

## **The Undying Idea of “Starving Artists”**

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## Introduction

Does choosing a creative profession mean giving up hope for economic growth? The “starving artist” stereo-type creates internal debate for many aspiring creators. It’s origin dates back to some of the most prominent artists in all history. It’s common knowledge that Monet, Rembrandt, and Gogh all suffered in poverty throughout their careers - Van Gogh actually did have a stable income, but chose to blow it all on paints (Bailey, 2019). He, like many others, had to choose his art over his own well being. There are an estimated 2 million artists in the United States right now, that means around 1.4% of the workforce (Gioia, 2005). A substantial percentage of the population choses this profession, even with it’s negative connotations. In a survey conducted by the National Endowment of the Arts, 175 million adults reported attending artistic or creative events (*Public Participation in the Arts*, 2020). Consumption of the arts is high, so how could it be possible that artists aren’t earning enough? It’s critical that this idea be re-examined, as it may be impacting the workforce drastically. A variety of research and professional opinion shows that this trend is still prominent. In today’s society, the “Starving Artist” archetype continues to diminish the art industry and its constituents.

## Economic Influence

At the end of the Enlightenment, art became separate from religion and therefore became significantly less profitable. Being an artist used to be one of the most respected jobs in society. Artists were commissioned by the Church and the political elites (Hsu, 2020). Hua Hsu is an English and American Studies professor at Vassar College, as well as a staff writer for The New Yorker. He attended UC Berkeley and Harvard. He argues that this shift proves the downfall of the art industry. In his eyes, this separation is one of the main contributors to the issue and will block progress from happening anytime soon. Back then, being immersed in art was part of

being a sophisticated citizen. Today, art has become significantly undervalued. After examining the average income of artists in modern society, it becomes clear that this trend has continued. Duke University conducted eight separate, extensive studies on the likelihood of employers to lowball creatives. Jae Yun Kim, Ph.D, and three respected professors collected results from over 2,400 participants. They found that people find it significantly more acceptable to request extra hours, tasks outside of job-description, and inadequate pay from arts workers (Voynovskaya, 2019). This evidence demonstrates the persistence of this harmful trend. In a recent national survey, it was found that 55% artists reported that their income is spread between two or three sources (Thomson, 2013). This shows that today's artists are unable to support themselves purely from their art careers. Instead, many of them are forced to push their passion to the side, and focus on other jobs that will pay their bills. This discourages people from pursuing art full time and forces many to avoid the industry altogether. Another study revealed that 90% of artists are unable to support their livelihoods (Artist Income, 2019). In agreement with the previous source, the results also exposed that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of all visual artists must supplement their income. It's overwhelmingly apparent that the majority of workers in this field are still experiencing the negative impacts of this narrative. This statistical evidence alone asserts that the stereo-type of a "starving artist" is still a characteristic of our economy.

### **Multi-industry Issues**

One aspect of this shift in attitude comes from the widespread impact of the internet. Streaming platforms have made musical art less lucrative. Rather than purchasing CDs or records, people can now play any number of songs for free. It makes it extremely challenging for recording artists to make money off all their hard work. This is just one more example of how artists' profits are being depreciated. More and more of the population is utilizing streaming

services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Youtube to access their music. Unfortunately, as music consumption increases, the revenue artists earn decreases (Lewis, 2017). Despite the fact that musicians are working just as hard as they always have, they aren't being paid fairly. Many may argue that there are plenty of musicians entering this field despite the economic risk. Others may assert that there are plenty of very successful artists out there, who make more than enough money to support themselves. However, it has also been proven that art schools are now under pressure to bring in applicants and make the public believe that art degrees can be useful in the real world. Many art schools have had to shut down because nobody is enrolling. They now have to work harder to re-establish a strong reputation (Carlson, 2014). These institutions are hoping to highlight their successful alumni and provide more incentive to enroll. The Internet has also hindered this industry due to the invention of the term "for exposure". Countless small creators are forced to work for exposure in lieu of actual payment (Young-Powell, 2018). Exposure, in the social media world, means advertisement to followers or viewers. Larger businesses request free products in exchange for publicity. Many younger artists fall victim to this trap and trade in their pieces, in whatever form they may be, for the hope of new customers. The belief that these workers should just give away their goods, directly exhibits the issue at hand. Additionally, in a recent study done by the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts, researchers found that approximately 333,000 self-employed workers hold secondary jobs as artists (Artists and Other Cultural Workers, 2019). These findings indicate that a significant majority of the workforce do not believe that they can pursue art full time. Rather, they are forced to push it to the side of their more traditional occupations. The fear of becoming a "starving artist" is still holding strong.

