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EMINENCE AND CREATIVITY IN SELECTED VISUAL ARTISTS

by
JANE
PIIRTO

I dream of painting and then I paint my dream.

—Vincent Van Gogh

Who is eminent? How does one qualify to be eminent? In what does eminence consist? Eminence (n.d.) is defined as “distinguished superiority, elevated rank as compared with others; in reputation, intellectual or moral attainment, or the possession of any quality, good, or (sometimes) bad; acknowledgement of superiority; an excellence.” Simonton (1999b) defined eminence as having “made a name” for oneself (p. 647). Some speak of true eminence being defined as the person having made an original contribution to the talent domain, as opposed to high achievement, which consists of continuing old thought in the domain; thus, eminence is viewed as the highest level of the development of one’s talent.

People know who is eminent in the talent domains with which they are familiar, or in which they work, but eminence also exists in domains with which most people are not familiar. Eminent people have biographies written about their lives; they are cited in journals, magazines, newspapers, and other media. Simonton (1999b) noted that predicting eminence from mere prominence depends on certain criteria. In terms of individual differences, the productivity, intelligence level,

personality attributes, and degree of psychopathology are somewhat distinctive in eminent people. In terms of development, the family pedigree, childhood precocity, birth order, presence of early trauma, the presence of role models and mentors, and formal education and training are important. In terms of the sociocultural context, the political, economic, cultural, and ideological contexts are vital. Most of the research on eminence has focused on men (Albert, 1992; Cattell, 1903; Goertzel, Goertzel, Goertzel, & Hansen, 2004; Simonton, 1999a; Smith, 1938, Terman & Oden, 1959); Simonton (1999b) stated that fewer than 3% of eminent people throughout history were women, Marie Curie notwithstanding. The U.S. Inventors Hall of Fame includes few women, as do most other Halls of Fame. This has led researchers and feminists to propose their own lists (Kronberg, 2008; Piirto, in press-a).

And what about creativity? To put it simplistically, there are several ways to approach creativity. Creativity research focuses on the *person*—who is creative?; the *process*—what happens when one is being creative?; the *product*—what does the creative person make?; and the *press*—what is the environmental pressure on person, process, product (Rhodes, 1961)? One judges a product “creative” and then looks at the person who has produced that product to see what forces operated in the creation of that product and what that person is like. Another approach tests a child through paper and pencil or through observation, pronouncing him or her potentially or really more creative than others, on a presumed normal curve of creativity, as a construct which supposedly exists within everyone to some degree or another.

Domain-based studies of creators have been a focus of research since the 1950s, with the landmark studies of the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) at Berkeley (Barron, 1968, 1972; MacKinnon, 1975). Ghiselin (1952) presented an anthology of creators in various domains discussing their creative process. Feldman and Goldsmith (1986) studied six child prodigies in various domains. VanTassel-Baska (1989) noted that there are certain “necessary but not sufficient” characteristics necessary for creators in domains (p. 146). She also commented on domain-based creativity in 2005, summarizing the research on creativity in domains. Gardner (1993) did case studies of exemplars for seven of his eight intelligences. Creativity in domains also was prominently featured in the *Encyclopedia of Creativity* (Runco & Pritzker, 1999).

My approach has been to look at the creative person and the creative press. Elsewhere I studied creative writers (Piirto, 1998, 2002, in press-b). VanTassel-Baska (1996) also has studied creative writers, exploring themes in the lives of Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf. (Note: This correspondence between Joyce VanTassel-Baska’s interests and mine is striking, as my own master’s thesis (Piirto, 1966), studied Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette*.) With much yet to be said about creativity in creative writers, the present chapter looks at persons who have produced creative products in the visual arts. What are their backgrounds, their personalities, their experiences, and their ways of looking at the world?

