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**ARTIST AND INSANITY. FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO  
THE MODERN AGE**

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***Abstract***

Nowadays the meanings of the concepts ‘artist’ and ‘insanity’ are quite obscure. According to postmodernists, ‘the author is dead’; according to modern psychologists, there are no ‘normal’ people at all. What is more, it is not obvious what kind of person could be considered ‘normal’ and who could be referred to as ‘artist’. The article seeks to examine the correlation between such concepts as ‘artist’ (in broad terms), ‘creation’, and ‘insanity’. The purpose of the article is to reconstruct the evolution of the concepts ‘creation’ and ‘insanity’ in people’s minds from Antiquity to the Modern Age. In Antiquity, the process of creation was related to ecstasy. An artist created a piece in an ecstatic state of mind similar to a temporary frenzy. In the Middle Ages, people expected a divine insight from an ecstatic practice, but not from a creative work. In the Renaissance, a creative state of mind and insanity became absolutely different from each other. They could only have one touch-point: an artist could become insane if he sought help from the Devil. In the Modern Age, there was a slow transition from the faith in the omnipotence of human reason to the acknowledgment that its abilities are limited. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an artist and a madman were considered to have a lot of similarities.

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## 1. Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are two questions which are difficult to answer: who is an artist and what kind of person could be considered insane? These concepts are not well-defined in modern culture.

Let us start with the concept 'artist'. Who could be called an artist? Is it enough to have a suitable diploma? No, it is also necessary to be acknowledged by other accomplished artists, art experts, critics, and partly by the audience (Danto, 1964). However, to measure this acknowledgement we should address some notions that are beyond creation and creativity themselves; they are the royalties the artists get for their works. To have a talent only is insufficient to create a work of art. For instance, Banksy, one of the most provocative British graffiti artists, who has gained public acknowledgment and earned extensive sums of money for selling his works at the auctions, conducted an experiment. He decided to find out what exactly his fans were paying for – the name of the artist or the work itself. One day, Banksy exhibited his masterpieces at the marketplace without revealing his authorship, charging a price which was much lower than the price charged at the auctions. That day Banksy had only two people interested in his paintings. Meanwhile, when people know it is Banksy, they purchase all his works at once to have an opportunity to sell them afterwards at the escalated price. So, even acknowledgement is based on money nowadays (Thompson, 2014). The audience is willing to pay for the author's name rather than for the work of art itself.

Therefore, one of the challenges that a modern artist faces is to create their name, which is possible only by making a statement and catching the eye of the audience. A collocation 'insane artist', without doubt, is very eye-catching. It is definitely more appealing than the opposite – 'sane artist'. Why should an artist be sane in the eyes of a common consumer? Is it sanity that helps an artist in creation process? If it is so, how could a common consumer make sense of modern works of art? And what conclusions could a consumer make about his/her own mind? In other words, a sane artist benefits more from hiding their sanity very thoroughly.

On the contrary, an insane artist has a lot of opportunities. The most important thing here is to define the meaning of 'insanity', to understand how it is interpreted in modern culture and to identify what role an insane person plays in the modern hierarchy. What does 'to be insane' mean? 'The first and one of the most important questions to be determined when dealing with the concept of insanity is the meaning which we ought to attach to the word 'insanity' itself' (Sibbald, 2018, p. 151).

As Garvey (2018) wrote, 'according to the traditional theory, insanity is a cognitive or volitional incapacity arising from a mental disease or defect. As an alternative to the traditional theory, some commentators have proposed that insanity is an especially debilitating form of irrationality' (p. 123).

'The art world, through visual representation, can present us with an 'unknown' factor of 'madness' where madness remains a mystery that we will never truly grasp' (Nechitailova, 2019).

An insane person is the one who reacts in a non-standard way, who has a non-conventional viewpoint. However, this is the exact characteristic which distinguishes an artist from a common man (Petrova, Klenina, Stadnik, & Demeshchenko, 2017). 'Creativity mostly correlates with originality, non-standard approach, unexpected points of view and perspectives of solving problems (Antonian & Sokolova, 2018, p. 17).

So, does it mean that insanity should be one of the essential characteristics of a creative person? As Kazimir Malevich declared, 'Having reason for an artist is like being a convict on a chain-gang, so I wish every artist to lose their minds' (Semenyuk, 2016, p. 209). But has it always been so? Could an insane person living in different epochs has a status of an artist? To answer these questions let us delve into the history of culture.

The subject matter of the article is the correlation between the concepts 'artist' (in broad terms) and 'insanity' from Antiquity to the Modern Age.

