

The Creative Path



For many careers, the path to success is straightforward. Go to good schools, get degrees, work hard, and everything else will take care of itself. There's an almost alphabetical nature to the process due to the demand of most professions' skills. Do A, then B; then C, the end.

Doctors, engineers, teachers, business people and scientists are always needed, and therefore always valued because there are endless amounts of sick people who need treatment, information or construction that needs building, products that need to be sold, children who need to learn, and problems that need to be understood.

Simply put, our society depends on these and other professionals to perform their duties, or it will stop working.

Enter the artist. A person who crafts expressions that inspire others.

While most people can name plenty of their favorite artists, ask someone what makes an artist great, and you'll likely get a different answer from each person you ask. Try to compare the greatness of different artists and you might start an argument.

That's because feeling connected to a work of art is an incredibly personal experience. The same piece of work may affect two people in very different ways, ranging from delight to indifference to disgust. Some works of art end up in the trash, some incite riots, and some are put on the cover of magazines. Still, the art that ends up in the trash could be discovered years later, while the art on the magazine cover can end up forgotten.

No matter what happens to the art, as long as it exists, it always has the potential to inspire others.

Some artists are also "forgotten" about for hundreds of years, until their work is "rediscovered" by someone who brings new understanding to why their work should be considered important.

It's all very complicated, and nobody seems to have anything more concrete to say than the tired idiom, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

So if you're an artist, or want to be an artist, how do you know if you're successful? How do you even know if you're an artist?

To get an insider's perspective, I posed these questions and more to two very different New York City artists.

Choreographer/Dancer, Hadar Ahuvia:

What makes someone an artist?

The decision to be an artist. I believe everyone is inherently creative, some of us have a knack for one thing or another, but one can be artful through almost any media or activity. You decide to be part of an artistic community.

How did you know you were an artist?

I sometimes still wonder if I'm an artist, and have to refer to what I wrote above. But I've felt several times in my life that I made a decision. When I was sixteen I said to myself, okay, if after this summer I don't like dancing, I'll quit. I had a great summer dancing, and I'm still dancing, so I decided to keep going. Then I made a bunch of other decisions about how I wanted to dance. Soon I was arranging my life around it. It was becoming a larger piece of my identity; still it's only one of many.

What was the first project that made you feel proud of your work?

I used to draw in high school. I drew a picture of my sleeping adopted sister. It was both realistic, but because the blanket covered half of her face, it was a bit mysterious. It was the best realistic drawing I had ever done. I wasn't sure how it happened. Until then I had mostly drawn hands, but this drawing seemed to tell a story in a way the hands did not.

What makes something a work of art?

A work of art or a work of Art? A *good* work of art or a work of art? When I am feeling doubtful, I would say privilege, capital, education or framing. When I'm feeling inspired, I would say the specificity of an endeavor that yields a universality.

Why is making art important?

"There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open..."

-Choreographer, Martha Graham

What does it mean to you to be a successful artist today?

It means I decided today to express myself to the world, and that maybe I'll choose to do the same tomorrow.

Painter, Paul McLean:

What makes someone an artist?

I don't believe it's possible to "make" an artist, although I do believe any healthy society will encourage its people to try art. To be an artist involves a diverse set of capabilities and drives. The most important drive is an unbreakable resolve to make art. A definition of art is helpful to answer the questions of what an artist is and does, what she or he makes.

Becoming an artist is, I would assert, a more dimensional proposition and the process is faceted, durational, convergent, and so on. Internal and external factors come into play. It doesn't appear that an artist conforms to any patterning or template, in a one-size-fits-all or machine sort of construct.

In actuality, perhaps more the opposite is true. I would suggest that artist development is something that has commonalities with how Dungeons & Dragons characters can be designed and then evolve, in terms of identity, role-playing, abilities, and so forth.

In the end, in a largely flawed and irrational system such as the one that governs or manages contemporary art at the macro level, the meaning of being an artist is made *fungible*, which causes much confusion, and generates terrible waste and failed aspiration. For some reason, this question causes me to reflect on Bob Ross and a hundred other weird, inspiring and abominable examples of people navigating through the topology in search of success as an artist.

