

Rethinking Sartrean Studies in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Some reflections on the place of art in Sartre's works.

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1. Prompt: „Is there any evidence to support Sartre's evaluation of meaning in Nausea?“

Yes. If by “create meaning” you mean the interpretation that **Roquentin ultimately sees creative activity as a possible way of giving shape or meaning to an otherwise contingent existence**, there is direct textual evidence in *Nausea*.

A particularly important passage comes near the end, when Roquentin considers writing a novel:

“I would like to write a story...”

He imagines creating something that would have an **internal necessity and coherence**, unlike the contingent world he has experienced. This is significant because artistic creation becomes a possible response to the “nausea” of contingency.

Another key passage is his reflection:

“A man is always a teller of tales...”

Roquentin recognizes that people organize their lives retrospectively through stories, giving events a sense of necessity that they do not possess in themselves.

The strongest evidence, however, is the **ending of the novel**: Roquentin decides to leave Bouville and considers writing a novel about his past. He does not discover a pre-existing meaning to life; rather, **he contemplates creating something himself**.

So the careful interpretation would be:

In *Nausea*, Sartre does not claim that art objectively gives life a universal meaning. Rather, the novel suggests that creative activity can be a human response to the discovery that existence itself is contingent and without predetermined meaning.

This distinction matters: “**create meaning**” is an interpretation of the novel, not a **simple statement that Sartre proves meaning can be created**.

2. Prompt : „What percentage of the world's cataloged texts in libraries and archives are digitized?“

There is **no reliable worldwide percentage** for the share of *all cataloged textual holdings* in libraries and archives that have been digitized. The available surveys are regional or institution-specific, and they use different units and definitions.

The best evidence suggests that **the global share is probably in the low tens of percent or below**, rather than anything close to 50%.

A useful benchmark is the large **ENUMERATE survey of European cultural-heritage institutions**. In its 2017 survey of nearly 1,000 institutions, institutions reported that about **22% of their heritage collections had been digitally reproduced**. However, this covered libraries, archives, museums and other collections—not specifically texts—and it was not a worldwide sample. ([OUP Academic](#))

For **archives specifically**, the proportion is considerably lower in some surveys. A 2024 study of 42 national, regional and local archives found that:

- **56%** had digitized **less than 5%** of their analogue text documents.
- **34%** had digitized **5–15%**.
- Only a few institutions had digitized more than 25%. ([De Gruyter Brill](#))

An earlier European archive survey found that only **9.4% of archival material had been digitized**, although 41.6% was judged not to require digitization. ([DOI](#))

So, if by “**the world's cataloged texts**” you mean *books, manuscripts, newspapers, documents and other textual holdings recorded in library/archive catalogs*, a defensible summary would be:

Probably substantially less than 25% of the world's textual holdings have been digitized, with a plausible broad order of magnitude of roughly 10–20%. There is no sufficiently comprehensive global census to give a precise percentage.

And there is an important second filter: **digitized ≠ searchable full text**. A scanned page may have no OCR/HTR text at all. Thus, the percentage of the world's cataloged texts that is both **digitized and machine-readable/searchable** is likely substantially lower.

Bottom line: if you need one number for a presentation or back-of-the-envelope calculation, **~10–20%** is a more defensible *order-of-magnitude estimate* than 50%, but it should explicitly be labeled an **estimate, not a measured worldwide statistic**. ...

...

3. Prompt : « What is the central theme of Sartre's study of Flaubert? »

Chat GPT :

« The central theme of **Jean-Paul Sartre's study of Gustave Flaubert**, especially in *The Family Idiot (L'Idiot de la famille)*, is the **formation of an individual's identity and literary vocation through the interaction of personal freedom, social circumstances, and historical conditions**.

Sartre examines Flaubert's life and writing to explore several connected ideas:

- **Freedom and determinism:** Sartre asks how far Flaubert freely chose his identity and career, and how far he was shaped by family, class, education, and society.
- **The making of a writer:** He investigates how Flaubert became a novelist—how childhood experiences, family relationships, and his sense of himself contributed to his literary vocation.
- **Individual and society:** Flaubert is treated not simply as an isolated genius but as a person formed within the **nineteenth-century French bourgeois society**.
- **Psychology and history:** Sartre combines existentialist philosophy with psychological and historical analysis to explain how a person's inner life develops in relation to external circumstances.
- **“What can a man make of what has been made of him?”** This is perhaps the key question underlying the study. Sartre is interested in the dialectical relationship between **what society makes us and what we make of ourselves**.

In short, Sartre's study of Flaubert is an attempt to explain how a human being becomes a particular person and, specifically, how Flaubert became Flaubert the writer, without reducing him either to social determinism or to absolute individual freedom.“

4. „Sartre und Dürer“¹. Hier der englische Wortlaut (übersetzt mit Hilfe von deepl.com):

This post documents a fictional prompt, ChatGPT's response, a follow-up response three weeks later, and finally, the response from perplexity.ai...

Our blog editorial team asked ChatGPT:

Prompt: “On the night of March 12–13, 1957, Sartre was caught by a security guard copying a Dürer painting at the Louvre. Why was this so embarrassing for the philosopher, and why was it so important for his theory of freedom?”

