An intriguing paradox is revealed if one is inclined to troll the vast eBay universe for vintage popular magazines: the August 1, 1949, edition of Life with Joe DiMaggio on the cover can be had for less than fifteen dollars. The August 8 issue, just one week later—with the cover image of a comely but nameless lady—is on offer for almost twenty times that amount. Rarity is surely not the reason; Jackson Pollock is. With a memorable four-page spread in that issue, the artist instantly became a household name. What to make of that burly, unkempt man jumping about in a barn furiously pouring paint from a can onto a canvas spread out on the floor? Unheard of! Could this stunt be taken seriously, or was it just another hoax perpetrated by those phony art-world sorcerers? Legend has it that a Pollock canvas arrived in Florence in 1946 from an American artists’ consortium as a contribution for the rebuilding of the Santa Trinita bridge, the 1569 masterwork by Bartolomeo Ammannati. The city fathers considered this gift a cruel joke and promptly consigned the canvas to the dust bin, perhaps not altogether surprising in that redoubt of the Renaissance. If the story is not apocryphal, it may well be the sole Pollock not listed in the 1975 Thaw/O’Connor catalogue raisonné.

In reality, Pollock had not gone unnoticed. Long before the Life story, the artist had benefitted from the backing of the influential gallerist Peggy Guggenheim, with whom he had signed an agreement in 1943. Fulsome praise from the über-critic Clement Greenberg followed apace. The Museum of Modern Art mounted a full-dress retrospective in December of 1956, barely four months after the artist’s untimely death. If not at first embraced by the great unwashed, Pollock had already solidly established his place in the upper reaches of America’s post-war arts pantheon. The turbulence of his personal existence and dramatic death at age forty-four contributed to the mythology.

Many are the reflections that Pollock’s work elicits, but particularly pertinent to the theme of this discourse is how he painted—the making of an image as a physical act. What becomes immediately obvious in observing this act is the detachment of the artist’s hand from the result on the canvas, the distance the colors must travel before they reach the painting’s surface. This detachment injects a key and entirely unprecedented element in the creative process: that of pure chance. Despite the
oft-repeated admiration for Pollock’s “control” in the making of his most significant and innovative works—the “drip” paintings—the enormous variables inherent in his technique cannot be sufficiently emphasized. No artist before him had relinquished so much to the vagaries of simple fortuity. It can be argued that Pollock “erased” his presence with the distance separating the hand from the canvas.

Though at first glance dissimilar, Pollock’s process is, nonetheless, curiously parallel to the way Jeff Koons, a legendary perfectionist, determines every minutest detail of a sculpture or painting using a sophisticated computer program. This artist sits patiently at his Apple console “creating” while the actual artwork eventually emerges from the hands of highly trained studio assistants, virtually untouched by its author. At first it was the machines, starting with the Industrial Revolution, that usurped manual intervention in the making of things. By the mid-twentieth century, robots—incredibly dexterous mechanical “arms” and “hands”—had become an assembly-line fixture. The entire process was governed by computer technology.

With Pollock and Koons, albeit in obviously different ways, we are on the threshold of returning to an art “made without hands,” a phenomenon known since antiquity as acheiropoieton. It is a medieval Greek word defining several categories of images or signs appearing without human intervention. Considered miraculous events, all have been subjects of veneration at different times. An early example is cited in the Old Testament (Daniel 5) when, suddenly, an ominous warning appeared on the palace wall during a great banquet given by the sacrilegious King Belshazzar. The inscription was “written” by a disembodied hand, a non-human manifestation that struck terror in the assembled company. Of such otherworldly occurrences, by far the most renowned is “Veronica’s Veil,” represented in countless versions from early medieval times. The story of the female saint is well known: she followed Christ on the way to Calvary,
providing comfort by wiping His blood- and sweat-stained face with a cloth on which His likeness was miraculously transferred. The tale does not appear in the canonical Gospels but is a composite of apocryphal texts known as the “Acts of Pilate.” The saint’s very name has been said to be a fictitious construct of “Vera” and “Ikon” (True Image), also known in Italy as “Volto Santo” (Holy Face), venerated as Christ’s “portrait.”

Possibly the most famous and controversial acheiropoieton is the so-called “Shroud of Turin.” A fifteen-by-four-foot length of flax fiber textile woven in a herringbone pattern, it bears a faint but quite recognizable double image of a naked man. The ghostly figure has been seen as visual testimony of Christ’s likeness in burial. There is a first mention of the puzzling relic in France in 1354, after which it eventually came into the possession of the Dukes of Savoy. Whether the holy cloth enriched the spiritual life of Turin and its ruling dynasty is uncertain. It surely contributed significantly to the history of European Baroque architecture, for, in 1688, Duke Charles Emmanuel II of Savoy commissioned the renowned architect Guarino Guarini to build a suitable sanctuary for the precious Santissima Sindone (Most Holy Shroud). The result was an unrivaled masterwork, still universally admired for the complexity of the building’s geometry, ingenious fenestration, and innovative use of materials. It connects directly to Turin’s royal palace and, until relatively recently, was still under the jurisdiction of the Savoy family.

