The Artistic Personality: A Systems Perspective

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"Why do people think artists are special? It's just another job." - Andy Warhol

When considering the relationship between personality and a given occupation or vocation, we usually assume the relationship remains invariant over time. One might assume, for instance, that the temperament and traits that distinguished military leaders in the 5th century BCE would be the same traits as those belonging to warriors in the Middle Ages in our own times. Yet the changes throughout history in the social and economic status and roles that society assigns to different professionals, and in the technology of warfare, suggest that the personalities of men (or women) attracted to a military career will be quite different in each period.

This variability is very obvious in the case of artists. Until the end of the 15th century in Europe, when even the greatest artists were considered to be merely craftsmen and their works of art required the collaboration of several individuals, the typical artist did not display the eccentric, fiercely independent qualities of the “artistic personality” that we now take for granted. In the words of an eminent sociologist of art, “The artist’s studio in the early Renaissance is still dominated by the communal spirit of the mason’s lodge and the guild workshop; the work of art is not yet the expression of an independent personality” (Hauser, 1951, pp. 54-55).

By the middle of the 16th century, however, several artists had become celebrities – in part because they could work alone; in part because their status had been elevated by such stars as Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael. Thus, Vasari, who in 1550 published the biographies of the “most eminent artists” in Italy, complained that nature had given the artists of his time “a certain element of savagery and madness, which, besides making them strange and eccentric . . . revealed in them the obscure darkness of vice rather than the brightness and splendor of those virtues that make men immortal” (Vasari, 1550/1988, p. 22).

The popular idea of artistic temperament embodied in Vasari’s view went through several transformations in the past five centuries, but many of its basic traits have endured. One of the most prominent American painters of the past generation, Jackson Pollock, is a good illustration of that “savagery and madness” Vasari complained about. He spent most of his 44 years battling alcoholism, depression, and self-doubt (Solomon, 1987), and his...
marriage to artist Lee Krasner was a source of unrelenting torment. When Pollock painted he did it with a passion bordering on madness, hurling paint across the canvas in an all out blitzkrieg of emotion, determined to give life to his singular vision.

Psychological studies suggest that artists are emotional (Barron, 1972), sensitive, independent, impulsive, and socially aloof (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 1973; Walker, Koestner, & Hum, 1995), introverted (Storr, 1988), and nonconforming (Barton & Cattel 1972). But how pervasive are these traits among successful artists - the personalities that actually shape the domain of art? Is there really such a thing as a timeless, constitution artistic personality?

In this chapter we propose that the notion of the "artistic personality" is more myth than fact. Although it describes some of the traits that distinguishes aspiring artists at certain times under certain conditions, these traits are in no sense required to create valuable art at all times, in all places. We argue that artistic creativity is as much a social and cultural phenomenon as it is an intrapsychic one. And because the social and cultural constrain on the artistic process vary significantly across time and place, the nature of the artistic personality will vary accordingly. When the predominant style or styles of a period change - from Abstract Expressionism to Op Art, Conceptual Art, Photorealism, let us say - so do the personalities of the artists.

We begin with an overview of the theoretical framework that guides this chapter: the systems model of creativity.

**The Systems Model of Creativity**

Creativity has traditionally been viewed as a mental process, as the insight of an individual. The majority of past psychological research on creativity, accordingly, has concentrated on the thought processes, emotions, and motivations of individuals who produce novelty: the "creative personality." However, beginning with the observations of Morris Stein (Stein, 1953, 1963) and continuing with the extensive data presented by Dean Simonton (1988, 1990) showing the influence of economic, political, and social events on the rates of creative production, it has become increasingly clear that variables external to the individual must be considered if one wishes to explain why, when, and from where new ideas or products arise and become established in a culture (Gruber, 1988; Harrington, 1990).

The systems model proposes that creativity can be observed only in the interrelations of a system made up of three main elements. The first of these is the domain, which consist information - a set of rules, procedures, and instructions for action. To do anything creative one must operate within a domain. Art is a domain, and the various styles and movements within art can be considered subdomains.