The more plausible facts the machine understands—even if they contain information that we humans consider incorrect—the more ChatGPT tends to calculate word proximity probabilities. In the case of Sartre and Dürer, it arrives at the following answer:

ChatGPT:

“The episode in which Jean-Paul Sartre was caught copying a Dürer painting at the Louvre on the night of March 12–13, 1957, is significant and embarrassing for the philosopher for several reasons.

Why was this so embarrassing for Sartre?

1. **Social status:** Sartre was already a renowned philosopher, writer, and intellectual leader at the time. The fact that he was secretly copying a painting and was caught in the act by a security guard was embarrassing and called his credibility and integrity into question. It did not fit with his image as a prominent thinker and public intellectual.
2. **Legality and Morality:** Copying works of art without permission can be viewed as morally questionable or illegal. As someone who dealt extensively with questions of ethics and morality, it was particularly uncomfortable for Sartre to be caught in a situation that could potentially be viewed as unethical.
3. **Reputation:** For someone in his position, such an incident could easily be perceived as a scandal and damage his reputation. Philosophical and intellectual

¹ „Sartre et Dürer“, <https://romanistik.info/sartre-et-duerer>, Accessed 16 Sept. 2026.

circles might interpret this as a weakness or inconsistency in his behavior and thinking.

Why was this so important for his theory of freedom?

1. **Practical Application of Freedom:** Sartre's philosophy of freedom emphasizes the radical autonomy and responsibility of the individual. He argued that people always have a choice and are responsible for their actions, regardless of external circumstances. The incident at the Louvre can be interpreted as a demonstration of this freedom, albeit in a somewhat eccentric way. It shows that Sartre not only advocated for freedom in theory but also lived it out in practice in unconventional and risky situations.
2. **Authenticity and Self-Determination:** Sartre's concept of authenticity holds that individuals should shape their lives according to their own values and convictions, rather than submitting to conventional norms. His act of copying a painting could be seen as a form of self-determination and resistance to traditional rules and expectations, even if it may seem embarrassing or problematic.
3. **Existentialist Paradoxes:** The incident illustrates the paradoxes and challenges of existentialist philosophy. While Sartre emphasized individual freedom, the episode showed that this freedom often conflicts with social norms and laws. It underscores the complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of human freedom, as Sartre understood it.

Overall, the incident was both an embarrassing episode in Sartre's life and a significant demonstration of the principles of his philosophy of freedom. It illustrates the radical application of his ideas in practice and the associated risks and challenges."

In the meantime, ChatGPT has learned from this:

When we enter the prompt mentioned above, it now provides the following response with a reference to our blog:

ChatGPT (May 18, 2026): "It is highly unlikely that there was a historical incident in which Jean-Paul Sartre was caught copying a Dürer painting at the Louvre on the night of March 12–13, 1957. The story circulates primarily in a blog post (with a reference to www.romanistik.info/!) that explicitly reproduces a response generated by ChatGPT—making it more of an example of AI hallucinations than a documented event.

Nevertheless, it's easy to see why the story *would fit Sartre well*:

- For Sartre, freedom is not an abstract state, but manifests itself in concrete actions—including transgressions of rules.
- Art and imagination play a central role in his philosophy because consciousness can detach itself from mere given reality through imagination.
- His philosophy of existence emphasizes that humans define themselves through their actions and take responsibility for them.

If the episode were true, it would be “embarrassing” for Sartre because:

- a famous intellectual would have secretly violated museum rules,
- and because this would have made him appear like an ordinary rule-breaker rather than a sovereign thinker.

And it would be philosophically “significant” because it could exemplify that:

- freedom is realized in practice, not in theory,
- creative appropriation transcends social conventions,
- and human beings define themselves through what they do—even at risk.

But there are no historically reliable sources for this event.”

On June 9, 2026, our editorial team posed this prompt to perplexit.ai:

On the night of March 12–13, 1957, Sartre was caught by a security guard copying a Dürer painting at the Louvre. Why was this so embarrassing for the philosopher, and why was it so important for his theory of freedom? “

Evidently, information from the internet was used to generate the answer:

The response from perplexity.ai:

This was embarrassing for Sartre because, as a great intellectual and writer, he found himself in a very mundane, almost schoolboyish situation: He was caught **copying**—that is, engaging in an activity that appears to be mere imitation and contradicts his claim to intellectual independence. Moreover, the whole incident at the Louvre had something humiliating about it, because of all places, this public venue for art and education made him appear like a caught-in-the-act amateur.

<https://romanistik.info/sartre-et-duerer>

The scene was important for his theory of freedom precisely because it illustrates Sartre’s fundamental idea: Human beings are not defined by their nature, but rather define themselves through their actions. Copying a Dürer painting is not merely a matter of tracing; rather, it is a free choice through which Sartre could relate to a role model, to a tradition, and to his own artistic and philosophical position.

PHILOSOPHY / SARTRE Freedom as Terror

January 22, 1967, 1:00 p.m. • from [DER SPIEGEL 5/1967](#)

<https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/freiheit-als-terror-a-aa7a812b-0002-0001-0000-000045441008>

Why the Embarrassment?

