



# Art Success: Necessarily Against Ethics?

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**Abstract.** Throughout art history, there are many negative anecdotes. Many artists are flawed when it comes to morality issues, even though they have made extraordinarily outstanding art pieces. Their defects include not only sexually transmitted diseases and chaotic relationships, but also encompass violation of law and usage of drugs. However, there are not a lot of research articles on art and ethics. Through the analysis of different artists' backgrounds and works, this article discusses whether there is a natural conflict between artistic success and morality, and expounds the importance of artistic ethics and the reasons for its neglect from both theoretical and empirical aspects. At the end of the article, the author makes a summary analysis and gives specific suggestions in order to improve the awareness of art and ethics.

**Keywords:** Art, ethics, aesthetics.

## 1 Introduction

Glancing through art history, the public has been fascinated with artworks as well as hearing about extremely negative anecdotes from well-known artists. It is true that many artists have flaws when it comes to morality issues though they have made extraordinarily outstanding art pieces. These flaws, not only include sexually transmitted diseases and messy relationships but also encompass violation of law and usage of drugs. As I looked through the literature on art and ethics to learn more, I was shocked to discover that the most recent "Artist and Ethics" study was published in 1977. This study discusses the moral issues of the works of art and the artists themselves, distinguishes three kinds of distinguishable types of moral, and examine their interrelationships<sup>[1]</sup>. This article only discusses the moral issues of artists under different requirements, and does not solve my problem, so I want to look into this "covered with dust" topic and see what advancement the world have made during half a century to fill the study gap.

I wonder whether a natural conflict lies between art success and morality. I want to know if is there any feasibility to tip the balance. Assuming all artworks have educational significance, what kind of social responsibility modern artists should take up?

## 2 The Relationship between Art and Ethics

### 2.1 The most ideal scenario: excellent in both art techniques and moral integrity

The normative ethical perspective known as deontology evaluates an action's morality using a set of rules. As contrast to the rightness or wrongness of the outcomes of those activities, this approach to ethics concentrates on the rightness or wrongness of the action description that is used to make the decision to act<sup>[2]</sup>.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, rejected the utilitarian premise that the morality of a deed depends on how fruitful its result is in his ethics theory. He contends that an action's moral worth is determined by its motivation, not by its results. According to his universalizability principle, an action must be able to be applied to all people without causing a conflict in it to be considered permissible. According to the autonomy formulation, rational agents are constrained by their own desire to uphold the moral code<sup>[3]</sup>.

Ideally, artists should observe the unity of opposites of autonomy which is bound to rational agents and freedom of lifestyle and art creation. Against the principle of utilitarianism, artists who are thirsty to make contributions must hold a strong faith of goodwill. Being decent in both art achievement and ethics is a necessity when defining a great artist. No artist disclaims from immorality whatever how great their artworks are. Otherwise, conflicts will arise.

### 2.2 Back to Reality: most great artists are morally discrepant but very few artists balance art success and morality somehow

It is doubtless that artists could enjoy wide recognition even though they have moral blemishes. However, the artist with noble ethics is worthy of being memorized. Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, a French realism painter, showed an optimistic, tolerant, nature-loving personality and he led a happy life together with his parents and wife. Because of his good qualities, he was a welcoming person during his elderly years. From Corot's experience, we can conclude that an artist does not have to sacrifice ethics in exchange for artistic success. Creation and morality are not controversial. Corot recorded splendid landscapes and peaceful portraits in his paintings that indirectly exhibited his positive mindset. (See Fig.1)



**Fig. 1.** Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, View of the Forest of Fontainebleau,1830<sup>[8]</sup>

### 3 A scope of Immoral Artists: squeezed out by unhappy life

All people are inevitably nurtured by the social environment, and so do artists. Artistic creation is greatly influenced by the artist's ongoing life affairs. They are loading sharp pains caused by frustrating life, psychological illness, natural physical disability, etc. To hedge these declining feelings, artists chose to let themselves go with the most free way, regardless of morality.