### **Professionals Moving Forward**

However, many in the industry advocate that this harmful paradigm can be reversed. J.D. Jordan is a professor and the co-founder of the design agency J+E Creative. He has worked with a variety of the most prominent agencies and brands in the nation and recently published an article outlining his thoughts on this dilemma. His argument is that art schools have left their students unprepared for the real world (Jordan, 2005). They teach the art, but not the business aspect. He adds that it only hurts the industry when artists accept unjust payment. Another expert, David Dorfman is one of the most experienced professionals in the performing arts world. He believes that dance is one the most undervalued arts because performers don't know how to ask for proper compensation, they are not prepared to have business conversations and negotiations (Dorfman, 2019). Dorfman explains that dance practitioners are underpaid because society believes that the love they have for their work is enough to sustain themselves. He asserts that this "old school mentality" is what's upholding the taboo surrounding pay. Similar to Jordan's argument, Dorfman believes that artists must become better educated from a business perspective. They need to learn how to sell their art and prove their worth. They need to learn to ask for what they deserve. Luke T. Baker, a graduate of the Harvard school of design concurs with Dorfman and Jordan. He argues the importance and impact of the W.A.G.E, an organization that advocates for fair wages in the professional art community (Baker, 2018). Baker says that artists are constantly being asked to do work for "exposure" or for very little pay. The idea that art isn't really an occupation is what's holding the community back from making sustainable incomes. In his opinion, organizations like W.A.G.E will be the key to leveling out this pay gap. These inputs prove that artists are still starving and something must be done to help alleviate the financial stress the industry is under. Many other respected professionals claim that the key to fixing this problem is to teach artists business skills. Marketing, brand creation strategies,

relationship cultivation, and reputation management are not valued enough in artistic education. These skills are vital to success in this industry (Loizos, 2019). This is relevant because it demonstrates that experts in the field have not only recognized that this is an issue, but have localized the causes and the steps that need to be taken in the future.

### **Devaluation Through Societal Shifts**

It's critical to mention that there is a substantial connection between society's growing greed and the devaluation of artists. In recent years, many influential artists and intellectuals have commented on this change. In fact, world renowned painter Banksy recently shared his vision of this cultural adaptation. Banksy's painting of the banker titled *Zero Percent Interest*, exposes the greed of large corporations and the power of money in our society (Banksy, 2010). It depicts a banker advertising "0% Interest in People". The artist is trying to show that money is what big businesses care about, rather than the individuals who work to earn it. This perspective relates to the continuing struggle of artists everywhere, who aren't seen as worthy of investment. His commentary on the downfall of culture is very relevant to this issue. This powerful statement is reinforced by the actions of one of the largest multinational companies in the world, Apple. Although Apple brings in billions of dollars each year - making its founder one of the richest men in the world - KQED found that the company doesn't pay the artists who perform in its stores. Instead, they are compensated with random, insufficient products (Voynovskaya, 2019). Even the nation's largest companies aren't supporting deserving artists. It's ignorant to suggest that this dilemma isn't impactful. Max Weber, one of the most highly regarded theorists, has reflected on this message similarly to Banksy. He insisted that capitalism drives society's perception of work and earnings (Weber, 1930). Weber stated that the public is hyperfocused on occupations that will bring in the most profit. His theories intertwine with the idea that artists

still are not respected. Many will not choose a profession that is widely disregarded, especially if they cannot make a living off it.

### **Taking Action**

Becoming financially stable is not unheard of for the artistic community. However, it does remain a rarity. There are many speculated and proposed causes of this problem, but all lead to the same conclusion; being an artist immediately creates the expectation of economic struggle. A multitude of misconceptions are contributing to this issue, but the lack of discussion is what exacerbates it the most. The blatant mistreatment and disrespect experienced within the community are simply respected as a characteristic of the job. Art and poverty go hand in hand. Although payment may vary across the variety of artistic professions, the majority will be taken advantage of. Even the most well-known professionals have had to deal with the results of this paradigm. Despite this, most would agree that art is undeniably influential to culture. Some may even describe it as the “barometer that measures levels of cultural sophistication”(Fernandez, 2021). It takes years for most artists to perfect their skills, then years more to produce their works and market them. They deserve to be compensated fairly. They deserve to be viewed as professionals. There is no question about that. In order to make this proposal a reality, this topic needs to be brought to a bigger stage. It has to be known that there are ways to avoid the stereo-type and set a new standard. Advocating for fair payment - and accepting only that - will better the treatment of everyone in the industry. It's time to stop justifying inadequate compensation. Feed the artists.

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