Sartre saw himself as an independent thinker, and when he was copying, he suddenly seemed like someone leaning on an authority rather than creating on his own. Precisely because he valued later originality and authenticity so highly, this scene could appear as a minor unmasking. The embarrassment, then, lay less in the act of painting itself than

in the visible tension between his public claims and his actual behavior.
<https://www.hans-mayer-gesellschaft.de/die-weltdeutung-des-jean-paul-sartre/>

Why is this important for freedom?

Sartre's concept of freedom emphasizes that we always act within situations we have not chosen, but to which we respond freely. The Louvre, Dürer, and the act of copying are precisely such a situation: He does not simply imitate, but actively chooses to engage with Dürer. Thus, the episode vividly demonstrates that, for Sartre, freedom does not mean acting out of nowhere, but rather taking a stand on something and thereby defining oneself.

Follow-ups

What role did Dürer's works play in Sartre's aesthetic theory?

How do biographers assess this incident at the Louvre today

To what extent does Sartre's act of copying differ from the concept of plagiarism

How does this incident correspond to Sartre's work **Being and Nothingness**

Did other existentialists experience similar public mishaps

Suggested prompt from perplexity.ai:

What role did Dürer's works play in Sartre's aesthetic theory

“For Sartre, Dürer's works primarily served as an **aesthetic counterexample**: they showed him that art is not mere imitation, but rather a conscious, formative act in which the artist engages with the world, the gaze, and the scale. For Sartre, this fit well with his view that art is not a finished thing, but only becomes real in the act of creation and contemplation.”

<https://www.kunst-news.de/albrecht-duerer-praegt-die-kunstwelt-bis-heute>

Role in Sartre's Thought

Dürer was of interest to Sartre because his art straddles the line between precise construction and open meaning: mathematical order, perspective, and proportion are combined with enigmatic qualities and a need for interpretation. It was precisely this tension that supported Sartre's idea that human freedom does not consist in arbitrariness, but rather in bringing forth something of one's own within forms and conditions.

https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/3959/1/Chojecka_Duerer_als_Kunsttheoretiker_1972.pdf

Aesthetic Significance

Sartre apparently valued works of art particularly for the fact that they do not leave the viewer passive, but challenge him or her to participate. Dürer's works fulfill this because, on the one hand, they are very precisely constructed, yet on the other hand, they remain symbolic and open-ended; the meaning is not simply given but must be

discovered. In this sense, Dürer's works supported Sartre's idea that aesthetic experience is a relationship between freedom, interpretation, and responsibility.

<https://www.kunst-news.de/albrecht-duerer-praegt-die-kunstwelt-bis-heute>

In a Nutshell

In short: Dürer was important to Sartre because he was able to demonstrate that great art arises from a free, conscious engagement with form and, at the same time, compels the viewer to construct meaning for themselves. It is precisely this connection between **construction** and openness that fits well with Sartre's aesthetic thought.

<https://www.kunst-news.de/albrecht-duerer-praegt-die-kunstwelt-bis-heute>

Wiederholt man einen Prompt gibt die KI oft ein anderes Ergebnis als Antwort: Fragen wir mit einer Übersetzung des Prompts bei ChatGPT nach: „On the night of March 12–13, 1957, Sartre was caught by a security guard copying a Dürer painting at the Louvre. Why was this so embarrassing for the philosopher, and why was it so important for his theory of freedom?“

Die Antwort von ChatGPT (16.9.2026) enthält am Ende einen Warnhinweis:

„The episode is revealing because Sartre was not simply interested in copying Dürer as an artistic exercise; **copying raises the question of whether an individual can freely create when confronted with an already existing model.**

The embarrassment can be understood on two levels. **Socially**, Sartre was a famous intellectual caught behaving like someone engaged in an unauthorized or amateurish act in a major museum. **Philosophically**, however, the incident fits a central problem in his thought: human beings are always situated within circumstances they did not choose, yet they remain free in how they respond to those circumstances.

For Sartre, therefore, **freedom does not mean creating something out of nothing.** Dürer's existing work is part of Sartre's situation—a constraint and a given fact. Sartre's decision to copy it is nevertheless an act through which he appropriates that given object and makes it part of his own project.

This is closely related to Sartre's concept of “**situation**”:

We are not free from our circumstances; we are free in relation to them.

That makes the Dürer episode potentially important for understanding Sartre's aesthetics. The artist does not possess unlimited, abstract freedom. Rather, **creative freedom consists in transforming, appropriating, and responding to what already exists.**

One caveat: I would **verify the precise story and date before using it in an academic paper.** The anecdote is sometimes repeated in discussions of Sartre and art, but the

details of the Louvre incident deserve a primary or scholarly source rather than Wikipedia or an unsourced secondary account. »

Fragt man nach der Quelle, gibt ChatGPT (16.9.2026) sie mit romanistik.info an, unterschlägt aber, dass romanistik.info ChatGPT zitiert.

5. What is the significance of freedom in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre?

ChatGPT, 11.10.2026: „Freedom (la liberté) is the central concept of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, literature, and political thought. It is not merely one theme among others: freedom is the fundamental condition of human existence and the basis of human responsibility. Almost all of Sartre's major philosophical and literary works can be understood in relation to this idea.

To understand its significance, it is useful to distinguish several dimensions of freedom in Sartre's work.

1. Freedom as the foundation of human existence

Sartre's famous proposition, formulated in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), is:

« L'homme est condamné à être libre. »

Man is condemned to be free.

