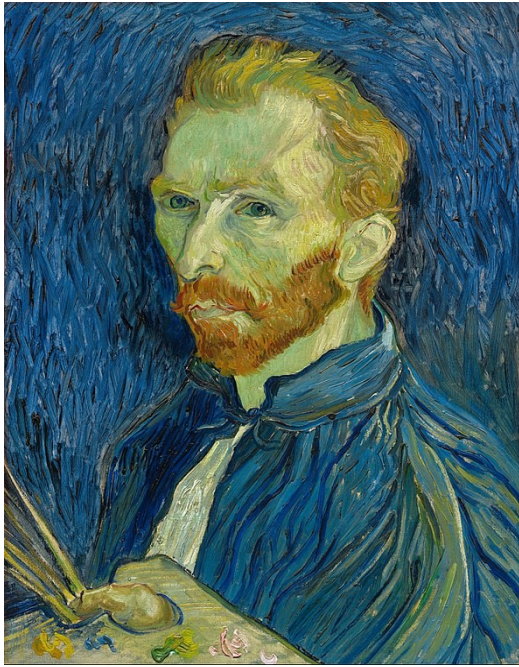


Studio Craft: “Hard work or Inspiration?”



Vincent Van Gogh, “Self Portrait” 1889

Ask the Experts: “I always cringe when the term “artistic inspiration” comes up. I think the idea that artists are especially “inspired” or that creativity is something you either have or don’t, doesn’t tell the real story of how art is made, which in my case is by grinding out hours of work every day. I can’t be the only artist who thinks this.”

A: Artists often chafe at the stereotypical image of perpetually waiting for, or obsessively consumed by, inspiration from a mysterious source. Some feel that this romanticized image magnifies the importance of “divine spark” and unfairly diminishes the role of work and acquired skill.

While the term “inspiration” seems inseparable from art, however, leaders in every field cite inspiration as part of their own achievements. It means something different for each of us, but however you characterize it, inspiration means the intangible, unknown factor that sometimes allows us to achieve beyond what we believe our ability to be.

Every artist remembers the hours of practice invested in learning their craft, and most are not shy about taking full ownership of their ability. Every artist, whether working for a living or strictly for passion, has known hard work. After all, the concept for a work of art may exist in perfection as an idea, but work and skill are what makes it real for the audience.

Even the most celebrated geniuses have acknowledged the necessity of this effort. Picasso said, “*inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.*” Vincent Van Gogh, the artist perhaps most often described in terms of his inspiration, said, “*It is not only by one's impulses that one achieves greatness, but also by patiently filing away the steel wall that separates what one feels from what one is capable of doing.*”

Being a hard working artist by no means excludes inspiration as an essential element. Some of the hardest working artists, and some of the most technically proficient, can also be the quickest to acknowledge what inspired their achievements.

Where artists differ is in whether the source of inspiration is internal or external, and to what degree they feel obliged to credit or express gratitude to an unknown motivating, guiding force. That is deeply personal to the individual artist, and not something we would judge as right or wrong.

We think if you consider times when you were less certain of your abilities, and reflect on what helped you push through, you might identify what others consider to be inspirational. Think about what first made you want to learn art. It may have been a parent, teacher, fellow artist, or a work of art in a museum. That may help you resolve the “work/inspiration” relationship for yourself, and understand that being inspired by someone or something doesn’t have to diminish your accomplishments.

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