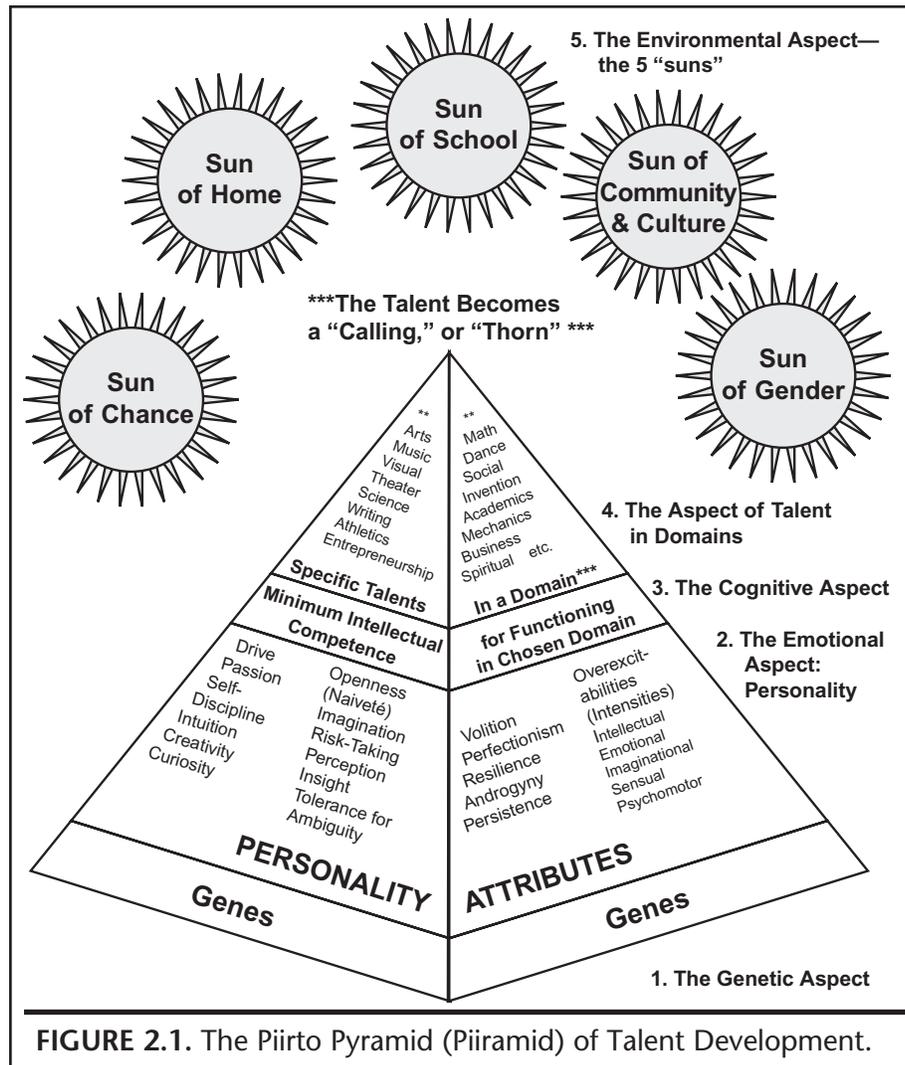


FIGURE 2.1. The Piirto Pyramid (Piiramid) of Talent Development.

The methodology I have used in the research to be presented here is qualitative and archival. Scholarly biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and published interviews have formed the basis for this research. The findings in qualitative research are inductive. In doing the massive reading necessary for writing a synoptic textbook, I formulated my first version of the Piirto Pyramid in 1994. This model has since guided my work on talent in domains (Piirto, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2004). It is a contextual framework for a biographical method that considers person, process, and product, as well as press, or environmental factors (see Figure 2.1).

THE PIIRTO PYRAMID (PIIRAMID) OF TALENT DEVELOPMENT

The eight basic assumptions of the Piirto Pyramid include (1) creativity is domain based; (2) environmental factors are extremely important; (3) talent is an inborn propensity; (4) creativity and talent can be developed; (5) creativity is not a general aptitude, but is an attribute of personality, dependent on the demands of the domain; (6) each domain of talent has its own rules and ways in which talent is developed; (7) these rules are well-established and known to experts in the domain; and (8) talent is recognized through certain early *predictive behaviors*, that is, certain patterns that are common to those who enter the same field. Along with these predictive behaviors are certain crystallizing experiences (Feldman, 1982). Crystallizing experiences are unique to the individual, while predictive behaviors are common to the field. The crystallizing experience lets the person know that this particular domain is the one for him and sets him on the path.

