Nature's Journeymen: The Education and Training of the American Artist

by Joan Jeffri

The American Artist, just entering the last decade of the twentieth century, has been over-educated, underpaid, encouraged by his mother, in a household where art was respected, and in an environment where self-teaching and intrinsic motivation have helped to sustain him in a career he would definitely choose to repeat.

In the last fifty years the education marketplace in the United States has provided a wide variety of opportunities for artists. Fuelled by post-World War II government monies through the G.I. Bill, American artists bought time and legitimacy through higher education. Artists like painter Al Held, who had two years of high school, found themselves studying at the Art Students League in New York, then spending several years in Paris, Mexico or Italy. Workshops, classes, weekend retreats, symposia, conferences, community college, undergraduate and graduate degree programs exploded in the fine, performing and applied arts and artistic pursuits were increasingly described (usually not by the artists themselves) as 'careers'.

To get a clearer idea of the development of artists during this last half-decade, The Research Center for Arts and Culture undertook a survey of a random sample of 12,000 of them, preceded by 150 personal narrative interviews with artists and related experts in the fields of crafts, painting and acting. The premise of the study was that there are certain forms of validation and resistance that artists receive throughout their development, and it is unclear whether these influences are the same for all artists, for the majority of artists in a particular medium, or what commonalities and differences exist among them. For policy makers, this kind of information is critical. For example, by learning that these artists began their artistic training in adolescence, with a median age for actors of 12, painters 14, and craftspeople 16, funders interested in furthering educational opportunities would do well to look at in-school or extracurricular programs in middle schools and high schools to make an impact. Undergraduate school may be too late.

The inquiry elicited information about educational, training, and career development experiences from the artists themselves. 4,000 craftspeople, 2,000 painters and 6,000 actors were surveyed. What kinds of choices had these artists made? What artistic experiences and exposure led up to or accompanied them? What kind of educational experiences provided artists with early validation and early resistance for their choices? And, if their educational training did not adequately prepare them for their professional careers, what were the factors responsible for this view? And, finally, in a world of increasing credentials, what were these artists' notions about professionalism in their artistic worlds, of themselves and of their peers? With a response rate of 30% for the actors, 33% for the craftspeople and 46% for the painters, within appropriate statistical constraints the data can be generalized to the populations of artists from which the samples were drawn.

Early Training

A general overview of the early training experiences of these artists reveals that exposure for visual artists centered on the home, while the performers received stimuli from school and community. While teachers were important to all three groups, so were peers. Actors, as previously noted, began their artistic training at the earliest age, with a median of 12, while painters began at 14 and craftspeople not until 16.

One particular surprise in both the personal narrative interviews and the surveys was the frequency with which artists in each area spoke about finding their art form. In a variety of cases, the surveyed artists had started out as artists in different areas; they seemed to know that they were artists, but they had to find the right medium. Often artists knew they had to make the artistic 'journey' even if certain things might be unavailable to them. Glass artist Mary Kay Simoni said, 'If there were no glass, I'd be an artist with mud, or sticks, or twigs, or dirt.'

In 1963, two psychologists from the University of Chicago, Jacob W. Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, conducted the first and, to date, only longitudinal study of fine artists in the United States. They followed up 250 of their original sample of 281 junior and seniors at the school of the Art Institute of Chicago eighteen years later. While there were numerous variables in their study "on the vices anditudes of creativity in art," they realized the larger context in which their investigations needed to be viewed:

"Creativity does not manifest itself in the abstract; it is always the expression of all the vector forces operating in the artists' experience. Worries
The Business of Being an Artist

about being able to pay the rent, about whether
to have children, about being good enough to
call oneself an artist, concerns about politics and
pollution, involvement in the community and
curiosity about the meaning of life all play an
important role in the creative process, and leave
a mark on its products.2

These insights should be kept in mind for anyone
seeking to make societal or policy changes for
individual artists based on even the best scientific
investigations.

Mother, Home and Apple Pie

Mothers and homelife seem to have provided a
supportive atmosphere for these artists, with 63% of
the craftspeople, 73% of the painters and only 26% of
the actors having their initial experiences with art at
home, and about half of all three kinds of artists
indicating that their mothers were the most supportive
people of their art in their households. In fact, over
half the visual and performing artists indicated that
the members of the household in which they grew up
were supportive of their artistic explorations.