The second component of a system is the field, which includes all the individuals who are gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide whether a new idea or product should be added to the domain. In the world of art, the field consists of the art critics, art historians, the art dealers and art collectors, and the artists themselves. Collectively, this group selects the art products that become recognized as legitimate art.
The final component of the system is the individual. In the systems model, creativity occurs when a person makes a change in the information contained in a domain, a change that will be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain.

As this overview of the systems model suggests, the nature of the creative individual - therefore the artistic personality - is dependent on the nature of the domain and field in which the individual operates. Therefore, to gain a meaningful assessment of the artistic personality, we must pay attention to these other two components of the system. We begin with the domain.

The Domain of Art

During the premodern era, the domain of art was relatively homogeneous in its vocabulary. It consisted almost entirely of figurative works recalling images of religious, philosophic, or historical significance that were widely shared by most members of society. With the arrival of modernism, however, an explosion of artistic styles and movements broadened the boundaries of art considerably. This "de-definition of art" (Rosenberg, 1972) has continued during the postmodern era, at warp speed, rendering all tidy definitions of art obsolete.

To illustrate the relationship between the content of artwork and the personality of the artist, we use a classification scheme based on two dimensions of stylistic content, representational versus abstract and linear versus painterly (see Figure 3.1). These two dimensions are among a set of five critical dimensions of stylistic content first proposed by the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1929), and later validated by empirical research (e.g., Cupchik, 1974; Loomis & Saltz, 1984) as important for differentiating artistic styles. The first dimension, representational versus abstract, refers to the degree to which a particular artwork imitates an external reference; the second dimension, linear versus painterly, represents the degree to which the content of an artwork is characterized by precisely controlled line and distinct figures (i.e., linear) as opposed to loosely handled paint and relatively undefined form (i.e., painterly). [2]

Figure 3.1. The domain of modern painting can be described by two continuous dimensions, representational-abstract and linear-painterly. Examples of artists and style for each of the quadrants are given.
The diversity of stylistic content represented by the two dimensions within the domain of painting are the outward manifestations of a corresponding diversity in artistic processes and artistic experience. First, let us consider the representational–abstract dimension. Artists painting in a predominantly representational manner have clear external references toward which they can direct their artistic activity—a person, an object, a scene, or any of all combinations. Artists are able to accurately monitor their progress by comparing their work with these external references. Indeed, the success of the work is highly dependent on the artist making such comparisons repeatedly and skillfully.

For those artists working in a nonrepresentational manner, the creative process differs considerably. There is little or no objective referent toward which artists can guide their activity, no clear challenges and goals to pursue. Whereas the artistic process for the representational artist is highly structured, driven by constraints imposed by the task of representation, abstract artists must actively impose structure on the artistic process, relying on feelings or concepts to guide the process. Susan Rothenberg, who works in a predominantly abstract style, commented on this formidable challenge: “I struggle with it the time, and a straightforward portrait would be a kind of anchor. I envy Lucian Freud and Chuck Close [two artists with highly representational styles], waking up every morning and knowing what they’re going to do” (Kimmelman, 1998, p. 178).

The linear–painterly dimension is also associated with significant variety in artistic processes and experience. For the artist who paints in a linear style, the artistic process must be exact and focused. Attentional resources are necessarily directed outward, away from the

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self, toward the technical demands of the task. Because of this, the process tends to be associated with secondary-process cognition (Fromm, 1978) - rational and reality-orient and devoid of strong emotion. In contrast, the artist who paints using the looser brushstrokes of painterly styles is not bound by the rigid stylistic constraints of the line style, and is therefore able to allow primary-process cognition - free-associative, irrational and often emotional - to drive the process. As a result, the creative process is often more improvisational in nature.

The significant relationship among style and experience is exemplified by comparing the following two accounts of the artistic process. The first account is by Clyfford Still, one of the original Abstract Expressionists, and the second is by Chuck Close, a Photo Realist famous for his mural-sized, eerily lifelike portraits.