#### 3.1 Desperate real life

Living difficulties always achieve great artists. From the unique angle of different artists, toughness was interpreted into various art styles and themes. Among artists who have sad living stories, some of them illustrated ego and pain whereas other artists caught the suffer of underprivileged groups.

Edvard Munch went through bad personal health, his sibling's mental illness, as well as his family member's death. His temperamental and religion-crazy father planted a seed of psychoneurosis and inherited madness in his heart. The angels of fear, sorrow, uncertainty, and death stood by his side since his early years and made him abuse alcohol when he grew up. Edvard also screamed out these toxic feelings via art creation. (See Fig.2)



**Fig. 2.** Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893<sup>[9]</sup>

Josephson had a turbulent personal life. By the time he was in his late 20s, he had syphilis, which had a negative impact on his love life. Josephson was compelled to give up trying to get together with the young model Ketty Rindskopf<sup>[4]</sup>. (See Fig.3)



**Fig. 3.** Ernst Josephson, *Ecstatic Heads*, after 1890<sup>[10]</sup>

### 3.2 Inner pain with no unleashment

Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet had an extremely hard life. Born in a rich farmer family and surrounded by loving family members, however, he went into a self-imposed exile to avoid bankruptcy after he ended his prison sentence. He didn't get married during his lifetime though he had never fallen in love with a woman. Luckily, his maid gave birth to a child for him. Life treated him even badly and he had grown delirium under the pressure of debt and life. In exchange for relief, he spent time painting and misbehaved himself immorally or illegally. As a witness of peasants, he noted down labour scenes of stone breakers in his paintings, intending to show the hard labor that poor citizens experienced. Courbet made a tactful metaphor that every disadvantaged individual shared the two figures' struggle that he didn't show the two figures' faces but their backs and ragged clothing. (See Fig.4)



Fig. 4. Gustave Courbet, The Stone Breakers, 1849<sup>[11]</sup>

## 4 Artistic ethics is crucial but widely disregarded

As a component of morality outlook, artistic ethics is long-time marginalized by the mainstream and thus bears deep ignorance. Theoretically and empirically, the importance of art ethics and the reason of art ethics disregard are clarified in this part.

### 4.1 Why artists should be moral?

According to Kant, the highest good is an a priori necessary object of our will<sup>[5]</sup>. Only the supreme good has complied with the wish of rational life to pursue perfection. The supreme good refers not only to virtue, but also virtue and happiness can be perfect goodness. The improvement of morality must face the restraint of rational pain, in order to obtain happiness that conforms to personal preferences and sensibility. As one of the career choices, artists should not break through social moral order, and maximize their personal happiness on the basis of affecting the interests of others. As I mentioned above about Corot's case, art morality was never necessarily against art accomplishment and pain was not essential to art inspiration.

## 4.2 Why artistic ethics is universally neglected?

Prevailing art morality disregards composed of complex factors. There are many attributing factors, such as artists themselves, art education, and art industry.

Most artists lack rational ethical constraints. Max Ernst firmly pursued illusion and irrationality in his paintings that manifest wild imagination and sinister composition of real-life objects. Max Ernst obtained inspiration by letting his mind go crazy and re-structuring images on the canvas that he never created artworks guided by his logical thinking and rational. Factually, the artist is an occupation that is not driven by logic and rational but by imagination and innovation. As a result, artists are much more likely to be less moral because they have never thought about the significance of rational ethical restriction. Society has no expectation of artists' morality, in consequence, there are many dissolute people among artists. (See Fig.5)



Fig. 5. Max Ernst, The Elephant Celebes, 1921<sup>[12]</sup>

There is no curriculum in art education that emphasizes art ethics. Plenty of well-known artists studied in professional art institutes. Take the oil painting major for example, surprisingly, no curriculum emphasizes the significance of art morality. Artistic students are trained to be brilliant solely in drawing techniques and theories, but the students have no idea what social responsibility artists are taking because they are never taught how to create under ethical restrictions. The moral outlook acknowledged by the masses has a gap in art ethics, so none of us has ever recognized the importance of art ethics. Neither did the art professors. More and more artists try to promote themselves by self-media, creating eye-catching videos to get a large volume of viewing traffic so that artists would harvest fame and wealth. This phenomenon strengthens immoral attention-attracting marketing behaviors of artists, deteriorating art morality standards.