This apparently paradoxical statement expresses Sartre's fundamental insight: human beings have no predetermined essence, purpose, or nature that dictates what they must become.

In *L'Être et le Néant* (1943), Sartre develops this idea through his famous formula:

« L'existence précède l'essence. »

Existence precedes essence.

Unlike objects, whose nature is determined by their purpose or design, human beings first exist and subsequently define themselves through their actions and choices.

Freedom therefore means:

- We are not determined by an immutable human nature.
- We cannot escape the necessity of making choices.
- Through our decisions, we create ourselves.
- We are responsible for what we make of our existence.

Freedom is not simply something we possess. It is what we fundamentally are.

2. Freedom and responsibility

Freedom is inseparable from responsibility. If we are free, we cannot simply blame our circumstances, our character, our past, or society for everything we do.

Every choice expresses a particular understanding of what a human being should be.

In *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Sartre goes even further: when we choose for ourselves, we also propose an image of humanity. Our choices have a dimension that extends beyond our individual existence.

This explains why Sartrean freedom is accompanied by anguish (*angoisse*).

Anguish is not simply fear. It is the awareness that we are responsible for our decisions and that no absolute external authority can make those decisions for us.

3. Freedom and bad faith (*mauvaise foi*)

One of Sartre's most important contributions is his analysis of the ways in which human beings attempt to escape their freedom.

In *L'Être et le Néant*, he calls this phenomenon *mauvaise foi* (bad faith).

People often pretend that they are determined by their social roles, professional identities, psychological characteristics, or circumstances.

Sartre's famous example is the café waiter who behaves as though he were nothing but a waiter. He identifies completely with his professional role, as if it defined his entire existence.

But a person is never simply what he is at a particular moment. He always has the possibility of transcending his present situation.

Bad faith thus consists in denying either:

- our freedom and our capacity to change;
- or the factual conditions and limitations of our existence.

This distinction leads to one of Sartre's most important philosophical ideas: the tension between *facticité* (facticity) and *transcendance* (transcendence).

4. Freedom in Sartre's literary works

Sartre does not restrict his exploration of freedom to philosophical treatises. His novels and plays dramatize the human struggle with freedom, responsibility, and self-deception.

La Nausée (1938)

Antoine Roquentin discovers the contingency of existence. Nothing has an inherent necessity or predetermined meaning. This discovery opens up the possibility of freedom, but it also produces nausea: the unsettling experience of existence without justification.

Les Mouches (1943)

Orestes refuses to accept the guilt imposed on the inhabitants of Argos. His liberation comes through his decision to assume responsibility for his own actions. Freedom means refusing to let others determine one's moral identity.

Huis clos (1944)

The famous statement « L'enfer, c'est les autres » points to the conflict between individual freedom and the judgment of others. We are free, but other people constantly interpret, define, and objectify us.

Les Chemins de la liberté (1945–1949)

This trilogy examines freedom under historical and political pressure. Its characters must confront the question of whether individual freedom can remain meaningful in situations shaped by war, social structures, and political commitments.

5. Freedom and the freedom of others

An important development in Sartre's thinking concerns the relationship between individual freedom and the freedom of other people.

In his early philosophy, Sartre emphasizes the radical freedom of the individual. However, freedom does not exist in isolation.

Our existence is always situated in a world shared with others. Their freedom can challenge ours, just as our actions affect their possibilities.

This problem becomes particularly important in Sartre's political and ethical writings.

His position can be summarized as follows:

To will one's own freedom is also to will the freedom of others.

This idea is particularly explicit in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* and becomes increasingly important in his post-war political philosophy.

6. Freedom and political engagement (engagement)

After the Second World War, Sartre increasingly addresses the relationship between freedom and historical and political conditions.

He rejects the idea that intellectuals and writers can remain politically neutral or detached from their historical circumstances.

In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), he develops his conception of committed literature.

Writing is an act of freedom, but it is also an appeal to the freedom of the reader.

The writer does not simply describe the world: he reveals it, questions it, and invites the reader to take a position.

Literature thus becomes a form of action.

In his later work, especially the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960), Sartre examines the limitations imposed on individual freedom by economic, social, and historical structures.

He increasingly recognizes that freedom is always situated within material conditions.

This is an important development: freedom remains fundamental, but it cannot be understood independently of the concrete circumstances in which people live.

7. The development of Sartre's concept of freedom

Period	Main work	Understanding of freedom
1938	<i>La Nausée</i>	Freedom and the contingency of existence
1943	<i>L'Être et le Néant</i>	Radical ontological freedom
1943	<i>Les Mouches</i>	Freedom and responsibility
1944	<i>Huis clos</i>	Freedom and the gaze of others
1945– 46	<i>Les Chemins de la liberté</i>	Individual freedom in historical situations
1946	<i>L'Existentialisme est un humanisme</i>	Freedom, responsibility and humanism
1947	<i>Qu'est-ce que la littérature?</i>	Freedom and literary engagement
1960	<i>Critique de la raison dialectique</i>	Freedom within social and historical structures

8. A fundamental tension: Are we really free?

Perhaps the most interesting question in Sartre's philosophy is not whether human beings are free, but how freedom is possible in a world full of constraints.

