

# THE RAINBOW

Box Art Group Newsletter - Friday 27<sup>th</sup> January  
2023

Written by and for the members of Box Art Group (No. 82)

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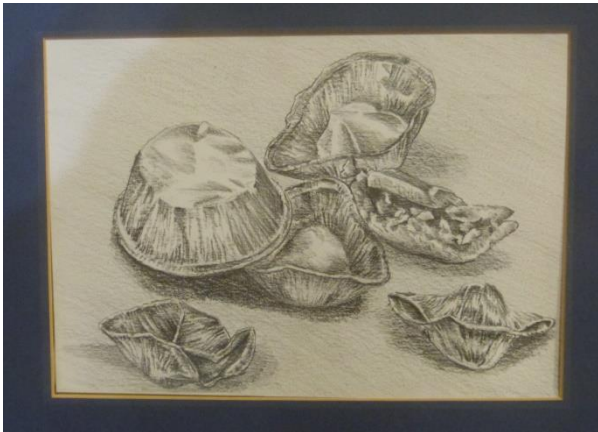
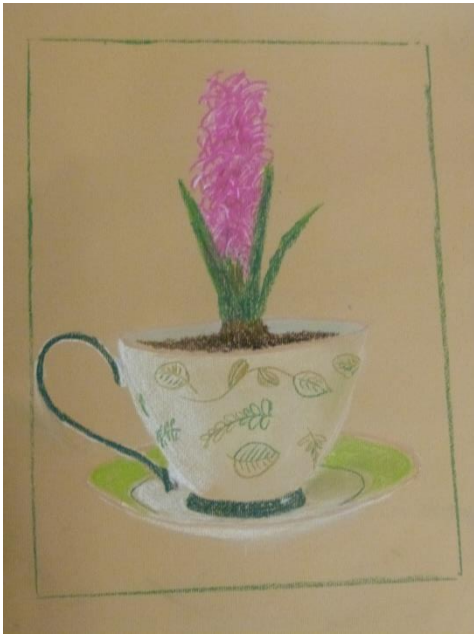
## Local Trees

I enjoyed doing the trees in the background of my last pic ('Minchinhampton'), so I thought I'd make them the subject of my next effort. I went out and photographed an attractive silhouette of trees locally, duplicated and flipped the image in Photoshop and printed out the result to use as a loose reference. I didn't want it to be obvious that I'd duped the image so I made sure that there were some differences between the left and right hand sides. *Richard*



## Christmas Competition

'What remains after Christmas' was the theme of the event held over the Christmas break, with the voting and assessment held on our first day back. So well done to those members who found time and inspiration to produce an entry. And especially to Sheila, with her tender farewell, which won.







"Missing You Already"

Sheila



### More Trees

I thought I'd like to do another painting of trees and it'd be interesting to do a multiple view of rainforest trees. The picture can be viewed any way up!

Richard



## Can a Robot Out-paint Me?

The Guardian newspaper recently<sup>1</sup> challenged some art experts to tell the difference between the outputs of human artists and those created by Dall-E, an artificial intelligence driven art generator. (Other image generators are available.) In each case the AI tool was told to produce an image “in the style of” a major artist, and also promoted with some keywords to guide the image selection. The machine has already been “trained” using billions of images scraped from the Internet, probably including an essentially complete database of verified works of any well-known artist. It can now generate sequences of random images and “recognise” those which have similarities to the required style and also containing objects identified with the input keywords. Over many trials, the images with higher scores are progressively nudged towards even higher scores and ultimately often produce fairly impressive digital representations. Some may argue that this has little to do with “intelligence”, but in truth it probably does have some similarities with the unconscious pattern recognition going on in our brains.

The art experts found it easier to correctly identify the AI artist in the more representational works, but found it harder when examining works of abstract art. I myself found that the representational images of Dall-E seemed to lack a “story” - one wonders why the image has been painted - whereas the “real” painting seemed to me to pass this test. That should not be surprising: AI software does not “understand” what it is doing in the way that we would, and has no appreciation of style development or wider cultural knowledge, which feeds into the “why” of art. It is, however, interesting that the experts all found it much harder than they expected. (People with more experience of looking at AI images do, however, claim that it becomes easier to recognise their particular defects. More recently, however, AI software trained to actually identify AI generated images is also being included in the creation process, in order to filter out those images that are showing such characteristics. The technology advances at great speed!)