The relevance of the research lies in clarifying the meanings of these concepts considering their various interpretations existing for the last two thousand years.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The meanings of many concepts in modern culture are obscure: what kind of person is considered 'insane' or 'normal'? Who should be referred to as 'artist'? How are the concepts 'artist' and 'insanity' related to each other? Are they complementary? Is it true that a creative person has to be insane? The last question prevailed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, Michel Foucault (trans. 2018) wrote about intense listening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that tried to find in the insanity something that could speak about the truth of a man. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was also characterized by hesitation between considering the speeches of the insane either senseless or highly significant. A lot of famous scholars such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Cesare Lombroso, Sigmund Freud and others while trying to determine the correlation between these concepts came to controversial conclusions. For example, according to Schopenhauer (trans. 2017), a genius artist should be super-intelligent objectively, but completely mad from the everyman's perspective. As some researchers think, 'while not a prerequisite, a touch of madness could enhance creativity' (Ludwig, 1989, p. 4); 'madness does not tell the truth about art, and vice versa, but there are links between both that must be delved into if we are to engage in deeper reflection on the topic' (Providello & Yasui, 2013, p. 1515). Nowadays, the problem of correlation between 'creative work' and 'insanity' is still unsolved.

So, it is necessary to analyze the correlation between 'creative work' and 'insanity' in the history of culture.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research questions, the answers to which we try to find in this study, are as following.

- 3.1. Is insanity one of the intrinsic characteristics of a creative person?**
- 3.2. Has it always been so?**
- 3.3. Is there a correlation between a creative process and madness?**
- 3.4. Who should be considered 'normal'? What does it mean to be insane?**
- 3.5. How did philosophers and scholars answer these questions over the period of time from Antiquity till the Modern Age?**

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to analyze the philosophical considerations on the nature of creative work from Antiquity to the Modern Age.

This will help to clarify the meanings of such concepts as ‘artist’, ‘insanity’, and ‘creation’ and establish their correlation to each other in modern culture.

## 5. Research Methods

As a methodological basis for the study, a descriptive method is used that enables us to examine the problem of correlation between the concepts ‘artist’ and ‘insanity’ from different perspectives. Besides, general scientific methods of analysis, comparison and generalization are used in the paper.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Antiquity: Ecstatic Creation

In Antiquity a creator of a work of art is considered to be inspired by God. He is just a tool with the help of which divine beauty of the world reveals itself. Creative work, as well as prophecy and love, is interpreted as a kind of rampancy. It originates from the divinity rather than from the reason of the artist. According to Plato, art is ‘the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses, which take a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations’ (Plato, Phaedrus, 245a, Jowett version).

An artist is not supposed to have any knowledge to create his works. He definitely should go mad; be beside himself with ecstasy. As Plato says, ‘if anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses’ madness, he will fail’ (Plato, Phaedrus, 245a).

Ancient people believed that the insane were inspired from above. ‘We possess not only the witness of history to this effect, but also that of the words *navi* and *mesugan* in Hebrew and *nigrata* in Sanscrit, in which the ideas of insanity and prophecy are confused and assimilated’ (Lombroso, trans. 2015, p. 8).

Being self-aware and mindful about his own creation is a disaster for an artist, ‘his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds’ (Plato, Phaedrus, 245a).

On the other hand, an artist is considered insane only during the process of creation. After that, he returns to his normal state of mind, and being in this state he can hardly say anything about his masterpiece. As Plato (The Apology of Socrates) said about creators: ‘Almost everyone present, so to speak, would have spoken better than the poets did about the poetry that they themselves had made’ (22 a–b, Jowett version). The artist’s mind is now at the mercy of God or a Muse that inspired him. ‘I soon recognize that they do make what they make by wisdom, by some sort of nature and while inspired, like the diviners and those who deliver oracles’ (Plato, The Apology of Socrates, 22 a–b).

It is worth mentioning that an essential function performed by any work of art in that period was catharsis – cleansing the soul from everything insignificant, volatile, and elusive. This very function was also performed by various ritual techniques that put a person into a trance. Thus, an artist had such a strong influence on the audience that the latter temporarily fell into an altered state of consciousness, as if they lost their minds and sank into blissful unawareness close to madness. The state of being beyond oneself, free from distracting thoughts and mundane wishes, was considered to be the most desired one when a person could feel as a part of Creation and perceive Plato's idea of the good.

## **6.2. Medieval Period: Artist vs. Madman**

In the Medieval period the meaning of the concept 'creation' changed. The only creator was God. He determined how everything came into being; he established the canons according to which an artisan (not 'artist') could only copy divine forms created beforehand. This person was no longer able *to create* or *invent* something new. He aimed at *imitating* something that had already existed.

