

Three Keywords;

- Practise
- Talent
- Prodigy

Student Name:

Joshua Owens

Student Number:

1701463

Course:

BA (Hons) Illustration

Module:

Level 5 Personal Inquiry- 'Research in Practise' (ADAD5004)

Word Count:

2561.

(Excludes all in-text references and quotations, bibliography/reference list and titles. The word count including all in-text references and quotation text=4089)

Lecturer:

Louise Burston

Practise, Talent & Prodigy

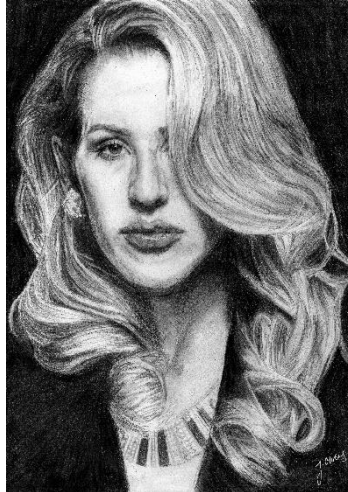
As a practising illustration student, I have found that I have been required to showcase my portfolio of work to any interested spectator. And those who are perhaps not as learned in the practise often cite the same hallowed phrase- “I wish I could draw”. I always question this statement because of the development my illustrative skills have seen from when I first started to draw to now. There is evident progression which has developed as a result of, I believe, endless practise. Because of this, I have always considered the prowess and achievements being the result of dedication and hours put into their practice. However, I am also aware of some artists deemed to have an *innate* talent and I have decided to research how this affects the success of the artist with visual representations of these ‘prodigies’ and how they differ to artists who simply just have a talent. I will use the findings of art professionals and behavioural experts to develop my enquiry. This proposal has been the catalyst which has led me to my keywords; Practise, Talent and Prodigy.

Practice

When enquiring the most 'common' route to becoming a qualified artist, many consider it to occur from being educated within an academic establishment such as a school or university. As mentioned in the introduction, while it certainly *could* be considered that those with an artistic talent could have been born with the necessary disposition to be talented in the field, there are many who would argue that an education in mastering skills is what enables an artist, or indeed any practitioner to become successful in their field. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are my own illustrations from when I consciously began drawing out of childhood to today after countless hours of practise and progression of age. There is a clear distinction in the skill-set after the practise with the addition of academic teaching in the subject.



(Figure 1: Owens, *Portrait of Ellie Goulding* (2013))



(Figure 2: Owens, *Portrait of Ellie Goulding* (2020))

Behavioural specialist, John Watson said-

“Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist. I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist... regardless of his talents...”

(Watson, 1930)

Coming from an article that explores if *deliberate* practise is all that is required to be deemed as ‘successful’ or a master in one’s field, Watson’s statement very much supports the theory that what is required to fulfil your practise is a dedication and perhaps a designated or specific environment in order to

specialise in that field. Watson continues stating that, “practicing more intensively than others...is probably the most reasonable explanation we have today not only for success in any line, but even for genius” (Watson, 1930, p.104-112). This, of course may not be the opinion of some, but many could argue that we, as babies, were not accustomed to simply being able to partake in a skill- not even being able to hold a pencil or medium- until you are taught how to do so and so Watson’s statement could certainly have an element of validity to it.

Another individual with a similar opinion to Watson’s is blogger, Carrie Brummer who states-

“Art has elements of SKILL, just like learning to write an essay has techniques... But, if your education incorporates those techniques and skills, you will become more skillful... Almost every student I’ve worked with from Korea here can draw nearly photo-realistically... their education incorporates drawing skills as part of their curriculum from a young age. And as we all know the sooner you put hours into something and if you are taught a skill and made to practice it, you will get more skillful.”

(Brummer,2013)

This source gives an interesting insight by including work ethic of Korean students. Arguably, this suggests that there is a greater significance put on being taught the arts in Korea when one compares it to, for example, the education system in the United Kingdom (UK) where arguably, humanities and The Arts are considerably under-represented in comparison to 'core' subjects like Maths, Science and English. From a report, the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Values, held by Warwick University, figures show-

“between 2003 and 2013 there was a 50% drop in GCSE entries for design and technology...It cited figures showing that since 2010, the number of arts teachers in schools had fallen by up to 11%, teaching hours and teachers for design and technology were down 11%, drama teacher levels had fallen by 8% and teaching hours for the subject, including hours taught by non-specialists, had reduced by 4%.”