Before we go off the deep end we do need to point out some more deficiencies in the challenge. This journalistic experiment would not qualify as a good scientific protocol: the number of trials was far too small and the results looked to me as though they could in fact be consistent with random guessing. The experts only had access to electronic images, probably of somewhat moderate resolution (because the AI image generators do not yet do super-high resolution) when in reality they would expect to spend a good deal of time closely examining the actual surface of real art works, asking whether the detailed handling of paint seems to be consistent with an artists’ known practices. As far as I know, technology has not yet reached a stage where a physical robot can hold a paint brush and reproduce the technique that human artists might employ when mixing and laying paint on a canvas.

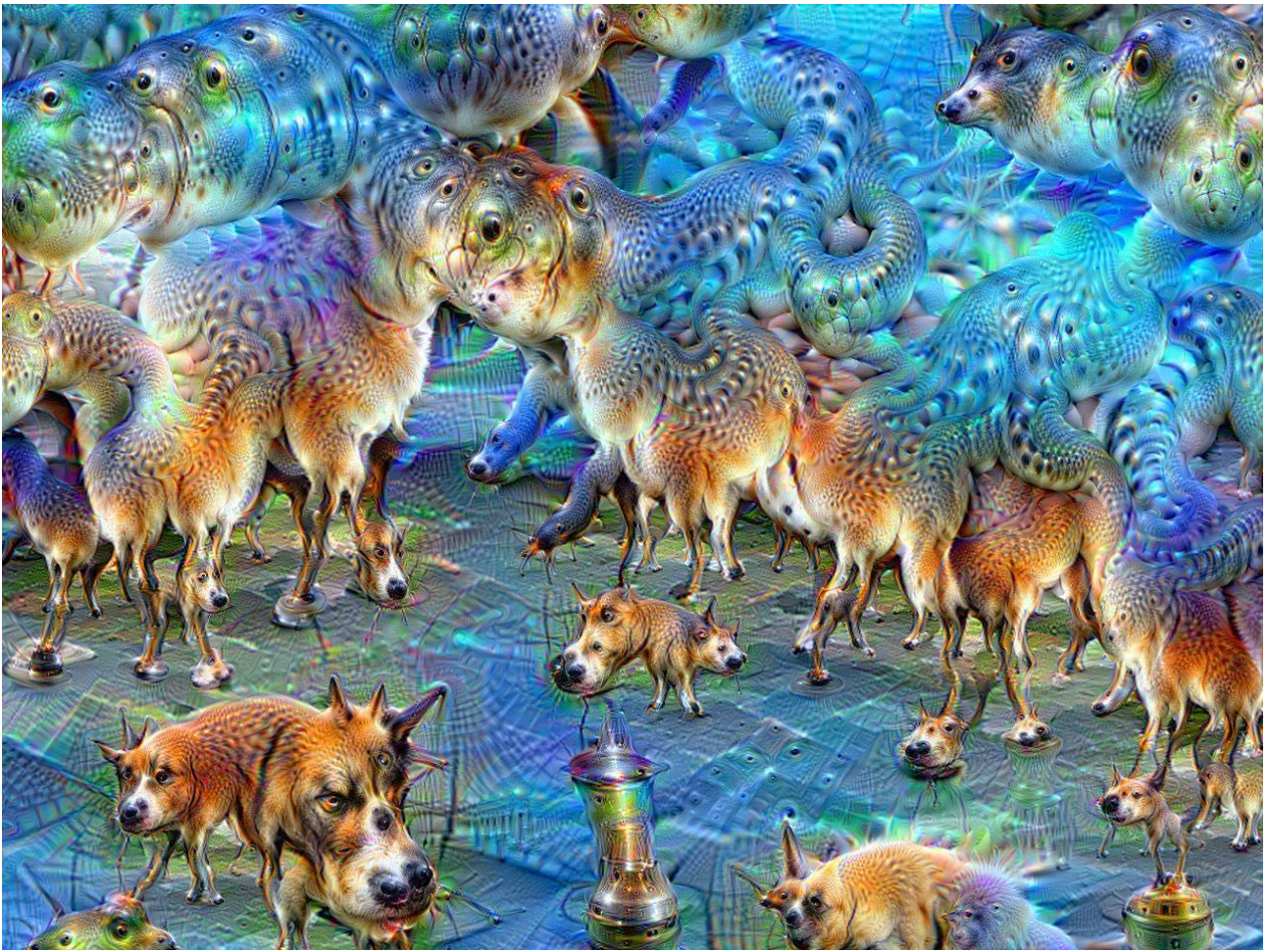
Nevertheless, while it is hard to fake the exquisite technique of old masters, there are, in fact, many traditionally-trained modern artists who can certainly get pretty close. We do know, for example, that human forgers have reproduced both the style and techniques of old masters sufficiently well to fool the curators of major museums. Such forgers are even more successful when faking the work of modernist artists to the extent that even the experts will only authentically works that have cast-iron provenance trails. Some university robotics labs are looking at producing a robotic artist-craftsman (e.g. AARON has been around since the mid1990s, and I would happily hang some of its output on my wall). Although I do not think that a really effective AI faker will emerge any time soon in the longer term I would not bet against them.

