

**Social Construction Of The Mad Artist**

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## **1. Introduction**

**1.1 - Thesis Statement** - This research project is about perceptions of mental illness and its relationship with creativity in the art field. How do the perceptions of mental illness and creativity affect the art world? Is there a connection between mental illness and art? How is art used as a medium to portray mental illness? This paper will use a historical analysis in gaining insight on perceptions of mental illness and how they relate to artistic genres such as visual arts, music and poetry. I will be focusing on stigmas about mental illness and artists in different environments such as in asylums, educational institutions and the effects these stigmas have in the art field. Furthermore, I will include through my research the romanticization of mental illness using artists as an example. I will conclude by demonstrating that the relationship between mental illness and creativity has gone from being stigmatized to being romanticized and that in contemporary times both processes are existing simultaneously. When analyzing different sources, it will be essential to explore the social construction of the Mad Artist and the involvement of the media, art dealers, psychiatrists and consumers of art. These will be some of the key actors that play a role in researching the construction of the Mad Artist. The information I gather will be used to further understand perceptions of mental illness and artists using an analysis of books, scholarly journals and articles. It is important for artists and institutions in which art is involved to understand perceptions of mental illness and their connection to the art world.

## **2. Social Perception: Defining Key Terms**

Social perceptions of mental illness have been compared to artists due to their separateness from social norms. These abnormal qualities have led to the social construction of

the Mad Artist, a label that stems from perceptions of mental illness and creativity. There are several concepts that can be analyzed to understand perceptions of mental illness and its relationship to art. The following concepts have been studied by sociologists and are vital in discussing social perceptions of mental illness and art.

## **2. 2 - Social Constructs -**

The idea of a social construct is that societies share an understanding of something and define it as a reality. Mental illnesses are debated as being either biological or socially constructed. In the case of Asylum Art, creativity and mental illness has become a social construct in which art in confinement is considered to be a product of mental illness. Through media platforms and popular culture, the stigmatization of mental illness has made its way into being romanticized, creating the social construct of the “mad artist”.

There are levels to social constructionism ranging within highs to lows. The highs can be extreme notions that a particular concept is solely a social construct with the opposite end perceived as reality. On the other side, when a social construct is low, it implies that although society has labeled something and made it the social norm, it is still more likely to be associated with reality.

Social constructionism becomes problematic when discussing mental illness. Unlike physical health, mental health cannot be measured and analyzed the same way. Mental illness can be theorized as a social construct invented for the purpose of defining individuals who behave and think outside the social norms of their societies (Warner, 2009).

## **2. 3 - Artist Social Types -**

When referring to the “Mad Artist” as a social construct, it’s helpful to understand the concept of artist social types defined by Howard Becker, who defined empirically recognizable types of artists. Integrated Professionals are what Becker defined as the artist who’s work is integrated in an art community in which there is a specific method in the creative process, and follow the conventions within that art world. There is an exact way to be trained in the arts and an audience that is also trained to enjoy or immerse themselves in that art. In other words, it is an organized art world. The Maverick is another social type that Becker defines as being a product of the organized art world like the integrated professional, with the exception that they are loosely connected to the conventions dictated in the organized art world. The Maverick feels held down by conventions, thus making it more difficult to produce art. There is a sense of independence attached to the maverick such as performing in unusual places. An example of a maverick is John Cage, who challenged musical conventions as can be seen in the usage of unusual instruments. Naive artists, another social type, have never been trained unlike the previous two types, integrated professionals and mavericks, and they use a distinctive style that is completely unconventional. Naive artists aren’t familiar with terminologies typically learned through training in the arts, thus making it harder to explain their work. In turn, this leads audience members who don’t receive an explanation for the Naive artists’ work, to perceive them as insane or mad. Naive artists tend to be judged, ridiculed and abused for their art. Folk art is a form of art that isn’t considered art by the ones creating it. It focuses on the purpose of the art as a function, such as singing the “happy birthday” song or a national anthem. Similar to integrated professionals, folk art falls into conventions and has a predictable process. These social types are

an example of how the art world can be taken apart and categorized even if there are conventional or unconventional aspects within it (Becker, 1976).

