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The Creative Genius

Some cultures believe that an artist is a creative genius, with almost transcendent abilities, operating in some way differently or on a higher plane than regular humans. The act of creating art is something extraordinary, magical, or divinely inspired, and beyond instruction or understanding.

Interestingly, the first name of an artist in recorded history has been associated with the concept of genius. Imhotep was an ancient Egyptian architect, priest, scribe, physician, and minister to the pharaoh. He was responsible for the design of the first pyramid, which predates by about 25 years the oldest of the *Great Pyramids*. After his lifetime, Imhotep was worshiped as one of the Egyptian gods.

From Africa we have examples of artists whose abilities were so great that they were referred to in heroic and grand terms. Olowe of Ise, was the subject of a poem of praise that referred to him as “handsome among his friends, outstanding among his peers” and speaks of the fame of his carving. Artist-geniuses seem to be above making mistakes, as seen in this description of another Yoruba artist named Bandele:

“No matter how complicated a work may be and though he has no drawing to guide him, Bandele never cuts away by accident any wood he may need later; he would be ashamed to have to add another piece.” (Fr. Kevin Carroll, quoted in Willett 1993: 156)

However, the artist-genius does not emerge from just any environment, but is the product of favorable social circumstances:

“Constant suitable work is necessary for the full development of a carver’s abilities. It was the group of carvers in a district—repeating the same themes and only gradually introducing new ones—which built up a cumulative genius capable of supporting the less gifted carvers. It was . . . this evolution as a group, rather than the religious intensity or emotion of the carvers, which gave much of its artistic power to the old carving. If sufficient carvers could be similarly employed—and fully employed—in modern times, the artistic level of the whole group would rise and individual geniuses would emerge.” (Fr. Kevin Carroll, quoted in Willett 1993: 22–23)

In Europe the concept of the artist as a creative genius begins to emerge during the Renaissance, around the fourteenth century. As we have seen, prior to that time, in Medieval Europe, artists were considered skilled workers. But the rise of the philosophy of humanism changed that attitude. Humanism stresses the nature, ideals, and interests of humans, while decreasing emphasis on the supernatural. Humanism asserts the dignity and value of individual persons. Learning is emphasized, especially in the humanities, science, and the arts. Humanism fosters an interest in the beauty of nature and human beings. The model person was not the holy recluse who rejected the world, but the intelligent, thoughtful, soulful person of the world.

During the Renaissance, the best artists were seen as possessing the divine gift of genius. The reward of genius was the cult of fame, a kind of immortality in which later generations would remember individuals’ names and honor their achievements. Of supreme importance was human vision, both for science and for art, as we have seen with Leonardo da Vinci. The ability to see resulted in scientific discoveries and high achievements in art. The genius did not *blindly* follow the authority over personal observation.

Among the many artists of great ability working during the Renaissance, Michelangelo Buonarroti must rank near the top. His *Creation of Adam* reflects both the humanism of the era and the concept of

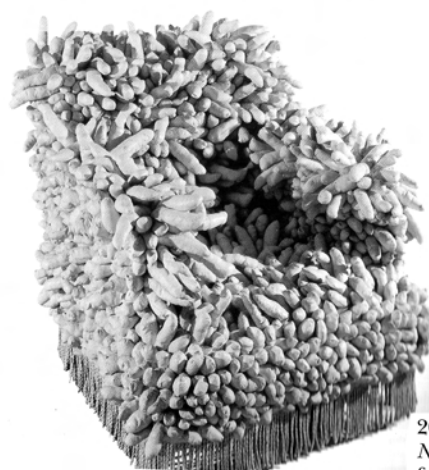
genius. In Michelangelo’s portrayal, Adam, the first human in Judeo-Christian sacred writings, looks very much like God, thus elevating humans to a God-like status. Significantly, this image illustrates a creation story. The artist is like God, whose divine energy brings life to inert material.

During the Romantic era in Europe, roughly 1750 to 1850, the notion of the artist as creative genius was augmented. The Romantics emphasized freedom, uniqueness, feeling, individuality, and imagination, and saw it exemplified in artist freedom and expressiveness. They were also interested in the sublime in art and in nature. These attitudes developed at the same time as capitalism was rising in Europe and the bourgeoisie saw themselves as self-made, unique individuals. The Romantic notion of artists as free, sensitive, individualistic, and strongly feeling persons contributed to the idea of the creative genius, unfettered by convention and social boundaries, but free feeling and moved by the heart instead of by reason.

A final variation of the idea of creative genius is the artist as the troubled, tragic, or alienated genius. Vincent van Gogh is a good example of such an artist. He was raised in a religious family, and worked for a while as a lay minister among the poor, but became exhausted in mind and body. When he turned to painting, he threw himself into his work between bouts of mental illness. His life was unhappy, as he was unable to make friendships and human connections that he sought. He committed suicide at age 37. However, his fame since then has grown tremendously as large exhibitions of his works have drawn record crowds to museums. His images appear on countless posters, and he has been celebrated as a tragic genius even in pop music!

The tragic, damaged, or alienated artist has become a kind of hero in industrialized nations today. Yayoi Kusama, who made *Accumulation No. 1* (figure 20.13), has voluntarily lived in a mental institution in Japan since 1977. She suffers from compulsive behavior and visual hallucinations. Her childhood was scarred by her early family life, the oppressive Japanese right-wing political state, and the devastation and deprivations of World War II. The following quote is from a recent museum catalog:

Daring—for better or worse—can be a by-product of true obsession, and Kusama has been daring, creating the art that she must against great odds. At another time we might have mythologized her in the manner of Vincent van Gogh and Jackson Pollock, romantic figures whose obsessive need to create was paralleled by an even stronger inclination to push the emotional and physical boundaries to the edge of self-destruction. If Kusama is heroic, it is for an opposite and arguably more prosaic reason. Rather than suffering for her art, she has used it to fight psychic disintegration. . . . Today, in the United States, much of the art world is disenchanted with movements . . . and global theories. Kusama—offbeat, relentless, and female—may be the only kind of hero that we can accept. (Zelevansky 1998: 31)



20.13 YAYOI KUSAMA. *Accumulation No. 1*. Japan, 1962. Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, fringe on chair frame, 37" × 39" × 43".