

Diane Johnson Handloser 1991-1992

Lecture Dedication

TO THE MEMORY of Dr. Harold Dunn

Lecture Perspective

DESCRIPTION OF THE artist . . . 'His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities — like the vulnerable body within a steel armor . . . The artist appeals . . . to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition — and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity . . . which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.'

—Joseph Conrad

Giotto's O & Other Tales: Myths about Artists & Their Work

**Diane Johnson Handloser, M.A.
Professor of Art History**

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THANK YOU. And welcome. I'm very happy to see all of you today and I thank you for sharing this wonderful occasion with me.

I have a confession to make: this was a tough lecture to write. I kept telling myself that I should think of it as just another 50-minute lecture, like any class I teach during the week. But this one loomed larger, more important than the rest, as you can imagine. It wasn't until I began to think of this lecture as a way of saying thank you to all of you who have been my friends, my co-workers, and my students over the past 21 years, that I found my voice, and the subject I want to share with you today.

Before I begin, I want to extend special thanks to my family, who have had to live with my distraction while I prepared for this lecture. My husband, John, and our daughters, Hope and Gretchen, keep me in touch with everything that is really important in life, and

keep me from becoming overconcerned with the daily pressures of teaching. I would also like to thank my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ovie Johnson. They have always believed with a kind of blind, loving parental faith, that I could do anything, and that faith has been a great base to build on. My parents are here today, having recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. I'd like all of my family to stand. Please join me in thanking them.

I have been blessed with many inspirational teachers through my life. One of my best teachers was right here on this campus, and I would like to dedicate this lecture to his memory: Dr. Harold Dunn, who died in May of this year. Hal guided the Music Department and the Fine Arts Division for many years at Santa Barbara City College. When I was first hired, I joined Hal's choir during my lunch hour. That semester I learned to sing the alto part of Verdi's *Requiem*, and participated in a thrilling performance at the Granada Theater. More importantly, I had the opportunity to study a gifted teacher in action, on a day to day basis. I knew the mechanics of teaching, but Hal showed me the human side, the art of teaching. He taught me the importance of being absolutely one's self when standing in front of a class, and that good teaching is based on honestly sharing one's love of learning.

The last time I talked to Hal was in mid-April, when he called to congratulate me on being named Faculty Lecturer. He promised me that he and Phyllis would be here today. Phyllis is, and I know Hal is in spirit. Hal was a great storyteller; I think he's going to like the stories I tell today.

And I hope that you are going to like these stories, too. I'll begin by showing you one of my favorite drawings, entitled *The Artist and the Connoisseur*, by the 16th century Flemish painter, Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Brueghel depicts an artist, possibly himself, focused on his work, as an admirer looks on with wide-eyed wonder while reaching for his purse. I've always thought that Brueghel was poking fun at the connoisseur. The connoisseur looks a bit too awestruck to be taken seriously. Brueghel is telling us what he thinks of the connoisseur, and it's not too flattering



One of the reasons I like this drawing is because it is about the relationship of those who make art, and those who don't. I do not make art, but, as an art historian, spend my time, somewhat strangely perhaps, talking about this essentially non-verbal artform. Despite the fact that Brueghel does not exactly flatter his admirer, as an art observer, I identify with the connoisseur in this drawing. Like the connoisseur, but better looking I hope, I am interested in artists and in the gnawing necessity they feel to make art.

I am not alone in this interest. The personality and character of artists have intrigued the public at large throughout history, and continue to do so today. I find that people often know far more about the details of an artist's life, than they know about that artist's work. For example, students just beginning to study the history of art, always know that Vincent Van Gogh (Fig. 1) is the one who cut off his ear. In fact for many, Van Gogh is a kind of archetype of what the artist is, embodying many of the stereotypes of the creative individual.



*Fig. 1. Vincent Van Gogh:
Self-Portrait with Severed Ear.*

It is often assumed that artists are eccentric, disorganized, temperamental and difficult to get along with, egocentric, obsessed with their work, crazy, alienated from society, different from "normal" people, etc., etc. I think most people recognize these as stereotypes, but still this image of the artist persists. I have wondered about the roots of these stereotypes. How was this image born? Why are we so ready to accept such images as *typical* of the artistic temperament?