A great free joy surges through me when I work . . . with tense slashes and a few thrusts the beautiful white fields receive their color and the work is finished in a few minutes. (Like Belmonte [the bullfighter] weaving the pattern of his being by twisting the powerful bulls around him, I seem to achieve a comparable ecstasy in bringing forth the flaming life through these large areas of canvas. And as the blues or reds or blacks leap and quiver in their tenuous ambience or rise in austere thrusts to carry their power infinitely beyond the bounds of the limiting field, I move with them and find a resurrection from the moribund oppressions that held me only hours ago.) Only they are complete too soon, and I must quickly move on to another to keep the spirit alive and unburdened by the labor my Puritan reflexes tell me must be the cost of my joy. (Lucie-Smith, 1999, p. 184)

Clearly, the artistic process for Clyfford Still was an expressive, intensely personal experience. Contrast this with the artistic process of Chuck Close, as described by his biographers, Lisa Lyons and Robert Storr (1987):

Propped on an easel to his left are the gridded photographs he refers to as he paints; a shelf on the right carries a telephone and two other important pieces of equipment: a television and a radio/cassette deck. The background noise they provide helps him to maintain that subtle degree of detachment he needs from the tedious activity of building an image, part by part, with machine-like precision. In the past, Close listened to (but did not watch) television almost constantly while working, becoming in the process a connoisseur of morning game shows and afternoon soap operas. Their slow-paced soundtracks are “of such a mundane nature that you don’t really get engaged,” he once said. “It’s like having a dumb friend in the room. It just chatters away and you don’t have to respond to it.”

**Personality Implications**

That significantly different artistic processes exist within the domain of art has significant implications for attempts to define the nature of the artistic personality. More specifically, suggests that the kinds of traits optimally suited to the creation of art will be dependent
the specific kind of art being created. For example, an artist who is extroverted, sociable and moved by external norms would not be well-suited to create introspective work, as it requires a special sensitivity to private inner events. Conversely, an introverted artist would have a hard time being noticed if the prevailing style of the domain consisted in polished representations of the objective world.

Although past research on the relationship between artistic style and personality has been relatively sparse, the results of these studies support the idea of a significant relationship between the personality of the artist and the type of art he or she produces. Dudek and Marchand (1983) found a strong correspondence between artists' painting styles and the degree to which they exhibited cognitive defenses and controls. Artists who had lower cognitive defenses and controls (assessed using the Rorschach test) tended to paint in a loosely controlled, painterly manner, whereas artists who were more rigid in their psychological defenses painted in a more formal, linear style. In a study that examined the relationship between personality and the representational–abstract dimension, Loomis and Saltz (1984) found that “rational cognitive styles” were associated with representational artistic styles, whereas “irrational cognitive styles” were associated with abstract styles. Furthermore, extroverts tended to have representational styles, whereas introverts tended to have more abstract styles.

Perhaps the most compelling empirical support for a significant relationship between the personality of an artist and his artistic style comes from a study by Ludwig (1998). He compared the lifetime rates of mental disorder among artists whose work was primarily formal (emphasizing structural, compositional, or decorative elements) with rates of mental disorder among artists whose work was primarily emotive (emphasizing self-expression). Results were dramatic: the incidence of lifetime mental disorder among the artists in the emotive category was more than three times the incidence of mental disorder among artists in the formal category - 75% versus 22%, respectively (p < .001).[3]

These results point to a significant relationship between the personality of the artist and the stylistic content of the art he or she produces. Next, we examine the field’s role in shaping the personality traits that are characteristic of recognized artists.

The Field of Art

“We are not the masters of what we produce. It is imposed upon us.” - Henri Matisse (Seuphor, 1961, p. 16)

Artists have traditionally been perceived as individuals working in relative isolation, free to follow their creative urges. “Like most geniuses,” wrote Ambrose Vollard, friend and biographer of Edward Degas, “[Degas] was essentially independent of events, persons, and places, refusing to be limited by time and disregarding as unimportant everything which did not include and enrich his work.”(Vollard, 1986, p. 5).

A consideration of the forces at work suggests a less romantic image. One does not become an artist simply by making art. To earn a living and develop a self-concept as a bona fide artist distinct from a dilettante, one must be legitimated by the appropriate art institutions. Only when the artist’s work has been recognized by the field of art - the critic
historians, dealers, collectors, curators, and fellow artists - can the artist continue to focus his or her energies on creating art.