(Warwick University, 2015)

This report provides evidence that could encourage one to believe that there is a lesser significance in art-subjects in the UK with a clear decrease in the

number of professionals and resources available to students. The report then continues to say that “In 2012-13, only 8.4% of students had combined arts and science at AS level” (Warwick University, 2015), which is, of course, a percentage that is much lower than it would be if there was a greater encouragement for the subjects. In contrast to these figures, perhaps what Brummer is suggesting is that students in Korea have more skills because of the greater hours of essential practise and the significance on partaking in The Arts could encourage the students to further succeed in the practise. This could be interpreted that this is the necessary attribute in order to become successful in the Arts.

In the same blog post, Brunner continues to say-

“Just like any subject (math, sport, English), some people are predisposed to specific skills. And that predisposition can lead people to their choices in school...It’s okay if you have no interest in learning how to draw or don’t have the time, but admit to it. “I just don’t have the talent” is an excuse.”

(Brunner, 2013)

While this is perhaps a slightly negative comment on the subject, this reflects the premise that was highlighted in the introduction to this enquiry. It could be argued that many people simply do not *know* if they are talented in art and design because they have not 'put in the hours' or dedicated themselves to the number of hours that it requires to achieve a certain skillset in the field. Again, this could be a result of a lack of support for the subject in schools, particularly in the UK, which ultimately could have resulted in a lack of interest for the subject.

Associate Art Historian at Penn State University, Nancy Locke, wrote in her article "Probing Question: Are Artists born or taught?" about the possibility of an innate talent being credible while recognising the importance of being taught the necessary skills.

"Artists are also made... They require training, education and a culture of other artists... Put an artist in isolation and nobody can learn anything from the work. A craftsman masters a skill, but an artist ventures beyond to innovate. Artists have to be in touch with other artists, building on what other artists have done"

(Locke, 2007)

Locke could be implying that while an 'artist' could be born with a talent in the arts, it should not be relied upon solely for their career. There must be a willingness to learn from others and adapt in order to address the ever-updating art world and to forever challenge the skills they acquire to continue to improve. It suggests that teaching is imperative to any artist who wishes to maintain a level of commercial and personal success, even if one has a *natural talent* to begin with.

Talent

Another viewpoint for how an artist acquires their talent is that they were conditioned with the ability to draw from birth; an innate talent. There are many psychologists and behaviourists who have observed those with this ability and have deducted that they are conditioned in a slightly different manner to those who are considered 'normal' who simply enjoy the process of creating. Many would argue that an individual *could* be taught how create in their artistic field to a certain level but those with the 'natural talent' may be what constitutes an 'authentic' artist. An article from the journal, *Art Education*

states that there is no definitive means of identifying those with the potential 'innate' talent or giftedness in The Arts-

“Facility with materials may not mean giftedness, but talent. The talented person is described as gifted, clever, accomplished, while the genius is said to have extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery. The talented child is one “who has received, for one reason or another, sufficient satisfaction from a certain kind of activity to participate in it more frequently and with more intensity than most children in the same age group, and so has developed his capabilities beyond the average of his group.”

(Salome, 2015, p.16-19)

As this source suggests, there are many who would argue that one could be taught how create in their artistic field to a certain level of artistic skills but those with the 'natural talent' are the difference between successful artists, perhaps. Again, in reference to the viewpoint set out in the introduction, it also suggests that for the children mentioned in the source, that practice is still a necessity for progression but it could require the innate talent to feel conditioned to *want* to continue in their intense or obsessive practice. Salome

also suggests that those with the innate ability have the creativity to allow their artwork to progress or develop in a way that those considered 'normal' children perhaps could not. This could be the key factor as to why an individual develops into an accomplished artist and could be more common than it is perhaps believed to be in the commercial art world already.

Another example of the prevalence of innately talented artists comes from US psychologists, Ellen Winner and Jennifer Drake. Naming it as a 'precocious ability', they state-

"Deliberate practise (or hard work) is necessary for the achievement of high levels of expertise, but it is not sufficient. Talent- the innate proclivity to learn easily and quickly in a particular domain- is also a necessary ingredient and should not be dismissed. We use the domain of the visual arts to illustrate our position, focusing on the drawings of children who draw realistically before their peers...First, the drawings of these children are advanced from the start... Second, these children are not just advanced but are also different. Third, there are biological markers of artistic talent. And fourth, these children show a "rage to master" in the domain of drawing- a strong drive to figure out the rules of graphic representation. Only when children have such an intense

interest are they willing to engage in extensive deliberate practise. And
an intense interest in a domain is almost always a sign of innate talent”

(Winner and Drake, p.333)

This theory of a ‘rage to master’ is an interesting take as it suggests that there are psychological factors that play into the ability. It could be interpreted as having an obsessiveness to perhaps prove to themselves or their peers that they can develop and harness their pre-existing skills. Perhaps when an individual’s skill is recognised, they feel the determination to continuously develop as a means of maintaining their relevance or validation. It is interesting to consider that there are certain signs of innate talent that can be observed to compare to the other children who did not show the same levels of dedication or determination, perhaps.