What is distinct in the case of the “Mad Artist”, is that it is a label often associated with being unconventional yet has become normalized to the point of conventionalism. Due to normalizing the social construct of the “Mad Artist” in current times, fitting it into any of Becker’s artist social types has become possible. The reason for this is mainly because what is stigmatized is also romanticized in the realm of artistry. None the less, the “Mad Artist” is a social construct the same way that deviancy, as Becker states in his labeling theory, is as well.

#### **2. 4 - Deviance/Stigma -**

Stigmatization can impact individuals in societies that are considered outside of social norms due to their physical appearances or actions. In defining a stigma, the society’s perceptions of the individual as someone abnormal requires it to be publicly visible. Due to this transparency, the individual that is stigmatized experiences emotions associated with shame and guilt. Erving Goffman states, “The awareness of inferiority is what the stigmatized person is unable to keep out of consciousness, the formulation of some chronic feeling of the worst sort of insecurity, the anxiety of being shamed”. A stigma is placed on individuals when they do not meet societies’ standards, causing them to feel like outsiders. A complication in defining stigma is that societal standards may change, thus the stigma can be perceived and be affected by publicly related platforms. A factor contributing to stigmatization is media portrayal. In the case of individuals with mental illnesses, an example is the media’s portrayal of their social deviancy (Gilbert, 1998).

Art created outside of the art field's norms is associated with Outsider Art. Examples can be seen within Tattoo Art. Similarly to Asylum Art, Tattoo Art's deviancy and outsidersness has been redefined as an aesthetic-cultural field discovered and legitimized by institutions. Similarly, Asylum Art has been compared to well-known art, such as art created by mentally ill patients sharing qualities with Vincent Van Gogh's work, contributing to its' redefinition and legitimization as an aesthetic field. Furthermore, Tattoo Art has been perceived within media platforms as a profession and has found its way into the Fine Arts. Both Asylum and Tattoo Art have become Outsider Art genres and the aesthetic value they contribute to the Fine Arts (Mary Kosut, 2006).

### **2. 5 - Psychiatrization -**

The process of psychiatrization occurs to separate individuals from the totality of a society. These individuals are then defined as abnormal due to behaving in ways outside of what is defined as normal. Although psychiatry is used to treat mental illness, the way that mental illness is defined by psychiatrists differs depending on the social norms of a society. Foucault writes about the power of normalization within societies and how psychiatry is used to maintain it. Psychiatrization arguably turns regular life experiences into psychiatric issues, creating what is normal and abnormal as a whole through medicalizing individual behaviors. (Foucault, 2006, Mills, 2015)

### **2. 6 - Romanticization -**

While stigmas create shame in individuals for their mental illnesses, they also create societies that romanticize them. Romanticization can be defined as the process in which something becomes glorified and portrayed in an appealing way. In the subject of mental illness,

its romanticization is seen throughout popular culture and into the art world, particularly in outsider art. Therefore, mental illness is not only stigmatized, but also romanticized.

### **3. Social Construction of the Mad Artist Through History**

#### **3. 1 - Ancient Greece: How Artists Were Defined -**

Those with mental illnesses and creative individuals have been observed as being separate from the norm, dating back to Ancient Greece and perceived differently throughout the Romantic Period and contemporary times. In Ancient Greece, physical artists such as sculptors and architects were not yet considered artists, rather the attention was focused on poets and speakers as artists (Kaufman, J. 2014).

#### **3. 2 - Modern Era: A Shift In Madness Perceived In Artistry -**

The Romantic period is described as a change in how “madness” was perceived, reviving the divine aspect of insanity that occurred in Ancient Greece, in which artists who were mentally ill were gifted through divinity, possessed by demons that made the artists unique and separate from the norm. Within these observations came the correlation between them, linking them as ingredients to one another, whether seen as a genius quality, outcast or deviancy. During the Romantic era, the label of the “mad poet” became a social construct that led into the twentieth century, and has effected visual aesthetics in the arts, including the fine arts, as well as the literature field (Bridget M. Keegan 2018). Mental illnesses became thought of as an ingredient in the geniuses of artists, leading to the category of outsider art, a non-conformists art form that rebels against social norms (Hall, M. D., Metcalf, E. W., & Cardinal, R. 1994). Perceptions of “mad artists” changed from the way Romanticism focused on the insanity of the individual to the imagination that makes them artistic geniuses. The Romantic period’s attempts to bind the

creative genius with madness was met with The Enlightenment era, in which the genius artist was to abide by rules and training within the art world, which in turn perpetuated the label of “Madness” as an undesirable and feared trait within western societies (Kaufman J, 2014).

