THE SINGULARITY LOG

The Preciousness Problem

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The first essay in this series argued that AI is rabies for capitalism: that the system built on scarcity is thrashing because its core assumption just broke. This essay asks a related question: where did our obsession with singular, precious authorship come from in the first place?

Nobody painted the Mona Lisa alone.

That sentence bothers people. It shouldn't. Leonardo da Vinci ran a workshop. He had apprentices, assistants, specialists. Someone mixed pigments. Someone prepared panels. Someone filled in backgrounds while the master worked on hands and faces. This was not a scandal. This was Tuesday. Every major Renaissance painter operated the same way. Raphael's workshop produced so much work under his name that art historians still argue about which brushstrokes are "his." The answer, for most of the history of art, was that nobody cared.

The workshop model was the default for centuries. Art was a craft. You learned it through apprenticeship, the way you learned carpentry or metalwork. In Florence, painters belonged to the Arte dei Medici e Speziali, the guild of physicians and apothecaries, because apothecaries supplied pigments. The guild system governed who could practice, what materials they used, how they trained. The master's name went on the piece because the master ran the shop. Not because the master's hand touched every square inch of canvas. Attribution was a business convention. Not a moral claim.

Patrons didn't buy genius. They bought results.

The Medici commissioned frescoes the way a modern company commissions a website. Here's the wall. Here's the subject. Here's the deadline. The artist's job was execution within constraints. Creative freedom existed, sure. But the idea that an artwork sprang fully formed from one person's singular vision, untouched by commercial pressure or collaborative process? That would have gotten you laughed out of Florence.

The shift happened later than people think. The 17th century planted the seeds. The Romantic movement watered them. But the real transformation came with the rise of the modern art market in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Dealers needed a story. Collectors needed provenance. The gallery system needed a reason to charge what it charged. By the mid-19th century, speculation had become integral to the art market and dealers signed contracts with artists before their rise to fame, building reputations to justify prices. The reason they all landed on was authorship. Singular, verifiable, individual authorship. "Who made this?" became the question that determined value. Not "is this beautiful?" Not "does this serve its purpose?" Not "does this move you?" Just: whose hand? Whose name? Whose genius?

The lone genius myth is an economic invention.

That's not a metaphor. The art market required scarcity to function. A painting by Vermeer is worth millions because there are only thirty-four of them. If Vermeer had run a factory, if his apprentices had produced hundreds of works in his style, if attribution was fuzzy and provenance uncertain, the price collapses. The market doesn't work without the story of the individual creator whose output is finite and whose touch is irreplaceable.

So the market built that story. And then culture absorbed it. And then we forgot it was a story at all.

The Victorians finished the job. They codified the split between "high art" and "craft." Painting: high art. Pottery: craft. Sculpture: high art, unless it was functional, in which case: craft. The distinction had nothing to do with skill or beauty or cultural significance. It had everything to do with which objects could be sold as unique expressions of individual genius and which ones couldn't.

Craft was collaborative, reproducible, functional. High art was singular, authored, useless. The uselessness was the point. It proved you were paying for the idea, not the object. For the name, not the thing.

The line moves. It always has, and it applies here too.

Every time a new tool makes creation faster, cheaper, or more accessible, the market panics. Not because the art gets worse. Because the scarcity gets harder to maintain. Photography threatened painting. Recorded music threatened live performance. Digital tools threatened the commission economy. Each time, the cultural response was the same: that's not real art. That's mechanical reproduction. That's cheating.

The argument was never about quality. It was about control. If anyone can make an image, the image loses market value. If the artist's hand is no longer required for every pixel, the story of singular authorship breaks down. And if that story breaks down, the entire pricing model collapses.

This is what the AI panic is about. Not authorship. Not ethics. Not the sanctity of human creativity. The market's need to maintain scarcity in a world that just became infinitely reproducible.

Art is upstream of culture. We take in the world and return two outputs: meaning, and therapy bills. The artists go first. They absorb the contradictions early, sit with them longer than is comfortable, and turn them into something you can look at without flinching.

By the time it reaches everyone else, it feels like a trend. A vibe shift. A “sudden” change in what people care about. It isn’t sudden. It’s sediment. Layers of feeling, stacked and compressed until they break the surface all at once.

What’s coming next won’t arrive as policy or product. It will arrive as a feeling you can’t quite name yet, and then, all at once, everyone will.

I'm not an art historian. I'm a practitioner. I make things with tools that would have horrified the Victorians and confused the Medici and made perfect sense to a Renaissance workshop foreman.

Da Vinci directed artisans the way a film director runs a crew. The foreman told the apprentice which colors to mix. The patron told the foreman what to paint. The whole system was collaborative, hierarchical, and nobody pretended otherwise. The genius myth came later. It came from the market. And it came with a price tag.

When the argument against AI art centers on "a human didn't make every decision," it's worth asking which tradition of art that standard comes from. Not the workshop. Not the guild. Not the folk tradition. It comes from the market, the one that needed singular authorship to justify its prices. The concern is understandable. But the framework it rests on is newer and narrower than people realize.

The workshop knew better. The guild knew better. Every culture that treated art as craft instead of commodity knew better. The preciousness was never in the object. It was manufactured by the market that sold it.

And now the market is scared. Because the tools just got cheap enough that the story stopped working.