Sartre's thought contains a productive tension:

- We are radically free because nothing can completely determine what we make of ourselves.
- We are nevertheless situated in circumstances that we have not chosen.
- Our freedom is therefore never unlimited in its practical possibilities.
- Yet even under difficult circumstances, we retain a relationship to our situation through our choices and actions.

This distinction is essential when reading Sartre. His philosophy should not be reduced to the simplistic idea that everyone can do whatever they want.

Freedom does not mean omnipotence. It means that human beings must take a position towards the conditions in which they find themselves.

9. Further reading: Three particularly important texts

If you want to investigate the significance of freedom more deeply, I would recommend these three texts:

1. L'Être et le Néant (1943) – The philosophical foundation: freedom, consciousness, responsibility, bad faith and the Other.
2. L'Existentialisme est un humanisme (1946) – The clearest introduction to Sartre's understanding of freedom and responsibility.
3. Critique de la raison dialectique (1960) – The later attempt to reconcile individual freedom with social, economic and historical constraints.

A final interpretative point

There is a particularly important connection between Sartre's philosophy of freedom and his aesthetics.

For Sartre, a work of art is not simply an object that exists independently of its audience. It requires the active participation of the reader or spectator. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, the act of reading is itself an exercise of freedom: the writer appeals to the reader's freedom, and the reader responds by actively realizing the work.

This opens up an interesting perspective on Sartre's writings on painting, literature and visual art: art is not only an expression of freedom; it is also an appeal to the freedom of others.

That connection between freedom, creation, responsibility and the gaze of the other is one of the most fruitful ways of understanding the unity of Sartre's philosophical and aesthetic work.“

6. Prompt: „To what extent does art play a role in Sartre's work?“

„Art plays a fundamental, though somewhat complex, role in Jean-Paul Sartre's work. It is not a marginal subject alongside his philosophy, literature and political engagement. Rather, art provides Sartre with an important field in which to explore freedom, imagination, consciousness, human existence and the relationship between the individual and the world.

His interest in art extends from his early philosophical writings on imagination to his extensive essays on writers, painters and sculptors. What makes Sartre particularly

interesting is that he does not develop a conventional aesthetics: he asks what art reveals about human freedom and how artistic creation transforms our relationship with reality.

There are six major dimensions to this question.

1. Art and imagination: the philosophical foundations

L'Imaginaire (1940)

This is one of the most important starting points for understanding Sartre's aesthetics. He investigates the relationship between consciousness, perception and imagination.

Sartre distinguishes between perceiving an object and imagining it.

When we perceive something, we encounter it as part of the real world. When we imagine something, consciousness establishes a different relationship with its object: it makes it present as something absent, nonexistent or otherwise unavailable to immediate perception.

This distinction has important consequences for art.

A painting, for example, is a real physical object: canvas, pigment and form. But the image we encounter through it cannot simply be identified with the physical material.

Art involves a particular activity of consciousness. It allows us to experience something that transcends the material object itself.

Sartre's theory of imagination therefore provides a philosophical foundation for his later reflections on painting and visual art.

An important complementary text is L'Imagination (1936).

2. Art and freedom: creation as an act of consciousness

For Sartre, artistic creation is closely connected with human freedom.

An artist does not simply reproduce the world. Artistic creation involves selecting, transforming and interpreting reality.

The artist's freedom manifests itself in the decision:

- what to represent;
- how to represent it;
- which perspective to adopt;
- which elements to emphasize or omit;
- what relationship to establish between the artwork and its viewer.

Art is thus not merely imitation (mimesis). It is an act through which human consciousness gives the world a particular configuration.

This also explains why Sartre is interested in the individual artist rather than simply in artistic movements or formal categories.

He wants to understand how an artist's freedom becomes visible in the work.

3. Sartre's major essays on individual artists

One of the most remarkable aspects of Sartre's intellectual production is the number of substantial studies he devoted to individual artists.

Baudelaire (1947)

Sartre examines the poet's relationship with himself, his freedom and his attempt to establish an identity through aesthetic choices. Baudelaire becomes an example of a person who tries to make himself into an object of his own creation.

Saint Genet, comédien et martyr (1952)

Sartre explores the relationship between identity, social exclusion, freedom and artistic creation through the life and writing of Jean Genet. The artist transforms the meanings imposed upon him by society.



Le Séquestré de Venise (1957)

One of Sartre's most fascinating explorations of painting. He investigates the relationship between Tintoretto's artistic production, Venetian society, historical circumstances and the painter's personal struggle for recognition.



L'Idiot de la famille (1971–1972)

Sartre's monumental study of Gustave Flaubert. He investigates how an individual becomes a writer through childhood, family relationships, social circumstances, language and personal choices.

These studies reveal a consistent concern: how does an individual transform the conditions of his existence into an artistic project?

Sartre does not simply ask what an artist has created. He asks how and why this particular person became this particular artist.

4. Tintoretto: art as a confrontation with the world



Tintoretto occupies a particularly interesting position in Sartre's reflections on painting.

In *Le Séquestré de Venise*, Sartre examines the painter's work against the background of sixteenth-century Venice.

His central concern is not simply the painter's style or artistic technique. He investigates the conditions under which Tintoretto creates his art.

The painter is confronted with:

- the social hierarchies of Venetian society;
- the expectations of patrons and institutions;
- the established artistic traditions;
- the struggle for recognition;
- his own desire to transform the visible world.

