

**The Artist as Entrepreneur**

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## A Note on the Limitations of Defining Art

Because of art's democratization in a free society, the definition of what comprises art can be broad, depending on the context and views of its creator or audience. For example, art can be defined as anything from a painting by Caravaggio, or a Mozart opera (Figures 1 and 2), to the works of art-as-social-commentary (Figures 3 and 4) portraying contemporary graffiti technique in Detroit; from vandalism on an abandoned home, to the award-winning and controversial work of artist Tyree Guyton's *The Heidelberg Project*.



Figure 1: Caravaggio, *Lute Player* (1596)

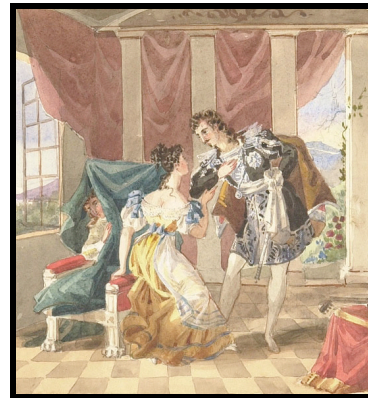


Figure 2: Anonymous Watercolor, Scene from *Le Nozze di Figaro* (19th Century)



Figure 3: Derek Farr, *Art Van Dalism* (2008)



**Figure 4: Derek Farr, Tyree Guyton's  
*Faces of God* (2009)**

Defining the philosophical or aesthetic aspects of what constitutes art is beyond the scope of this paper. However, allowing the free flow of ideas is critical to the development of new art forms, and many artists revered as masters today, such as Caravaggio, were often controversial in their own time. Keeping this in mind, this paper will only attempt to explore matters pertaining to how artists may improve their chances of functioning as fiscally viable entrepreneurs, whatever their medium or style of art.

## The Romantic Myth of the Starving Artist



**Figure 5: Carl Spitzweg, *Der arme poet* (1839)**

As an artist studying economics, I'm often met with exclamations of incredulity when someone learns of my academic pursuits. Comments usually have to do with the misconception that artists are not of the mind to bother themselves with matters of economics and money – they must be too busy creating, inventing, and dreaming. The image of the starving artist, exemplified in Figure 5 comes to mind. While many artists I know also think this way, I aim to show that to be a successful artist, in addition to holding a certain level of artistic competence, an artist must develop the business and finance skills that lead to successful careers for artists and non-artists alike. The ability to market oneself, take advantage of economies of scale, utilize commercial dissemination of one's work, and career skill set diversification are critically important to long-term fiscal viability. As any entrepreneur will tell you, taking risks can increase career reward, and artists are often known for taking risks creatively and in their careers. However, there is a

difference between risks that can lead to growth, and risky professional behavior that does not lead anywhere.

Perpetuating the myth and stereotype of the artist as economically ignorant does a disservice to the arts-related fields, serving to encourage an entitlement mentality among artists for the sake of egalitarianism. Artists are in a unique position that their role in society is to enlighten and entertain, supported by the generosity of their peers. As such, their value can sometimes be considered of an esoteric nature, difficult to define, and remuneration for their services may be lacking when value is not perceived or other needs are considered more pressing. Because of this, government programs such as the New Deal's Work Progress Administration Federal Arts Program (WPA/FAP) are remembered fondly by some artists because of the explosion of art and employment offered by federal funding during the Great Depression.

Author and WPA/FAP art archivist Lincoln Cushing suggests that in today's economic climate, artists would benefit from a revival of New Deal policies for the arts,

*With the United States economy spiraling down the drain, there's been a renewed interest in the New Deal projects of the 1930s and 1940s as potential models of how to once again make big government good government. (Cushing, 2009)*



**Figure 6: Richard Halls, New York City WPA Federal Art Project (1937)**

Cushing accurately identifies the WPA/FAP resulting in a burst of experimentation and democratization.

*Among the various campaigns of that period, several involved the cultural sphere and resulted in a dramatic change in the nature of the arts in this country...The deliberately public nature of WPA was a grand experiment, not just in putting artists to work, but in the democratization of the arts themselves. Fine artists worked alongside communities all over the country, re-imagining the iconography of the egalitarian principles that this country believes it was founded upon...We all benefited from the WPA/FAP. I myself was lucky enough to get work through CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Assistance) in 1979, the tiny "ghost of WPA" that was the lifeblood of many community arts groups until axed by Reagan. (Cushing, 2009)*

However, Cushing fails to consider whether expenditures creating unique, eye-catching posters for a variety of federal programs were the best use of public funds during the Great Depression. Furthermore, the implication that in the absence of

government subsidy, experimentation and democratization would not exist is unverifiable. Perhaps more accurately, experimentation and democratization can successfully be found when “a society’s constitution [guarantees] artistic freedom, in particular that new artists, and new art forms, have a chance to flourish. In an age of self-determination, this is best achieved in a democratic society” (Frey, 2000). Artists should familiarize themselves with such distinctions, in order to understand the true source of artistic freedom.

