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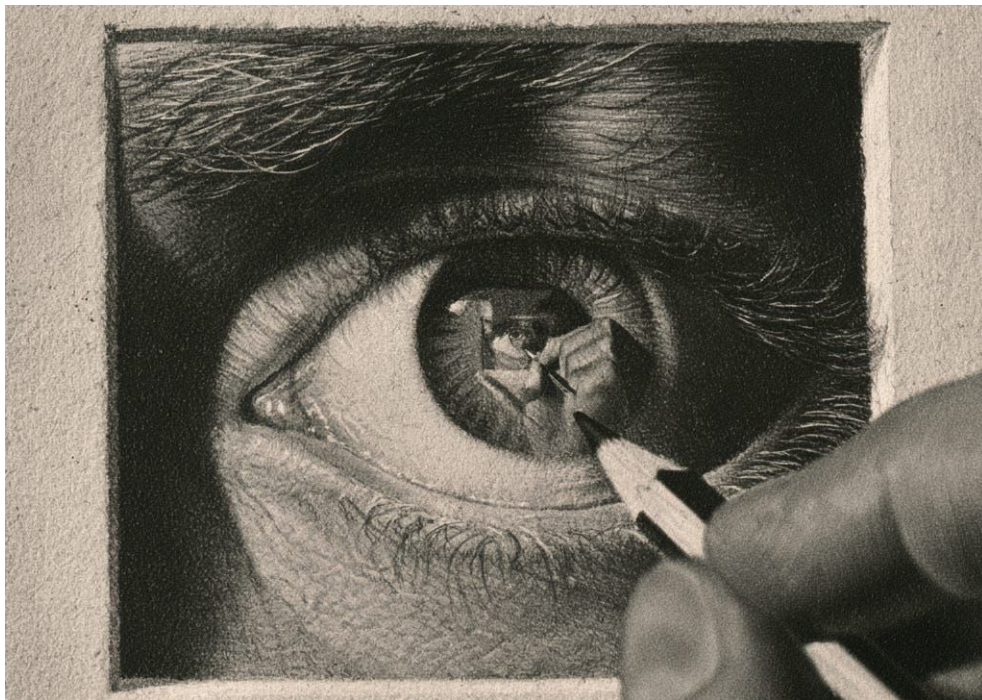
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Eye, Hand, AI: a letter to my daughter

BY JULIE ZHUO · THE LOOKING GLASS · 5 AUGUST 2026

I write a letter series for my daughter, who is now 11. This is one I gave her a few months ago.



Dear L,

When I was in college I read a wonderful book called “The History of Love” and it made me want to become a novelist. (As yet an unfulfilled dream, for reasons you will shortly see!)

In the book, there is a beautiful quote from Wittgenstein that I’ve never forgotten: “When the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.” The idea of the Eye and the Hand has been with me ever since.

A few years later, after I got my first jobs in engineering and then design, I came across another gem of a quote, this time by Ira Glass:

“Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it’s just not that good. It’s trying to be good, it has potential, but it’s not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you.”

What I love about these two quotes is that they draw a clear distinction between the Eye and the Hand, and for makers, this distinction is crucially important.

Your eye can be thought of as determining your “taste” (which is sort of a confusing analogy, because shouldn’t taste have to do with your mouth? But stay with me here). What “taste” means, in the creative realm, is the ability to distinguish the *truly excellent* from the *merely good*.

For example, you may say of a friend “they have great taste in music” if every time they select a track, you find yourself bopping along and yelling, “What band is this?!” You may say of an architect, “I love their taste,” if every time you walk into one of their works it takes your breath away (remember that time we explored Gaudí in Spain?). You may pause in wonder at a piece of fashion or food or even software if something about it strikes you as having a special quality that sets it above all the many other examples you have seen.

With things that feel “tasteful,” you get the sense that the creator poured a lot of care into the creation, that they possessed both a keen eye and a deep obsession for quality.

We must remember that taste is not simply *uniqueness*, it is uniqueness with *mastery*. A master is someone who has studied their craft for years, and whose natural curiosity has led them to deep explorations of what precisely makes this thing *great*.

For example, I might think I’m making a *unique* piece of art by tossing spaghetti and pastel paint splatter and confetti onto a corkboard. But I doubt anyone would call my work *tasteful*. Why? Well for one thing I haven’t really studied art in depth; I haven’t dug deeply into the abstract expressionism and pop art movements, haven’t pulled on the threads of Pollock or Warhol or Rauschenberg. I haven’t even tried making more than one of these creations! If I had, I’d see that my initial idea isn’t really all that unique, nor my outcomes that remarkable.