Winner and Drake expanded on their mentioned theory and findings to state-

“The second problem with the argument that hard work causes the high achievement is that it does not explain what motivates these children to work so hard. One cannot even cajole or force a normal child to draw or play music or chess all day, and the children we are talking about

insisted on spending their time in this way. Indeed, they often had to be dragged away from their preferred activities in order to eat, sleep, go to school, and be sociable. The interest, drive, and desire to work on something must be part and parcel of the talent. Of course, as we have indicated... the daily hours spent working on something lead to improvement that would not occur without the daily work. However, the desire to work so hard at something comes from within, not without, and occurs almost always when there is an ability to achieve at high levels with relative ease.”

(Winner and Drake, p.348)

Again, they suggest that there is an evident difference between children of this disposition to what is considered the ‘normal’ but while it may take a pre-existing innate ability to possess artistic capacity, they still mention the need for practise. However, in the case of these innately talented children, it could be considered an excessive desperation to further succeed in their practise or simply an obsession with their hobby. A contributing factor to their desire to ‘master’ is the ease to which they can improve because of their abilities as opposed to those who do not possess the same traits and perhaps are deterred from the practise because it takes more effort to achieve the same standard.

A famous example of innate talent is in Vincent van Gogh's work. Van Gogh is undeniably one of the most successful artists in history, but his failures are as famous as his catalogue. In his short art career, he famously only sold one painting and was considered a failure in the profession. However, now his paintings are regarded as some of the most famous and supports the theory that a large part of what is deemed a success comes from the opinions of critics and viewers alike. Van Gogh's career lasted just ten years before his death and he had not been academically educated in the arts. Arguably, his success could solely be a result and example of innate talent as there was no education to enhance those existing capabilities. Blogger, Fiona Haze, says-

"Vision is also innate: while an artist can be passionate about creating, he or she can have less talent when it comes to vision — meaning the composition and idea of an artwork before she/he has started to paint. Taught the right skills, anybody can copy one of the great artworks we know of today, like *Starry Night*. However, art truly isn't all about skill. Artists have to be real innovators, meaning being able to have the vision that creates great artwork."

(Haze, 2020)

This suggests that learning skills in art is simply not enough, but in order to be deemed successful, there has to be a natural knowledge or talent that conveys

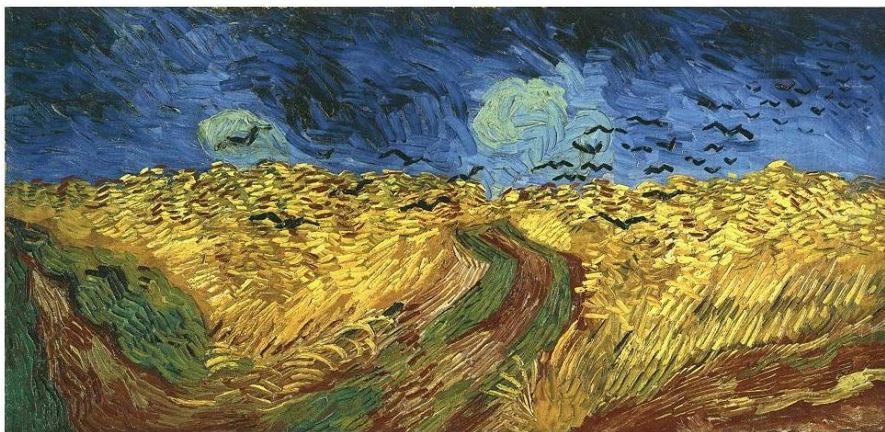
the emotions in a way similar to how Van Gogh would which could be a result of the psychological factors that play in the theory of an innate talent. When dissecting Van Gogh's first (fig.3), most successful (fig.4) and last paintings (fig.5), there is a clear development of style in the paintings from his first which perhaps was more familiar to what was 'typical' of the time. Perhaps he used his innate ability and initiative to develop his own art style which could be a reason why they are held at such esteem now; which may not have been possible if he did not possess an innate premonition beforehand. This could be the reason why all of the most famous artists have achieved their esteem in the art world today.



