsiveness to prompt specificity. The top-left version most closely resembles Munch's original, capturing the swirling sky and iconic figure while integrating requested impressionistic elements. Emphasis on an "awestruck figure" and "ominous black sky" led to dramatic interpretations. The use of the "--style raw" parameter contributed to a raw, expressive aesthetic, while the aspect ratio "75:106" emphasized verticality and intensified the emotional impact. A similar pattern appears in the *Starry Night* series. References to "oil paint and gouache," "distinctive brush strokes," and a specific palette ("shades of blue, yellow, and green, with white swirls") prompted textured, expressive outputs. The bottom-left variation most closely mirrors Van Gogh's composition. The "--ar 128:101" aspect ratio produced slightly wider compositions, allowing for expanded landscapes. Again, "--style raw" contributed to bolder, less filtered visual results.

Across these sets, Midjourney's approach reveals consistent tendencies. Prompts emphasizing "swirling patterns" in *The Scream* and *Starry Night* led to geometric interpretations, sometimes deviating from the originals' organic flow. This suggests an AI tendency to regularize visual elements, even when interpreting expressive styles. These findings illustrate how prompt specificity shapes output. Simpler prompts often result in more faithful reproductions, while complex prompts invite broader reinterpretation. This dynamic highlights the dual role of AI as both reproducer and reinterpreter, raising ongoing questions about creativity, authorship, and the evolving role of AI in art.

4. Discussion

The analysis of Midjourney's reinterpretations of *American Gothic*, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *The Scream*, and *Starry Night* offers key insights into the intersection of artificial intelligence and artistic reproduction. This discussion explores how AI interprets visual input, the influence of prompt engineering, and broader questions about creativity and authenticity. A central finding is

the nuanced relationship between AI-generated outputs and their source material. While some variations remain faithful—such as the bottom-right American Gothic or top-right Great Wave—others diverge creatively, including pastoral reinterpretations or modernized elements like those in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. These shifts reveal that AI does not merely replicate but synthesizes imagery, drawing from its training data to introduce unprompted stylistic elements.

Prompt specificity is critical in shaping these outcomes. Concise prompts for *The Great Wave* and *The Scream* led to consistent, recognizable results. In contrast, more open-ended descriptions for *Girl with a Pearl Earring* allowed for broader variation in both style and composition. This underscores the importance of prompt design in balancing fidelity and interpretive flexibility in AI-generated art. A further trend is the AI's tendency to amplify or regularize certain stylistic features. In *American Gothic* and *The Scream*, architectural or atmospheric elements are exaggerated—likely a result of associative pattern recognition rather than true understanding of artistic intent. These outputs often emphasize visual tropes, pointing to AI's reliance on probabilistic modeling over contextual sensitivity. Midjourney's capacity to reinterpret artworks across media adds further complexity. For example, its photographic version of *American Gothic* preserves the original composition while shifting the visual format—challenging traditional notions of medium specificity. Such outputs contribute to broader debates about whether AI-generated works constitute original creations or derivative reproductions.

5. Conclusion

This study examined Midjourney's reinterpretations of canonical artworks to better understand the intersection between AI-generated imagery and artistic authenticity. The findings suggest that while AI can produce visually compelling and stylistically coherent outputs, its reliance on data-driven pattern recognition—rather than intentional, context-aware creativity—positions it within a fundamentally different paradigm than that of human artists. Midjourney functions not as a precise replicator of artistic intent,

but as an evolving creative tool shaped by its training data and the textual instructions provided by users. It demonstrates significant potential for creative expansion, enabling new modes of artistic expression and experimentation. However, this same flexibility introduces challenges related to artistic fidelity, authorship, and originality. The model's tendency to exaggerate stylistic elements, its limited contextual understanding, and the unpredictability of its outputs raise important concerns about its reliability in contexts that demand historical or artistic accuracy. The study also underscores the pivotal role of prompt engineering in shaping AI-generated art. Prompt specificity was shown to significantly influence the degree of fidelity versus reinterpretation, emphasizing the collaborative nature of human-AI interaction in creative processes. These findings point to a complex interplay between algorithmic processing, linguistic input, and artistic output that warrants further investigation.

Looking forward, future research should explore how different AI models interpret art across diverse cultural and historical contexts, as well as how iterative prompt refinement might reduce stylistic distortions. Additionally, examining how artists and designers integrate AI tools like Midjourney into their workflows could offer insights into shifting creative practices. Comparative analyses involving other generative models may further illuminate the broader implications of AI in contemporary artistic and cultural production. Finally, as generative AI continues to evolve, it is imperative to address the ethical and legal concerns it raises—particularly around authorship, ownership, and the potential erosion of traditional artistic labor. This study contributes to a growing body of research aimed at understanding the role of AI in creative domains, highlighting both its transformative potential and the challenges it presents for the future of art and artistic authenticity.

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Bio

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