What follows are the results of my investigation into these questions. I am going to tell you stories about artists. Some are true. Some are blatant inventions. All are part of the mythology which has grown up around the character and behavior of artists. We will first examine the myth, and then look at how the myth relates to reality, to the truth about artists. To clarify the intriguing, complex and at times contradictory stereotypes I have uncovered, I will focus on three aspects of the myth of the artist: we will look at the myth of the artist as hero, the artist as bohemian, and the artist as superstar.

I will begin with some anecdotes written by Renaissance biographers. These anecdotes, whether they are true or not, tell us something about the artist in that they may contain the proverbial grain of truth. *And* they tell us about what the biographer thought was important to include, and, thus, they express society's expectations about the artistic personality.

A continuous history of artists' biographies begins during the Renaissance. During the 15th and 16th centuries in Italy, particularly in Florence, the position of artists in society changed. They gained more independence, and began to be thought of as individuals. Biographies of artists express this enhanced social position. The earliest Renaissance biographies begin in the 15th century to treat the artist as somehow larger than life, a hero, a chosen one of blessed birth and blessed life, linked to God by his gifts.

The Renaissance myth begins with the painter Giotto, who stands at the beginning of the Proto-Renaissance period in early 14th century Florence. In his great monument in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Giotto proved himself one of the great dramatists of the history of art, telling the story of Christ's life with both simplicity and power. In his *Kiss of Judas* (Fig. 2), he describes the betrayal with the powerful sweep of Judas' yellow cloak which envelops Jesus. All the bustling activity around these two figures is held together by this central device. And, in the meeting of the eyes of Christ and those of Judas, Giotto captures the full force of that awful confrontation of good and evil.



Fig. 2. Giotto: Kiss of Judas, Arena Chapel, Padua.

In the century following his death in 1336, there grew up stories about Giotto that were eventually recorded in written biography. One myth about Giotto, written in the 16th century by Giorgio Vasari, tells us of his discovery as an artist (Fig. 3). One day, the Florentine painter Cimabue was walking in the hills outside of Florence, when he came upon a young shepherd boy, drawing pictures of his sheep, from life, upon the rocks. Struck by the skill and talent of the young shepherd, Cimabue sought permission of the boy's father to take him into his studio as an apprentice, and thus began Giotto's career as an artist.



Fig. 3. Giotto: Joachim Among Shepherds, Arena Chapel.

This is a simple enough story, but it contains several stereotypes which in Renaissance biography became almost a formula. Often, in these biographies, the artist is of humble origin. That Giotto was a shepherd and that his subject was sheep, drawn from life, connects him to the natural world as a source of subject and inspiration. (By the way, as great an artist as Giotto was, I never have thought that this story made much sense in light of the way Giotto actually painted sheep in this scene of *Joachim Among the Shepherds* from the Arena Chapel.)

That Giotto was discovered by Cimabue helps to provide a kind of artistic genealogy for Giotto. Again, there is nothing to indicate that Giotto was ever Cimabue's student, let

alone discovered by him (like Lana Turner at Schwab's Pharmacy), but, by linking Cimabue and Giotto, the biographer provides Giotto with a noble artistic lineage.

Many Renaissance myths about artists have to do with the artist's virtuosity as a source of amazement and admiration. Vasari tells us one such story about the cleverness of Giotto. This is the story of Giotto's O, which I mention in the title of my talk. The Pope sent emissaries to all the greatest artists of Italy, asking for plans for a new building. The winner of the competition would be announced on the basis of these plans. (Giotto, by the way, was an architect, having built the Arena Chapel, as well as having painted it.) When an emissary came to Giotto, the artist simply drew a circle on a piece of paper. The papal emissary protested that Giotto was supposed to submit detailed plans. Giotto patiently told him to take the drawing to the Pope, that the Pope, in his wisdom, would understand. And indeed, the Pope did understand. He recognized Giotto's genius when he saw that the artist had drawn a perfect circle, freehand, without the aid of a compass or any mechanical device! Such brilliance and simplicity deserved to win the competition, and, so based on Giotto's O, he was given the commission.