1. The Genetic Aspect and the Emotional Aspect: Personality Attributes

Many studies have emphasized that successful creators in all domains have certain *personality attributes* in common (e.g., Baird, 1985; Feist, 1999). These make up the base of the model, the affective aspects of what a person needs to succeed. These rest on the foundation of *genes*. Among these are androgyny; creativity; imagination; insight; introversion; intuition; naiveté, or openness to experience; overexcitabilities; passion for work in a domain; perceptiveness; persistence; preference for complexity; resilience; risk-taking; self-discipline; self-efficacy; tolerance for ambiguity; and volition, or will (see Piirto, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2004). This list is by no means discrete or complete, but shows that creative adults have achieved effectiveness partially by force of personality, and talented adults who achieve success possess many of these attributes. One could call these the foundation, along with the genetic aspect, and one could go further and say that these may be innate but to a certain extent they also can be developed and directly taught.

2. The Cognitive Aspect

The *cognitive* dimension in the form of an IQ score has been overemphasized. The IQ test often is an abstract, “out there” screen that served to obfuscate our efforts, and IQ is a *minimum* criterion, mortar and paste, with a certain level of intellectual ability necessary for functioning in the world. Having a really high IQ is not necessary for the realization of most talents. Rather, college graduation seems to be necessary (except for professional basketball players, actors, and entertainers), and as Simonton (1999a) said, most college graduates have above-average IQs but not stratospheric IQs. Theoretical physicists and philosophers may need the highest IQs.

3. *Talent in Domains*

The *talent* itself—inborn, innate, mysterious—also should be developed. Each school has experts in most of the talent domains that students will enter. The talent domain is the tip of the Pyramid. The talents are quite well-defined academically, and people can go to school to study in any of them. Most talents are recognized through certain predictive behaviors, for example, voracious reading for linguistically talented students or a preference to be class treasurer for mathematically talented students. These talents are demonstrated within domains that are socially recognized and valued within the society, and thus may differ from society to society.

4. *Environmental “Suns”*

These four levels described could theoretically be called the individual person. In addition, each individual is influenced by five “suns.” These suns may be likened to certain factors in the environment. The three major suns refer to a child’s being (1) in a positive and nurturing *home* environment, and (2) in a *community and culture* that conveys values compatible with the educational institution, and that provides support for the home and the school. The (3) *school* is a key factor, especially for those children whose other suns may have clouds in front of them. Other, smaller suns are (4) the influence of *gender*, for there have been found few gender differences in personality attributes in adult creative producers; and (5) what *chance* can provide. Chance can be improved by manipulating oneself so that one can indeed be in the right place at the right time. The presence or absence of all or several of these make the difference between whether a talent is developed or whether it atrophies. Many people’s “suns” have clouds before them, and their progress in the development of their talents is obfuscated by circumstance.

5. *Talent Multipotentiality: Feeling the Call, or the “Thorn”*

However, although absolutely necessary, the presence of talent is not sufficient. Many people have more than one talent, and wonder what to do with them. What is the impetus, what is the reason, for one talent taking over and capturing the passion and commitment of the person who has the talent? A useful explanation comes from Socrates, who described the inspiration of the Muse (Plato, *Ion*). Carl Jung (1965) described the passion that engrosses; Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described the process of flow; and depth psychologist James Hillman (1996) described the presence of the *daimon* in creative lives. All of these provide clues as to what talent a person will choose to develop. This is similar to the notion of vocation or call. I would call it inspiration or passion for the domain. Philosophers would call it soul, and depth psychologists would agree (Reynolds & Piirto, 2005, 2007). Thus, I have put an asterisk, or “thorn” on the pyramid to exemplify that talent is not enough for the realization of a life of commitment. Suffice it to say that the entire picture of talent development ensues when a person is pierced or bothered by a thorn, which is similar to the *daimon* (Jung, 1965), the acorn (Hillman, 1996) or the call (vocational psychology)—that leads to commitment.

