

WHERE DO ARTWORKS DERIVE THEIR VALUE? THE IMPACT OF AI ON TRADITIONAL ART AND THE HUMAN SEARCH FOR MEANING

ONAH, Aloysius Uchechukwu

Saint Thomas Aquinas' Major Seminary, Makurdi

onah4u2000@yahoo.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4606-5080>

DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.30371.98087

Abstract

It appears that the concept of “value” always refers to the idea of something important around which the people build every aspect of their cultural, religious, social, moral and scientific lives. Considering that human beings are the producers of every work of art, the question of attribution of value poses pertinent questions: Where do artworks derive their value? In the artwork itself or the producer? The complexity of these questions revolves around the impacts of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in art. Our examination of the above questions is enriching and reveals that the value of any work of art is either intrinsic in the artwork, or depends on the application of AI at various stages in its production and the quantity of its commercialization. Bearing in mind the complexity involved in answering the questions related to this research, we think that this concerns the meaning inherent in someone or a thing. The result of this work shows that the history of human beings which is represented by various artworks determines the value of artworks. We hope to conclude that human beings in Africa could Apply artificial intelligence to artwork to enhance their values without denaturing it.

Keywords: Art, AI, History, Producer, Value.

Introduction

In African. traditional art, the connection between the human search for meaning and art is widely known and the effort to discover the reason for human existence through art has no limit. Less attention is given to the connection between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and individual or collective human effort to find purpose and significance in their lives and experiences. The human search for meaning is comparable to the creation of value. But “there are no values that are things” (Raeymaeker, 1970). By implication, values are attributed to things. For this reason, “what characterizes value is not being, but 'having to be', 'being worth'” (Raeymaeker, 1970). Among the many disciplines that have explored how human beings give sense to their existence, traditional art seems to be the ultimate expression of human life and experiences. Generally, art may be described as “a living mirror in which all feelings and passions are reflected” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 2003), but traditional art also called “African. traditional art is a visible response to the search for an eternal Being with power over man” (Onah, 2023). The collective history, life experiences and aspirations of a people are translated into this art in order to indicate where traditional art derives its values. Traditional artworks therefore connect the past of human beings to the present, to enable them to fashion their future.

However, the *avant-garde* art movement which functionality is manifested through AI is fast replacing the sense of traditional art and modern art. It has become the contemporary

means of realizing artistic works. Modern art also called modern African. art is characterized by “their formal perfection and sophistication, their beauty and aesthetics and by the fact that they involve the application of modern technique by an artist” (Onah, 2023). The historical development of modern African. art attests to the integration of “historical antecedents, current socio-political experiences and the future of the African. people” (Onah, 2023). The values of traditional art inspired this, and this connection did not totally alter the human search for meaning. But is the *avant-garde* art movement which strongly relies on AI capable of modifying the human search for meaning? Can it be equated with the creation of African. traditional art?

While it is up to human beings to shape their own history and create conditions that give meaning to their existence in the world (Ngond' a Ndenge, 1996), can they achieve this artistically through AI? The use of AI in the creation of artwork today may not be perceived as a human search for meaning but as a threat to human existence because of the excessive and uncontrolled techno-scientific power of contemporary man (Ngond' a Ndenge, 1996).

The principal question that will guide the articulation of our thought is: where do artworks derive their values? Are values attributed to artworks or are they inherent? Considering the argument concerning the value of art, one is tempted to ask if it merits any philosophical reflection. Of course, yes. However, our analysis will focus on the impact of AI on African. traditional art and the human search for meaning in the African Context. This work will therefore describe the meaning of art, value and artificial intelligence, then it will examine where artworks derive their values and finally, the cultural impact of AI in the human search meaning.

Meaning of African Traditional Art, Value and Artificial Intelligence

African Traditional Art

African traditional artists create a great impact on the lives of individuals and society. Their works usually represent the lived experiences of human beings, either as individuals or collectively which are expressed through masks and various kinds of sculpture and textiles. The beliefs, cultural, philosophical, religious and social life of a people are usually encapsulated in African traditional art. This is the central argument of Freeland (2010) in her book *Portraits and Persons*. Similarly, Myers (2006) described African traditional art as “the result of historical happenings”. This form of art is different from “experiential art” and artworks in museums. “Experiential art” allows individuals to interact with artwork by engaging their senses. The essence is to enable the individual to participate in the purpose of the creation of a particular artwork. Meanwhile, artworks in museums can be seen but cannot be touched.

