

Creativity and the exceptional aging artist

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Abstract: Creativity in the aging visual artist is reviewed and modifying factors are identified. A program of support for the artist is described with the goal of regeneration of career with enhanced creativity and increased productivity.

Keywords: aging, late in life, artist, creativity, rejuvenation, visual arts, productivity

Introduction

Some artistic aging individuals have developed a spurt of creativity and productivity late in life. Although similar observations can be made in other fields, this paper focuses on the visual artist. With a steady increase in the numbers and percentage of the population who are 65–90 years or older, there is a question as to what skills or attributes members of this group have that will enable them to continue making contributions to society. While we can identify frequently unused or wasted resources in our “retired” aged population, there are also areas of interest or activities that may be therapeutic to the mental health and wellbeing of older individuals.

One contemporary group still active at 65–90 years of age includes leaders in the political arena. Recent examples are members of both of the houses of Congress (Senators Thurmond, Pepper, etc), retired US Presidents, communist political leaders, and union labor leaders. These individuals are dependent on interpersonal and communication skills, as well as negotiation experience, in addition to combinations of organizational development, strategic planning, and political savvy. They all utilize the behavioral strategies with the aggregate frequently referred to as the ability for “intrigue”. This contrasts with more common types of administrative ability that peak between 45 and 65 in both industry and academia.

Creativity

Creativity is a highly desirable skill at any age and has been considered to vary or change during the aging process. The precise definition of creativity is much debated. However, by general agreement it must include originality, as well as the ability to conceive and/or produce the unusual. It follows that flexible thinking should be a virtual sine qua non and that rigidity, as well as excessive fixation in the routine and obvious are destructive (Abra 1989).

Simonton (1988) found that if one plots the number of creative contributions produced in the general population during a given age period, such as at yearly, 5 year, or decade intervals, the same general longitudinal curve appears. Beginning somewhere in the 20s, output increases fairly rapidly until a peak is reached, usually sometime in the 30s or 40s, after which a gradual decline sets in. This age curve remains even after introducing all varieties of statistical controls for potential artifacts and spurious relationships. The decrement in creativity after mid-life, correlated with age, seems very real, and appears to be crossculturally and transhistorically valid.

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Lehman (1953) reported that poets and mathematicians showed the earliest peaks in producing works of originality, verifying that the latter at least may be a “young man’s game”. He found philosophers and novelists to mature somewhat later, perhaps because they need more “life experience” or more education/skill training. Lehman concluded that scientists do their highest quality work before the age of 40, though productivity may persist into old age. However, Cole (1979) found that age had only a minor impact on scientific performance, which may be influenced by the reward system (ie, promotion and tenure). No systematic effect of age was found in mathematics.

Abra states that decline in creativity may vary, being more pronounced (1) when the attribute of originality is prominent, (2) in the sciences as opposed to the arts and humanities, (3) when motives such as notable self expression and sublimation of sexuality are operative, and (4) for male as compared with female creators. Creativity may simply change rather than decline with age as different stylistic and thematic concerns gain priority (Abra 1989). Pruyser, from the Menninger Clinic, makes an interesting observation that the achievement of humor is probably one of the greatest forms of creativity within reach of ordinary people who do not possess other conspicuous talents (Pruyser 1987). Humor has been identified as the last achievement of a mind striving to integrate itself on a level of mature awareness; the capacity to smile benignly at oneself, to accept one’s inevitable foibles, and to be realistic about one’s limitations in influencing the world without being crippled by such awareness (Pruyser 1987).

Aging

Creative artists, scientists, and inventors always have to battle the authority of custom or ignore the establishment in their particular domain (Pruyser 1987). While some old people may become more conservative as they climb in years, aging can make other people more liberal, freer, more lenient, and more radical in espousing progressive ideas and causes than they were in their middle years. Above all, the maintenance of a thrill of discovery is essential in old age. Picasso observed, “It is enthusiasm of which we have the most need, we (the old) and the young” (Abra 1989).