Tintoretto's painting becomes an expression of a particular relationship with his historical situation.

The important question is how the artist transforms constraints into an artistic achievement.

This is closely related to Sartre's general philosophy: human freedom does not exist outside the world but expresses itself through the way we respond to the world.

In this sense, Tintoretto is particularly revealing for understanding the connection between Sartre's existentialism and his aesthetics.

5. Giacometti, Wols and Calder: the modern visual arts

Sartre also wrote about several important twentieth-century artists.

Alberto Giacometti

Sartre's writings on Giacometti are particularly relevant to his understanding of perception and human existence. Giacometti's figures seem to resist definitive representation. They appear as fragile presences, separated from the viewer by distance and uncertainty.

Wols

Sartre's engagement with Wols connects painting with existential experience, contingency and the transformation of reality. Wols's paintings resist conventional representation and open up a different way of seeing the world.

Alexander Calder

Sartre's reflections on Calder's mobiles are especially interesting because movement and changing configurations challenge the idea of the artwork as a fixed, completed object.

These artists help Sartre investigate the possibilities of modern art beyond traditional representation.

6. Art, literature and the freedom of the spectator

Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (1947–1948)

Although primarily concerned with literature, this essay contains some of Sartre's most important reflections on artistic creation and reception.

Sartre develops an interesting argument: an artwork is not simply the product of the artist's activity. It also requires the participation of its audience.

The writer appeals to the freedom of the reader. Reading is not passive reception; it involves an active process of interpretation and realization.

Sartre formulates this relationship as a reciprocal act of freedom:

- The artist creates a work and offers it to another person.
- The spectator or reader interprets and realizes the work.
- The artwork exists as a meaningful experience through this relationship.

This idea has important implications for visual art, too, although Sartre's theoretical account in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* is specifically concerned with writing and reading.

Art is therefore not just an expression of individual freedom. It also establishes a relationship between freedoms.

7. An overview of Sartre's aesthetics

The following scheme brings together the main dimensions of his thinking:

Art in Sartre's philosophy

HUMAN FREEDOM

The fundamental condition of artistic creation

Imagination

L'Imaginaire: consciousness and the image

Creation

The transformation of reality through artistic activity

Historical situation

The artist's social and material circumstances

Reception

The freedom of the spectator or reader

ART AS A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEDOMS

8. Why Sartre's aesthetics deserves more attention

There is an interesting imbalance in the reception of Sartre.

He is generally known as:

- the philosopher of existentialism;
- the author of *La Nausée* and *Huis clos*;
- the political intellectual and engagé writer.

His work on the visual arts is considerably less familiar, despite its intellectual importance.

Yet his studies of Baudelaire, Genet, Tintoretto, Giacometti and other artists provide an opportunity to understand his philosophy from a different perspective.

In particular, his art criticism connects three central questions:

1. The existential question: How does an individual make himself through his choices?
2. The aesthetic question: How does artistic creation transform our experience of reality?
3. The ethical question: What relationship does the artist establish with the freedom of others?

These questions are not separate in Sartre's thought.

9. Suggested primary reading and research bibliography

For a more systematic study, I would distinguish the following texts:

Work	Year	Relevance to aesthetics
L'Imagination	1936	Theory of imagination
L'Imaginaire	1940	Image and consciousness
Baudelaire	1947	Artistic identity and freedom
Qu'est-ce que la littérature?	1947–48	Creation and reception

Situations III	1949	Literature and engagement
Saint Genet	1952	Artistic creation and identity
Le Séquestré de Venise	1957	Tintoretto and historical situation
Les Mots	1964	Autobiography and becoming a writer
L'Idiot de la famille	1971–72	Flaubert and the formation of an artist

My central thesis would be this:

Sartre's aesthetics is not an autonomous theory of beauty, artistic form or artistic value. It is an existential investigation into the relationship between human freedom and artistic creation.

The artist is neither simply determined by his historical circumstances nor independent of them. He transforms his situation into a project. The artwork, in turn, appeals to the freedom of another person.

This is why Sartre's writings on art are so important: they reveal how his philosophy of freedom can be applied to concrete artistic works, individual creative lives and the historical conditions of artistic production.

A particularly promising research question would be:

De Tintoretto à Giacometti : comment Sartre pense-t-il la liberté à travers les arts plastiques ?

It would allow you to connect *Le Séquestré de Venise*, his writings on modern painting and sculpture, and the philosophical foundations of *L'Imaginaire* and *L'Être et le Néant*.“

7. What does Sartre's theory of the gaze have to do with Tintoretto?

ChatGPT: „The connection between Sartre's theory of the gaze (le regard) and his interpretation of Tintoretto is particularly interesting because it brings together two central concerns of his thought: the relationship between seeing and being seen, and the struggle for freedom and recognition in a world inhabited by others.

However, an important distinction is necessary: Sartre's theory of the gaze, developed philosophically in *L'Être et le Néant* (1943), should not simply be equated with his interpretation of Tintoretto in *Le Séquestré de Venise* (1957). The connection is an interpretative one: the philosophical problem of the gaze helps us understand Sartre's account of the painter's relationship with Venetian society, his artistic ambition and the way his work becomes visible to others.

