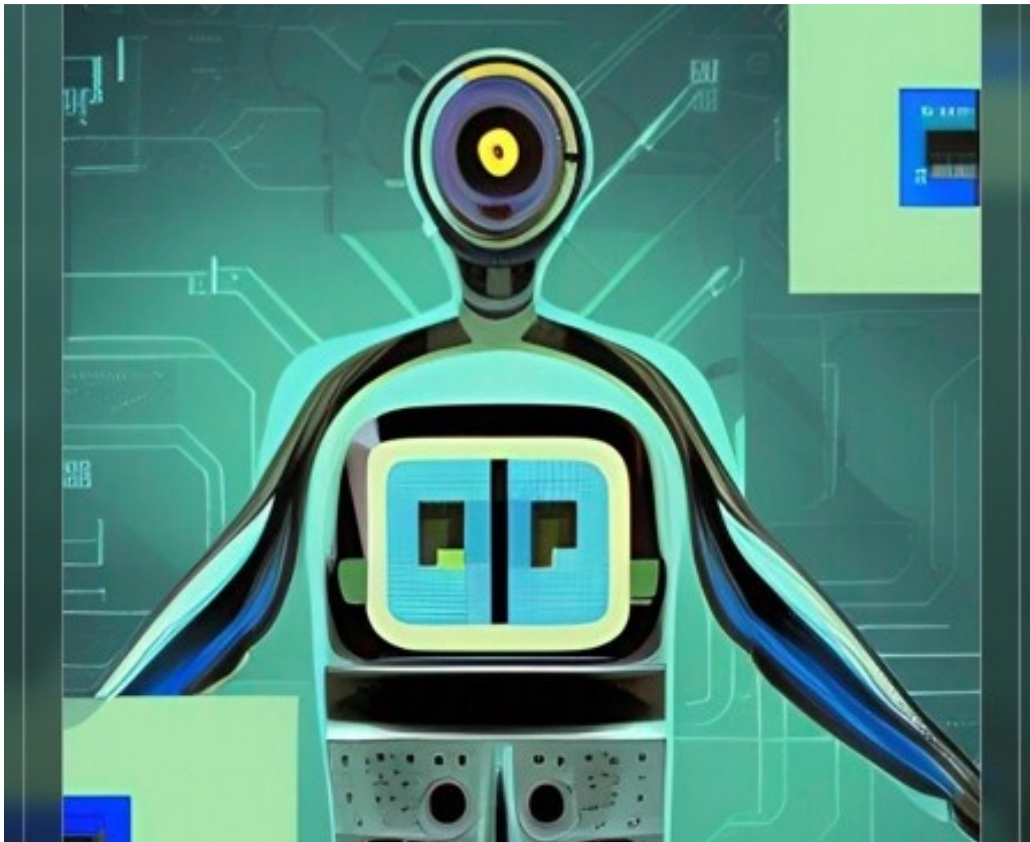


Could AI-generated artwork put you out of a job?

By Leyla Hussein • 20 December 2022



A [marketing manager I work with](#) turned her laptop around to show me a picture she was rather proud of. A fox in a spacesuit, riding a horse across the surface of the moon, lit like a film poster. She had not drawn a line of it. She had typed a sentence into an app and waited about eight seconds.

Then she stopped smiling and asked me the question that was really on her mind. If a machine can do that, what happens to the illustrator she pays every month?

It is a fair question, and plenty of people have been asking it. Over the last couple of years these AI art generators have gone from a novelty to something everyone has had a go at. You describe what you want in plain words, the software reads the meaning inside those words, and it hands you a finished image in high resolution, shadows and reflections included. Tools like [DALL-E](#) turned prompts into pictures. Apps like Lensa turned a handful of selfies into fairies, princesses and Renaissance portraits, and charged a small subscription for the privilege. Artists were not thrilled to see their style copied wholesale, but there is not a great deal they can do about it. You cannot copyright a style.

So the worry is real, and I understand why people in creative roles feel it. Artificial intelligence has spent years building a reputation for quietly removing jobs, and now it has arrived in art and animation, doing in seconds what used to take days. When something is that fast and that cheap, the natural fear is that the person becomes optional.

I do not read it that way, and here is why.

The machine still needs someone to point it

Every one of those images starts with a human deciding what the image is for. Somebody has to choose the subject, the mood, the message. Somebody has to look at the twenty versions the software spits out and know which one actually lands, and which nineteen are noise. The tool is astonishingly good at production. It is hopeless at judgement. It does not know your customer, it does not know what you are trying to say, and it certainly does not know why one composition makes people feel something and another leaves them cold.

We saw this play out in public. An entrant at a state fair in Colorado won the digital art prize with a piece he had generated using one of these programmes. A lot of artists cried foul and said he had cheated. He kept the ribbon. What the argument missed is that he still chose the idea, still steered the tool through version after version, still decided when it was finished. The software was a very fast brush. The intent was his.

What actually changes

My honest view is that the job does not disappear, it moves. The value stops being in the hours of manual execution and starts being in the thinking. If your whole offer was that you could render an image slowly, that is under pressure. If your offer is that you understand what a brand is trying to communicate and can make people care, you have just been handed a tool that removes the boring part and leaves you the interesting part.

I say the same thing to [sales teams when they panic](#) about automation, so I will say it here. Technology takes the repetitive work. It does not take the relationship, the read of the room, or the decision about what matters. Art, at its core, is a person using creativity to carry a message or an emotion. A machine can assemble the pixels. It still takes a human to have something worth saying.

So no, I did not think my client's illustrator was finished. I thought her illustrator was about to get a lot faster, and that the ones who learn to steer these tools will quietly leave behind the ones who refuse to touch them. That has always been the pattern. The people who lose out to new technology are rarely the ones who use it.

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