(Fig.3: Van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters* (1885))



(Fig.4: Van Gogh, *Starry Night* (1889))



(Fig. 5: Van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890))

Prodigy

A phrase that is often linked to an innate talent is 'prodigy' - or more specifically- a child prodigy. When a child shows an artistic talent, or innate

ability, from a young age, they are heralded as a prodigy in their field based on the attention their artwork sees from that young age and the profit or acclaim they receive as a result. In an article exploring what makes an artistically talented child a prodigy, US journalist Jacoba Urist says-

“Stand before any abstract painting—try a Jackson Pollock...— and it’s inevitable someone will say: My child could have done that. For many, the dripping spatters or scribbles seem haphazard and simplistic, not unlike something an average toddler might do with a set of finger paints. And as contemporary art becomes more conceptual, it’s harder to know what makes a piece of art great...Seven-year-old Australian abstract painter Aelita Andre... embodies what one art historian calls the “my kid could do that” impulse. Once again, the media seems taken with the idea that a child’s art may be a joke on a self-important art world.”

(Urist, 2014)

When one considers the two artists mentioned in the same abstract artist category, Aelita Andre and Jackson Pollock (as seen in figures. 6 and 7), while there are similarities in their application of paint, there are many art critics who perhaps would argue that there is more concept behind the piece. In fact,

in the same article, Urist references a 2011 study published in *Psychological Science* by Dr. Ellen Winner which says

“adults who were untrained in the visual arts, were able to distinguish abstract work by professional artists from “strikingly similar works made by untrained children and nonhuman animals” (Winner, 2011). Most participants correctly identified the work of the professional artists and therefore challenging the common claim that an abstract artist’s work was not considered more successful than the work or paintings of an ‘ordinary’ child.”

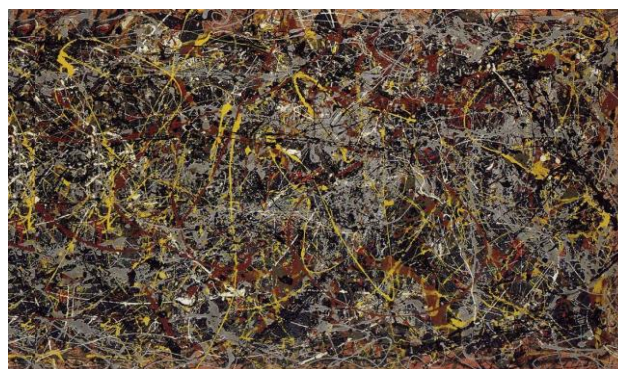
(Urist, 2014)

This finding implies that while many would still consider there to be a great similarity in the process of abstract art, particularly that of artists like Pollock, it still perhaps requires an artist to develop their style with an education in the arts and potentially the years of experience in order to be considered established or successful. Nevertheless, Andre has still received acclaim and the title of ‘child prodigy’ and it is undeniable that she possesses a talent that most ‘ordinary’ children would not be capable of having with a definite group of admirers. Her work is considered to be in the same league as other abstract

artists so perhaps a combination of both innate talent and an audience are what deems a talented child a prodigy.



(Fig.6: Andre, *The Golden Pearl Unicorn in Space* (2014))



(Fig.7: Pollock, *Convergence* (1952))

Arguably the most famous example of a child prodigy is Pablo Picasso who famously said, “It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.” (Picasso, n.d). A *National Geographic* article written by Claudia Kalb, which explores Picasso’s journey from prodigy to ‘genius’, states-

“The vast majority of prodigies don’t grow up to be geniuses, no matter how flawlessly they master a skill. Genius requires a game-changing personality, endowed with the courage and vision to transform a discipline.”

(Kalb, 2018)

This suggests that perhaps what is sought after to be recognised as a prodigy (a skill in realistic drawings has been mentioned often) is not necessarily what would be required to be a successful fine artist. Arguably it requires that innate talent that is important to develop the fundamentals of drawing to begin with but then, through education and one’s own experimentation, an artist must develop their own formula or style to be considered as innovative in their practise. This is how the success is recognised- through creating an art that is fundamentally *new* and ‘organic’ to that individual artist. This is evident when one considers his earliest (fig.7) and last painting (fig.8). While there is obvious

talent from his earliest painting (painted at age 9), it is vastly different from his developed style as a professional fine artist which brought his success.