Additional research by economists David Throsby and Ruth Towse indicates governments that pursue egalitarian policies through subsidy for the arts may encourage unintended behavior. While the goal of subsidy is to increase artistic output by supplementing artists’ income, a side effect of such policy is that more individuals decide to become artists. Furthermore, if the new ‘artists’ entering the field are in reality art consumers rather than producers, the government can be effectively subsidizing individual hobbies that may generate neither productive capital for artists nor creative capital for society. Instead of boosting income for currently practicing artists, subsidy encourages new artists are emboldened to enter the field. In this way, subsidy can paradoxically achieve the goal to increase artistic output, but not individual artists’ income. Therefore, an artist’s chance of earning below-average income may *increase* due to subsidy. (Towse, 2003) Towse writes further on this phenomenon in the Netherlands, which instituted a program where low-income artists could receive considerable supplement,

*Recently in the Netherlands a new scheme, the ‘Wet*

*Inkomensvoorziening Kunstenaars' (Law for the Income Provision of Artists) has been established that can be used by all low-income artists who would otherwise need social benefits. Artists who are in a bad financial situation and receive the special WIK benefits while still being able to earn some money in the arts and without an obligation to apply for other jobs. Given the data from the first year of operation, 1999, the scheme turns out to be attractive to far more artists than had been the intention. Artists use it as a replacement not only for benefits but also for second jobs in order to work more hours in the arts. (Towse, 2003)*

The above example indicates the Dutch government's inability to anticipate the effects of price-fixing artist's wages. While subsidy may at first appear to be a beneficial way to assist artists, it also functions as a price floor, encouraging a flood of art labor supply.

It is the nature of pursuing a career in the arts that individual artists are likely to suffer economic uncertainty. Though some countries attempt to alleviate this problem by providing substantial public support for the arts, the artist cannot rely upon subsidy as a technique for securing steady income streams. At most, subsidy should be considered a minor ingredient of a diversified strategy for pursuing a career in the arts, as it can disappear as easily as it appears based on the whims of those in political power, the nature of one's art, and general economic conditions. Furthermore, to ensure artistic freedom, minimal government interference in art is preferable.

The importance of recognizing governmental and institutional influence over individual decisions to pursue careers in the arts cannot be overlooked. Theories about the reasons why people pursue artistic careers despite the poor prospects can also be linked to the relatively inexpensive, often highly subsidized means to obtain

a higher degree in the arts, or even the idea that one needs no formal education to be an artist. Social programs such as unemployment and social security similarly signal that the government will mitigate the risk of an artistic career. (Abbing, 2002)

Sometimes the pursuit for government money in the name of art can reach ridiculous levels such as in Norway, where women working as strippers can earn a government subsidy because they have lobbied to be accepted as artists. While people should be free to choose their employment, others should not be required to pay for activities they may find morally reprehensible. (Dubay, 2005)

### **The A-Commercial Ideal: Artists' rejection of the market**

Despite considerable evidence that an artist welfare state is bad for the artist and society, rejection of market mechanisms and commercialization are prevalent among artists. Author and economist Hans Abbing poses an interesting question in his book, *Why Are Artists Poor?*, "How can artists and intermediaries who deny the economy make a living? Some evidently do. Anti-market behavior can be profitable" (Abbing, 2002). Abbing offers a thesis,

*Sometimes, the more anti-commercial artists and intermediaries present themselves, the higher their status and incomes are. Such a-commercial attitudes don't follow from a strategy. Artists behave a-commercially because they are artists. In the course of history of the artistic profession this type of behavior became part of the artist's 'character'. Artists have learned to play 'games' in two spheres. That is how they earn a living. (Abbing, 2002)*

While it is difficult to empirically verify an artist's intention is to deny the market

while simultaneously attempting to make a living, it would explain the overwhelming support artists give to government subsidy and disdain for the free market. From worldwide opposition to the appointment of business man Mario Resca as an unpaid advisor to the Italian Culture Minister (Rocca, 2009), to the recent efforts of prominent artists in the U.S. to create a cabinet-level position for the arts (Trescott, 2009), it is clear artists feel deserving of creating without being hindered unnecessarily by market mechanisms, which can be discriminating, and may not pay the prices sought by artists for their work.