In the households themselves, art seems to have
been viewed with some respect: between 42% and
50% of the respondents grew up in households where
some form of art was important or very important.
Nevertheless, for 48% of the craftspeople, 63% of the
painters and 65% of the actors, no one worked in any
arts at home.

School

For artists, then, one place to find mentors and
models was at school. For 78% of the actors, in fact,
their initial art experiences were at school while 40%
were in community theatres. Up to high school, 60%
of the craftspeople and 56% of the painters got their
main exposure through a few art classes in school,
while another 44% of the painters were exposed to art
through visits to museums and galleries.

76% of the actors were exposed to acting through
seeing movies, and 70% through being in school
plays. By high school, visual artists seem to be finding
other avenues of exposure to their art form since 31%
of the craftspeople were exposed to their art through
a few art classes in school, and 36% of the painters
through many art classes, while actors seem much
more engaged, with over two-thirds exposed to their
art form through involvement in school plays and
reading stories and plays.

“They Like Me”

When Sally Field received her first Oscar in 1979 for
her starring role as the union organizer in Norma Rae,
had initial reaction became showbiz legend when,
flushed with emotion, she clutched her statuette, and
said, tear-eyed, “They like me, they really like me.”
The rawness of her need for approval is an
appropriate illustration for something the Research
Center study tried to quantify by asking artists about
their early experiences of ‘validation and resistance’.

While teachers played an important validating role
in these artists’ early lives, with 56% of the
craftspeople, 61% of the painters and 68% of the actors
citing teachers as early validators, close behind came
the approval of peers. About half of all three kinds of
artists found peer approval: an early validator and 68%
of the actors, true to Sally Field’s example, listed
audience approval as a source of early validation.

In Getzels’ and Csikszentmihalyi’s work they define
four major categories that artists gave for painting or
sculpting — “discovery in general, self-knowledge,
understanding other people, and the quest for reality,”
all adding up to what psychologists call intrinsic as
opposed to extrinsic motivations. Indeed, “sale of
work” — an extrinsic motivation — appeared much
lower on the list of validators for the Research
Center’s visual artists.3

The authors also comment on art as a profession in
a manner which gives resonance to experiences that
provide validation and resistance:

“Art differs from other occupations in that artists
must find their jobs within themselves...the
typical occupation or profession consists of skills
and rules which tradition has clearly delineated.
In contrast, the modern artist is expected to
develop the content and the rules of his
profession from within. External signposts are
few, and ambiguous by definition.”4

Early Resistances

The number of respondents answering a question
about early resistances dropped significantly from
those answering one on early validation. Not all
choices could be described as strictly educational
experiences. In fact, it is interesting that the highest
responses in this area had to do with money, work
and family attention.

A third of the visual artists and 27% of the actors
cited lack of financial support as an early resistance.
Closer to one fourth cited no sale of work (or no
acting work), and lack of or negative family attention.
One difficulty here is that the time period described
as “early” was never defined; thus, these responses
may refer to early career rather than early education
or to some combination of both.

Training and Education

A look at the education and training of artists,
generally a retrospective activity in this particular
forum, must be established in the context of their
history. With a median age in the late 30s and early
40s for all the artists surveyed, the major early
childhood exposure to and experience with art as
well as early formal education probably took place for
most of these artists in the 1950s and 1960s, two
decades with their accompanying characteristics of
political liberalism, educational accessibility,
affirmative action, the growth of the nonprofit sector
and the continued growth of the higher education
factory of undergraduate and graduate degrees in the
arts.
Between half and three-quarters of the artists received a formal degree in the arts, with a high of 76% for the painters. Actors gravitated more to private teachers (58%) and experiences with a mentor or master teacher (60% Equity, 48% non-Equity) than formal degrees (50%) and to community based (40% Equity actors, 55% non-Equity actors) and summer theatre experiences (50%). 60% of the painters went to art school, and 63% of the Equity and 46% of the non-Equity actors went to acting school as preparation for their work in the arts.

While a high percentage of artists in each field indicated that they were self-taught (72% of the craftspeople, 61% of the painters, 46% Equity and 55% non-Equity actors), artists in general have a very high level of formal education (as do their audiences). For craftspeople, 38% had college degrees, and another 33% graduate degrees. Painters were higher still, with 39% having college degrees and 41% graduate degrees. For actors, 46% of the Equity actors had college degrees, and another 26% had graduate degrees; 55% of the non-Equity actors had college degrees, and 14% of the non-Equity actors had graduate degrees.