Only those who are ritually initiated can approach traditional art but viewers can come close to experiential art without undergoing initiation. While the former is a result of experience, the latter is not. From this point of view, traditional artworks are sacred illustrations of past events associated with human beings. Traditional artworks are the results of the union and harmony of two contradictory human situations “that appear to the mind as separate and opposed: the *ideal* and the *real*” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 2003). While the ideal encapsulates the best possible expression of dignified human existence, the real truly depicts the worthless condition of human beings.

The production of African traditional art distinguishes itself by its ability to establish the dignity of human beings, to give a profound sense to the human search for meaning and to make the human condition truly visible. Bush (2023) qualified this preeminent importance of human beings in art as an “anthropocentric gaze”. This suggests that nearly every artwork is preoccupied with human beings. By implication, art presents a glorified sense of human existence. The anthropocentric explanation of art is a good description of the human search for meaning. Still, it raises pertinent questions concerning where to attribute the value of art. Do artworks derive value from the message they convey or do their values reside in the artist who produced them? In other words, is the value inherent (inside) in the object or external to it? Perhaps, the examination of the meaning of “value” will give better clarity on this subject matter.

Value

Before explaining what value is, it will be good to state that “values are highly context-sensitive; changes in context lead to changes in values” (Vaccaria, 2015). This work shall consider two contextual factors that are not mutually exclusive but complementary. These factors are art and history. Some traditional artworks are articulations of human experiences and the memories of human histories are preserved through artworks. For instance, pre-historic arts reveal and have helped to understand the cultural values of human ancestors. This kind of art has also preserved the qualities that made human life desirable and pleasurable before any written record.

According to Raeymaeker (1970), “value is the rule that is 'worth' applying, the law that fixes what 'must be', the norm of facts”. In other words, value is the ideal towards which human beings aspire; it obliges men and women to act in a certain way. It suggests not only what reasonable people should do, but above all the direction of events. This presupposes that nothing happens by chance. Everything that happens is inspired and sustained by value. In this sense, value takes on a force that determines the actions of human beings for their fulfilment.

The above description of values wishes to emphasize the importance of African traditional arts in preserving and expressing human values. They embody lived experiences, ancestral history, belief, and all that is highly esteemed by a people but also suggest what gives meaning to their existence. It is clear that African Art and masks are not mere objects that have no connection to humans; they constitute the framework of their human life and aspirations. In other words, their values are a projection of human values. In some cultures, the destruction of certain African arts and masks is invariably the destruction of the human search for meaning.

It is essential to understand that the production of African Traditional arts and masks is closely linked to the creation of human values by a cultural group. In other words, arts and human values are produced, endorsed and adapted by the 'owner' of a culture (Scotty D. Craig & Darina Dicheva (eds.), July 6-7th, 2009). Granted that the production of values varies according to culture, belief and experience, it is frustrating to evaluate the benefits of an artwork produced through AI. The difficulty is situated upon where to attribute the value of such work. The reason is that “enhancements create new frameworks that change these values, to the extent of imposing values that a person might not have otherwise

endorsed” (Vaccaria, 2015). This state of things motivates us to ask pertinent questions such as what is Artificial Intelligence (AI)? How does it intervene in the production of artwork? What values do artworks produced through AI add to the human search for meaning?

Artificial intelligence (AI)

John McCarthy who coined the term AI in 1955 defined it as “the science and engineering of making intelligent machines” (Manning, 2020). AI is the use of machines to simulate human intelligence. It is also described as “‘smart’ machines that mimic human intelligence” (Berg, 2020). The results of the use of AI to mimic human intelligence “has even expanded into the artistic and creative realm creating works of art and fashion, composing poetry, stories, humour, music, movies, and media content” (Berg, 2020). Concerning its use to produce artwork, the question is “which or whose intelligence AI would have to replicate in order to be worthy of being called AI?” (Stahl, 2021). Is it the intelligence of the machine, the producer of the machine or the person operating the machine to make something new? These questions are important in determining the human search for meaning. This is because there are human experiences that cannot spring from digital technologies.

AI art is the use of a neural network, that is, a form of generative AI to produce artwork. This is a paradigm shift from the use of human hands and tools to represent all kinds of human experiences and history. The application of AI in creating art is very recent. It is applied in the production of music, sculpture, and paintbrush. AI can facilitate contemporary artists in the production of artworks; artists could apply different techniques to create cultural elements that appear real. However, it has raised questions about the alteration of human experiences which inspired the production of African traditional art. This renovation can be examined in terms of personal involvement, history and the *locus* which gives an artwork its value. The fundamental change can also be appraised from the point of view of human search for meaning.