Creative individuals are more self assertive and independent in general; they frequently resist authority (Abra 1989). They possess great ego strength, even arrogance, and their confidence seems crucial. Creators also have a tolerance

for ambiguity (Barron 1963). Creativity risks, even invites, periodic failure, which is experienced as a normal part of the process, even by the greatest (Abra 1989). In general, old age implies the person has had more and varied experiences than earlier stages of life. One may expect that sensitive and reflective older people will have developed an eye for the ambiguity or tragedy inherent in life’s important themes (Pruyser 1987). Love and hate, life and death, fortune and misfortune, pleasure and pain, freedom and bondage: each of these pairs of terms no longer has one clear and simple meaning to the older person. There may be a softening of earlier dogmatism, coupled with a “live and let live” attitude, as well as a forgiving approach to the foibles of oneself and others. Pruyser also points out that aged people are, in a special sense, survivors, and have developed for themselves some sense of what works and what does not; what they can realistically hope for and what are pipe dreams; what is essential and what is trivia (Pruyser 1987).

Knowing the difference between what is important and what are distractions is essential for guiding the next generation (Erikson 1964). Artists sometimes participate in group activity, as in music, theater, and dance, but add their own interpretation to the work. Usually the artist is an interpreter and recorder of his or her experience. Frequently there is conversion of the abstract into a concrete or physical product whose form is dependent or shaped by lifelong experiences and disciplines. The end result is setting and time dependent. There also is an element of projection as to what would appeal to (or be an article of beauty to) others. The effort or end results are usually timeless or permanent.

The artist

The discipline necessary for producing art begins early in life with regular daily practice, the learning of techniques, the development of insight, and the accumulation of experience, which gradually builds up. The furtherance of a career in art then depends as much on the artist’s personal qualities and planning as it does serendipity. An unconventional artist, with aging, may blossom into creativity by mellowing, with a serenity that assists in integrating their concepts and interpretations. They may maintain a wave of optimism and freshness, which may result in a renaissance of their career. Alternatively, while the artist may be creative at 40 or 50 years of age, this may be followed by a decline in productivity for a variety of causes: ie, depression, divorce, death of spouse, economic

reverses, family strife, political refuge, etc, with a subsequent latter peak of creativeness and productivity at age 75–85 (Simonton 1989, 1990).

Some widely recognized visual artists develop a formula, which by old age is simple, repeated, and watered down. A market, once established, is fed, as the work becomes dull and repetitive. There are those, however, who succeed when younger, who are well received, well recognized, successful in gallery sales and museum acquisition, and who in late years develop a kind of rejuvenated style, a freshness of approach, often with a brightened palette, (Ophthalmologically this may be due to cataracts, for example Degas, approaching blindness, intensified his palette markedly) new materials, or new techniques. This is still dependent, however, on the wisdom of developing a general formula or framework of success. Basically, there is a reversal of what one assumes to be the normal slowing down and deterioration of old age. Munsterberg refers to “old age style that reflects a simpler, more spiritual vision” (Munsterberg 1994).

Karl Haas devoted a 1997 program on Public Broadcasting System (PBS) radio to the music of older composers. He spoke of changes in compositional style and mood. Verdi, a composer of tragic, somber romantic operas, wrote *Falstaff* as his last opera, a comedy, not a tragedy; Richard Strauss, *Seven Last Songs* are markedly different from *Rosenkavalier* or *Til Eulenspiegel*. Phillip Johnson, noted creator of functional glass and steel architecture, in his later years turned to the whimsy of the AT&T Building, New York, US, with neoclassical attachments to an otherwise functional first design. Another example of renewed vision in old age is Matisse, whose approach in late life (when he was restricted to his bed by arthritis) was to cut colored paper shapes of his famous jazz series, and with a brush tied to his hands, he designed the mural and windows for the Venice Chapel. This late style was very different from his previous major works; now the shapes were all flat and colored in bright hues. His earlier elaborate iconography was refined and simplified to great effect.

Julius Held (1987) reviews some of the early literature on “alterstiehl”, a term used by art historians to describe a revitalized brilliance in the work of aged visual artists: “There was something special and almost uncanny about Titian’s late work. Critics were fascinated by the combination of painterly economy and profound thought in late Titian works” (Held 1987). Helze, another critic, found

a particular kind of expressiveness or spiritualization in both music and art, citing Rembrandt and Beethoven (Schiff 1987). Rosand (1987) speaks of the special license of old age, a willingness to let things take their course despite any negative results. This, claims Rosand, “permits the artist a certain liberty with his medium, a freedom of operation that leads to a transcendence of the material” eg, in the late works of Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, and our contemporary, DeKooning).

