

Disrupting a Gendered Mythos of Artistic Creativity: a Critique of the 'Lone Genius' Narrative

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Abstract Creativity, a central concept in the art discourse, has traditionally been associated with the narrative of the 'lone genius.' This archetype is predominantly masculine, highlighting a gendered concept of artistic creativity. This limited conceptualization not only marginalizes the societal roles of individuals but also perpetuates gender imbalances in the art world, often favouring male artists. Through a gender analytical lens, this article critiques the narrative of the lone genius and re-evaluates the concept of artistic creativity. By rethinking the definition of 'artist', this article moves beyond the narration of a lone genius to embrace the collective essence of artistic creation. The feminist art movement underscores this, blending personal narratives with political agendas, highlighting art's role as a socio-political catalyst. By unmasking biased perceptions of artistic creativity and highlighting the resulting disparities, this article argues for a more inclusive and gender-aware understanding of creativity, promoting a more equitable art landscape.

Keywords *Creativity, Lone Genius, Gender Equality, Feminist Lens, Art*

Artistic creativity and its foundational role in the art world is a topic of persistent interest and contention. While the definition of creativity remains fluid, a dominant narrative has emerged from historical frameworks. The narrative of the 'lone genius', deeply rooted in the Renaissance ethos, was further amplified during the European Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Montuori & Purser, 1995; Parker & Pollock, 2020; Parsons, 2010). This construct has not only shaped artistic ideals but has also influenced societal perceptions, with many arguing that the way creative people are perceived is crucial to fostering this specific notion of 'creativity' among members of the younger generation (Parsons, 2010).

The prevailing narration of the 'lone genius' obscures the infrastructure, encompassing art institutions, galleries, critics, historians, auction houses, academies, and art journals, that supports successful artists (Bourdieu, 1994). Within the vast nexus of the art world, dominant gender power dynamics curate distinct lived experiences and trajectories for female artists, but not for their male counterparts (Parker & Pollock, 2020). However, from a gender perspective, such a conceptualization is fraught with narrowness. It subtly entrenches and reinforces patriarchal notions of creativity, framing it within a gendered, often male-centric context. Scott (2007) posits that deploying gender as an analytical lens not only destabilizes taken-for-granted assumptions but also illuminates the intricate power matrices that underlie them. Such an approach uncovers the deeply entrenched cultural fabrications that socially orchestrate gendered roles and expectations (Scott, 2007).

Using gender as an analytical lens, this article seeks to unravel the mythos of the 'lone genius,' discussing its genesis from a deeply gendered schema of artistic creativity. It challenges the narrative of the 'lone genius,' emphasizing that artistic creativity is not an isolated phenomenon but is intrinsically intertwined with societal structures and cultural production (Dalton, 2001; Emery, 2002; Hopper, 2015). It delves into the historical tapestry of individualism, tracing its embryonic stages during the Renaissance and its peak during Modernism. By critically analysing the role of the artist in the gendered realm of art, this article dismantles the dominant narratives surrounding artistic creativity. To this end, this article not only challenges gendered views of artistic

creativity but also promotes a broader, intersectional dialogue about art and its interaction with societal perceptions.

Gender as an analytical lens

Beyond mere biological distinctions or superficial social groupings, the term 'gender' encapsulates a profound interplay of socio-cultural constructs that shape perceptions, roles, and identities (Scott, 2007). Drawing on the French usage of the term 'genre' to denote social recognition, gender delineates how individuals are ascribed sexed identities and how these ascriptions, in turn, influence their self-descriptions (Scott, 1988). Therefore, the exploration of creativity cannot be divorced from this consideration; to understand the historical notion of creativity, it is necessary to examine how gendered constructs have bestowed specific roles and functions upon each sex, how the meanings of 'man' and 'woman' have oscillated based on temporal and contextual parameters and how these categories intersect with prevailing regulatory norms, power structures and symbolic systems (Scott, 1988; Wiertz, 2020).

Utilizing gender as an analytical lens underscores the need to question the premises upon which our understanding of creativity is based. It posits that sex is invariably already gendered, governed by the overarching impositions of hegemonic and culturally specific ideas about gender (Scott, 2007). Regarding the notion of creativity, it has historically been disseminated by those in power, often promulgating beliefs that reinforce and replicate existing gender hierarchies (Author, 2019; Glaveanu et al., 2020). Thus, the apparent 'naturalness' of male genius and the relegation of women to the margins of artistic and creative domains are a reflection of these hegemonic gendered constructs. As such, the term 'creativity' requires careful historicization to determine how and in what contexts meanings have been attributed to it, how these meanings have adapted over time and how certain interpretations have become normative, overshadowing or completely eclipsing others (Eisler et al., 2016). The crux of such an inquiry is to understand how power is constituted and exerts its influence (Deemer et al., 2014), thus determining how creativity is perceived, celebrated and, at times, stifled.