6. Crystallizing Experiences and Catalysts

Much evidence exists that the creative person decides to pursue the development of his or her talent after some catalyst reveals that this is what must happen. It may be winning a contest or receiving praise or may come after a long period of thought and meditation. The creative person recognizes that the thorn is pricking and the call must be answered. In this chapter, I will elucidate only one of the talent domains, visual arts, using the Piirto Pyramid as a framework.

DOMAIN: VISUAL ARTS

Vasari (1561) began the consideration of eminence in visual arts with his classic books, *Lives of the Most Eminent Artists* (emphasis added). Throughout this medieval text, themes that are still current in the lives of artists show up, especially in the presence of the predictive behavior of compulsive drawing during childhood.

1. The Genetic Aspect

The evidence shows that talent in visual arts runs in families (Goertzel et al., 2004) with the families of Calder, Duchamp, Renoir, Picasso, O’Keeffe, Kahlo, Raphael, Bernini, and Utrillo as examples. Nochlin (1988) pointed out that in the 17th and 18th centuries,

the transmission of the artistic profession from father to son was considered a matter of course; . . . a large proportion of artists, great and not so great, in the days when it was not normal for sons to follow in their fathers’ footsteps, had artist fathers. (p. 156)

Greer (1979) pointed out that female visual artists frequently came from dynasties of artists, but their works often went unsigned.

2. The Emotional Aspect: Personalities of Visual Artists

Studies (Barron, 1972; Sloane & Sosniak, 1985) have shown that visual artists care little about social conformity, have a high need to achieve success independently, and are flexible. Personality attributes recognized through biographical studies (as cited in Piirto, 2004) were androgyny, risk-taking, depression, tolerance for ambiguity, preference for complexity, naiveté, nonconformity, intuition, ambition or drive, and interests and values that resemble those of other people in the arts.

3. The Cognitive Aspect in Visual Artists

The intelligence of visual artists is spatial intelligence (Gardner, 1993), or figural intelligence (Guilford, 1967). As Vincent Van Gogh, in his letters to his brother, said, “It is at bottom fairly true that a painter as man is too much absorbed by what his eyes see, and is not sufficiently master of the rest of his life” (Stone & Stone, 1937, p. 45). The Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) study of visual artists

revealed that their cognition is most aptly described as problem finding, rather than problem solving. Problem finding precedes problem solving.

4. The Domain “Thorn” in Artists

Art is a vocation, a sacred calling, and those who heed the call have a certain character besides interest and talent. The decision to commit their careers to making art—to being artists—came “as a progressive or sequential revelation,” according to Sloane and Sosniak (1985, p. 130). For example, N. C. Wyeth as a child was driven by a “constant need to draw,” and he put a drawing table in his bedroom (Michaelis, 1998, p. 32). His schoolbooks and notebooks were filled with sketches in the margins. He begged his merchant father to pay \$10 for art lessons from a local woman who had graduated from the state art school. As another example, de Kooning also displayed his early talent, and at age 12, when he finished his academic education in Rotterdam, he began working for a design firm. They were so impressed with his talent that they paid for him to attend the local art school (Stevens & Swan, 2006).

Biographical evidence (Piiro, 2004) indicates that there are certain predictive behaviors for the visual artists, including precocity, or creating art like older children do, being known as the class artist, using drawing as a means to communicate and to self-comfort, keeping sketchbooks, winning art contests, continuing to draw when other children stop because they can’t achieve verisimilitude, and demonstrating interest in the work of other artists. For example, Salvador Dali described his battle at the age of 8 with his parents for a playroom in which he could paint (Dali, 1942, p. 174). Nochlin (1988) cited several mythic stories that accompany stories of artists’ childhoods, such as doodling in the margins of their schoolbooks, the “mysterious inner call in early youth, the lack of any teacher but Nature herself . . . the fairy tale of the discovery by an older artist or discerning patron of the Boy Wonder,” usually in the guise of a shepherd (p. 154).