Contrary to the general perception that AI art is devoid of human experience typical of African traditional art, Bernd Carsten Stahl cited the work of Virginia Dignum, an AI researcher whose description of AI rejoins the reason for producing African art. Virginia Dignum sees AI as “artefacts” and an “academic community”. As artefacts, AI signifies different kinds of machines that are produced to solve human problems or enhance human abilities. Indeed, “such artefacts are often referred to as (artificial) agents. Intelligent agents are those that are capable of flexible action in order to meet their design objectives” (Stahl, 2021). And as an academic community, this author considers “AI to be the discipline that studies and develops computational artefacts that exhibit some facet(s) of intelligent behaviour” (Stahl, 2021). By implication, the development of these artefacts is comparable to the motives of traditional artists for engraving collective human history and experiences in material objects.

The examination of AI art from the point of view of an “academic community” presupposes the preeminence of human experience in inspiring the production of AI art. The value of this form of art can be applied to different therapeutic purposes. The use of AI to assemble different cultural, economic, political, religious, and social elements in Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) for instance, means that this form of TAT can enhance the diagnosis and healing process of someone who has a psychological problem. In this

sense, an artist can use AI to create a scene where “the subject identifies with the hero of the story, attributing to the imaginary hero his own thoughts, feelings, tendencies and problems” (Dictionnaire de la Psychologie, 1967). From this perspective, AI arts are invaluable means of discovering the meaning of human existence. But considering the implications of human agents, objects and diverse activities involved in the production of artworks, whether African traditional art or AI art, this work is preoccupied with finding out where artworks derive their values. This paper envisages two possible solutions.

Where do artworks derive their values?

This work envisages a good response to the question concerning where artworks derive their values by examining two the intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives.

Intrinsic perspective

The intrinsic perspective intends to show grounds for concluding that the value of any artwork is inherent in the work itself. This approach explores the ability of artworks to stimulate emotions and thoughts and modify human behaviour. This is possible because “Art is the language of sensations, whether expressed in words, colors, sounds or stones” (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 1942). In this sense, art draws the attention of people to what the impersonal unconscious is trying to tell them by increasing their knowledge of good and evil (Geoffrey, 1935).

Storck (2009) disagrees with the intrinsic value of any work of art by establishing that there is no “intrinsic criterion which makes a book either high or lowbrow”. This is because, when people develop a taste for other values, the importance given to the previous object will be less. In other words, the strong tendency to change one's opinion concerning any artwork, or the variables responsible for greater or lesser attribution of value to art imply that artworks in themselves, do not have value. The paradigm shift in science is a practical example of the fact that artworks have no intrinsic value but that their value depends on one generation or another, the person, group or community that created it or received it.

Besides, the intrinsic value could be considered from the point of view of the material used in creating artwork or the place of origin. These aspects “express and reinforce the culture's own ideas and feelings” (Storck, 2009). This is true of African traditional arts which express the life experiences of a group of people. It is only by proxy, secondarily, or even by initiation that others can participate in the ideals of the autochthons. This can be contested, especially with the creation of modern art which tries to research, construct and integrate imaginary experiences in their works. Although it is possible to draw some moral lessons from the fruits of their labour but the depth of historical experience is lacking. This way of imposing values on artwork raises doubts as to whether artworks derive their values from the objects used and the place of their origin, or whether they receive their values from something else.

The foregoing raises the question of the distinction between low art/low culture and high art/high culture. The former is considered primitive and emphasizes material substance and form. The origin of this form of art is purely human creation and springs from the application of natural tools and elements. The creators are believed to be uneducated and the significance of their work is limited in scope. The latter is considered contemporary

and is characterized “with abstract ideas or even with fictional forms of contemporary social problems and issues” (Storck, 2009). The artists use modern types of equipment and technology like Dall-E to produce artificial materials that are universally accepted.

Moreover, the cultural and historical appraisal of art is a matter of interest to the intrinsic importance of artworks because the latter are closely associated with cultural heroes who act “on behalf of society to guarantee our individualism and renew its means of expression” (Cottingham, 2005). These heroes may be part of the “creators” of the world or those who contributed significantly to its transformation or discovery of essential elements for the survival of human beings. This is peculiar to traditional art and not modern or contemporary art, or art in general. The dynamism in the evolution of art reveals that the value of African traditional art is not always connatural; for this reason, this paper shall look into possible external determinants.

Extrinsic perspective

The extrinsic perspective shall explore circumstances that contribute to the value of an artwork. These facts are essentially outside the artistic work and include, the number of visits/visitors to an art gallery, and commercialization. Many literatures on art talk about the number of visitors to exhibitions, to artistic events or the composition of the public attending such events all over the world. The value assigned to any artwork depends on these variables: the number of visitors attending an exhibition, a concert, or the number of those borrowing literary works. While Cottingham (2005) observed that the number of visitors who attended the recent Matisse-Picasso exhibition outnumbered that of Tate's annual Turner Prize exhibition between 1996 and 2000, Francès (1979) emphasized the number of those visiting bibliothèques in organizations such as *Maisons de la Culture* to borrow literary works.