(Fig.7: Picasso, *Le Picador*, 1890))



(Fig. 8: Picasso, *Self Portrait facing Death* (1972))

In the same article, it suggests other factors that contributed to Picasso reaching his 'genius' status. Kalb says-

"Picasso seemed destined for artistic greatness... a family that cultivated his creative passion, intellectual curiosity and grit, clusters of peers who

inspired him, and the good fortune to be born at a time when new ideas in science, literature, and music energised his work and the advent of mass media catapulted him to fame... Family members recalled that Picasso would draw for hours at a time as a child...until he was too exhausted to continue”

(Kalb, 2018)

It seems that these sequences of events could have been a part of the reason for Picasso’s success. The emergence in the development of media capabilities could be considered a great factor as without the transmission into the public eye of the art world, the potential would be undermined. His family being supportive of his talent is also very important as that encouragement could have encouraged Picasso’s persistence to harness his innate skills, as mentioned previously. It states that he would draw for hours “until he was too exhausted to continue” which seems to mirror the theory that children born with an innate talent have a ‘rage to master’ in their field through endless practise, which it has been implied was the case for Picasso. It could be considered that these factors, along with his precocious abilities propelled Picasso into his status of one of the most accomplished fine artists in history, so to suggest that an innate talent is the reason one has the ability to be an artist may not be necessarily true.

Upon exploring my three chosen keywords, and how they have correlated or deferred from one another, I have made several enlightening discoveries on how an individual becomes an artist. The working question of 'Can art be taught, or is it innate?' is extremely poignant for an investigation into finding out how an artist achieves their talent or success. From my findings, it seems that many professionals also have contrasting opinions, which have been showcased in this personal enquiry. However, one could argue that while an artists may be born with the innate talent or skill to naturally be competent in an artistic field, it requires practise, determination and dedication to develop into a unique style or niche that categorises them as a 'successful artist'. In many cases, it can require support or subjectivity from those judging the art to be considered worthy. It is interesting to consider what holds the greatest bearing on an artist's achievements and has scope to develop this enquiry further.

My question= 'Can art be taught, or is it innate?'

Bibliography

- Andre, A. (2014). *The Golden Pearl Unicorn in Space* [Mixed media on Canvas]. Available at: <https://www.londonbiennale.co.uk/artist/aelita-andre>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Brummer, C. (2013) 'Is Art a Skill or Talent?', *Artist Strong* [Blog]. 16 February. Available at: <https://www.artiststrong.com/is-art-a-skill-or-talent/>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Drake, J. E. (2012) 'How to Spot Artistic Brilliance'. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-spot-artistic-brilliance/> (Accessed: 13/04/20.)
- Drake, J.E and Winner, E (2013) *The Complexity of Greatness: Beyond Talent or Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Haze, F. (2020) 'Is True Talent a Hoax?'. *Warrior News* [Blog] 13 January. Available at: <https://aswwarriornews.wordpress.com/2020/01/13/is-true-talent-a-hoax/> (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Kalb, C. (2018) *How Picasso's Journey From Prodigy to Icon Revealed a Genius*. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2018/04/how-picassos-journey-prodigy-icon-revealed-genius>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Locke, N. (2007) 'Probing Question: Are artists born or taught?'. Available at: <https://news.psu.edu/story/141174/2007/08/13/research/probing-question-are-artists-born-or-taught>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)

- Picasso, P. (1890) *Le Picador* {Oil on Wood}. Available at: <https://www.pablo-ruiz-picasso.net/work-261.php>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Picasso, P. (1972) *Self Portrait facing Death*. Available at: <https://curiator.com/art/pablo-picasso/self-portrait-facing-death>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Picasso, P. (n.d) *What Makes a Child an Art Prodigy?*. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/what-makes-a-child-an-art-prodigy/382389/>
Accessed: 13/04/20
- Pollock, J. (1952). *Convergence* [Oil on Canvas] Available at: <https://www.jackson-pollock.org/convergence.jsp>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Salome, R.A (2015) 'Identifying and Instructing the Gifted in Art', *Art Education*, 27(3), pp.16-19.
- Urist, J. (2014) *What Makes a Child an Art Prodigy?*. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/what-makes-a-child-an-art-prodigy/382389/>. (Accessed: 13/04/20)
- Van Gogh, V. (1885) *The Potato Eaters* [Oil on Canvas] Available at: <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0005V1962?v=1> (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Van Gogh, V. (1889). *Starry Night* [Oil on Canvas]. Available at: <https://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starry-night.html> (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)

- Van Gogh, V. (1890). *Wheatfield with Crows* [Oil on Canvas]. Available at: <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0149V1962>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Warwick University, (2015) *Arts and creativity 'squeezed out of schools'*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31518717>. (Accessed: 23rd April 2020)
- Watson, J. (1930) 'Deliberate practice: Is that all it takes to become an expert?', *Intelligence*, 45, pp.34-35. Available at: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1016/j.intell.2013.04.001> (Accessed: 11/04/20