*Fig. 4. Michelangelo:
St. Matthew (Detail).*

Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, we find references to the artist's divine power. Alberti, the great architect and theorist, called artists "a second god." Michelangelo (Fig. 4) himself often compared his power as a sculptor to the power of God to make man. And he said that as a sculptor he was merely unlocking the figure encased in the stone, as the soul was incarcerated in the body. Dürer, in 16th century Germany, whose wonderful self-portrait of 1500 referred to artistic activity as "creating just as God did." Michelangelo and Raphael were both called "il divino" by their contemporaries, and references were made to the divine paint brush of Titian.

Another recurring theme has God working through artists in a miraculous way. According to legend, El Greco (Fig. 5) broke off an arm of Christ from a sculptured crucifix and proceeded to paint with it. I find it hard to imagine the artist painting with this sculptured arm, but in the myth, the emotional power of El Greco's compositions is said to have come from divine intervention through this arm.



*Fig. 5. El Greco: Christ
Cleansing the Temple.*

During the Renaissance, the visual arts entered the circle of the liberal arts and the artist, who for centuries had been a manual worker, rose to the

position of intellectual worker, his profession on a par with poetry and the theoretical sciences. Leonardo da Vinci (Fig 6) had a lot to do with the recognition of the mental powers required by the making of art. Addressing the literary men of his day, he said, "If you call it (painting) mechanical because it is, in the first place, manual, in that it is the hand which produces what is to be found in the imagination, you writers also set down manually with the pen what is devised in your mind." Certainly, these drawings by Leonardo exhibit all of his considerable intellectual power.



*Fig. 6. Leonardo da Vinci:
Woman's Hands.*

It is interesting to note that this argument concerning the intellectual status of art and artists was largely won in the Renaissance, but that today the argument still rages, indeed sometimes even on this campus. In the Renaissance, however, it came to be accepted that art was the result of intellectual effort that, as Michelangelo said, "a man paints with his brain." It was believed, in the words of Leonardo, that "painting has to do with natural philosophy, that it is truly a science" and that a painter had "first to study science and follow with practice based on science." Art was connected with learning. This philosophy dominated the general attitude toward artists at least until the late 18th century.

The myth of the artist as hero extended only to male artists, however. In the early Renaissance, it was believed that women did not possess the potential for artistic genius, and this general belief affected the training of young women, and surely their images of themselves. In the 15th century, fewer than 10 women throughout Europe were recorded as artists in published documents. By 1550, the number of women artists began to grow. It came to be believed that the God-given gifts of the artist could occasionally extend to a woman. The earliest women artists who appear in the records were often the daughters of artists, which gave them access to the artistic training not available to most women.

One such artist was Artemisia Gentileschi (Fig. 7), who was born at the end of the 16th century in Italy. We see her beautiful self-portrait here, as the personification of painting. Her father, the painter Orazio Gentileschi, recognized his daughter's artistic gifts and trained her well. Unlike most women, Artemisia had the opportunity to study from the nude model, and thus was one of the earliest women artists to deal with the human figure in large-scale compositions. She was not the only woman to make a significant contribution to the history of art. From the mid-16th century on, there were growing numbers of gifted women artists who defied the conventions of their time and maintained highly productive careers as artists. Nevertheless, the overwhelming prejudice against women artists assured that the myth of the artist remained largely a male myth until the 20th century.



The next phase of our inquiry explores the myth of the artist as bohemian. While the Renaissance creates the myth of the artist as hero, in tune with the society in which he lived, it was also the Renaissance which gave rise to the earliest myths of the artist as eccentric. Liberated from the guild, independent from its rules, as well as its economic security and protection, a new type of artist begins to emerge: one who refuses to conform to society's accepted norms.

By the Renaissance, artists were already considered different, set apart in one way or another. A 16th century writer said to one of Michelangelo's contemporaries: "Your being a sculptor brings with it a privilege that permits you every extravagance." (This is the 16th century equivalent of the remark one hears occasionally today, "What do you expect, she's an artist!") Michelangelo himself is supposed to have grown impatient with the stereotype which already existed in the Renaissance. According to his biographer, Francesco da Hollanda, Michelangelo said, "People spread a thousand pernicious lies about famous painters. They are strange, solitary, and unbearable, it is said, while in fact they are not different from other human beings."