However, from an African traditionalist point of view, the value of art depends on the restrictions placed on the number of those who visit to see artworks or masks. The number of visitors is determined by whether a person is initiated or not. By implication, the consumption of the categories of art which restricts the number of those who visit it depends on many factors namely, one's social status, being initiated, and financial capabilities. The above factors appear to be extrinsic to the work of art itself and make one question what they actually contribute to art.

In addition, artworks acquire their value through commercialization. This was made possible by the capitalist idea which invaded the cultural practices and significance of traditional art. It was motivated by the desire to turn “art into a gallery-based commodity” (Cottingham, 2005). Consequently, it led to the increase of art galleries and museums around the world and the application of modern tools to make artworks attractive, beautiful, charming and gorgeous. These forms of artwork are mostly created by individuals and do not spring from the collective history and life experiences of a people. They are simply good for their aesthetic importance. However, an individual artist could engage in the historical representations of a people's history. An artist could satisfy the curiosity of people through the forms of art called historical painting or historiography. The possibility of artists to re-create human experiences involves not only the use of modern tools but also implies individuals' commitment. As explained, the commercialization of art does not eliminate human experiences in the past but enriches

them by making them accessible to the present generation.

As a result of the foregoing, this paper shall examine the impact of AI on African traditional art and then propose a precise perspective for the human search for meaning. It shall take into account the epistemological/scientific understanding of the search for meaning, as well as the socio-cultural/historical criteria.

Impact of AI on African Traditional Art and the Human Search for Meaning

AI art has a deep impression on African traditional art in many ways. It could be argued that AI art is based on individual inspiration and imagination and not *real* human experience. Inspiration stimulates creativity, the ability to use imagination to produce a new idea or product. This depends on the capacity of an individual, which seems to distinguish itself from experience, that is a collection of events or activities that leave an impression on a group. Contrary to imaginary fear, this paper upholds the view that the influence of AI art on African traditional art is complementary. In other words, AI arts recall past beliefs, customs, events, people and traditions that have been forgotten or which have remained unconscious to the memory. Considering the explanation of AI arts as an “academic community,” it offers people opportunities to relive the heroic events of yesteryears and examine the significance of human existence today.

For instance, a Nigerian artist in the music industry has re-created socio-economic and political situations of the past to enable Nigerians to reflect on the meaning of their lives. Recently, Chukwuebuka Emmanuel Amuzie popularly known as Brain Jotter used a song produced in 1983 by a Nigerian music legend Mike Ejeagha to communicate the state of affairs in Nigeria. In a video posted on 5th July 2024 on his Instagram, Brain Jotter used the melody of the song *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* and the words “Gwo Gow Gwo Ngwo” to bring to consciousness the central message of Mike Ejeagha namely, the tale of how tortoise outsmarted an elephant. Briefly, the author of *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* presented the framework for understanding the deceptive and cunning attitudes of a few minorities who mislead the majority for selfish reasons. Instagram is not AI but it uses AI features such as content recommendation to suggest content to visitors and users. In this sense, AI played a significant role in reviving the central message of Mike Ejeagha. The influence of AI on this subject matter reveals that the human search for meaning is ongoing. This is epistemological because it unravels the truth about deception and questions suspicious actions.

Another strong influence of AI arts on African traditional art is that AI reinforces the gregarious nature of human beings. The desire to be with others begins with personal contact and reaches the thought and consciousness of the “other I”. The *loci* of most of the arts created by AI are virtual/ hosted on a network, while those that are eventually produced are exhibited on special occasions to create awareness about the possibility of these categories of artistic works to reach a wider consumer. The *loci* of AI art allow human beings to establish multiple consciousnesses almost at the same time, and to easily share their opinion concerning their perception of an artwork. Contrary to the defence in favour of arts produced by AI, it is important to state that human beings feel contact and consciousness of African traditional arts and AI art differently. Unfortunately too, the possibility of meeting with other people and consciousness are controlled, determined and regulated by companies which manufacture AI. The *loci* of AI art are so general and

opposed to diverse specific human experience and history. This means that the relevance of AI art demeans the attachment of human beings to their culture and the values transmitted by the latter. The AI makes people to be attached to the picture of “things” instead of the thing itself (Berg, 2020). The place where artwork/mask is situated vis-à-vis the profound history and experiences of human beings reveals the profundity of human life. In connection with the previous point, one can say that AI art is limited in furnishing tactile or haptic sensations. This is also true concerning olfactory sensation.