5. Environmental “Suns” for Visual Artists

Sun of Home. No outstanding demographic patterns have surfaced as to the professions of the parents. As many fathers were professionals as were blue-collar workers. Coincidentally, both Dali’s and Marcel Duchamp’s fathers were notaries in their hometowns (Etherington-Smith, 1995; Tomkins, 1998). Families were both encouraging and discouraging (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976; Goertzel et al., 2004). The elder Duchamp gave each of his three artist sons 150 francs per month while they established themselves. The elder Dali did the same for his son. The genetic aspect seems to apply, especially historically, where whole families were engaged in the business of making art. Childhoods were both idyllic and traumatic. de Kooning, who grew up in Rotterdam, experienced the divorce of his parents, moving 14 times in 7 years, extreme poverty, and the necessity to be a child laborer (Stevens & Swan, 2004), while Duchamp grew up in pleasantness and security (Tomkins, 1998).

Sun of Community and Culture. Cross-fertilization and cross-cultural influences among artists is common (e.g., Matisse and Picasso). Artists do not create in a vacuum. It is a myth that artists do not respond to community and culture. For example, Picasso's repeating theme of the Minotaur had a profound influence on Jackson Pollock (Naifeh & Smith, 1989). Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) used the term *loft culture* to describe the interactions among artists in art centers in urban areas. They stated that the artist often must move from the setting that inspired the art to a place where one can make one's name among the artists and the galleries.

It is difficult to make a living making visual art, and the art collector is an important part of the community and culture, or the press (Rhodes, 1961) of the milieu of the visual artist. Saarinen (1958) described the collecting passion and patronage of individuals and families such as Mrs. Potter Palmer of Chicago; Isabella Stewart Gardner of Boston; J. Pierpont Morgan of New York City, who "purchased by the carload" (p. 75); as well as Gertrude Stein and her siblings, who kept a famous salon in Paris that was memorialized in Hemingway's (1964) *A Moveable Feast* and other memoirs of the time.

Art critics and art galleries also are important in making the public aware of the work being done. An entry-level gallery and a group show are the first steps, and the visual artists move progressively to higher level galleries, one-person shows, and higher prices for their works. The artists who are not darlings of the critics or who do not win the prizes often band together to do shows that are outside the mainstream, but which eventually become recognized and accepted into the mainstream such as the Surrealists in Paris (Etherington-Smith, 1995).

Sun of School. In both academic school and art school, visual artists showed intense drawing and the emphasis on products, on making the drawings realistic and recognizable representations. Regular academic school often is a challenge, with apocryphal stories abounding: Dali being so dreamy that he never learned to read until his teenage years; Picasso's father taking him out of academic school so he could paint and draw at home; Jackson Pollock almost flunking out of high school. The childhood of Mark Rothko is anomalous amidst the stories of how poorly many visual artists did in academic school; in fact, his childhood resembles that of creative writers, who are often good academic students in verbal areas (Breslin, 1993).

Sun of Chance. In order to enhance their chances of eminence, visual artists must rent or buy a loft, move to an art center such as New York City, Los Angeles, Paris, or London, and be in juried art shows. They must try for a one-man/woman show and begin with group shows. An alternate strategy is to continue studying to get a master of fine arts, and to try to become art professors or teachers, although the danger of teaching is that it may suck the creative juices needed for doing art. Good luck follows proximity to the world of art. Proximity may be enhanced by attractiveness, as it was for Georgia O'Keeffe, who attracted Alfred Stieglitz with her beauty as well as her talent.

Sun of Gender. Women are and have been less likely to become well-known artists. Greer (1979) commented that historically, women were not permitted to sign their paintings (thus the plethora of paintings by Anon.), and were relegated by their brothers and fathers in artistic families to paint miniatures of the easel portraits painted by their male relatives. The very lack of existence of scholarly biographies on women artists other than Mary Cassatt (Hale, 1975), Georgia O’Keeffe (Robinson, 1989), and Frida Kahlo (Herrera, 1991) speaks to this marginalization. Women also are more likely to go into art education than into fine arts, perhaps for practical reasons, including the reason that many creative women use—the mommy imperative—how can I be in the creative arts and still be a mother (Piiro, 1992)?