How did you know you were an artist?

The first moment came when I etched a Cyclops into the wet ink on a silkscreen. It happened very fast. I'd never seen anything quite like it. The Cyclops returned my stare. No one was around. I was in the basement of the Notre Dame University [a university in the United States] art building. I immediately realized this was it.

With several important exceptions, every other aspiration I'd entertained in short order shifted into a lesser position with respect to art. I was hooked. I called it "getting bitten."

What was the first project that made you feel proud of your work?

My guerrilla senior show at Notre Dame University in the art building's Isis gallery.

What makes something a work of art?

Until fairly recently, the discussion of defined art was simple: painting and sculpture. Mostly, the qualities desirable in art were at stake.

A conceptual flip-flop of these dynamics has occurred over the past two centuries. Now, art is a term applied to anything and everything. All one has to do is Google "the art of" to get a picture of this phenomenon.

The question is *what does civilization lose, when art ceases to be specific?*

As long as producing art is seen as irrational and exclusive, programs like the BRAVO reality show competition "Work of Art: The Next Great Artist" will be a kind of answer we are force-fed. It's

helpful, speaking for myself, to return to the cave paintings at Chauvet and Lascaux in France, to be reminded that art is central to the human experience.

Why is making art important?

It is one of the best means for humans to engage with time, for memorializing the estimable, for celebrating the beautiful and the experience of living in the world. It also embodies a form of service that is worthy of one's time.

What does it mean to you to be a successful artist today?

Everything. To be Nobody. One hundred things.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. How does the author in this passage define “an artist”?

- A) a person whose path to success is straightforward
- B) a professional upon whom society depends
- C) a person who crafts expressions that inspire others
- D) a person who paints and draws

2. The passage examines artistry through the perspective of two artists. How is the perspective of the two artists provided in the passage?

- A) The artists write mini essays about art which are included in the passage.
- B) The artists answer questions asked by the author of the passage.
- C) The artists interview each other and the text of this interview is included in the passage.
- D) The author includes full biographies of each artist.

3. Read the following sentences, spoken by choreographer Hadar Ahuvia: “When I was sixteen I said to myself, okay, if after this summer I don't like dancing, I'll quit. I had a great summer dancing, and I'm still dancing, so I decided to keep going. Then I made a bunch of other decisions about how I wanted to dance. Soon I was arranging my life around it. It was becoming a larger piece of my identity; still it's only one of many.”

Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?

- A) Ahuvia thinks that one cannot choose to be an artist.
- B) Ahuvia thinks that only dancers are artists.
- C) Ahuvia thinks that becoming an artist involved many decisions.
- D) Ahuvia thinks that being an artist is not important.

4. When asked, “Why is making art important?” Hadar Ahuvia answers by quoting choreographer Martha Graham. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made about what Hadar Ahuvia thinks about Martha Graham's quote?

- A) Hadar Ahuvia disagrees with Martha Graham's quote.
- B) Hadar Ahuvia agrees with Martha Graham's quote.
- C) Hadar Ahuvia thinks Martha Graham's quote is unclear.
- D) Hadar Ahuvia thinks Martha Graham's quote is complex.

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A) the differences between doctors and artists
- B) the struggles of an up-and-coming choreographer
- C) the moment Paul McLean became an artist
- D) how two artists approached the creative path

6. What is true about the questions the author posed to both artists?

- A) The author asked them different questions.
- B) The author asked them the same questions.
- C) The author asked them questions about their childhood.
- D) The author asked them questions about painting.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The author of this passage wanted to get an insider's perspective on the topic of becoming an artist; _____, the author interviewed two artists, choreographer and dancer Hadar Ahuvia and painter Paul McLean.

- A) therefore
- B) meanwhile
- C) however
- D) finally

8. According to Hadar Ahuvia, what makes someone an artist?

9. According to Paul McLean, what is "the most important drive" an artist can have?

10. In the passage, Paul McLean says that “it doesn't appear that an artist conforms to any patterning or template, in a one-size-fits-all or machine sort of construct.” How does the author’s interview with the two artists support this conclusion? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