The argument against the limitations of AI art seems to be opposed to its relevance to the human search for meaning. However, “memory” plays a vital role in helping human beings to relive certain experiences. Saint Augustine (1960) carefully treats the link between memory and human experiences in Book 10, ch. 8 (14). In his view, memory is that which enables human beings to recall what they are, what they have done, when and how they have been affected by events in their environment. From this perspective, Book 10, Ch. 6 (9) described memory as a storehouse that receives all experiences of the senses (Augustine, 1960), including those externalized through artworks. By implication, memory is the resource where all information on African traditional arts can be found, whether written, oral or direct experience. This means that the use of AI to collect different elements to produce art could help people relive important experiences when they perceive artworks realized through the help of AI. Therefore, the impact of hybrid art in the human search for meaning could help in resolving problems. This perspective explains the scientific role of memory in the human search for meaning.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the sense of the human search for meaning by exploring the meaning of art, value and AI. This offered an opportunity to understand how the creation of African traditional art and masks expresses the history and profound experiences of human beings. The human search for meaning is artistically represented but their values are frequently changing because of the history of the evolution of the production of art.

Certainly, artworks and masks derive their values from both internal and external sources. The two perspectives considered in this work are not exhaustive but reveal how the value of art is connected to multiple human elements before, during and after the process of production. We think that the excellence of artworks is always imbued with human experiences and history which inspired their production.

In this paper, we tried to show that artistic creation is a symbolic way of explaining the human search for meaning. This search for meaning begins with African traditional art which is infused with collective human experiences and history, and gradually gave way to individualistic incentives to act in a particular way. The AI art, which is the culmination of *avant-garde* art increased the interest for commercialization, and fame, to the point of deliberately paying attention to or caring about forming a conscious image of humanity and reliving past events.

It will be commendable if future AI art improves on cultural elements in the aspects of texture and smell. This will reinforce the sense of the human search for meaning.

Works Cited

- Augustine, S. (1960). *The Confessions*. Trans. (J. K. Ryan, Trans.) New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland: Doubleday.
- Berg, J. v. (2020). Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Perspectives from theology, philosophy and education. (eds, Ed.) *Sunbonani Scholar*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928424512>
- Bush, S. S. (2023). Portraiture and Anthropocentrism. *De Ethica*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3384/de-ethica.2001-8819.23739393>.
- Cottingham, D. (2005). *Modern art. A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dictionnaire de la Psychologie*. (1967). Paris: Librairie La Rousse.
- Francès, R. (1979). *Psychologie de l'art et de l'esthétique*. Paris : PUF.
- Freeland, Cynthia A. (2010). *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Geoffrey, G. (1935). *The Arts To-Day*. (ed., Ed.) London: John Lane The Bodley Head.
- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. (2003). *Esthétique* (Tome I ed., Vol. Tome I.). (C. B. Chicoutimi, Trans.)
- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. (1942). *Qu'est-ce-que la philosophie?* Paris: Les éditions de Minuit.
- Manning, C. (2020, September). Artificial Intelligence Definitions. *Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence*.
- Myers, F. (2006). 'Primitivism', Anthropology, and the Category of 'Primitive art'. *Handbook of Material Culture* . 274. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607972.n18>
- Ngond'a Ndenge, N. (1996). Savoir et Responsabilite. *Recheches Philosophiques Africaines*. La Responsabilite Politique Du Philosophe Africain. Actes du IXeme Seminaire Scientifique de Philosophie Kinshasa, du 20 au 23 juin 1993. 25 (1996).
- Onah, A. U. (2023). Traditional art, modern African art and African masks: An expression of Global search for the Absolute. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* , 24.
- Raeymaeker, L. D. (1970). *Philosophie de l'être. Essai de synthèse métaphysique* (3e éditions ed.). Louvain-Paris: Les éditions Nauwelaerts-Béatrice-Nauwelaerts.
- Scotty D. Craig & Darina Dicheva (eds.). (July 6-7th, 2009). AIED 2009. *14th International Conference on Artificial Intelligence in Education. Workshops Proceedings*. Brighton.
- Stahl, B. C. (2021). *Artificial Intelligence for a Better Future. An Ecosystem Perspective on the Ethics of AI and Emerging Digital Technologies*. Leicester: Springer.
- Storck, T. (2009). Culture and the embodiment of Cultural ideals as preliminary to a philosophy of culture. *Philosoophicum*, 14.
- Vaccaria, A. (2015). Transhumanism and human enhancement: A post-mortem. *Bioethica Forum*, 8(1).