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Art explained: How the internet changed the art world

Social media and smartphones are the most significant technological developments to impact the art world since the invention of the camera. In 2007, the first iPhone entered the market, followed swiftly by the first iPad (2010) and, in the same year, Instagram, signaling a seismic shift in how we experience and share images.



British artist David Hockney takes a picture of press photographers with his mobile phone as he poses in front of his painting entitled "The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011" at the opening of his exhibition David Hockney RA: A Bigger Picture in the Royal Academy of Arts. Credit: Oli Scarff/Getty Images Europe/Getty Images

These digital disruptors brought as much energy to the weather system of the art world as the transistor radio did to pop music in the 1960s. Affordable portable radios created the first truly global platform for music, so the arrival of the Beatles' innovative magic could ride the airwaves and explode in real time in London, Laguna Beach or Leningrad. The more plays "She Loves You" got, the more records were coveted and sold.

Although East and West have a heritage of many centuries of great art, it's only in the last decade or so that art also has had a global platform for viewing or sharing in a way never before conceived. A little more than a decade ago, conversations about art were the purview of a select group of art lovers. A collector in Geneva or Grand Rapids or Goa would only know about the auctions in New York or London if he or she happened to be on the auction house mailing list for catalogs.

Now, that fellowship of art lovers has expanded to include a much bigger and global and younger community, and rightfully so. Digital has reversed the current and put the power in the hands of the collector to search at will for information. He or she can now choose among a myriad of means to acquire art, from fairs to galleries to private dealers to auction houses to private individuals. It takes two clicks to Google any artist or image. In fact, by 2015, a survey found that 87% of collectors checked Instagram more than twice a day.

Anyone and everyone can see what exhibitions are coming, what auction houses are selling, what a newspaper has to say about a particular painting, and what that painting sold for when it last changed hands.



Gallery staff take photos on their phones of the painting by Carel Fabritius 'The Goldfinch' at the Scottish National Gallery on November 3, 2016. Credit: Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images Europe/Getty Images

The online world has not only democratized, but revolutionized the art game. When auction sales dipped globally in 2015, the online art market that year grew an estimated 24%, and by 2017 had exceeded \$4.2 billion.

Similarly, museum and gallery attendance has not flagged since the digital revolution. As with music, art becomes more coveted the more it is experienced. New York's Museum of Modern Art has around 4 million Instagram followers. At the same time, there has been an exponential increase in museum attendance worldwide. That's not a coincidence. The availability of information about museum exhibitions and about art online is driving people to see the actual original work in the flesh. Take Yayoi Kusama's mirror rooms: 160,000 visitors went to the Hirschhorn Museum show in 2017 -- double the average attendance. David Zwirner gallery's exhibition of the artist's work drew more than 1,500 visitors a day. They even had to instil 60-second viewing limits on the works.



An installation by artist Yayoi Kusama at the Liverpool Biennial, International Festival Of Contemporary Art on October 4, 2008 in Liverpool, England. Credit: Jim Dyson/Getty Images Europe/Getty Images

But the vast amount of information available online and the cavalcade of images also adds a layer of complexity. Collectors have more access to what's out there but require more help than ever before in navigating this busy landscape. Which source of information is to be trusted? And which metrics matter? Moreover, how does one discern which work of art has value?

The answer is that anything you can learn or view digitally does not provide the whole picture. The single most important element in the art collecting equation is still the emotional connection between the art and the viewer. That's why paintings, drawings, and sculpture all continue to live and be loved.

Digital can send out a billion invitations to view a work of art. Its image then becomes part of the global conversation, and the multiplying viewings serve to increase the value and highlight the uniqueness of the original object itself. There is only one of the real thing. As in any economic model, rarity and scarcity are key drivers. But for art, the most important driver is whether the artwork moves you. If a painting is good and truly has that 'innovative magic,' it will create an emotional response in the viewer that transcends what's

on the canvas -- or on your iPhone.

In Sir Tom Stoppard's play "Indian ink," one of the characters, a painter, explains the concept of Rasa: "A painting must have its Rasa which is not in the painting exactly. Rasa is what you must feel when you see a painting." Whether it's a Constable cloud study, an Ai Weiwei, or a Warhol Elvis, it's that ineffable quality in the work that takes us out of ourselves. On Instagram and digitally you will know about a work and learn about a work. If you're lucky, that knowledge may, in turn, incite a craving to feel and live with the authentic spirit of a work, its Rasa. It's a blessing when this happens.