It is interesting, nevertheless, that the art experts claimed that, after provenance trails, they would normally need to place considerable weight on cues that are related more to details of craftsmanship exercised in the production of the art, rather than evaluating the quality of what we might like to think of as the uniquely human artistic vision. If even recognised art experts cannot reliably identify the unique vision of a major artist, why is it regarded as great art?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jan/14/art-experts-try-to-spot-ai-works-dall-e-stable-diffusion>





AI-Generated Semi abstract art. (Created by “Deep Dream” .)

Image licensed under Creative Commons - see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeepDream>

All of this raises some interesting questions, both philosophical and practical. We have until recently always considered that the arts would be the last area in which AI would be able to do a job that until now was the exclusive province of humans. Only a real human, we would claim, can actually “understand” the purpose of the image, the story it tells, and the connections it has to a wider cultural context. AI image generators recognise patterns in vast databases of human created images, collected from all over the Internet, and, in a sense, merely rearrange visual clichés into new combinations. It is just a “mash-up”. But how much of genuine human creativity involves doing just that? Perhaps quite a lot. It is even claimed that creativity can be taught, or at least promoted, through exercises in which the student is *required* to produce outputs that combine random and diverse prompts. The unique element added by human artists, however, using their deeper understanding and background knowledge, is their ability to recognise and fine-tune the options turned up by their imagination, selecting only those which do have deeper significance in a wider context of which the artist has awareness not available to a robot.

That, of course, assumes that the artist is indeed employing their deeper and wider understanding, and not just stopping with some random choice whose context appears sufficiently obscure to pass as “profound”. (You may perhaps be forgiven for thinking that at least some contemporary art has simply stopped at “sufficiently obscure”.) One suspects that the AI software is unlikely to produce something which is as convincing as the work of the really great artists - but could it do better than you or I at creating work we ourselves would not mind exhibiting? Are our artistic impulses really so shallow that they can so easily be simulated by a machine?

What about copyright? Does a David Hockney have any rights to new images generated in his style, when the machine could not have produced the work without making use of the many Hockney images on the Internet? Such images are still copyright - but in some countries, including the UK, the law is moving in the direction of explicitly allowing this way of using copyright material. Is this another threat (as if one was needed) to the income generating possibilities for professionally trained artists - especially in the commercial world?

The masters became famous not just because of their techniques (those who broke with the traditional academic approach in the 19th Century were heavily criticised on this score by contemporary critics) but because they had a point of view that arose out of their times and the cultural history up to that era. A modern pastiche in that style is still, however, a pastiche because it is just a rearrangement of elements that were originally conceived by the master. I think that it would be fair to ask, for example, if van Gogh or a Constable were re-incarnated today and continued to paint in their old style, would this now be considered more than superficially interesting. While it would certainly qualify as a van Gogh or a Constable, in the sense that it was indeed produced by the hand of the master (and would have a market value) the context in which their earlier work was created no longer exists: it could not produce the same type of reaction in the viewers as the earlier originals. Once they had demonstrated a different way of seeing they were followed by later (and sometimes technically more proficient) craftsmen and women, but that road is now so well-signposted that they have nothing new to contribute. One would expect, of course, that a truly great artist would become original in a modern way.