So in some ways, the more you learn about a craft, the more humbled you become about how difficult it really is to make something stand out. And yet, exploring the breadth of what has come before is what often trains the eye to see *excellence* and to understand why it is excellent.

A strong eye doesn’t just mean you can spot excellence, it also means you can understand the *shape* of excellence. A master musician doesn’t just respond “it sounds better” when you ask them “why do you like this song?” They’ll dissect for you what makes it so special. They’ll introduce you to a whole range of similar songs because they’ve gone deep in understanding musical lineage and the inspirations behind their favorites. They genuinely love this stuff, that’s why they’ve gone so deep.

Now let's move onto the Hand. While the eye can appreciate, the hand is what *makes*. And most people's hands cannot make things as well as their eyes can see them.

When I was learning to draw as a kid, I spent many years feeling frustrated that my work wasn't as beautiful as the pieces that inspired me. I'd try to copy some of my favorites only to be disappointed at my attempts—my lines were shaky, my body proportions out of whack, my poses static and boring.

This was the same frustration I felt starting out as a writer. I loved myself a poetic turn of phrase, but my own sentences felt clunky and repetitive. I was prone to clichés and spindly sentences. (Hence why I have not yet penned a Great American novel!)

Thank goodness Ira Glass anticipated all this and dispensed some sound advice:

"A lot of people never get past [the frustration], they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know it's normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions."

I took his words to heart, and I saw the results firsthand. After enough years of practice, my hand started to catch up to my eye. I started drawing things I was proud of, which I displayed on the Internet in high school. I started writing essays that didn't make me cringe upon re-reading. (note: my college application did not pass this bar.)

Now we get to an interesting conundrum: while the Eye can see things that the Hand can't yet make, the Hand can *never* consistently create better than the Eye can see.

To develop our ability to make increasingly more excellent things, we have to train both our Hand and our Eye!

This gets to some fascinating questions today about AI. What happens when technology gets so good that you don't *have* to write your own essay or draw your own art to make something amazing?

Given everything we have discussed so far, it should be clear that having a good eye is still important. Otherwise, if you can't tell if AI is creating mediocrity or brilliance, you'll probably continue churning out mediocrity (albeit at a faster rate than before), and in the process cede your creative expression to the AI.

When it comes to the Hand, however, this is where AI has the advantage. Already AI creates far better drawings than most of us (me included, despite my years of practice.) It also writes better than most people (although for now, I like to think my hard-earned skills put me a notch above. But maybe that's just my ego talking... What say you, L?) Certainly AI does most things better than a beginner. Does this mean AI can replace our Hand?

I think yes and no. The 'yes' comes from short-term practicality. If AI draws better than me, and my goal is to produce a watchable cartoon

series as quickly and as cheaply as possible, I'd be silly not to use AI. Hand-animating all that is simply going to get me a worse (and more expensive) result.

I'm a big believer that our souls need proof of work to sing. There are, in my experience, no shortcuts to excellence. One must love the hard work's journey, not merely its fruits. So L, one question I keep thinking about is: what happens to the girl who never sews the crooked seam, because AI gives her a finished outfit immediately? What happens if she never learns to overcome the struggle? I fear that girl may never quite grow her Eye. When given two AI-created outfits, one singular, and one quite mediocre, I fear she won't be able to tell which is which. That is the danger these tools pose, my love. Not that the machine is a bad Hand, but that in being so polished it decreases our capacity to obsess over the details, and in doing so to learn and grow.

My hope for you is that in the era of AI, the shape of your work may look different but will be no less hard. I imagine that instead of perfecting the drawing of a character by hand, perhaps you will use AI to explore many different characters and animation styles. Still, you will find it necessary to put in your reps playing with the characters, testing them in a scene, experimenting and failing and succeeding until you understand what makes them truly come alive and touch our hearts.

As you grow up in an AI world, L, I hope you will remember these fundamentals. Your Eye needs training. So does your Hand. Even as it can wield ever more powerful tools, no new technology will ever replace our human journey of being curious, exploring new edges, and caring enough to push onward towards new frontiers of excellence.

You are such a force of creativity, L. I can't wait to see how your Eye and your Hand grow to make magic in the decades ahead!

With tasty love,

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