There are many tales about the obsessiveness of artists. Masaccio (Fig. 8), who in his brief life of 27 years, wrought a revolution equal to Giotto's a century before in painting, was said by Vasari to be so obsessed with work as to be totally indifferent to all but his art. It is hard to square the following story with Masaccio's magnificent frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, so expressive of the intellectual order of the Renaissance. In this tale, which may be true, Vasari tells us the origin of Masaccio's name. Vasari says:



*Fig. 8. Masaccio:
Tribute Money.*

Masaccio, whose real name was Tommaso Guidi, "was a very absent-minded and careless person; having fixed his mind and will wholly on matters of art, he cared little about himself and still less about others. And since he would never under any circumstances give a thought to the cares and concerns of the world, nor even to his clothes, and was not in the habit of recovering his money from his debtors, except when he was in greatest need, Tommaso was called Masaccio (Silly Tom) by everybody."

There are other myths about various kinds of bizarre behavior by artists: of Piero di Cosimo living on nothing but eggs, which he boiled, 50 at a time, at the same time as he boiled his glue; of Pontormo, who lived in absolute isolation—lonely, introspective, and with a pathological fear of death. By and large these stories seem to be exceptions, the unusual examples which made for good reading and whose stories were told because they were of interest and precisely because they were atypical and thus fascinating. Artists played an important role in Renaissance society, and thus what they did was of interest.

The greatest contribution to the myth of the artist as bohemian comes of course from the Romantic period, the early 19th century. The Romantic philosophy preached the necessity of experiencing all of life, especially life at its most extreme, so that the artist would have the emotional information available to him to describe life at its most powerful and sublime. In Géricault's *Portrait of an Artist in His Studio* (Fig. 9), we have the Romantic ideal of the artist, whose creativity stems from his sensitive and intuitive nature. Exploring his own genius, the Romantic artist learned to trust the primacy of his emotions, and attempted to work with absolute spontaneity in response to his sensations. From this philosophy sprang many examples of non-conformist behavior.



Fig. 9. Géricault:
Portrait of Artist.



Fig. 10. J.M.W. Turner:
Steamer in a Snowstorm.



Fig. 11. Eugene Delacroix:
Death of Sardanapalus.

The 19th century English painter, Joseph Mallord William Turner (Fig. 10), provides a great example of behavior typical of the Romantic myth. Here we see his *Steamer in a Snowstorm* of 1842. What looks at first glance like an abstract painting, is really his interpretation of an overpowering personal encounter with nature. On a voyage, Turner's ship was overtaken by a violent snowstorm at sea. Determined to experience the full fury of the storm, Turner had himself lashed to the mast of the ship, and rode out the storm for four hours. He was not a foolish young man, but had just passed his 67th birthday! He said that he fully expected to die in the experience, but, that if he survived, he felt bound to set this experience down on canvas. The desire to fully understand the unbridled power of nature caused him to put himself in great danger for his art.

The 19th century French painter, Eugene Delacroix, seen here peering out of the darkness in Géricault's interpretation of genius, is an embodiment of the Romantic myth of the artist. In his *Death of*

Sardanapalus (Fig 11), Delacroix, only 28 years old at the time he painted it, gives us the perfect Romantic picture, filled with lush color, organized and energized by a powerful diagonal which cuts across the composition. In it he tells the story of Lord Byron's play of the same name, in which an Assyrian general, facing certain defeat in battle, has all his most valued possessions, his concubines, his eunuchs, his finest

horses, his jewels, brought to his tent. There, presiding over it all, he has the tent set ablaze, choosing death over defeat.

Delacroix's paintings suggest by their subject matter and style, a full involvement with the Romantic philosophy of a celebration of the senses. And yet, it is interesting to note that Delacroix, after a brief foray into bohemian behavior in his youth, spent most of his life living in his own aristocratic circle. He never married, but devoted his life to his work, producing an astounding output of more than 850 oils and thousands of drawings and watercolors, confounding another aspect of the bohemian myth, that artists don't work.