However, during the Romantic Era, the notion of the creative genius as mentally ill was under the constraints of the authorities of the art world, within the academics and society. Author James C. Kaufman states “Before the eighteenth century, it was commonly accepted that the human imagination constituted a capricious and dangerous element of the lives of men.”

Although mental illnesses have been stigmatized and associated with deviancy and criminal behavior, its’ romanticization is evident in artistic genres labeled as Outsider Art. Historical connections between mental illness and artistic ability have led to social stigmas and the romanticization of mental illnesses. During the Romantic era, these labels combined to form a new category, the “mad genius”, which gained attention in scholarly studies, but also criticized by them as individuals who were “degenerates”. This criticism and concern with the “mad genius” contributed to the social stigma of artists and the mentally ill as deviants, along with stereotyping them as morally corrupt. In contrast, valorization of artists with mental illnesses were written about and observed in the early twentieth century by art historians and European artists, leading to another category called “Art Brut”, defined as “art by people believed to work outside established artistic and cultural systems” (White, A.G. 2006).

### **3. 3 - Psychiatrists Romanticizing Artists In Confinement -**

Psychiatrists have written about artists with mental disabilities in a manner that associates them with abnormality. This association places them in a lower position within a hierarchical structure while these artists are also noted for their creativity. In this sense, there appears to be a



contradiction with how artists with mental illnesses are treated within asylums that suggests that they are less than human, yet they are capable of creating art. Their work receives a respectable response, but as people, are treated as incapable of being in society. This is especially true during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when psychiatrists placed attention among artists with mental illnesses in confinement. During this era, psychiatrists contributed to the notion of artists with mental disabilities as geniuses due to their distinct perspectives. This also contributed to labels such as “Mad Artist” in an era where patients in asylums were labeled as “mad men” and “abnormal” (Richardson, J. 2018).

The outsider art genre of “Asylum Art” was introduced during the 1980’s as a trend that contributed to the art of the insane becoming a social construct. Artists such as Martin Ramirez became praised while they were institutionalized in asylums, as he was considered to have a unique imagination that gave him access to something the sane cannot obtain (Zolberg, V.L., & Cherbo, J.M. 1997).

### **3. 4 - Contemporary -**

Although artists with mental illnesses have historically been stigmatized, they have also been romanticized. It is important to note that artists during the twentieth century adopted the “mad genius” notion to represent their “otherness” style. Authors such as Anthony White suggests that whether mad art was stigmatized or romanticized, the attraction stems from being different from the norm (White, A. 2007).

Contemporary Chinese poets during the 20th century wrote about their mental illnesses in their poetry. Author Birgit Bunzel Linder suggests that these types of poems can be used to further examine the relationship between mental illness and creativity. According to the

literature, accounts of isolation and mental disorders within their poetry are attempts to relate the poet's individual experience to the collective one. These artistic expressions are a method of integrating into society by being understood despite their mental illnesses. Guo Lusheng, a poet with Schizophrenia, is praised for his technical skill and form by critics, displaying awareness of his "madness" in a structured manner. Lusheng wrote much of his work during his hospitalization and thus can be categorized as Asylum Art. He also struggled with his identity during hospitalization and describes his stay as "bitter". However, using his poetry to cope with his mental illness, Lusheng is said to want to "offer light to those hungry and cold". The author aims to shed light on cross-cultural medical humanities fields that may lead into new forms of aiding those with mental illnesses, suggesting that rather than seeking cures for mental illnesses, it would be more effective to teach how to cope with them (Linder, B. B. 2015).