That 72% of the craftspeople surveyed indicated that they were self-taught has an interesting parallel in a study conducted in 1992 by the Crafts Council of Great Britain in which 54% of the craftspeople said they were mostly self-taught. The surveyors were surprised by this finding and commented that, “If more than 1 in 10 of those who, despite having graduated from a higher level art or craft course, become independent craftspeople in a discipline for which they have to rely on self instruction, some questions should perhaps be raised about the what subject choices are made within the art or craft departments of colleges and universities”.

Is the implication here that self-teaching is regarded as a negative influence, or at least a waste of good resources that properly belong to formal education? Or, perhaps, is this a warning to the academy to explore its relevance? With the numbers in both studies hovering near or over 50%, this is an area worth further investigation.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships were most important to craftspeople for the technical knowledge afforded 59% of those who had them which was a quarter of the sample or 303 craft artists. 78% of the actors had engaged in apprenticeships, and, during the 1960s and 70s Actors’ Equity Association had a very active journeyman program for actors to work their way to their Equity membership through just such apprenticeships.

Other Educational Experiences

Other educational experiences were important to many respondents. Over 60% of all three kinds of artists said they received additional preparation from the school of hard knocks, and over 40% from their peers. Artists were asked if their education did not adequately prepare them for their careers, to what did they attribute this? 50% or more cited their major reason as little or no preparation for the real world.

Professionalism

Throughout all the studies the Research Center has conducted on artists, there has been a focus on the artists’ definition of professionalism. The world of professionalism connotes a set of standards or benchmarks set by some outside validator: The marketplace, the educational or training system and one’s peers are three examples. It is these three divisions that the Research Center used to create a series of statements by which artists could define both themselves, and other artists, as professionals.

All artists were asked to rank their top three choices out of a total of twelve statements first, in relation to others (criteria used considering someone to be a professional artist) and then, in relation to themselves (criteria as they apply to you). Although painters are used to illustrate the statements here, the statements were made specific to crafts and acting for the other artists surveyed.

The three groupings listed below were for analytical purposes only and did not appear on the questionnaire.

1. The Marketplace Definition
   - The person makes his/her living as a painter.
   - The person receives some income from his/her work as a painter.
   - The person intends to make his/her living as a painter.

2. The Education and Affiliation Definition
   - The person belongs to an artists’ association (discussion groups, artists’ coop, etc.)
   - The person belongs to an artists’ union or guild.
   - The person has been formally educated in the arts.

3. The Self and Peer Definition
   - The person is recognized by his/her peers as a painter.
   - The person considers him/herself to be a painter.
   - The person spends a substantial amount of time working at art.
   - The person has a special talent.
   - The person has an inner drive to make art.
   - The person receives some public recognition for his/her art.

86% of the craftspeople, 91% of the painters and 95% of the Equity and 775 of the non-Equity actors consider themselves professionals. Although the word professionalism had various meanings, it seems that several separate and distinct definitions are constantly being meshed, confused, or used interchangeably. First, a common definition of professionalism relies on standard occupational measures such as hours worked per week and major income derived; it is quite common in the arts that artists’ major work, their art, is not their major source of income, nor necessarily what they spend the largest percentage of their time doing for payment. Second, there is a definition of professionalism that relies on official credentialing as a result of examination—attorneys take the state bar exam, for example. Finally, when people use the word professional as a descriptor they often refer to the quality of the work of production.
rather than the credentials of the producer (this may be one explanation for the 77% of non-Equity actors who consider themselves professional, not a designation the actors' union would appreciate).

These overlapping, confusing concepts of professionalism affect these three kinds of artists in different ways. For all of them, one of the issues mentioned frequently is that they, and their work, are insufficiently appreciated by society. This may be due in part to the fact that artists often consider themselves artists because they define themselves as such, not because they fulfill the measurable characteristics found in other fields.

Second, the production of their art is a major source of income for only half the craftspeople, 26% of the painters and 47% of the Equity and 26% of the non-Equity actors. Additionally, less than half of the respondents support themselves entirely from their art work — 36% of the craftspeople, 14% of the painters, 35% of the Equity and 13% of the non-Equity actors.