If the Romantic philosophy encouraged a nonconformist lifestyle, so did the economic position of artists in the 19th century. Artists found themselves bound to the Academy, which placed increasingly constrictive ties upon them, controlling everything from the writing of contracts to their methods and inventions. Artists who did not conform to Academic rules, found themselves on very shaky economic ground, and, as a consequence, their alienation increased.

The Romantic ideal of the artist's genius lived on into the late 19th century and early 20th century. Paul Gauguin represents the bohemian image most vividly because he chose to abandon "this filthy Europe," as he called it, in an effort to find humanity in a purer state, in the South Seas. The Gauguin myth tells of a middle-class stockbroker who suddenly abandoned his wife and three children in order to paint, eventually retiring to Tahiti, where, in the words of the painter's son, Emil Gauguin, "he lived and loved and painted and died like a savage." Emil Gauguin contradicts the legend, affirming that his father had been interested in painting for years, and that his mother had agreed to let Gauguin go off to the South Seas, "not because she had faith in his genius, but because she respected his passion for art."

In an 1889 self-portrait, Gauguin was thinking of himself in mythic terms, depicting himself as an icon. This may have been painted tongue in cheek. He never explained what he meant, nonetheless, Gauguin portrays himself as a saint, a prophet, a magician, and, at the very least, as a hero of the new order of painting.

What Gauguin found when he arrived in Tahiti was a people who had been Christianized for over a generation, who wore clothes and had already been subject to strong European influences. What Gauguin created in his work was a version of truth that was closer to what he anticipated finding in Tahiti, than to actual reality. Disappointed by what he found, he created his own Romantic myth about his life and art. Nonetheless, Gauguin makes us taste the mangoes and smell the sweet scent of abundance.

Another artist who conforms to the myth of the artist as bohemian was the painter Suzanne Valadon (Fig. 12). Valadon, the illegitimate daughter of a laundress, grew up homeless and in poverty in the bohemian quarter of Montmartre, in late 19th century Paris. On her own from the age of 10 or 12, she supported herself as a circus performer. By the age of 18, she had borne an illegitimate son. In later years, Valadon would teach her son, Maurice Utrillo, to paint, reversing the traditional direction of art teaching from artist father to daughter. She frequented the cafes of the French avant-garde, and met Degas, Renoir, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, for whom she worked as a model. Valadon must have learned a great deal watching the development of their paintings on a daily basis. She had loved to draw since childhood, and, although she had no formal artistic training, she was encouraged in the pursuit of her talent by her artist friends. Informed by her experience as both model and artist, the works she produced are marked by boldness, insight and sensitivity.



Fig. 12. Suzanne Valadon: Self-Portrait.

The myth of the artist as genius is still shaped by the Romantic ideal. In the 20th century, however, there are other elements which begin to influence the myth of the artist, the most important of which are the mass media and the marketplace. Jackson Pollock is a good example of an artist whose popular image was made by the media. Pollock came to national attention in a 1949 feature article in *Life* magazine which asked the question: "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" Although quoting a statement by critic Clement Greenberg, *Life* certainly must have understood the impact their question would have on a public totally unprepared for Pollock's work.



*Fig. 13. Jackson Pollock:
Last Self-Portrait.*



*Fig. 14. Jackson Pollock;
Blue Poles, No. 11.*

Pollock, whom we see here in his last self-portrait (Fig 13), was a difficult man. He was tense, insecure, uncomfortable socially; he was an alcoholic. In many ways, he fulfilled every expectation of the bohemian artist in his personal behavior. In his art (Fig. 14), he was equally nonconformist, using unconventional methods and materials, rolling out the canvas on the floor, working above the canvas from all four sides, making the final decision as to size and orientation of the piece after he had stopped painting. Using house painter's paints, he dripped and flung the paint, creating large powerful paintings which are a record of the very process of painting itself. *Time* magazine would later call him "Jack the Dripper," making him a household word to millions of people who knew and cared little about his art. In the art world, however, Pollock's influence was overwhelming. That his work was a force to be reckoned with was memorialized in a portrait of Pollock by California ceramic sculptor Robert Arneson, entitled "The Myth of the Western Man."

