

The Seven Deadly Art Myths

By Robly A. Glover

I have taught jewelry design and metalsmithing for seven years and during this time I have developed a list of what I consider to be the seven deadly art myths. As a student with the self absorption of youth, I believed I was the only one wrestling with these common cultural misconceptions. When I started teaching, I realized that the students I taught were confronting the same misconceptions. I tell students that in order to make art and to build one's personal visual vocabulary one must look within. I believe that in order to make art one must be true to one's life experiences and the person one is. When students are filled with stereotypic ideas of what they should be, they have more difficulty finding their own way. The seven deadly art myths that disrupt a student's ability to develop as a self-sufficient artist are:

1. Art is easy.
2. Artists are dumb.
3. Artists are poor and starving.
4. Artists are martyrs.
5. Artists are self-destructive.
6. Artists are sloppy.
7. Artists look like artists.

These seven myths inhibit young artists from reaching their potential. I have seen students carry these myths into their professional lives with unfortunate consequences for themselves and their art. This is why I have chosen to present these myths for examination and discussion.

Art Is Easy

I once overheard two students talking. One said "I think I'll be an art major 'cause it's easy, right?" Artists are often portrayed as individuals who are trying to get out of doing work or having "real" jobs. The beret-clad, bearded beatnik of the fifties was a stereotype perpetuated by Hollywood and the general public. A more contemporary art stereotype is the new age hippie. However, the roots go back to the destruction of the two world wars. Some art students want to believe they are associated with this legacy, but in most instances, they are rebels without a clue. They adopt the image because it gives them an identity they feel they lack.

Many young artists expect the muses to fly down from heaven and bop them over the head with a great idea. They don't realize that persistence and thoughtful works are the keys to true innovation and creativity. Art is a career in the truest sense. Most of the professional artists I know work eight to fourteen hours a day. Making art involves tremendous problem solving ability, since each piece poses a new set of questions to be addressed. Being successful in art required desire, determination, talent, hard work, persistence and luck. If art were easy, everyone would be successful, but only a few are. Being successful requires a willingness to expose one's true self and to make a meaningful commitment.

Artists Are Dumb

This is a particularly annoying myth. It is a popular misconception among some students that artists do not need to understand why they make art. They believe that artists meander through life, making art so self absorbed and obscure that the average person could not possibly understand the meaning. Both of these extremes are false assumptions. Culture is understood through the study of art and architecture. The soul of a culture is revealed through the objects that the artists create.

Besides the media's portrayal of the dumb artist, an even greater culprit is our educational system. Slow and/or disruptive problem students are often "funneled" into art classes. This reduces the

attention and resources for students who are serious about art. This lack of understanding by school districts across the country that the arts are an intellectual pursuit is appalling. Some students become art majors because they believe they are not smart enough for anything else. I tell students that the world doesn't need any more mediocre artists. They should strive to be great artists.

Some students believe that art is the only subject they need to study. An artist must know about music, architecture, literature, philosophy, psychology, history, etc. The more you know, the more versatile you are and the better artist you become. For artist to make meaningful statements about their time and place, they must know what is going on in their culture and how other artists are expressing themselves. Whether you have a liberal arts education or you are self-taught, you must be aware of the world around you in order to make an intelligent contribution to the art of your own time.

Poor Starving Artists

“Hurry today, to the Holiday Inn for the starving artist sale. Nothing priced over \$29.95. Everything must go.” Certainly no one hopes to become a starving artist. I think the dread of every parent is that his or her child will want to become an artist. I deal with these concerns every time I council students. I tell students and parents I do not believe in the starving artist's myth. As in any other career, in art there is a full gamut from success to failure. If being the starving artist is your goal, I can almost guarantee that you will achieve that goal. Individuals often become what they perceive themselves to be. Each individual is responsible for the decisions that lead to his or her personal goals. If you are truly talented, creative and innovative there is no reason for you to become a starving artist. I believe that artists must be safe and secure before their work can reach its true potential. This potential must be grounded in self-confidence and understanding of their field. For each person the process is different but at some point he or she must discover a way to survive and make art simultaneously. The romantic idea of a starving artist is not very practical.

Art Martyrs

Art martyrs are individual who complain incessantly about how hard they work, but they never seem to get much accomplished. The closet martyrs emerge from the woodwork during the last three weeks of the semester. Not sleeping, not washing, not eating for days on end, they “sacrifice” for their art. More projects are ruined than saved at 4:00 a.m., but “not having enough time to do it right” is always a ready excuse for a desperate student. Unfortunately for the art martyrs, I am not impressed. Fifty hours of crap and fifty hours of crap equals one hundred hours of crap. This may seem harsh, but students must learn how to work intelligently in order to survive. They may learn a great deal about techniques and process but this knowledge must be assessed in relationship to how it is used. There is a time to do your work and a time to take care of your personal needs. Successful artists recognize this and adjust their lives accordingly.

Artists Are Self-Destructive

The image of the self-destructive artist like other art myths has its roots in the concept of the bohemian artist. Hollywood has romanticized the hedonist lifestyle of artists in such movies as *Lust for Life*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, *The Wolf At The Door*, etc. These movies have ingrained this image into popular culture. Many students feel obligated to pursue this lifestyle in the name of art without fully understanding the ramifications of their actions.

I believe the fear of success and/or the fear of failures are at the root of this self-destructive behavior. Art is a high-minded pursuit. Self-destructive and addictive behavior can do nothing, but destroy the creative process. It robs one of valuable time that can never be replaced.

Artists Are Sloppy

I have students who say, "I'm sloppy, I'm an artist." This is a myth buried in the psyche of many students. It is my belief that many individuals use this myth to hide their own insecurities. The myth of the sloppy artist can mean failure to someone seeking a career in art. The field is a competitive one. There are many excellent artists who do not represent themselves professionally and consequently do not get the recognition they deserve. Conversely, there are mediocre artists with strong media skills who receive too much attention. Time must be taken to document your work well in order to achieve recognition. If that is what you seek. When a juror is down to the final selections and an over or underexposed slide is compared to another that is crisp and clear, the choice is obvious.

Artists Must Look Like Artists

"How can I be an artist? I don't look good in black and I don't want to pierce my nose or shave my head." Everyone has a preconceived idea of what an artist should look like. If being an artist is about not conforming, why would you conform to the stereotype of what others think an artist should look like? Are you not defeating your own purpose? Anyone can look like an artist, but it takes more than a look to succeed. More people will view your artwork than will ever know what you look like. Anyone who invests more time looking like an artist than making art is wasting his or her time.

I have encountered these myths while teaching. Myths and stereotypes are curious things that exist for many reasons. The purpose of this article is to open a discussion that will foster a better understanding of how these misconceptions can adversely affect a student's development.

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Howling Bold Spiraling Tea Thing. Constructed. Sterling silver, 12" x 8" x 3.5". 1992. Photo Credit: Robert Suddarth.