Definitions: Self

If we look at the respondents' own views we find the highest ranking choices as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Craftspeople</th>
<th>1st Choice</th>
<th>2nd Choice</th>
<th>3rd Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Drive</td>
<td>Time Spent</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Make Art</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Painters</th>
<th>1st Choice</th>
<th>2nd Choice</th>
<th>3rd Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Drive</td>
<td>Time Spent</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>1st Choice</th>
<th>2nd Choice</th>
<th>3rd Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making a Living</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Peer Recognition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(32% Equity, 15% non-Equity)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Definitions: Someone Else

When we apply the same question to someone else the responses look like this:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Craftspeople</th>
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<th>2nd Choice</th>
<th>3rd Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Peer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(27%)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<th>Painters</th>
<th>1st Choice</th>
<th>2nd Choice</th>
<th>3rd Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Drive</td>
<td>Time Spent</td>
<td>Formal Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(38%)</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Make Art</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making a Living</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(38% Equity, 28% non-Equity)</td>
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It is extremely telling that the visual artists in the study, both for themselves and others, rank "inner drive to make art", a "self and peer" definition, as the primary justifier of professionalism, while the actors choose the marketplace as their primary definer. The reliance of actors on a marketplace definition is not substantiated by results of an earlier study conducted by the Research Center in 1988 of 10,000 artists in ten different locations in the United States, 1,000 of whom were actors. The aggregate of Actors' Equity actors in all ten sites chose "inner drive" as their primary justifier of professionalism, even though half of them earned their major income from acting in the preceding twelve months. This area warrants further investigation. In addition if we are looking for the worth of education and training, it appears only once, as the third choice of painters and then, only when applied to someone else - not themselves.

Are what Hamlet called "nature's journeymen" being trained for a world in which sophisticated principles of the Internet, audition techniques, copyright instruction and marketing of one's self or one's work continues to sustain the apparent rift between the world of training and the "real world" of the arts? Eschewing former Broadway producer David Merrick's philosophy that all actors are children and need to be instructed in the more practical aspects of living, there seems to be a majority among these artists who feel they were somehow unprepared for the "real world". Whether the kind of training that now exists can or should prepare them is a matter worth contemplating. But the choices these artists value in defining themselves as professionals give us some insight into the difficult balance between the artist and his or her market.

Yet, between 87% and 89% of the responding artists in all three fields said they would choose the same career if they had to do all over again. In fact, half the visual artists and over a third of the actors said they were very satisfied with "doing the work" and the "personal satisfaction with the work". And, although all of them were mostly dissatisfied with the money situation, how dissatisfied varied greatly with only 22% of the craftspeople, 34% of the Equity and 43% of the non-Equity actors and a large 46% of painters objecting to the current money situation.

The areas of their satisfactions and disappointments were illustrated most persuasively in the open-ended final question on career satisfaction and disappointment, the comments section of the questionnaire to which over half the artists responded. High on the list for artists as a major source of disappointment was rejection. For Equity actors, missing the "big break", being fired, having a contract withdrawn, having a show close, and losing a role to another actor were prime sources of disappointment. For non-Equity actors disappointments centered more on the entry levels to work - auditions, rejections from educational, MFA and other educational programs.

For craftspeople, not receiving a National Endowment for the Arts or other professional grant, or losing the grant due to an inability to raise matching funds, provided great disappointment, plus rejection in other forms - not being accepted to a craft fair, a gallery, a juried show, not winning an award or competition, or rejection of a previously commissioned work.

For painters, the unfairness of market 'politics', and negative or nonexistent critical review of work, feedback from instructors, rejection from juried exhibits, from school, loss of competitions and commissions all provided disappointment.
The whole role of the artist in society was summarized pungently by a 66-year old painter from Charlotte, North Carolina:

"Perhaps a moment of greatest disappointment was when I realized that my concept of what an artist/painter should be, was all wrong. Unfortunately, this happened after I had devoted many years to the task of being an artist. It was, after all, necessary for a painter to be also a salesman, an entertainer who can hold his liquor, a raconteur, a filler-out of forms and applications, a beggar, a flirt, a politician...I probably forgot to mention something...and he (she) best have social and business connections, friends – preferably in high places, perhaps a marriage of convenience? For me, it was none of the above...I realized that my education and my talents had enormous loopholes".

One craft artist summed up the lot of many of his colleagues when he said:

"My work is my life. I make no excuses for my failures. I pay no tributes to my success. I find doing what I do to be just slightly less frustrating than not doing what I do".

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Notes:

1. The well known Gulbenkian Foundation Inquiry, The Economic situation of the Visual Artist, cites similar opportunities for study of fine art in the United Kingdom after World War II.