However, embracing market mechanisms is a more sound strategy to building a successful career. In fact, some of the most revered artists throughout history became commercial successes during their lifetimes, their works continuing to shape the arts today. Salvador Dalí embraced capitalism and is reported to have said, “All that interests me is money” (Frey, 2000). Because Dalí welcomed the popular demand for his style of work in the market and promoted it to gain profit, he was eventually ostracized from a community of surrealist artists he associated with who felt he was straying from their cause. Artist Mark Vallen quotes the following passage from Philadelphia Museum’s Dalí exhibit catalogue,

*“[Art critic Andre] Breton had long thought Dalí's art had become too commercialized and that Dalí's growing fame threatened the unity and agenda of the Surrealists. His growing disgust with Dalí's financial success as an artist led him to dub Salvador Dalí with the anagrammatic nickname 'Avida Dollars,' describing what he perceived as Dalí's greed for money and fame.”* (Vallen, 2005)

Vallen adds that Dalí's supposedly conservative political views caused a rift within the group of surrealists as well. Apart from the reason for Dalí's exile, his whole-hearted acceptance of the market allowed him to flourish as an artist during his lifetime. He sought ways to integrate his work into the mainstream milieu by collaborating with well-known commercial ventures, so his name would become more familiar to a wide audience. Vallen notes,

*[Dalí] lived in America from 1939 to 1948, where he became a master of exhibitionism and self-promotion. He was the darling of advertisers, who used him to sell every imaginable product. He worked for Disney and created a cinematic sequence for Alfred Hitchcock's 'Spellbound'. His meticulously cultivated flamboyant persona and thoroughly orchestrated eccentricity guaranteed a public perception of him as the ultimate Surrealist artist - it also brought him a personal fortune estimated at over \$30 million dollars. (Vallen, 2005)*

The artists in surrealist circles who adopted the *a-commercial* ideal are not likely to be household names like Dalí is today, who's work is the exemplar of the brand of surrealist art. Regardless of one's affinity for the style, it is clear that Dalí and his ability to embrace and exploit his work via commercial means led to his unprecedented success in the genre.

### **Great Artists and Great Entrepreneurs**

The story of Salvador Dalí is one of many examples of artists throughout history achieving commercial success during their lifetimes. Other artists include, Rubens, Tiziano, Rembrandt, Lenbach, Stuck, Picasso, and Beuys. Composers and musicians include Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, Wagner, Domingo, Pavarotti,

Carreras, and Callas. Authors and playwrights include Shakespeare, Goethe, Dickens, Hauptmann, Brecht, Thomas Mann, and Jane Austen. All of these artists became wealthy due to commercial success during their lives (Frey, 2000 and Cantor, 2006).

Using two more artists as examples, Mozart and Shakespeare, it can be seen that adopting an entrepreneurial attitude about one's creative work is beneficial. This will be followed with ways in which today's artist can utilize similar techniques to improve their chances of career success.

Mozart is one of the most beloved composers of all-time, and was also a great businessman. He benefited from living in a time that allowed him to compose freely without needing to rely on a patron. In Tyler Cowen's book, *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, he attributes Mozart's freedom to the market demand for his music supported by works commissioned by wealthy nobles in Vienna, along with the wide dissemination and increased availability of published works written for mass markets due to capitalistic innovation and investment in printing techniques. (Cowen, 1998 and Cantor, 2006)

While Mozart's life and persona are often romanticized, the imagery of him leading the life of a pauper is mostly lore. The 1984 film, *Amadeus*, "portrays Mozart in the nineteenth-century fashion as an unappreciated and misunderstood genius whose financial situation was either borderline or impoverished, with only a few coins left" (Brown,1992). In reality, "Mozart was never poor by the standards of

his time” (Brown, 1992). Any financial difficulties Mozart may have had were likely related to his own habit of lavish expenditures, possible problems with gambling and billiards, and general economic conditions during the Austrian war against the Turks, not due to his inability to secure an adequate income from his work as a composer and musician. Mozart carried on a variety of music-related activities and positions during his early career, “Mozart's income came from five sources: public and private appearances as a pianist, the giving of subscription concerts, teaching, commissions, and the publication of his music” (Brown, 1992). Later in his life, Mozart was able to streamline his work to gain income from composing alone. Upon his death, while *Amadeus* portrays a gruesome scene where Mozart’s body is dragged to a communal grave, it should be noted this was how the majority of burials were conducted at the time in Vienna. Since 85% of people would have had the same burial, there was nothing unusual about it, nor did it signal Mozart was impoverished by comparing the ritual to today’s standards.