From the renaissance to modernism: unpacking the patriarchal underpinnings of the 'lone genius' narrative

The dominant conception of the 'lone genius' in artistic creativity, a narrative rooted in notions of individualism, has its origins in the Renaissance (Montuori & Purser, 1995). This narrative venerates individualism, often associated with divergent thinking and distinctiveness, as emblematic of creative personas (Proudfoot et al., 2015). Historically, both specialized and generalized scholarly creative pursuits have disproportionately accentuated the persona of the individual creator, marginalizing collaborative or collective contributions (Montuori & Purser, 1999).

The Renaissance (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) witnessed the genesis of this individualist artist, a narrative that culminated during the Modernist period (Emery, 2002). This narrative created an image of artists as solitary entities, producing original masterpieces in isolation. Adherence to this archetype required artists to distance themselves from societal constructs, even forsaking family ties for the purported sanctity of their art, a notion vividly depicted in Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), a novel inspired by the life of the French Post-Impressionist artist Gauguin.

The 'lone genius' trope features primarily, if not exclusively, male protagonists. In this framework, women are relegated to secondary roles, epitomized as muses or models, sources of inspiration for male artists rather than being recognized as artists themselves (Emery, 2002; Nead, 1995; Nochlin, 1971; Park & Pollock, 2013). This patriarchal narrative, still prevalent in contemporary culture, associates artistic creativity with hyper-masculine sexuality, reinforcing the erasure of female artistic contributions (Nead, 1995). Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1831) exemplifies this, analogizing a canvas to a woman over which male artists exercise both romantic and paternalistic dominion, thereby emphasizing a divine, gendered artistry.

Further reinforcing these biased notions, early psychological forays into creativity perpetuated this gendered narrative. Although artmaking has a long history, formal studies of artistic creativity emerged primarily in the nineteenth century, strongly favouring a positivist experimental lens (Pelowski et al., 2017). This reductionist trend continued into the twentieth century, with efforts to quantify creativity through standardized drawing tests, aligning it with the principles of experimental psychology.

The ascendancy of neuroscience has introduced brain imaging into the discourse, further reinforcing a deterministic approach to artistic creation (Pelowski et al., 2017).

Such myopic perspectives obscure a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of creativity. Notable academic voices in psychology advocate for a multifaceted examination of creativity, encompassing historical, cultural, socio-economic, and intersectional perspectives (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Eisler et al., 2016; Montuori, 2019; Proudfoot et al., 2015). At the same time, an emerging critique challenges the phallogocentric assumption that artistic brilliance is inherently masculine, exposing and contesting gender biases that marginalize and pigeonhole female artists (Eisler et al., 2016; Nochlin, 1971; Parker & Pollock, 2020). If left unchecked, such biases will jeopardize gender inclusivity in artistic representation, compromising women's academic and professional trajectories. At a time when creativity is paramount in artistic discourse, critical inquiry is essential to realign dominant paradigms.

Deconstructing the gendered concept of artistic creativity

In this section, I deconstruct the gendered concept of artistic creativity within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts, arguing that these dynamics have significantly influenced contemporary understandings of gender in art. Drawing on prior studies of the interplay of gender and art (e.g., Chadwick, 2020; Clement, 2007; Hopper, 2015; Tufts, 1973), I discuss the following salient processes with which our discourse closely aligns: (1) tracing how historical narratives have often muted or sidelined women's contributions; (2) exploring how certain art forms and styles have been masculinized or feminized, affecting their valuation and reception; (3) shedding light on the structural barriers that hinder diverse gender participation; (4) questioning the very concept of 'artist' through a gendered lens; and (5) evaluating the complexities faced by artists grappling with gender dynamics today. I meticulously unpack each process, illustrating how each is intricately woven into the fabric of artistic creativity while simultaneously highlighting how modern artistic discourses and movements are intrinsically linked to these multifaceted gendered processes.