Stuart Shedletsky curated an exhibition *Still Working*, which traveled to a half dozen museums (Shedletsky 1994). It featured 32 obscure professional lifetime artists over 60. He found them engaged in the strongest work of their careers; they had found the means to reinvent themselves creatively in a cultural milieu antagonistic to late self-discovery. Shedletsky explains the core concept of his exhibition, “I was interested in artists who were still working to not settle, still working not to look over their shoulders at missed opportunities, working not to repeat or copy themselves or mark time as their advanced age would in the eyes of a generally pitying but effectively absentee audience, surely allow; simply still working at the highest level of achievement”.

Fiscal support

A small foundation has been assisting artists whose late-in-life careers show evidence of continuity of effort as well as interest on the part of the museums and critics (The Richard Florsheim Art Fund provides support for older visual artists whose invitation for a museum exhibition, catalog, or purchase is not fully funded). These artists show evidence of continued drive and often develop an iconography not previously explored, the Alterstiehl; a renewed drive to create in ways not previously explored. Three artists aided by the foundation, George MacNeil, Robert Barnes, and Noah Purifoy, are typical of those with continuing vigor with their late-in-life works. George MacNeil, interviewed at a 1993 retrospective exhibit at New York Studio School, speaks of liveliness in his painting: “Liveliness is more or less considered to be synonymous with youth. It shouldn’t be that way because mostly creation comes from feelings, and feelings don’t change” (Freundlich personal communication, 2005). MacNeil also referred to the declining ability to memorize and learn things like a foreign language.

Robert Barnes, one of the artists included in “Still Working”, writes in the catalog about “the waning of the

terrible hormonal surge that propels the young headlong into all sorts of wonderful absurdities. The painter's palsied hand slows the mind and eyes dull, and resignation takes over. Well, I've got news for you: I didn't begin to realize the real power of the thing until I reached fifty. The secret is in the pursuit and that's different from just working." Noah Purifoy is another artist assisted by the Florsheim Fund. He is approaching 85 years. He first came to public attention in 1965 when he created public works from the rubble left by the Watts riots. After a career as an art teacher and social worker, Purifoy moved to the desert in Joshua Tree, California in 1989. Here he began to create assemblages from discarded material he was able to find in the desert and junk yards of greater Los Angeles. His sculptures are now in the collections of the Corcoran and Whitney Museum, and he has been commissioned by the Getty Foundation to create a sculpture.

Two phenomena converge when artists of previous substantial acceptance by critic, curator, and collector reappear in the art world: the rapid changes in what is stylistically of interest in the art market, and the tendency of continued productivity, which deserves attention and interest. Various scholars have commented on continued productivity in the later years of life. Some have pointed at the possibility of an Alterstiehl, the increased life span of our times, and the unusual personality traits of aged artists. The Florsheim Fund's experience has shown that the popular notion of retirement at a given age does not apply to all of the artistic population. As one grantee said, "I'm not going to stop painting at 65 and take up golf, beer, and TV watching" (Freundlich, personal communication, 2005). The aspects of personality that shaped a career as an artist are still at work in many older artists. An actual increase in innovation occurs in some artists. The Fund's goal is to encourage the curator, critic, and collector to take note of what these older artists are producing, by granting modest support in aid. The collected evidence indicates there is a great deal of valid artistic and innovative art being produced by older artists that deserves attention and interest.

Summary

Creativity is an asset that is both appreciated and utilized at any age, but is especially cherished by artists who are at the end of their career. There are some aging artists who continue their life work and creativity with their accomplishments, though generally having a lesser quantity of output. A few demonstrate a brightening of spirit and a renewed outburst of invention. The factors that impinge on the artist are both environmental and physical. Success in being seen and the quality of vision in the artist are both critical. Unfortunately this opportunity for the development of a spark and the subsequent fire that drives the artist to new and greater achievements late in life is given to only a few. A program that provides support for the aging visual artist and is designed for rejuvenation of career, creativity and productivity will be most helpful for this segment of the profession. The differences between the artist who starts artistic activity late in life, as therapy or hobby, the professional whose work degenerates into formulas, and the exceptional aging artist, are found in creativity, cognitive skills, experience, and self confidence.

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