Science meets art: While 'painting' this view of Madrid rooftops, the Tryptych computer program is able to add shade and experiment with different materials

Art by Robotticelli

BY JO STEELE

A COMPUTER with imagination – is it the stuff of nightmarish sci-fi or the future of art?

A computer scientist who specialises in artificial intelligence has devised a program which could put ordinary PCs in Picasso's league. Dr Simon Colton believes computers have the ability to be creative and could produce their own masterpieces.

He said: 'One of the tests of creativity is using imagination. I want to get the computer to do this to a create a new image.'

He has designed software which enables computers to paint from a digital image without human assistance.

It can even change the original pictures, adding shading and changing the materials used, for example from oils to pastels or chalk, to see if the picture looks better.

Although the Tryptych software can currently be used only to re-interpret existing masterpieces,

Computer pair: Richard and Judy

such as Johannes Vermeer's Girl With A Pearl Earring, or to turn photos into 'paintings', as in the Richard and Judy image below, Dr Colton says getting the program to create its own pictures is 'maybe months' away.

The computer can already invent scenes using a chosen picture, but the next step is whether it will be able to come up with its own image. Dr Colton said: 'There are a number of programs we call creative.'
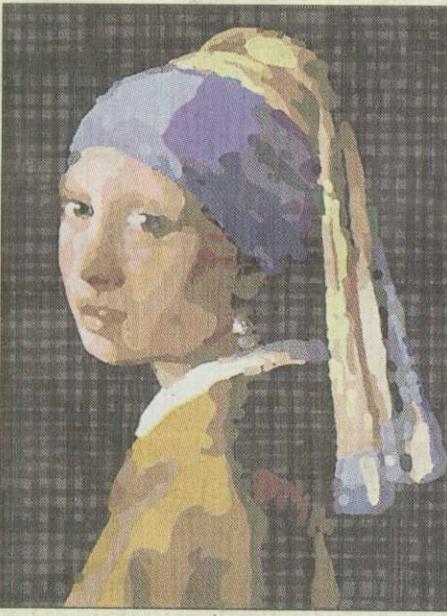
But artists need not worry about being pushed aside. 'They won't be put out of business,' Dr Colton added. 'Lucien Freud won't stop painting just because of this. There will always be a premium for human blood, sweat and tears in art.'

Dr Colton will demonstrate his invention at Imperial College, London, tonight.

Lookalikes: A copy of Vermeer's Girl With A Pearl Earring, left, and the original