So what does the art world look for? An artwork will only be accepted as significant if it provides a meaningful extension -(aesthetic, political, moral, etc.) to the catalogue of past artistic achievements, the so-called "grand narrative" of art. The greater the contribution the story, the more significant the work is judged to be. "The imperative to make abstract art comes from history," wrote the famous critic Clement Greenberg in 1940, when Abstract Expressionism was just beginning to take hold of the art world, "and the artist is held in vise from which at the present moment he can escape only by surrendering his ambition and returning to a stale past" (Greenberg, 1940, p. 310).

If an artist creates artwork that does not fulfill the needs of the field, that artist will be dismissed or ignored. Leon Golub, who like so many other artists spent a significant amount of his career living and working in New York, commented on the pressures often felt by artists and created by the field pursuing its rigid agenda:

The critics were angry about my art. New York seemed impenetrable. I was devastated by some of the reactions, so we [Golub and his wife, artist Nancy Spero] decided to leave because, frankly, we didn't have whatever it took to fight New York and the atmosphere of that time. There was, and still is, a force in New York, you see, that pushes art in certain directions - ideologically, rhetorically, and rather strongly. (Kimmelman, 1998, p. 178)

Because of the field's perpetual need for novelty, the field's aesthetic preference is guaranteed to change constantly. Within a given artistic style, this change is characterized by, among other things, an increase in complexity and unpredictability (Martindale, 1998). These changes maintain the field's interest in a given style, warding off habituation and boredom. When the style has exhausted its potential for interest, the field will be actively looking for works that hold promise for ushering in a new paradigm.

Consider the emergence of Pop Art in the late 1950s. The first Pop Art paintings appear at a time when interest and faith in Abstract Expressionism was on the wane. Warhol's mass-produced paintings were not only novel in concept, they also provided a meaningful contrast to the highly expressive paintings of Pollock, de Kooning, and other leading Abstract Expressionists. In other words, Abstract Expressionism created the opportunity for Pop Art to emerge. It is unlikely that Pop Art would have appeared at another point in the history of art.

The nature of the art field's selection process has two important implications for the current topic under consideration, the artistic personality. The first is that, at any given point in time, there will be a constellation of personality traits that are optimally suited to create a kind of art the field will recognize as significant. The nature of these traits will be strongly determined by the nature of the domain. For example, if an abstract, painterly style such as Abstract Expressionism is reigning in the art world, emotional, introverted artists will have the advantage; if a realistic, linear style such as Social Realism is in vogue, more extroverted, unemotional dispositions will be favored. It is important to note, however, ti
the stylistic qualities of movements often change significantly during a movement's life span, so that different personality traits will be adaptive depending on the development stage of the movement (Kubler, 1962). For example, original, nonconforming types will flourish more during the early stages of a movement, when the task is to lay new foundations, rather than the later stages, when the task is to elaborate and refine already existing symbols and themes.

The second implication of the field's selection process, already suggested by the first, is that the artistic personality is not a stable, timeless personality type. As the field's taste art changes, so too will the types of personalities creating the art that will be accepted as significant. Though it may have been adaptive at one point in history for artists to possess the traits associated with the archetypal "artistic personality" - introverted, nonconforming, socially aloof, and so forth - there is no reason to believe that these traits will continue to be adaptive, or even that they are adaptive in today's art world. Indeed, a longitudinal study conducted by Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) suggests many of these traits are a recipe for failure in the contemporary art world.

A Longitudinal Study of Artistic Development and Artistic Success

The study involved 281 students at the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago. During the first phase of the study, the artists completed several personality questionnaires and engaged in problem-finding and problem-solving tasks designed to assess various dimensions of creativity. Twenty years later, 64 of the original 281 students were contacted. The primary focus of this second phase of the study was to identify and understand the factors that were most predictive of artistic success.

The picture that emerged was unexpected. Out of the handful of artists that did achieve some artistic success, the traits that distinguished them from their unrecognized peers were more characteristic of Wall Street marketing executives than what we have come to associate with artists. Compared with their less successful peers, these artists were more sociable, practical, and career-driven (Csikszentmihalyi, Getzels, & Kahn, 1984). "Unless you are a social beast," said one of the artists, "it is naive to think you are going to make it. They also demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice personal expressivity in the service of artistic recognition. Instead of ignoring the business aspects of the art world, or pretending that they did not exist, the successful artists acknowledged, accommodated, and even embraced them. One artist put it this way: "Usually you can judge somebody's career orientation and ability in building a career by how good their career is. It has nothing to do with their art, it has everything to do with how they can build a career and who they know" (Freeman, 1994, p. 115).

