



Great Artists Steal

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In a gallery, hundreds of paintings sit quietly. They are all completely different but alike in style and quality. Their colors have been mixed to perfection and then applied to a canvas in masterful brushstrokes as broad or detailed as needed. They practically sparkle with life. They are masterpieces.

At the front of the gallery, in the seat of honor inside a golden frame, sits a painting that differs from all the rest. It is almost a perfect square and perfectly symmetrical, consisting of four hundred and thirty-two lines. Most lines are horizontal or vertical. However, twelve different oblique lines run across the canvas, ranging from a thin yellow line to a massive aquamarine gash barging through at forty-five degrees. Where it can be seen, the gray background has been textured with a motif of a dark ouroboric swirl, reminiscent of a tiny snake eating its tail. The painting is titled *Fleeting Sentiments*.

On a cold fall evening, the night of the painting's premiere, a woman in a trench coat stares at it. She takes it in. She looks up and down and tilts her head parallel to the mysterious oblique lines.

She does not get it.

She looks around, hesitantly. She is not alone — there are other

critics here, a private showing before the main event. They are accompanied by a polite man in a tuxedo who seems quite pleased with the admiring silence of his charges. None of the other critics seem confused like she is. What do they understand that she does not?

The woman turns to the painting again. It stares right back at her.

"It is a masterpiece," says a man in a brown jacket.

"Of course. Truly inspired, if I may add," says a woman in a cardigan.

"The deconstruction of the painting's subject in a heterogenous, functionally rhizomatic way effectively works to capture the painter's dissent from accepted cognitive norms," says a woman in a black suit to nods of agreement. "Tomorrow, this will be on the front page of the Arts and Culture section of every newspaper in the world."

The woman in the trench coat thinks that perhaps the other critics had a closer look than her. Her coat ruffles the velvet rope as she removes her glasses, surveying the painting for any sign of life.

"It's great to hear your support," says the man in the tuxedo.

"We at Tabula Labs appreciate the enthusiasm the art world has generated for LUCI's work."

"Well, of course," says the woman in the cardigan. She gestures

around at the gallery. "Hyperrealism no human can truly match, painted without the drab character of photography. Long ago were the days of uninspired portraits of misshapen people. LUCI is the future."

The man in the tuxedo nods. "I am glad to hear your enthusiasm extends to LUCI's newest work."

"What?" The woman in the cardigan turns back toward the front of the room. "That. Oh, that..."

All eyes turn to Fleeting Sentiments.

"It is an incredibly enigmatic piece," the woman in the black suit offers. "The modality it employs to present its mystery is refined practically superhumanly."

"Precisely," says the man in the brown jacket. He awkwardly pauses. "Tell me, what prompt inspired the painting? My readers have to know!"

The man in the tuxedo smiles. "That is an excellent question," he says. He strides to the front of the group, right next to the woman in the trench coat still scrutinizing the painting.

"All of the paintings in this hall have been painted by LUCI, our proprietary Artificial Intelligence art model," he explains. "LUCI stands out from the crowd because its paintings have true artistic merit. It does not try to appeal to the common man. Instead, it appeals to a higher calling — that of true creativity. That is actually our motto. You have read the press releases — you are probably tired of hearing it." He chuckles, and they laugh lightly.

When they fall silent, he continues, "Now, fundamentally, artificial intelligence is a reflection of its creators. The pioneers who first worked on AI decided to model their algorithms off the human brain, and we still use the same principles they discovered. Artificial intelligence consists of 'neurons,' which can be activated or deactivated. Connections between activated neurons represent concepts. That is more or less how our brains work as well.

"When I founded Tabula Labs, I realized that if we studied how creativity works in human brains, we would be able to make an AI that was truly creative. The results have been astonishing." The man gestures around the gallery. "We trained LUCI on hundreds of millions of different artworks. Using extraordinarily complex mathematics, LUCI captures the semantic essence of each painting. Then it combines those ideas in new and original ways, just like a human. The resulting paintings rival those of the best human artists."

The man grins with a smile fit for a magazine cover. "Now," he says, "we have perfected the algorithm. We hooked LUCI up to a supercomputer capable of six quadrillion calculations a second. Then we prompted it with the words, 'the deepest secrets of the human psyche.' And this is the result." With a flourish, he gestures at Fleeting Sentiments. "Behold — by any objective measure, this is the best piece of art ever made."

For a moment, the room is silent.

"I do not understand," says the woman in the trench coat.

Everyone in the room stares at her. "Sorry, I was talking to myself," she continues quickly. "I just... do not understand what you mean. How is this the best piece of art ever made?"

"Well, no mere human can truly appreciate Fleeting Sentiments," says the man. "It is too complex for our tiny little brains."

"But that is the thing." She points a quizzical finger at the woman in the cardigan. "You said it was 'inspired.' You all said how much you liked the painting. One of you said it was a masterpiece. How can you say that if you do not even understand it?"

A coldness spreads through the air.

"Well, it is kind of thrilling, do you not think?" the man in the brown jacket says, stepping forward. "I mean, this is the future of art right here. LUCI is millions of times more creative than Picasso or Van Gogh."

"Right," says the man in the tuxedo. "Take it in while you can! We should probably be going — the gallery is about to open to the public."

The art critics relax their shoulders and button their coats. They are ready to leave, but the woman in the trench coat is not. She looks Fleeting Sentiments up and down.

"Why did LUCI decide that the human psyche looks like a bunch of lines on a gray background?" she asks. She glances at the man in the brown jacket, who furrows his brow.

"Are you asking me?" he says.

"Yes. What do you think?"

"You want me to guess?"

The woman nods.

"Um, maybe the lines represent... Maybe they represent different emotions that a human can feel. Most of them are either vertical or horizontal, but some are diagonal. So most of the time, we feel happy or sad, but sometimes we feel a combination of emotions. LUCI is trying to say that feeling happy and sad about something is perfectly normal."

The art critics stare at the painting.

"I do not think that is it," says the woman.

"My apologies, but we really should be going," says the man in the tuxedo.

The woman turns toward him. "What do you think?" she asks.

"LUCI is an artificial intelligence with a mind unimaginably more complex than any of ours. Any guess I make will be—"

"Just guess."

The man in the tuxedo swallows then faces Fleeting Sentiments. "Well... I thought that they might represent people. Just as a painting is ultimately a collage of different ideas, a person is ultimately just a collage of the personalities of the people they have met. Each line represents another facet of human personality. The lines weave together to form a cohesive whole."

"That's a great way of looking at it." The woman frowns for a moment. "But I do not think you are quite right."

"Well, I would not expect to be right. Fleeting Sentiments is not meant for us humans — it is AI art. It is meant for an audience that is smarter than us," says the man. "Alright. Should we get going?"

"Yes," the woman says, smiling. "I think I have seen enough to write my review."

As the art critics walk away from the painting toward the museum's cold courtyard, the woman feels a tap on her shoulder.

"Well, what do you think the lines mean?" asks the woman in the cardigan. "You have asked us, but you have not said what you think."

"Oh, that is easy," says the woman in the trench coat. She smiles again. "I do not really think they mean anything at all." ● ● ●