I have often wondered whether the immediately recognisable styles of certain artists (for example, a Jackson Pollock or a Mondrian) became a trap for them. When they find that their paintings sell successfully, do they become afraid to experiment with new aesthetic departures for fear that they would lose their market? When, however, Mondrian or Pollock keep repeating variations on the same theme, are they themselves merely exploiting their own original vision but in fact adding little that is new or worthwhile to the artistic experience (other than allowing more people to "own an original" in their well-known style)?

What about you and I? How much of what we do could easily be bettered by a robot (as judged by an impartial human observer)? To what extent are we really demonstrating human intelligence and artistic capabilities? Is it perhaps possible that most of us are doing little more than the pattern recognition and reproduction capabilities of the robots that use "deep learning"?

Since I keep turning up on Thursdays, however, you may possibly suspect that I do feel that there are differences which make the doing of art a worthwhile experience (at least for me). First and foremost, we generally have a reason for producing our art. I do not claim that I have particularly profound reasons: sometimes it is just the challenge of slightly improving my technique over time. Nor do I deny that after a Thursday session (or one of my Saturday life drawing sessions) with its intense concentration, I feel more relaxed and satisfied. The works I produce give me pleasure and very occasionally a sale means that they give pleasure to others. Sometimes I hope to go further: I have been arrested by a visual experience and want to produce a painting which says "This is what it was like!" Here, it is not enough simply to reproduce an accurate representation of the scene before my eyes, I also need to convey the effect that it had on me, at that moment.

Professionals, of course, do it for the money, and some, especially those at the bottom of the food-chain in commercial art, fear that their livelihoods will be under threat - for example, free-lancers or juniors in larger commercial studios could be replaced by "digital assistants". Others are less worried: they see that, given a commercial brief, an AI image generator can quickly feed them with a large number of creative prompts, from which they can select ideas and add the human element. At the very least they may be saving precious time and cutting down on the failed attempts that go into the waste bin. (I have had some relevant experiences in an engineering design environment: we welcomed the relief from repetitive mental "grunt work".) Others claim that the effort that goes into the process of developing ideas is an essential part of the creative process: the pain is part of the gain. All I am sure of is that the world has changed. There is no going back, so we will have to learn to live with the new technology.

*Michael*

### Spring Term 2023

Date	Tutor	Programme	Spring Competition
12th January	Beth	Christmas Competition critique	
19th January	Beth		
26th January	Roxy	Still life	
2nd February	Roxy		Competition set
9th February	Beth	Coffee break tutorial - Exhibiting	
16th February	Beth		
23th February	Roxy	Still life	
2nd March	Roxy		
9th March	Beth		
16th March	Beth		
23th March	*****	Village Hall Pantomime	
30th March	Roxy	Still life	Competition Critique

N.B. New term begins on 20th April to the 1st June

Could members please remember to wear their name badges during our Thursday afternoon sessions.

Despite the best efforts of Richard, we are still struggling to find sitters, ideally members, for the portrait group for the Thursday sessions. I should be grateful if members would consider volunteering to sit for a half session, and put their name on the list, and also ask friends and neighbours who might be interested to sit.

### Annual Exhibition

The hall has been booked for our annual exhibition from Friday 13<sup>th</sup> October to Sunday 15<sup>th</sup>, with setting up on the 12<sup>th</sup>. Beth will give a short talk about exhibiting paintings on 9<sup>th</sup> February, and Pete will follow this up with a demonstration of how to use the group's mount cutter. We typically have about 80 paintings produced by members to exhibit, based on a maximum of 5 from any member. There are also prints and cards to sell, so it's not too early to start thinking about what to produce, and how to display it to best effect.