Pollock's connection with the West became an important part of his myth. He was born in Cody, Wyoming, and grew up in Arizona and California. In the late 1920's, he worked with his father on a surveying job on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. He eventually moved to New York to study at the Art Students League. Although Pollock never settled again in the West, nearly all of Pollock's biographers would emphasize this Western connection, sometimes to the point of absurdity. One compared Pollock's paintings to the "cowboy sport of bronco busting." Another called him the "Billy the Kid of the Manhattan art world, twirling lariats of color in wide open spaces" in order to create "vistas of writing paint trails." By the late 1940s, Pollock was identified with the rugged independence of the cowboy, a loner, a man true to his instincts.

The image of rugged independence was further reinforced by more subtle connections that were made by biographers to some of the culture heroes of the 1950s, especially James Dean and Marlon Brando. Some of the descriptions and photographs of Pollock (Fig. 15) from the early '50s seem to have been modeled directly on these actors and their roles as rebel heroes. It has even been suggested that the personality of Stanley Kowalski, played by Marlon Brando in Elia Kazan's 1951 film, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was actually modeled, at least in part, on Pollock. Jackson and his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, knew the playwright, Tennessee Williams, and they frequently saw each during the summer of 1944, three years before Williams wrote the play. Williams admired Pollock and said that he was able to create "moments of intensely perceptive being." He went on to say that Pollock "could paint ecstasy as it could not be written."



Fig. 15. Jackson Pollock (Photo), 1950.

Fig. 16. Andy Warhol: Self-Portrait.



Fig. 17. Andy Warhol: Soup Cans.

Andy Warhol best exemplifies the image of the 20th century artist as commercial success and gallery superstar. Warhol was a prolific self-portraitist, making himself the subject of many of his artworks (Fig. 16). But what I find most fascinating about Warhol, is how he literally shaped his own myth, creating an image of himself which was as much a work of art as were his paintings, silkscreens and films. From his wigs, to his carefully studied projection of a bland and vacant personality, to his addiction to glamor and fame, everything about Warhol was outrageous. He called into question many of

the most defining attributes of art-making. By celebrating repetition, boredom, and banality (Fig 17), he reversed the normal role of the artist as an explorer of the imagination. (I was amused, but not surprised to discover in my research that Warhol once had eight cats, all named Sam.) By employing the process of silkscreen, and having his Factory produce the works he designed, he raised questions about authenticity and originality, and the special role of the artist in making a work of art.

By celebrating money, in his art and his lifestyle, he reversed the bohemian myth. The artist, according to Warhol, must be a good businessman. He said, "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art . . . I like money on the wall. Say you were going to buy a \$200,000 painting. I think you should take that money, tie it up, and hang it on the wall. Then, when someone visited you, the first thing they would see is the money on the wall." All of this was delivered with deadpan seriousness. He left us wondering whether this was a magnificent put-on or simply the honest recognition of the reality of the influence of big money on the art world. Warhol's power lay in the myth he created, in his enigmatic personality, in the moral ambiguity of his statements.

Warhol used to say, "I want to be a machine." Now, several years after his death, his wish is about to come to fruition. A life-size robot, begun during Warhol's lifetime and cast from his body, is nearing completion. This Warhol clone is an incredible post-mortem gesture for an artist who attempted to deny the myth of the artist as genius. This totally synthetic fake, the embodiment of his myth, makes an appropriate monument to his memory.

All of these tales are amusing and entertaining, but what interests me is how the myth relates to reality, to the truth about artists. The myth often blurs and conceals the truth; it just as often reveals something essential about the nature of artists and the society in which they live.

Let's look at the truths. The first truth that the myth conceals is that there is no such thing as the stereotypical artist. Yes, there have always been artists to illustrate the myth, but, by far, the great majority of artists in the history of art have lived outside the myth, not fulfilling the stereotypes of behavior expected of them. Great art has been created by artists who exhibit all types of behavior, reflecting the range of behavior found in the rest of society.