Romanticizing what is stigmatized is what makes up the notion of the Mad Artist, and it may have been a result of the influence of respected artist with mental disorders. Authors such as Marylin Charles and Karen Telis have described the struggle of Vincent Van Gogh which translated through his life and work. Van Gogh became obsessed with his creative vision while self-identifying as a peasant in poverty because of his youth and environments that he lived in. He moved around frequently struggling to find a home and eventually found himself in the South where he experienced isolation and became obsessed with misery and death. The authors described Van Gogh's desperation to paint as a way of coping with his depression, which has also been said to have inspired him to create art about it (Charles & Telis, 2009).

Plato introduced the idea that melancholia becomes madness and a key ingredient to creative genius. Plato described madness as a divine mental state gifted from the gods, but other

philosophers such as Aristotle argued that abnormality was the key to greatness. Aristotle's outlook is influenced by science thus his theories on creativity differ from Plato's. During the Italian Renaissance, there was a philosopher Marsilio Ficino who believed in the connection between activities and planets such as Saturn. He believed Saturn would bring melancholy to certain individuals, which would also gift them with creative potential. This idea helped those who were suffering, such as melancholics, to channel their suffering or mental illnesses into their creative work. German artist Albrecht Dürer described melancholia as being necessarily linked to creativity, rejecting the notion that it is a depressive or mental disorder (Simpson, 2000).

Author Jane Simpson notes that in 1899, melancholia was defined by psychiatrists as depression, unlike the way Plato viewed melancholia as a source of creativity. Instead of using the term melancholia as a creative source, during 1980, the DSM replaced it with Hypomania, an elevated mood that aided in creativity. The author questions why there isn't enough research on why these terms were shifted and whether these modern definitions and perceptions of melancholia are superior to the previous ways (Simpson, 2000).

#### **4. Actors involved in the Social Construction of the Mad Artist**

Several actors are involved in the social construction of the Mad Artist label, responding in various ways. While some argue against labeling, others benefit from the mad artists' authentic value.

**Artists** - Jennifer Eisenhauer writes about her mental illness being displayed in her art exhibition entitled "Admission", in which she shows her personal experience as a form of "(be)coming out". She describes this "coming out" as a way of revealing that she has a mental illness so that the audience can interpret them in their own way. Her art is labeled as Outsider Art

due to her bipolar disorder and argues that this can further reinforce her mental disability in a negative way. Her aim is to show through artwork the complexities involved in “coming out” because of the various ways society perceives mental illnesses, suggesting that people with mental illnesses should and can use art to “(be)come out”, meaning to display how one represents oneself, despite the stigmas and historical constructs of madness (Eisenhauer 2009).

#### **4. 2 - Art Dealers -**

An aspect that may have contributed to the social construction of the Mad Artist is the category of self-taught art. To further elaborate, this type of art is considered identity art because of the biographical nature of its’ artist type. These artists are recognized for the process and stories behind their art, especially in terms of social location, which refers to their outsiderhood due to not being trained in art institutions. This is similar to Folk artists; those who unknowingly create objects that art fields consider art. This leads to untrained artists being given a social space to represent as they find authenticity for their uniqueness. One example used is Clyde Angel, who has a background story that is full of struggling and being mentally institutionalized for schizophrenia. His biography is a significant factor in his authenticity and gives his work a personal identity (Fine, G. 2003).

Art dealers and investors categorize artists as Insider or Outsider, which changes their value and authenticity. There is a certain criteria an artist meets that makes him an Outsider Artist, such as being disconnected from the overall art world and high class culture. It is suggested that the cultural elite exploit these artists and keep them within their label as Outsider for financial gain (Prinz, J. (2017). In “Against Outsider Art” a journal written by Jesse Prinz, the author argues that Outsider Art as a genre is exploited and misrepresented, and should be

reconsidered as a genre similarly to primitive art. Prinz describes Outsider Art as often associated with the art of individuals with mental illnesses. These accounts were evident in the 1970s in which people rebelled against cultural norms and criticized mental institutions, thus attitudes towards mental illness changed in this era. When discussing the link between creativity and mental illness, not all Outsider Art is considered to be created by such individuals as many insider artists were also diagnosed with mental illness. According to the author, these illnesses aided them in creating their work, whether labeled insider or outsider artists.

### **5. Art As A Medium To Portray Mental Illness**

Within my research, I came across other ways in which mental illness is linked to art. There has been much research on artists with mental illnesses and the way they have been perceived throughout history, however, art has also been used to portray mental illness in various ways and to teach the stigmatization of certain groups.