Shakespeare is another important figure in artistic and economic history. While he is not romanticized as having led the life of a pauper, according to author, economist and Shakespearean scholar Frederick Turner, his contributions to economics are largely unappreciated. Turner claims Shakespeare’s artistry not only revolutionized the use of the English language and the play, but contributed to educating his audiences about economic ideas,

Shakespeare was a key figure, perhaps *the* key figure, in creating that Renaissance system of meanings, values, and implicit rules that eventually gave rise to the modern world market and that still

underpin it. Using Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic definitions of those charged words—"bond," "trust," "good," and so on—English-speaking merchants transformed the planet and made the language of a small cold wet island the lingua franca of the world. It is no coincidence that the people who created the British Commonwealth were people who knew the plots of Shakespeare's plays, quoted Shakespeare frequently in their own writing, had been required to read Shakespeare in school... (Turner, 1999)

Turner goes on to cite examples throughout Shakespeare's plays where he appears to be extolling the virtues of money, profit, and interest; the positive aspects of technological innovation; even the development of the mathematical concept of zero.

Even if the idea of Shakespeare as an economist-via-literary-art is a stretch, it is clear he employed market ideas to become the most popular playwright in his day and perhaps, ever. Historian Robert A. Logan suggests Shakespeare's efforts to differentiate himself and surpass his contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, led to commercial success,

*...[Shakespeare] must have found great satisfaction and excitement in working at the Rose with someone of Marlowe's expertise. Marlowe's innovative employment of language and syntax, in addition to fashioning a nontraditional dramaturgy, could not have helped but influence Shakespeare...especially after he saw that Marlowe's introduction of new theatrical and literary techniques were bringing him acclaim and steadfast commercial success. (Logan, 2007)*

Shakespeare's work has stood the test of time because of intense competition for playwrights during his lifetime and his pursuit of literary, aesthetic, and theatrical innovation. Shakespeare's name and poetic phrases are part of everyday language worldwide. When the National Endowment for the Arts

(NEA) was first begun, it had the intention of discovering the “American Shakespeare” (Smith 2008). Despite funding literary artists of note, the NEA has not yet discovered someone nearly as popular or influential. Ironically, it was a large-scale revival of the British bard’s plays called *Shakespeare in American Communities* that was chosen to revitalize the American arts scene in 2004, after decades of discord over the allocation public funding of the arts.

The chairman of the NEA Dana Gioia said at the time, “Before this program the Endowment had touched the lives of hundreds...we now reach millions” (Smith, 2008). The endowment moved away from funding controversial, political art, to attempting to appeal to wider commercial tastes and audience development. Shakespeare’s work proved appropriate as ever to accomplish the task.

### Artist Career Diversification

It is the part of a wise man to keep himself to-day for to-morrow, and not to venture all his eggs in one basket.

~ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote. Part i. Book. iii. Chap. ix.*

There is no panacea that will solve the many difficulties of pursuing a career as a creative artist. Though author Miguel de Cervantes is well known for his work *Don Quixote*, he struggled to find commercial success during his lifetime and was poor for most of his

career. However, his quote in the above box is apropos when thinking about one’s career or investments. The approach to diversify and mitigate risk that has served

great commercially successful artists and private sector entrepreneurs can serve today's artists as well.

In the discipline of finance, it is common for investment professionals to speak of portfolio diversification, which is a method of allocating one's investments among a variety of styles and vehicles based on an individual's risk profile or tolerance in order to choose investments that match an individual's willingness to bear a certain amount of risk. "The principle of diversification tells us that spreading an investment across many assets will eliminate some, but not all, of the risk" (Jordan and Miller, 2009)

It could be argued that when individuals choose their life's work, they should approach career decisions in a similar way. This is particularly true if one is pursuing a career in the arts, which can be considered risky due to the uncertainty of securing a long-term position, the unpredictable fluctuation in cultural trends, and the ability for consumers to easily go without consuming artistic goods in times of economic recession

The reason artists can expect more volatility in their chosen career is that relative to other goods and services, the arts are not a requirement for survival. No matter how one could argue the arts enrich our lives, other human needs are more pressing, which can be seen clearly in times of economic slowdown. Often, arts and entertainment are considered items that are more easily cut out of a family budget. Because of cultural goods are highly elastic, and lower forms of art may be

substituted, or these types of goods can be omitted from an individual's expenditures without much loss to personal welfare.