An example of a great artist whose life did not conform to the myth was John Constable, the 19th century English painter. He lived a quiet domestic life, focused on his family and his painting. Essentially a self-taught artist, he produced marvelous depictions of the English countryside (Fig 18). He made great art out of his own experience, just as Jane Austen, living a narrow life surrounded by nieces and nephews, produced great literature about that life. Constable said, "My limited and restricted art may be found under every hedge." And he once wrote in a letter to a friend, "The sound of water escaping from mill dams . . . willows, old rotten banks, slimy posts, and brickwork. I love such things. They made me a painter (and I am grateful)." We should be grateful, as well, for his fresh views of the English countryside cause us to breathe deeper, and remember our connection to the earth.



Fig. 18. John Constable: Hampstead Heath.

Another truth is that art doesn't necessarily mirror the personality of the artist who created it. The myth is very compelling, and tempts us to read the artist's work in light of what is known about his or her personality. But such a reading can often be very misleading, and prevent us from truly seeing what the artist created. This fact is clearly illustrated by Pollock, whose behavior was at times ugly and antisocial; nevertheless, his paintings were graceful and lyrical. Through his art, Pollock transcended the shortcomings of his own character, and created something of great beauty.

The myth also conceals the truth about who becomes an artist. Artists come from both sexes, from all races and socio-economic groups. As interpreters of experience, artists are found in all segments of society. Last spring, a contemporary woman artist, Carmen Lomas Garza (Fig 19), visited this campus. She spoke eloquently of the experience of growing up a Chicana near the Mexican border, in Texas, and the difficulty of living in two cultures. Her narrative art, in all its directness and simplicity, interprets her life in a way which makes it accessible to those of us who have not shared that life experience. In her work, she deals with



Fig. 19. Carmen Lomas Garza: Birthday Party.

specific events of her own childhood, and, through those specific events, she also deals with values which are universal and which cross cultural lines.

The myth of the modern artist would have us believe that all artists are either starving or else they work full-time as artists, living off their art. The truth is that, through the history of art, many artists have done neither. Instead, they have been 'part-timers,' working at other jobs to support themselves, while saving a part of themselves for their art. Vermeer (Fig. 20), for example, in 17th century Holland, ran a tavern and acted as a dealer not only for his own work, but for the work of other artists as well. He painted only a handful of pictures. When he died, he left a very large family and large bills for his widow to pay. He considered himself a painter, was head of the painters' guild, but had to support himself with other work in order to make ends meet. This has been a common pattern for artists through history.



*Fig. 20. Johannes Vermeer:
Young Woman with Water Jug.*

The mythology of artists also *reveals* certain truths about artists. The myth, no matter how far-fetched it may appear, mirrors the culture of the time. In other words, the myth is ultimately grounded in the attitude of the time toward artists. Thus, in the Renaissance, when creative power was thought to arise from the intellect and the rational mind, there was an appreciation of the mental powers required to make a work of art. When, in the 19th century, feeling and sensation were viewed as the source of creativity, artists were expected to, and often did, sate their senses in nonconformist behavior in order to inform their art. Lastly, the commercialism of late 20th century Western society has produced a myth which represents the unfortunate devaluation of art as a locus of spiritual value, and the appreciation of art as one more commodity in a secularized and commercial world.

Finally, the fact that a mythology of artists exists at all is recognition of another truth in which the myths are all grounded: that when all is said and done, there *is* an 'otherness' about artists. The very existence of the myth confirms that artists, at their best, hold a certain power over us, a power which at times may touch us deeply and personally. Artists offer us, in the words of Lewis Hyde, "images by which to imagine our lives." They offer us a way of understanding our past, sorting out the present and foreseeing our future.

Artists, by maintaining a connection to the child within them, awaken in us a sense of play and wonder. Their vision makes us more keenly aware of our own. By presenting us with evidence of their gifts, the fruits of their own rich inner life, they remind us of our own potential, making us feel gifted for a while, encouraging us to nurture our own creative selves.

This lecture has been my homage to artists, artists of the past, and those I work with every day. We should value them. We should support their work. For in nourishing their own imaginations, they feed our spirits.

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