“Veronica’s Veil” was not so fortunate. Not a trace of it has survived—if it ever existed. First documented as having been brought to Italy in 1199 by two pilgrims returning from the Holy Land, the relic may have been lost during the Sack of Rome in 1527. A dark, splotchy pall of indeterminate material and age is conserved in an elaborate but difficult to see reliquary in St. Peter’s. It hardly figures among the Basilica’s major attractions and normally resides high in the triforium, on the right side of the nave. By contrast, the apocryphal story of Veronica has found a permanent place in Church liturgy as the sixth “Station of the Cross.” It is recited countless times daily across the world. The pious Veronica retained a commanding presence in the visual arts as well. She appears, veil and all, in the right valve of the van der Weyden Crucifixion triptych, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. This iconography of the saint remained fairly constant through both the Italian and Northern Renaissance, giving way to a freer interpretation only by the seventeenth century. In St. Peter’s, Veronica is represented in one of the four colossal statues at the crossing of nave and transept, below the majestic dome. Executed in 1629 by Francesco Mochi (1580–1654), it is an exuberant explosion of limbs, windblown veils, and hair. The magisterial work also marks the commanding affirmation of the Baroque style, a visual idiom characterized by emphatic drama, kinetic theatricality, and technical wizardry.

A scholarly article by Nicole Blackwood examined a significant apparition of the veil in a work by the Italian printmaker Ugo da Carpi (ca. 1460–1525). While this artist’s graphic output enjoyed wide circulation in Italy and abroad, he is known to have executed only one painting: a large panel representing the central figure of St. Veronica holding the veil, flanked by Saints Peter and Paul. Judging by photographs in Blackwood’s article, Ugo probably did well to stick to his graphic pursuits; the panel shows scarce artistic, let alone painterly, gifts. Despite this, it was
commissioned for St. Peter’s in Rome, though it seems not to be currently on display. Blackwood states that her article “offers an account of the parallels between, on the one hand, miraculous theories of pictorial production, and on the other, artistic innovation and authorship.” Her choice is particularly apt as it represents the female saint holding a large veil with an image of the “Volto Santo” clearly derived from the St. Peter’s relic and the numerous known copies it inspired. The intriguing aspect of Ugo’s painting is that it is signed: “Per Ugo da Carpi Intaiatore/fata senza/penello” (“by Ugo da Carpi woodcut engraver made without the brush”). Blackwood’s close inspection of the altarpiece revealed the truth of Ugo’s inscription: the presence of copious fingerprints and “finger strokes,” presumably the artist’s own. Vasari, a slightly later contemporary, was—as almost always—well informed, confirming Ugo’s peculiar technique in his “Life” of the artist.

The search for other acheiropoieta might encourage a hardy traveler to seek out the village of Manoppello in the seldom visited province of Abruzzo, in southeastern Italy. There, just on the outskirts of town, is a handsome sanctuary church built in the early seventeenth century but much restored after the ravages of the last war. It displays, on its main altar, a simple silver reliquary framing the faint image of a man’s bearded face, painted on silk. Heinrich Pfeiffer, a German Jesuit scholar has, in the past two decades, expended great efforts to promote the “Mannoppello Image” as the “Vera Ikon,” despite the very painterly quality of the man’s features and their similarity to the pictorial style of late Trecento Italian art. The perceptive art historians Roberto Longhi and Federico Zeri would have readily been able to attribute the image to the hand of a specific artist—in pointed contradiction to “painted without hands.”

This reaching back to the arcane realm of mediaeval acheiropoieta has its relevance to contemporary art, some of which is created “without human hands,” as witnessed, at least in part, with Pollock and Koons. But then came the inevitable next step: art created entirely by a machine, from concept to execution. With this, a rational, reasonably cultured individual enters kicking and screaming into the contemporary dystopia of “Artificial Intelligence,” or, simply, AI. The acknowledged pioneer of the discipline is Professor Edward A. Feigenbaum, formerly at Stanford. Not surprisingly, the concept of AI software surfaced in the la-la land of California academe. Feigenbaum’s 1963 publication Computers and Thought is one of the subject’s earliest treatments. Art, naturally, does not appear in the discussion, nor does it in Feigenbaum’s 1977 submission to Stanford’s “Heuristic Programming Project” other than in the title: “The Art of Artificial Intelligence.” The opening words of that article’s abstract should strike terror in the heart of every thinking person: “The knowledge engineer practices the art of bringing the principles and tools of AI to bear on difficult applications problems requiring experts’ knowledge for their solutions.” Is this not reminiscent of a dog biting its tail?