Erasing the feminine in artistic genius

Creativity, an intrinsic quality that gives human experience its depth and richness, is a defining difference between us and our closest evolutionary relatives (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). How we perceive creativity directly shapes our educational approaches and outcomes. If this perception is tinged with gender bias, it leads to unequal educational opportunities (Hopper, 2015). Notably, academic discourse on creativity have been predominantly monopolized by men, as posited by Eisler et al. (2016). This male-centric discourse celebrates only male genius, sidelining women's contributions. This marginalization, deeply embedded in the psyche, finds resonance in Eysenck's (1995) claim that genius is a trait exclusive to men. Women, according to Mathews (1999), are relegated to the domestic sphere, their abilities being limited to homemaking and fulfilling their reproductive roles.

Yet history is full of women demonstrating unparalleled artistic brilliance. Unfortunately, their prowess often remains unacknowledged, overshadowed by their male contemporaries. For example, Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625), a revered artist of the Italian Renaissance, won the admiration of the King of Spain, but her legacy was almost obliterated from art history until Perlingieri (1992) revived her narrative. Similarly, the works of many female artists, either bearing the signatures of male artists or lost in the annals of history, epitomize the systemic marginalization of female artistic talent (Tufts, 1973). The shared legacy of artists such as Marietta Robusti (1560-1590) and her renowned father, Tintoretto (1518-1594), further accentuates the overshadowing of female artists (Chadwick, 2020). Furthermore, the commodification of art, with dealers often forging signatures to make more profits, ensures the persistent devaluation of women's artistic endeavours (Clement, 2007; Tufts, 1973).

This cultural misogyny not only suppresses women's creativity but also vilifies those who dare to challenge the norm. Labels such as *traitors to their gender* or *pseudo-men* further alienate women of genius (Mathews, 1999). Goncourt's declaration that women of genius are, in essence, men, further amplifies this phenomenon (Lombroso, 1891). Such statements not only rob women of their identity but also reify the false binary that creativity and genius are the preserve of men.

The entrenched patriarchal belief system positions artistic creativity within the masculine domain whilst perpetuating a narrow definition of femininity (Lippard, 1976; Weininger, 2005). This skewed binary, compounded by the myth of the 'lone genius,' systematically diminishes women's artistic contributions. This narrative deserves urgent dismantling, calling for a holistic analysis that reconceptualizes artistic creativity, taking into account its intricate historical and socio-cultural fabric (Eisler et al., 2016).

Gendered hierarchies in artistic traditions

The formation of art academies from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century resulted in a stratified structure of artistic practices, strongly rooted in patriarchal paradigms. Informed by a rigid gendered perspective, this hierarchy relegated female-dominated artistic domains to the periphery, characterizing them as lesser creative ventures (Emery, 2002; Nochlin, 1971; Parker & Pollock, 2020). Joshua Reynolds, in his influential 1771 address to the Royal Academy of Fine Art, championed the grand style and positioned historical painting as the pinnacle of artistic genius (Reynolds, 2009). Yet, this esteemed category was inaccessible to women due to patriarchal gatekeeping; women were systematically excluded from nude drawing sessions, a critical aspect of training in this domain (Chadwick, 2020). As a result, they often turned to artistic domains such as still life painting, embroidery, and handicrafts (Hopper, 2015).

However, the underlying patriarchal value systems systematically rendered these art forms subsidiary. The Modernist period, despite its proclamation of originality, perpetuated this marginalization. Female-dominated art forms, characterized by their intricate and meticulous designs, were derogatorily reduced to mere decoration, undermining the intellectual labour and creative ingenuity invested in them (Collins & Sandell, 1984). From a critical perspective, these practices underscore the deep-seated gender biases that inform the valuation and recognition of art, necessitating a radical reassessment and reframing of artistic merit beyond the constraints of male-centric dogma.

Unequal access to the art world

The idea that an individual's path to artistic excellence is solely determined by luck or intrinsic talent is an oversimplification that ignores systemic barriers. Csikszentmihalyi (2013) identifies exposure to a stimulating environment, filled with books, influential discussions, academic aspirations, mentors, and networking, as an important component in developing creativity. When scrutinized using a gender perspective, it becomes evident that this accessibility, deeply linked to family and socio-cultural heritage – or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994) – is inherently gendered, even if it is not always openly recognized as such.

An examination of historical and contemporary narratives reveals an insidious trend: boys and men, compared with their female counterparts, often benefit from increased opportunities to access these resources (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). Such differential access crystallizes into barriers for girls and women, stifling their creative potential and resulting in a conspicuous absence of women at the zenith of fields such as the visual arts, science, and music (Piiro, 1991). This echoes Nochlin's (1971) seminal question, '*Why have there been no great women artists?*', which does not question women's intrinsic artistic prowess; rather, it reveals the institutional and structural barriers faced by women in achieving equality in the art world. Consider, for instance, Michelangelo's ties to the Medici court during his formative years. Such access to patrons and resources instrumental to his creative trajectory was an unimaginable luxury for women of his time (Parker & Pollock, 2020).