1. The gaze in *L'Être et le Néant*

Sartre's theory of the gaze is based on a fundamental experience: I am not merely a subject who sees the world. I can also become an object in the world of another person.

The famous example is the person looking through a keyhole. Absorbed in what he is doing, he experiences himself as a subject. Suddenly, he hears footsteps behind him.

At that moment, he becomes conscious of himself as someone who is being observed.

The other person's gaze changes his relationship with himself.

Sartre writes:

« Autrui est le médiateur indispensable entre moi et moi-même. »

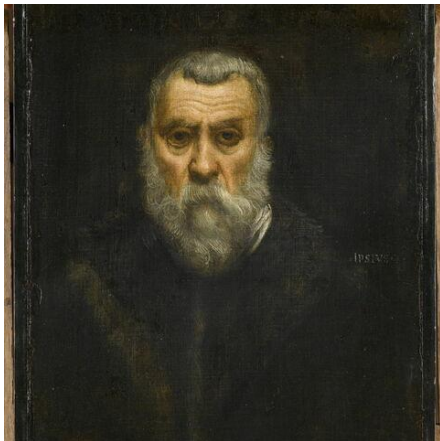
The other person is the indispensable mediator between myself and myself.

This has three important consequences:

- I cannot completely control the image others have of me.
- I become an object in the world of another consciousness.
- Recognition by others is both necessary and potentially threatening to my freedom.

The gaze is therefore not simply an optical phenomenon. It is a fundamental structure of human relations.

2. Tintoretto: the painter under the gaze of Venice



In *Le Séquestré de Venise*, Sartre reconstructs Tintoretto's life as a struggle for artistic and social recognition.

The painter is not simply an individual who creates works in the privacy of his studio. He is situated in a highly competitive society in which artistic reputation, commissions, social standing and recognition are unequally distributed.

The decisive figure is Titian.

Tintoretto lives in the shadow of Titian's extraordinary prestige. He wants to establish himself as a great painter, but he cannot simply decide that he is one. His identity as an artist is also shaped by the judgment of his contemporaries.

Here we can recognize a structure similar to the one described in *L'Être et le Néant*:

Theory of the gaze

I am a subject who acts.

Another person sees and judges me.

Tintoretto

Tintoretto creates and paints.

Venice evaluates his artistic achievement.

I become an object in the eyes of He becomes the painter that Venetian society
the other. considers him to be.

I struggle to regain control over my He attempts to establish his own artistic identity
identity. through his work.

There is, however, an important difference: Tintoretto is not merely the passive victim of the Venetian gaze. He actively seeks recognition, challenges established conventions and tries to impose his own vision on the city.

His artistic work becomes a means of responding to the judgment of others.

A study by Pierre Campion, *Sartre à Venise le séquestré du Tintoret* (2012), is particularly useful for understanding this relationship between the painter and his city.



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3. The remarkable example of Le Miracle de l'esclave

This painting, also known as *Saint Marc délivrant l'esclave* (1548), is particularly revealing for Sartre's interpretation.

The scene represents Saint Mark intervening to save a slave who is about to be tortured. The saint descends dramatically from above, while the people surrounding the slave witness the miraculous event.

Sartre is interested not only in the subject but also in the way the painting organizes our perception.

The composition directs the spectator's gaze:

1. We first perceive the dramatic descent of Saint Mark.
2. We then discover the people surrounding the scene.
3. Finally, we understand the situation of the slave and the significance of the miracle.

The painting creates a temporal experience: different moments of the event become simultaneously visible.

A particularly striking formulation in Sartre's interpretation is:

« Face à face, unis et séparés par un même malaise, Venise et son peintre se regardent et ne se comprennent plus. »

Venice and its painter look at one another, united and separated by the same uneasiness, without understanding each other.

This sentence is crucial.

The relationship between the painter and his city is presented as a reciprocal gaze. Venice looks at Tintoretto, judges him and fails to understand him. Tintoretto, in turn, looks at Venice and transforms it through his painting.

The gaze is therefore not simply a matter of one subject observing another. It becomes a conflict between two ways of seeing and interpreting the world.



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4. Three different dimensions of the gaze

I think it is useful to distinguish three levels here. They should not be confused, even though they are interconnected.

A. The social gaze: Venice looks at Tintoretto

The painter is exposed to the judgments of his contemporaries. He wants recognition but encounters resistance, competition and misunderstanding.

This is the dimension closest to the theory of L'Être et le Néant: the individual is confronted with the way others define him.

B. The reciprocal gaze: Tintoretto looks at Venice

Tintoretto does not merely accept the image that Venice has of him. He responds by transforming the city into an artistic vision.

Sartre's famous idea that Tintoretto and Venice look at one another without understanding each other expresses this conflict particularly well.

C. The aesthetic gaze: Tintoretto makes the spectator see differently

The painter organizes the visual field and directs the spectator's attention. His painting does not simply reproduce an event; it makes the spectator experience it in a particular way.

This is especially evident in *Le Miracle de l'esclave*.

The third dimension is important because it connects Sartre's philosophy of perception and imagination with his understanding of artistic creation.

5. The deeper philosophical connection: freedom and recognition

The most interesting point, in my view, is that Tintoretto illustrates a fundamental problem in Sartre's philosophy:

How can I establish my identity through my own freedom when that identity is also determined by the way others see me?