It is worth noting how visual representations of the mentally ill contributed to their stigmatization. Artists themselves may have been a component for these stigmas, such as in the fifteenth century, when it can be seen that some of them created works depicting the mentally ill as beast-like. Disfigurement and abnormality in faces and bodies were painted and engraved to express views of mental illness. These depictions may have been based on the fear of the abnormal. This fear is evident in the way society separates the normal from the abnormal, the natural from the unnatural, and leads to visual representations as tools to identify them. The desire for society to identify itself as sane contributes to the otherness of the mentally ill. In order to succeed in this identification, stigmatization of those abnormal from society is essential. The media is used to create this stigma by identifying the insane through visuals. This is evident in

popular culture, along with media targeted for children. Cartoons reference mental illness depicting them through visual and verbal ways, using words such as loony, mad and freak to describe characters along with showing them as visually messy, unkempt appearances. Overall, these representations aim to identify what is abnormal and non-human, contributing to stigmas surrounding mental illness (Eisenhauer, J. 2008).

Author Jane Kromm suggests madness was originally associated with mostly men, but then became associated with women. This shift in women mostly noted as insane occurred in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was represented through visual arts such as paintings where the character Ophelia from Shakespeare's play Hamlet was depicted. This contributed to stereotyping women and is an example of how art can be used to further enforce stigmas of madness. The author also notes that stereotyping women has overall shifted from being a poetic figure to an anti-social and violent figure, thus women are being constrained throughout history in several ways that make them appear insane. Examples of this constraint can be seen within visual representations in art (Kromm, J. E. 1994).

The impact of media's portrayal of mental illness as socially deviant can be seen during the early twentieth century after the First World War. Germany experienced an increase of drug use and festivities that became associated with deviancy by the media. The Nazi regime took advantage of this behavior using propaganda to create the stigma of drug usage as a sign of madness and deviancy, associating and blaming it on the Jewish people. This example shows mental illness being stigmatized in a children's book depicting an antisemitic tale comparing Jews to mushrooms; not being able to tell apart a good mushroom from a poisonous one.

Therefore, visual art was used as a tool to teach the stigmatization of mental illness as social deviance (Ohler, 2017).

## **6. Discussion/Conclusion**

Sociologists have studied mental illness and its relationship to stigmatization. Individuals who have mental illnesses have often been associated with abnormality and deviance. Societies are structured to isolate these individuals into confinement and asylums, but the attitude towards them changes in terms of artists with mental illnesses. There is a historical pattern in which mental illness is stigmatized, yet is romanticized for its artistic value. Scholars who have written about artists with mental illnesses often refer to the “Mad Artist” label, which has been socially constructed by several actors involved such as media, psychiatrists, art dealers and consumers of Fine Art. The idea of this social construction stems from mental illness as a key ingredient to creativity, which is beneficial for their art, but detrimental for the artist who creates it.

When discussing media, art itself has been used as a medium to portray mental illness. An essential aspect of media’s portrayal of mental illness is that it follows a set design of what mental illness visually represents and can be used to create and perpetuate stigmas surrounding it. In contrast, media can also be used to benefit those with mental illnesses by fighting stigmas and showing that it isn’t something that should be romanticized as it is a serious issue of mental health. Artists in asylums have also been portrayed in stigmatizing ways yet have been glorified for their art work. This notion has brought on discussions about the link between mental disorders and creativity, which several scholars have noted that there is a link, while others have noted that making this claim perpetuates their stigma and romanticization. Interestingly, this notion benefits art dealers in the world of Fine Arts, in which aesthetic value is measured by the

biography of an artist, implying that their art work is more valuable due to having a mental illness.

Initially, I researched through a historical background how mental illness went from being stigmatized to being romanticized, but both have coexisted since Ancient Greece and it seems that artistry plays a major role in that connection. Perceptions range from mental illness being a key ingredient for creative potential, to creativity being separate from mental illness. Furthermore, there are cases such as with Vincent Van Gogh that suggests that creativity has perpetuated mental illness, but there doesn't seem to be enough research on this topic.

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