Feminist critic Linda Nochlin (1988) pointed out that women were not permitted to study in the academies as late as the early 20th century, but in the 20th century, the barriers began to be broken down. In the 1950s in New York City, in the abstract expressionist school, the few women artists who hung around with the men at the cafes and bars were, as Stevens and Swan (2004) stated, quite strong:

The strongest female figures of the period refusing to be pitied, became remarkably tough survivors. They often did so not by rejecting the macho of the period, but by embracing it, showing the world that they could out-boy the boys. (p. 345)

EXAMPLE OF WILLEM DE KOONING (1904–1997)

As an example of how one eminent visual artist’s life is illuminated when utilizing the Piiro Pyramid of Talent Development (see Figure 2.1) as a biographical method, let us focus on the creativity of Willem de Kooning (Stevens & Swan, 2004).

Regarding de Kooning’s genetic aspect, he was good-looking, sturdy, and from a working class Dutch family. The personality attributes/emotional aspect attributed to de Kooning included (1) intense ambition—always thinking of his career and his art; (2) skill at defusing tension from experiences in his childhood home atmosphere; (3) a strong work ethic, clean and neat, and pride in being Dutch; (4) willingness to endure poverty for long periods of his adult life; (5) melancholy—he often battled with alcohol and depression; (6) his introversion: he preferred to work alone and he did not like to go to parties; (7) intensity: he was always described as intense; (8) tolerance for ambiguity: “poetic elusiveness and joy in paradox” (Stevens & Swan, 2004, p. 108); (9) persistence: he continued to paint even when he was not validated as an artist and painted until 1988; (10) shrewdness: he kept the end result in mind when dealing with people; (11) stubbornness: he would not change his style at the whim of the art world; (12) perceptiveness; (13) intuition; (14) risk-taking; and (15) generosity: he gave away drawings, paintings, and financially helped many. In regards to the cognitive aspect, de Kooning (1) was

academically talented and always in the top three of his grammar school class; (2) was always well read in philosophy and art criticism, having read Wittgenstein for entertainment; (3) sought to relate his work to art of the European past; and (4) first admired what Picasso was doing and later acknowledged the influence of Rubens and Matisse.

de Kooning's talent in the artistic domain was exhibited through (1) drawing on walls as a child and drawing as a constant throughout his life; (2) a scholarship to Rotterdam design arts academy; and (3) the creation of a few drawings after immigration that resulted in being hired over many others by Eastman Brothers as stage designer. The "thorn" for the artistic domain was demonstrated through (1) his need to draw from an early age; (2) seeking out the company of artists rather than house painters when he illegally immigrated to U.S., even though he made less money as a commercial artist; (3) his decision that he had to paint (clutched stomach when talking about need) in early 1930s; (4) an experience of an epiphany in 1932 at Gorky's studio—he was overwhelmed and became dizzy at true metaphysics of art; (5) model of meeting a serious artist who made art the center of his life; and (6) his passion for painting even when economic disaster ensued.

Influences upon de Kooning from the environmental suns included the following. The Sun of Home included (1) a poor family in Rotterdam with constant financial problems; (2) his father left to live with and start another family; (3) his mother remarried and took in wash, and his stepfather kept a tavern; (4) violence in the home: his mother had screaming fits and beat her children with wooden shoes; (5) he suffered borderline malnourishment and rotted teeth; (6) he moved 14 times between age 4 and 13; (7) he rented his first "loft" in 1932 and always had one because of a hatred of small, chintzy apartments; (8) he lived with multiple women, some simultaneously, several of whom had multiple abortions; (9) he had one child, Lisa; (10) he had many bouts with severe alcoholism that were life threatening; and (11) he painted in isolation in his studio on Long Island except for assistants.

The Sun of School included (1) teachers noticed his gift for drawing; (2) formal academic education ended at age 12, as was typical for most working-class people; (3) began to work as apprentice in decorating firm at age 12; (4) given drawing scholarship to technical arts academy in Rotterdam by owners of decorating firm at age 13 and was the best student in the class; (5) returned on scholarship to academy and went to 5th form, then quit; and (6) never returned to formal education, although he taught art at Yale and Black Mountain.