Today, although progress has been made towards gender equality, the artistic realm remains riddled with disparities (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). A good example is the mentoring experience, or lack thereof, for women. Mentorship is essential, not only as a way to hone one's creativity but also as a guide to make career decisions. Nevertheless, many women active in the creative arts lament the absence of such influential figures, while their male peers often tell stories of transformative guidance (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). This mentorship gap may offer a key to understanding the limited representation of women at the pinnacle of artistic success.

The notion of artist identity

In the patriarchal tapestry of art history, male narratives have often overshadowed the contributions of female artists, influencing the notion of artist identity. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), a pioneering art historian of the Renaissance, documented the works of thirteen female artists in his monograph (Vasari, 1550). However, by the twentieth century, a glaring gender chasm emerged, which was echoed in art literature by a blatant silence on female artists, suggesting, subliminally, the role of artists as an inherently male domain (Chadwick, 2020; Parker & Pollock, 2020). This biased representation is evident in seminal art books such as E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950) and H. W. Janson's *History of Art* (1962), which completely avoid any mention of female artists.

Assessing this phenomenon through a gender lens reveals a perpetuated stereotype of art as a male bastion, a prejudice further cemented by art criticism. As men's art becomes a subject of mainstream discourse, women's artistic endeavours are often relegated to the periphery, as evidenced by Miranda's 2015 study. Specifically, only 18 per cent of the artwork featured in *Artform's* monthly covers since 1962 have been created by women, compared with a staggering 74 per cent by men (Miranda, 2015). Such biased representation not only strengthens gender stereotypes but also influences budding artists. Indeed, according to a survey of school art education in the UK, when asked to depict an 'artist and a model', a majority of primary students illustrated male artists and female models, perpetuating the gendered trope and inadvertently narrowing the creative horizons of budding female artists (Hopper, 2015).

This gendered narrative of the artist's identity finds its roots in the historical evolution of the artist's status in society. The metamorphosis of artists from mere craftspeople to intellectuals and cultural luminaries, from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, gave rise to a different understanding of the term 'artist'. This new identity was laden with inherently masculine connotations, associating art with the 'revelation of divine truths' (Parker & Pollock, 2020, p. 82). Nineteenth-century literature further entrenched this notion, drawing parallels between artistic creativity and male sexuality. In Shroder's (1962) investigation of the identity of the artist in the literature of the nineteenth century, he identifies the growth of an analogy between artistic creativity and male sexuality, citing a comment from Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) that 'the creation of an artwork likes

sperm rising for an emission' (Shroder, 1962, p.171). Such analogies can be traced back to the Renaissance, a period that propagated the artist's role of preserving virility in their works (Parker & Pollock, 2020). This ideological context reinforces the myth of the 'lone genius,' valorising masculinity while minimizing women's contributions to the realm of artistic creativity.

Navigating gender disparities and cultural barriers in the modern world

The landscape of modern art and the identity formation of artists within it are inextricably linked to gender dynamics (Perkins, 1998; Piirto, 1991). A gender perspective shows that cultural constructs, deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, shape distinct experiences for female and male artists (Zwirn, 2006).

Around the world, a pervasive cultural script dictates differentiated gender roles: while men are propelled towards creativity and innovation, women are corralled into domains traditionally associated with caregiving, such as cooking and childcare (Cheryan & Markus, 2020). This archetypal demarcation creates a dichotomy where the public and professional sphere is synonymous with a men's world, while the domestic realm is a women's world (Montuori & Purser, 1995). Female artists, navigating these delineated worlds, often grapple with an additional layer of cultural expectations. For many women, the societal pressure to prioritize domestic responsibilities often becomes an additional barrier, requiring the support of a progressive partner for them to continue their artistic pursuits (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015; Perkins, 1998; Piirto, 1991). Foley (1996) highlights this sentiment by revealing that female painters, especially those with young children, face greater challenges related to financial and family considerations than their male counterparts.

Furthermore, the ways in which male and female artists internalize and prioritize art manifests differently, highlighting the influence of societal norms and expectations. Barron and Hall's (1972) study reveals that while many male artists view their craft as their primary life purpose, many female artists acknowledge that their art, while vital, coexists with future family considerations. This dichotomy does not, however, signify a differential commitment to art, but rather showcases the multifaceted challenges and considerations that female artists face.