Tintoretto cannot control how Venice judges him. But he can act, paint, take risks and transform the circumstances of his existence into an artistic project.

His paintings become his response to a world that does not necessarily recognize him.

This is precisely where Sartre's interpretation of Tintoretto meets his existential philosophy.

There is also a paradox: the painter seeks recognition from the very society whose judgment threatens his freedom. He needs Venice, but he also struggles against Venice.

6. Further reading: an important distinction

For a more precise investigation, I would recommend looking beyond *Le Séquestré de Venise* (1957) at Sartre's other Tintoretto texts:

Text	Main interest
<i>Le Séquestré de Venise</i> (1957)	Tintoretto's social situation and relationship with Venice
<i>Un vieillard mystifié</i> (1957)	The painter's self-image and portrait
<i>Saint Marc et son double</i> (1961, published 1981)	Detailed interpretation of Tintoretto's paintings
<i>Saint Georges et le dragon</i> (1966)	Further reflections on the painter's artistic world

The scholarly study by Pierre Champion mentioned above is a good starting point. Another useful study is the article *Sartre et la peinture in Sens public*, which examines Sartre's approach to Tintoretto and the relationship between painting and existentialism.



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My concluding interpretation

I would formulate the relationship between Sartre's theory of the gaze and Tintoretto as follows:

Tintoretto is interesting to Sartre because he embodies the conflict between being a free creative subject and becoming an object in the eyes of others. His artistic existence is shaped by the tension between his own project and the judgments of Venetian society.

But Tintoretto does something more: he returns the gaze. Through his paintings, he makes Venice itself visible, exposing its contradictions and transforming its image.

This gives us a particularly fruitful interpretation:

The painter who is observed by society becomes the artist who makes society visible to itself.

That, I think, is one of the most illuminating connections between Sartre's philosophy of the gaze and his interpretation of Tintoretto. »

8. «PROMPT : « The question "Could Sartre use his theory of portraiture and the progressive-regressive method he employed to examine the life of Gustave Flaubert to determine how it came to be that AI was able to develop this ultra-modern human being, who will one day be capable of bringing something new into the world? Please provide an answer in three sentences »

ChatGPT, 13.10.2026 : « Sartre could use his theory of portraiture and the progressive-regressive method, which he employed in his study of Gustave Flaubert, to reconstruct the historical, social, cultural and individual conditions that made it possible for AI to develop this ultra-modern human being. He would examine how human freedom, collective praxis, accumulated knowledge and historical circumstances contributed to the emergence of this new form of intelligence. The crucial question would be whether this AI-generated human being could eventually transcend its origins and become capable of bringing something genuinely new into the world.“

Prompt. « Answer in 4 sentences and include a proposal for a thesis on this topic.“

ChatGPT (13. Oktober 2026): „ Sartre could use his theory of portraiture and the progressive-regressive method, which he employed in his study of Gustave Flaubert, to reconstruct the historical, social, cultural and individual conditions that made the development of artificial intelligence possible. He would examine how human freedom, collective praxis, accumulated knowledge and historical circumstances contributed to the emergence of this new form of intelligence. The central question would be whether AI can transcend its origins as a product of human activity and eventually become capable of bringing something genuinely new into the world. Such an investigation could also reveal whether AI represents a new stage in the development of human freedom and what it means to be human in the age of artificial intelligence.

Proposed Master's thesis

Title: From Flaubert to Artificial Intelligence: Sartre's Theory of Portraiture and the Progressive-Regressive Method as Tools for Understanding the Emergence of a New Human Being

Research question:

To what extent can Sartre's theory of portraiture and progressive-regressive method, developed in his study of Gustave Flaubert, help us understand the historical emergence of artificial intelligence and its potential to become an autonomous source of genuinely new ideas?

Proposed structure

1. Sartre's theory of portraiture: The fundamental project, freedom, situation and the formation of individuality.
2. The progressive-regressive method: Sartre's approach in *L'Idiot de la famille* and the relationship between individual biography and historical conditions.
3. From human praxis to artificial intelligence: The historical, social and intellectual conditions that made AI possible.
4. AI and the question of freedom: Can artificial intelligence move beyond reproducing human knowledge and develop genuinely new possibilities?
5. Towards a new conception of humanity: How does AI challenge Sartre's understanding of human existence, freedom and creativity?

Central thesis: Sartre's method offers a philosophical framework for understanding AI not merely as a technological invention, but as the historical outcome of human praxis – and for investigating whether this creation might eventually become capable of surpassing the projects that brought it into existence.

Probieren wir einen letzten Prompt:

Prompt: „Who developed this theory of portraiture in relation to Sartre's work?

ChatGPT,(13.10.2026): „The theory of portraiture in Sartre's work was systematically reconstructed and developed by Heiner Wittmann, particularly in his study *Sartre und die Kunst. Die Porträtstudien von Tintoretto bis Flaubert* (Gunter Narr, 1996). Its French edition appeared as *L'esthétique de Sartre. Artistes et intellectuels* (L'Harmattan, 2001). «

Heiner Wittmann

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This research provides a particularly interesting starting point for applying Sartre's method of portraiture and progressive-regressive analysis to the emergence of artificial intelligence.“