The Sun of Community and Culture included (1) his first mentor (Bernard Romein, store display designer) at age 16, who showed him Mondrian, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Dostoevsky and introduced him to commercial art; (2) he hung around in extreme poverty with the "bohemian" crowd on docks in Rotterdam, went with two friends into Belgium, and worked as sign painter; (3) moved to Greenwich Village after illegal immigration, in search of "artists" and was friends with Pollock, Kline, Rothko, Rosenberg, and Noguchi; (4) emigré artists

at Eastman Brothers formed a group of highly intelligent, talented outsiders; (5) spent summers at artist colonies at Woodstock, Provincetown, Southampton, and Black Mountain; (6) was profoundly influenced by Arshile Gorky, Stuart Davis, John Graham, Picasso, Matisse, and Rubens; (7) regularly visited galleries and museums; (8) was part of the “downtown scene” for many years until moving to Long Island, where he socialized with high society, while always treasuring his working class origins; and (9) changed gallery representation and vastly improved financial status on advice of friend Eastman.

The Sun of Chance included (1) stowing away on a British ship bound for America in 1926 (he didn’t become a U.S. citizen until 1962); (2) his design background and talent would always help him get a job—house painting, signs, design, and carpentry; (3) WPA’s artist program made him finally stop “side jobs” and declare he was a full-time painter in 1935 and poverty ensued; (4) his first one-man show in New York City in 1948 did not sell any art but was a turning point that made the art world conscious of him—the critics, galleries, and museums take notice, and this became the turning point for his career; and (5) eventually winning the Presidential Medal of Freedom and many other national and international awards.

The Sun of Gender included (1) his paintings of men indicate insecurity and vapidness; (2) his paintings of women indicate deep misogyny and mistrust, anger, rage, and fascination; (3) like other artistic men of his generation, he viewed his art as primary, often neglecting his daughter and didn’t think it important she attend school; and (4) he had many women as muses.

de Kooning’s creative process was characterized with the following: (1) being a slow worker, scraping and rescraping his work many times; (2) the use of exercise such as walking and bicycling to meditate on his work; (3) drawing multiples while watching television, similar to automatic writing: “In this way the drawing comes from something deeper” (Stevens & Swan, 2004, p. 245); (4) talking about technical aspects of his work—palette knives, paint chemistry—with other artists; and (5) his inspiration from travel, nature, and women.

CONCLUSION

This very brief introduction to the biographical method I have employed to elucidate themes in the lives of creators in domains is, perhaps, too simplistic. After all, individual lives are complex, and each human is unique. However, certain patterns do exist among creators in domains. My students’ studies have confirmed these themes. Hundreds of my graduate students, teachers studying to be teachers of the gifted and talented, and my undergraduate students in general studies have completed biographical case studies that have mostly confirmed the themes I have discussed here.

COMMENTARY

I have known of Joyce VanTassel-Baska since she was Joyce VanTassel. I was finishing my dissertation at Bowling Green State University in 1977, and had taken a job as a gifted coordinator in Hardin County. One of my professors, in hearing that I had entered the field of the education of the gifted and talented, told me he had a graduate student at the University of Toledo in the joint doctoral program that the two universities had at that time named Joyce VanTassel, who was the gifted coordinator for the city of Toledo. Both of us graduated from that program with our doctorates in educational administration and supervision. Joyce went to Illinois, and I went to Michigan and then to New York City, and then back to Ohio. I followed her career from then on, and we connected at various conferences. Over the years, we have become friends, having lunch and dinner together at conferences here and abroad, and we have shared our similar backgrounds and our passions for literature and the arts. Joyce asked me to speak at several of the curriculum conferences at William and Mary, and I have required my graduate students in the curriculum class in our endorsement program to buy and to prepare to teach one of the William and Mary units. We stay in touch. I am very honored to be asked to contribute a chapter to this volume, and to celebrate the transition of my friend from the present to the future, where she will break new ground, I am sure.

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