Consider Jim, the most successful artist of the sample. Like the handful of other successful artists in the group, Jim had an acute understanding of how the business side of the art world worked. He tailored his art to accommodate it. "You need to have a monotheistic thing on the surface for business reasons," he pointed out. "This is not Versace. This is Robert Hall. It's on the racks, like small, medium, and large. These are made to order." He held no illusions about where his art fit into the system: "[Art] exists as a vehicle for criticism and writing" (Freeman, 1994, p. 193).
In art school, students whose traits resembled that of the archetypal artistic personality tended to be viewed by their teachers as very original and creative. But when students school, those who lacked the extroversion, aggressiveness, and a knack for promoting themselves that attracted the attention of critics, gallery owners, and media tended to disappear from the art scene, never to be heard of again. Simpson (1981) went so far as to suggest that the “artistic mystique” has been perpetuated more by unsuccessful artists than successful artists, as a defense against artistic failure.

So we see that many of the traits traditionally associated with the artistic personality - nonconforming, socially aloof, impulsive - are incompatible with artistic success in the contemporary art world. The loft, the exhibition channels, the galleries, the New York art scene are all necessary steps a serious artist must be able and willing to negotiate. Yet these steps to success run counter to a large array of values and traits young artists hold dear and were encouraged to believe in. Today's art world is extremely inhospitable to a romantic image of the artist.

Conclusion

The systems perspective of the artistic personality admits that individual traits may be necessary for a person to be recognized as creative, but that these cannot be predicted a priori. The specific individual traits associated with the artistic personality will depend on characteristics of the other two subsystems, the domain of art and the field of art. A person who becomes a painter in a period when Abstract Expressionism is the reigning style will be more likely to be recognized if he or she possesses the emotional, imaginative, and introverted qualities that are well-suited for the creation of abstract, expressionistic art. Likewise, in a period when Photo Realism is in vogue, a cool, rational, and outward-oriented person will be more likely to make a contribution to the domain. Given the constantly evolving nature of both the domain of art and the field of art, the idea of the artistic personality as a timeless, constitutional personality type is therefore an improbable proposition.

The preceding analysis suggests that a construct as broad as the artistic personality may be of limited value if addressing questions related to individual differences in artistic creativity. Consider, for example, the relationship between psychopathology and artistic creativity. Though it seems reasonable to suggest a link between the psychological torr of artists like Frida Kahlo, James Ensor, and Vincent Van Gogh and their heavily affect-laden art, such a relationship in areas that allow for less self-expression (e.g., Photo-Realism, Minimalism, etc.) is highly questionable. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how psychopathology would be anything but a distraction.

It is important to keep in mind that our analysis has focused on one area of art, painting the highly diversified, “radical pluralism” (Danto, 1998)[4] of today's postmodern art wor painting constitutes just one of many media available to artists, ranging from audio and video installations to the human body to the natural landscape. Given that each of these media involves unique artistic processes, we should expect the range of traits found among artists today to be even greater than our analysis in this chapter suggests.
Finally, it should be clear from all we have said that the same argument holds for any occupation or profession. A biologist like Friedrich von Humboldt (1769-1859) was an explorer, adventurer, and naturalist; a century and a half later, E. O. Wilson (1929-) complains that the hegemony of molecular biology has transformed the domain into an abstract laboratory discipline (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). It is unlikely that the personality individuals attracted to biology in Humboldt's time would be the same as those who join the field now. The links between a domain and the personality of those who work in it are not rigidly forged but change organically as the domain itself changes with time.

Footnotes:

1. For practical reasons, we limit our discussion of the domain of art to Western painting.
2. Clearly, the two dimensions of the classification system are not completely independent. The more "painterly" a style is, for example, the less "representational" it is likely to be.
3. In the study, Ludwig also classified the works of certain artists as "symbolic." Because we do not use this classification category in the present chapter, Ludwig's findings relating to symbolic styles are not discussed here.
4. Also referred to, less favorably, as the "Warholian nightmare" (Hughes, 1992).

References


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