The aspiration to become an artist from a very young age appears curiously balanced between the sexes, even in favour of girls. For example, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1973) indicate that girls outnumber boys in their desire to become artists before reaching the age of 10. This raises an important question: *What socio-cultural factors during adolescence alter these aspirations?* Delving into this transitional phase can provide deeper insight into the gender-specific intricacies that shape an artist's journey. One potential factor is the gendered stereotype of creativity and its impact on creative self-efficacy. The results of a recent survey of Chinese visual arts college students show that both male and female participants considered traits typically associated with masculinity more important for creativity than those typically associated with femininity (Author, 2023). Interestingly, the male students had greater creative self-efficacy than their female peers. That study highlights that entrenched gender stereotypes regarding creativity may undermine female students' confidence in their creative abilities, contributing to a gender disparity in the visual arts.

Rethinking the definition of the term 'artist'

Rethinking the definition of the term 'artist' requires delving into its historical and societal complexities. During the Renaissance, the term 'artist' was synonymous with a 'special person' who transformed ordinary materials into unique objects of art, establishing the work of art as a beacon of individual aesthetic value. This led to the artist becoming responsible for core artistic activities, with ancillary tasks being relegated to supporting roles. Although this view equated the reputation of an artist with the perceived value of their work, it ironically obscured the inherent collective nature of art. The Romantic period further propagated this myth of the solitary artistic genius, inadvertently marginalizing many female contributors. To counter this, feminist artists of the 1970s championed collaboration, harnessing collective effort to challenge dominant gender biases. They innovatively redefined spaces for female artists, boldly departing from male-dominated artistic traditions. The intricate tapestry of the art world is stitched with conventions encompassing artist-audience dynamics, support staff and shared cultural knowledge.

Becker's (2008) theory argues that art is not the product of individual genius or talent, but rather the result of the cooperation and coordination of many people who participate in different roles and activities within a network of conventions, institutions, and markets, highlighting the collaborative essence beyond the visible artist. Linked to commercial and popular arts, the core of the art world rests on the attribution of aesthetic values, with multiple players – from critics to technicians – essential to the journey and appreciation of a work of art. Yet the distribution system, with its biases, can steer recognition and obscure deserving artworks that defy norms. Therefore, it is the collective ecosystem that truly drives art, with artists drawing inspiration from and contributing to these communal spaces (Becker, 2008). Faced with rigid traditional systems, resilient artists and groups, like the feminist collectives of the 1970s, often innovate or establish new paradigms. According to Becker (2008), these 'rebel artists' embody the challenge posed to conventional definitions and emphasize the importance of viewing art and artists within expansive societal frameworks. As we navigate evolving art worlds, it is essential to understand and value the community spirit that drives art.

Concluding remarks

If we step back and look at the history of art and its evolution, it is evident that the landscape of artistic representation has been distorted by deeply rooted gender biases. The dominant perception of the artist as a solitary genius, underpinned by a reverence for individualism, has effectively obscured the myriad of contributions by diverse actors in the art world. This biased narrative not only fails to represent the true essence of artistic endeavour – a tapestry woven from multiple threads of collaboration and community – but also perpetuates a gendered hierarchy. In such a system, artistic practices traditionally associated with women are relegated to the periphery, while those dominated by men remain at the centre. The ramifications of this biased discourse reverberate throughout history and continue to resonate in modern contexts. From the sidelining of female artists to the systemic barriers they face, the art world inadvertently reflects the wider societal inequalities that feminist discourse vehemently critiques. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir (2010), an eminent feminist scholar, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (p. 283). This statement resonates deeply in the context of the

art world. Female artists have not merely 'been' but have 'become' in a context of a myriad of societal pressures, biases, and constraints. Their identities, both as women and artists, have been perpetually negotiated amidst a dominant male-centric narrative. Yet, through their resilience and collective strength, they have challenged this dominant narrative. The transformation required in our understanding and appreciation of art demands that we deconstruct these deeply rooted biases. By redefining the boundaries and norms of the artistic community and emphasizing the collaborative essence of art, we can move towards a holistic perspective that truly values and represents all contributors. To foster a richer and more diverse future for the art world, institutions, patrons, and observers must recognize and challenge these historical imbalances, ensuring that the tapestry of art, woven from countless threads, truly reflects the dynamic and diverse world from which it comes.

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