

Redefining “Original”

Adapting To New Technologies In Art

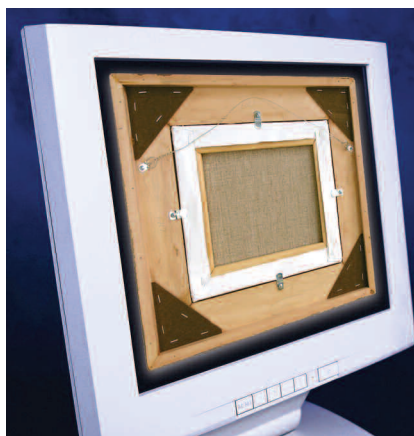
By JERRY POINTS

FOR THE ARTIST, the digital era has provided many devices to create, record, and print images at quality levels never imagined a few years ago. Many painters use digital cameras to photograph their subjects for reference, and computers to manipulate their images in endless variations. The choices in digital printing on archival papers and canvas, using up to 12 colors, have provided artists with exceptional quality for reproductions made on demand or in limited editions.

Today’s artists are taking digital technology in other directions, as well, and one practice in particular seems worthy of debate. In recent years, some artists have begun to create new “paintings” by starting with archival-print digital images (which may or may not have been manipulated in the computer) and painting over them with traditional paint media and brushes. For many curators and organizations sponsoring juried exhibits and gallery showings, this practice raises questions about how to classify the final product.

Under current guidelines published by most organizations, an “original” work allows the artist to use mechanical devices to draw, trace, transfer-by-grid, and even project the subject onto the painting surface in the initial stages. Beyond this point, the creative process of painting and decision-making determines how the final work of art is classified. The end result may range from abstract to photo-realistic, but 100 percent of the painting must be done by the artist’s hand in order to be defined as “original.”

Now we must ask: Does this definition still work, given new technologies?



When an institution or collector purchases a work of art made by overpainting a printed image of the artist’s own creation, is it an original, a reproduction, or a photograph enhanced and altered to look like a painting? Buyers need and deserve to know how the work was created before value is determined and price agreed upon.

We must also consider competitive situations. If technology provides a means to not only print a photographic image but also to lay down a brushwork pattern that mimics the masters, how is that “painting” to be judged? As a photograph? A painting? As digital art? When high-end computer software can render and sculpt high-frequency details of modeling, surfacing, and texturing techniques, how should the resulting work be classified? Is it fair to judge overpainted digital “paintings” against paintings done entirely the traditional way?

Presently, technology is ahead of our awareness and ability to detect this special breed of artwork. There have been cases in which digital images enhanced by hand brushwork have been accepted as original paintings in regional and national juried exhibitions.

These works have won awards and been purchased by collectors. Rightfully so, the collectors trusted that the work being purchased was an original painting. Was it? Or should the “paintings” have been classified differently?

To be historically fair, throughout the ages, nearly every “technological” breakthrough in artists’ tools and materials was met with critical review and discussion. Advancements we now take for granted as valuable were often disdained in their infancy. For instance, in 1410, Jan van Eyck upset the historic traditions when, in an effort to find a better medium that could be mixed with color pigment, he used a mixture of varnish and linseed oil (instead of egg yolk) to keep his paintings from cracking during the drying process. Many artists initially resisted the use of prepared paints available in metal tubes, despite their portability and timesaving convenience.

Whether we welcome evolution or resist it, the technological influence on creative endeavors is ubiquitous and inevitable. Change will require discussion, resulting in a re-examination of what a painting is. It’s possible that the art world will retain the current definition of “original,” developing some new term for describing artwork made on a digital foundation. Then again, perhaps our definition of original art will expand so that “done by the artist’s hand” includes the click of the mouse combined with the touch of the brush. ■

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