Because a career in the arts often involves precise, technical training that is not easily replicated, an artist's livelihood may rest on their ability to use their bodies in a certain way. Pursuing the wrong performance opportunities could damage the delicate coordination of a singer's vocal folds, a painter who develops arthritis could suffer diminished skill, and a dancer who falls and shatters her kneecap may never perform again. Bearing these types of risks are taken in the name of art, and they could result in the partial or total loss of income for artists. However, with proper planning and forethought, many artistic career risks can be reduced or diversified, to enhance chances of fiscal viability.

Based on anecdotal evidence and personal experience, practical career and financial skills that are taught in most business schools escape the curricula of most music schools or art conservatories. In my own undergraduate studies, the only formal business training was a forty-five minute lecture from a working soprano, offering her insights into an operatic career. My husband, who works as an industrial designer fared slightly better, and had a course on career development and grant writing. Other artists I talk to repeatedly express their desire for better business and financial training.

Due to time and length considerations, this paper will not go into detail about creating a business and career plan, however, the following areas warranted

considerable attention by any artist who hopes to make a living in their chosen field:

- *Personal Branding, Marketing, Networking Skills.* Most business professionals find it advantageous to seek ongoing education and training to improve their career skills. This could take the form of creating a detailed business plan with long- and short-term goals, including a statement of purpose. There are numerous resources, including books and training courses available for business professionals that could be applicable to the creative artist in crafting a business plan.
- *Financial, Tax, and Retirement Planning.* Creative artists will often find themselves working as freelance employees, needing to switch jobs frequently, move from city to city, or hold multiple jobs at certain points in their careers. This means their financial and tax situation will be more complex than the average worker, and the assistance of financial professionals or educating oneself about such matters is crucial to avoid problems and properly plan for long- and short-term goals.
- *Insurance and Disability Protection.* As mentioned above, artists often rely on complex technical abilities that could be susceptible to unpredictable chances of loss. Insurance protection for personal assets such body parts, costly instruments, or for works of art and their maintenance may help mitigate risk, but is not necessary in all cases. The current level of one's

income, age, goals, and the prospects of being able to replace that income via other means will inform the decision to obtain such insurance and in what amount. If necessary, the practice of insuring unusual body parts is a specialty of Lloyd's of London. Lloyds recently insured *Ugly Betty* television star America Ferrera's smile for \$10 million dollars. The actress' mouth is part of the show's brand image; if it were damaged, it could cost her considerable income.

- *Complimentary Careers.* Artists may find it necessary, or even satisfying to pursue dual or complimentary careers. For example, a concert violinist may decide to pursue teaching opportunities, or a visual artist may supplement their studio work with graphic design jobs. In Tyler Cowen's book, *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, he writes of the American poet Wallace Stevens who, "...pursued a full-time career in the insurance industry...When offered an endowed chair to teach and write poetry at Harvard University, Stevens declined. He preferred insurance work to lecturing..." (Cowen, 1998). By diversifying one's career prospects the chances of success, and even personal satisfaction, can be increased. Whether a secondary career is pursued out of interest or necessity, the reality is that most artists will need to consider the possibility, "In the U.S. only 20-25 percent of artists work more or less full-time at arts work, and it would appear that a majority of those working less than full-time at their chosen profession would prefer to spend more time at the arts but are deterred from doing so by the need to earn an income

elsewhere” (Throsby, 1994)

## **The Future of Artists as Entrepreneurs**

Far from ruining art, market competition and the benefits of commercialization can enhance art, and provide a platform for artistic success. In fact, the free market allows anyone who wishes to enter the field to do so, as the free market does not discriminate, and the supply and demand for art will be far more varied.

When artists consider their career choices and creative pursuits, they should keep in mind that artistic innovation can combine with other aspects of markets and technology to provide artists with new opportunities for growth. Throsby notes,

*It was not until 1959 that John Kenneth Galbraith tackled the confrontation between economics and art, in a lecture published in ‘The Liberal Hour’ (1960). He looked at the economic situation of the artist and at the potential for good design to promote exports of American manufactures. (Throsby, 1994)*

Looking at the careers of great artists of the past and the institutions that helped or hindered them is informative for the artists of today and in the future. For example, the common threads between Dalí, Shakespeare, and Mozart point to a complete acceptance of innovation, desire to please the mass consumer, and thriving under competitive conditions. These famous artists managed to create art that is considered to have withstood the test of time, and whose riches have not yet been fully revealed. Today’s artists would be wise to learn lessons from these great

artists, not only from their technical skill and artistry, but from their business sense as well.

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