The art industry is monopolized by male power. The art industry develops with a strong monopoly power, especially by masculine authority. Art was used to represent religious positions, telling Bible stories and supervising by the pope. Art illustrated many great revolutions throughout history. Almost all religious and political reforms that restructured the world were originated by male leaders and hence reinforced masculine influence. The art industry was also governed by males.

Camille Claudel was a promising student of the most famous sculptor of the day: Auguste Rodin. She had a tumultuous affair with Rodin and her resentment gradually transferred into madness. Camille was not only an ambitious sculptress, but also a woman scarred by male dominance. It was not easy for a woman to become an artist in the mid-19th century. Camille had to cope with moral prejudice, gender-related restrictions in her artistic training, and the prevailing male dominance in art creation<sup>[6]</sup>.

## 5 Suggestions

Currently, artistic morality cultivation still has a long way to go. Artists should nurture a moral consciousness that both art creation and art morality are significant to society. No matter how great an individual is he cannot be an exception. My suggestions below hope to help improve the artistic ethics of artists and their works.

Art can not provide shelter for immoral behavior. The role of art therapy should be reshaped so that it functions as a healing and curing means but not an efficient “tablet” of psychological disorders. Art should not be taken as a shield for unlucky people who are fighting against life pressure and therefore act recklessly.

Art education should stress the importance of art morality. Art education should add art ethics training content and develop healthy ethics at the early stage of artists. Artists could possibly be aware of the educational and social significance their artworks have and strive to deliver positive concepts via artworks.

Art regulation should promote art morality standard. Like other industries, art associations are able to lead artistic legislation. As long as artists have regulations to obey, the art morality level is going to be higher. Art associations could establish a blacklist of immoral artists, keeping records of tax defraud, tort of copyright, or indecent art creation. In addition, the art association should open a hotline for whistle-blowers or complaints. According to the overall rules, artists' certification could add a module of art morality test. Furthermore, artwork evaluation may put weight on art ethics by social-friendly index if it is required by art regulation.

## 6 Conclusion

Temporarily, art is widely abused by politics and inferior artworks spread dangerous intentions to the public and become less and less educational<sup>[7]</sup>. While great artwork is, not only a mirror of social reality, but also a social-optimizing method. Art should develop as a means of moral improvement. Art is not at the mercy of religion and politics but is never independent of law. Art creation encourages ego expression freedom but it is not free from restrictions. Society should hold a positive idealistic expectation that art contribution and art morality have intergrowth. Successful educational artworks collaborate with moralism, aestheticism, and mixed positions.

Moral depravity caused by suffering life should not be tolerated. If artists were forgiven for crimes because they led an unhappy life, other criminals would have an excuse to free themselves from the penalty and hence society is going to be in a declining order. What's more, tolerating the demise of artists is to put art appreciators in a victim

position that a large proportion of artists manifest distorted value in paintings, from which appreciators take unwelcoming and negative feelings.

Art should not only generate aesthetic value but also educational value and mental-curing value. However, artists are never forgiven for moral discrepancy. No matter how hard their personal life was, they should not perform any anti-social behavior. Overall, society lacks the art ethics outlook and artists lack the art ethics awareness. I will be concerned about art morality in the future and check if any suggestions I have listed above are adopted by society. To broaden my understanding, I would keep track of how to make remedy plans if the art morality crisis appears and the dynamic changes in art ethic outlook and art creation ecology.

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