Pressing on into this brave new world in search of “knowledge engineers” and AI art, one stumbles on the website of what appears to be a Spanish outfit that is a sort of clearinghouse for a potpourri of wokeish notions; de rigueur, of course, are climate change and transgender issues. But then, one recent post is the equivalent of a hole-in-one: “Artificial Intelligence and the Arts:
Toward Computational Creativity.” Its author, Ramón López de Mántaras, devotes most of his attention to music, the first of the four arts to be “de-humanized” via the computer. To compose their pioneering String Quartet No. 4 in 1957, L. A. Hiller and L. M. Isaacson used the illiac 1 computer, developed at the University of Illinois in 1952. It was a behemoth measuring over 180 cubic feet, with 2,800 vacuum tubes. The String Quartet No. 4 does not appear to have entered the concert repertoire, although AI-generated music is still being discussed, if not generally performed. It would be interesting to hear it now; would it bring to mind Arnold Schoenberg or Alban Berg? At any rate, the Hiller and Isaacson experiments are not surprising considering the intimate relationship of music and mathematics. The visual arts pose far greater obstacles to “de-humanization,” but that has not deterred “knowledge engineers” from trying. Success in this effort arrived spectacularly in 2018 when a Portrait of Edmond de Belamy was sold at Christie’s, New York, for well over $400,000. The smeared, out-of-focus image is disconcerting: a pudgy male ectoplasm stares out of a dark, indistinct background, his anodyne features telling us nothing of the figure’s humanity, with his costume giving no more than a vague eighteenth-century flavor. This “painting” is apparently the product

*Obvious, Edmond de Belamy, 2018, Ink on canvas. Photo: Christie’s, New York.*
of an algorithm devised by a three-man Paris-based collective calling itself “Obvious.” The team does not lack for humor: the “portrait” bears a “signature,” which is the mathematical formula developed by a computer algorithm named \textit{gan}.

The initials stand for “Generative Adversarial Network,” the brilliant newspeak invention of “machine learning” launched by Ian Goodfellow, a thirtysomething Ph.D. out of—where else?—Stanford. Not content with Edmond de Belamy, \textit{gan} proceeded to enlarge his family, generating, as if by autogenesis, an impressive genealogical tree comprising two branches and four generations with eleven members, each identified and portrayed, \textit{perruques} and all. Among them are dukes, barons, and even a cardinal. Judging by Edmond’s performance, such a clutch of distinguished sitters might fetch more than five million dollars at auction.

Christie’s did not let \textit{Edmond}’s stellar price go unnoticed. It titled a glowing press release “Is artificial intelligence set to become art’s next medium?,” concluding the puff with: “does the market see a future in it? It appears it does.” Were this not just wishful thinking in an effort to promote a new merchandise category, it would portend a murky and doleful future far more wretched than the one imagined by Orwell. \textit{Acheiropoieita} would no longer be artifacts generated by miraculous intervention from above but, according to “Obvious,” quite the order of the day:

On one side is the Generator, on the other, the Discriminator. We feed the system with a data set of fifteen thousand portraits painted between the fourteenth century to the twentieth. The Generator makes a new image based on the set, then the Discriminator tries to spot the difference between a human-made image and one created by the Generator. The aim is to fool the Discriminator into thinking that the new images are real-life portraits. Then we have a result.

And voilà, got it? Or is the result more akin to homogenized and pasteurized baby food? Tasteless, colorless, formless. By the way, how did “Obvious” manage to gather \textit{fifteen thousand} portrait photos—by digitizing the entire Frick art-reference library?

Simon Colton, a Briton not lacking for a sense of humor, identifies himself as a “computational creativity professor” at Goldsmith’s College, London. He has assumed the nom de plume “The Painting Fool” and describes this persona as aiming “to build a software system that is one day taken seriously as a creative artist in its own right.” Begun in 2006, the whimsical project has produced a seemingly infinite number of images sharing little stylistic or formal relationship to each other beyond a blotchy, abstract appearance. Visitors to the site are directed to “Amelie’s Progress Gallery,” evidently another invention of the resourceful Colton. No venue is given for this enterprise; it exists “virtually” in the ether—surely better than paying rent.

Should all these visions (or nightmares) come to pass, we will witness a robust resurgence of the medieval acheiropoieita: the brush will be snatched from the painter’s grasp, the pen from the writer, the musical instrument from the performer, and the chisel from the sculptor. The glorious trajectory of Western European art, after sputtering to a pause with Pollock and Koons, would succumb entirely as does the world in “The Hollow Men,” “not with a bang, but with a whimper”—only the soft whirring of the computer hard drive will be audible. In such a desolate
future, will the miraculous, shimmering surfaces of fourteenth century Sienese art; the extravagant impasto of Rubens and Delacroix; the exquisite glazes of Ingres portraits be forgotten or fondly cherished and admired? Therein lies a query central to our culture and its survival.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 39 Number 4, on page 12
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