In the Middle Ages, the art of writing so-called 'centos', i.e. poems, in which there was not a single expression, not borrowed from famous poets, was particularly encouraged. Yet the human reason was not very important in the process of creation. As Dante (Purgatorio, Canto XI, Longfellow version) turns to God: 'Come unto us the peace of my dominion, For unto it we cannot of ourselves, If it come not, with all our intellect'. The human reason was considered to be too weak to comprehend God and to understand the meaning of His Creation.

In that period, madmen were divided into two groups. The first group included the rambunctious people who were identified with the grievous sinners. The second group included quiet and half-witted individuals who were waiting for their unity with God in Heaven. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', the Bible said (Matthew 5:3, The New King James Version). They did not create any works of art. They were not supposed to work at all.

On the contrary, an artist had to work hard to praise the Lord and His Creation. Yet, this hard work was hardly appreciated and all the contributions made by the artist were brought to nothing, as far as a source of his inspiration was God. No wonder that the anonymity of creative work was postulated in the Middle Ages.

Gradually the attitude towards an artist and creative work began to change. M. Eckhart and J. Böhme doubted that a man was so insignificant in the Universe. In their works, these authors indicated the following contradiction: the world created by a perfect God is imperfect. As a perfect God cannot have made a mistake, it meant that the world had been created this way on purpose, so its imperfection was intentional. Human's mission was to improve an imperfect world and to make it divine again.

## **6.3. The Renaissance: a Reasonable Artist**

In the Renaissance, an artist became a competent creator. What is more, he did not imitate God's creative work but tried to compete with God, inventing new worlds, characters and improving everything that had been already created by God. According to M. Ficino, an ambition to become a God was natural to a human soul. Although in the Middle Ages this intention was completely unimaginable and purely blasphemous, each artist of the Renaissance strove to become godlike, i.e. the one and only, unique and

universal, immortal master of all existing things. To become equal to God, a Renaissance man aimed to refine his personality and to make his body as well as his soul virtually perfect. So, the only way to fulfill this ambition was creative work. The Renaissance ideal was an artist who at the same time was a scholar; he strove to know everything and to create the most beautiful works of art.

The Renaissance was an epoch when great artists were started to be called geniuses. Before that, the notion 'genius' ('daimónion' in the Antiquity) referred to a guide, a supernatural power, divine spirit that determined the deeds of an astonishingly talented human, but not to the talented person himself. The Renaissance thinkers did not approve of the rigid framework according to which everything was divided into two spheres – either natural or supernatural. So, the Renaissance philosophers admitted that it was possible to become divine in the lifetime. They were absolutely sure that it was not God who provided guidance to a man; it was a man himself who could create new things relying on his own free will and his own intention.

A Renaissance artist believed that the skills and natural abilities were not enough in the process of creation. He also needed knowledge and therefore, a highly developed intellect.

However, in this striving to develop, a person can go too far. If an artist lacks abilities and inspiration, he can ask help from the Devil himself. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a legend about Dr Faustus appeared. He sold his soul to the Devil because of his insatiable need for knowledge. At that period the Church also started fighting against demonic possession. But a demon-possessed artist was not just 'insane', he was 'super-sane', because his deal with the Devil granted him superhuman capabilities. Thus, at the end of the Renaissance, some people began to consider insanity as an essential element of some esoteric knowledge (Foucault, trans. 2018, p. 31).

#### **6.4. The Modern Age: at the Interface of Reason and Unreason**

At the beginning of the epoch, 'Descartes expels madness from the confines of culture and robs it of its language, condemning it to silence' (Felman, 2003, p. 38).

'Insanity is reduced to a human weakness which lies in the framework of moral standards' (Vavilov, 2015a, p. 84). 'Madness loses its sacred meaning and its significance comes down to subjectivity of insanity, or in other words, to stupidity' (Vavilov, 2015a, p. 85).

This view reached a critical point at the Age of Enlightenment. A human being became the center of the Universe, the link between the World of Matter and the World of Spirit. The aim of each individual on the Earth was to fulfill his natural potential in order to find an appropriate place in society – the only realm, where further development of his personality could be possible and where genuine creation originating from human reason could solely take place.

The thinkers of Enlightenment anchored their hope on reason. But later, when the Romanticism began to flourish, the primacy of reason was overshadowed and the irrational forces in a man and in the world came into light. The task of romanticist was to harness the chaos. A romanticist was not mad, but he was not 'normal', either. He balanced on the brink of insanity; he knew he could pay for his daring with his 'normality' or even life.

A talented creative person was referred to as genius again. 'In the arts as in the sciences ... the genius seems to change the very nature of things; his character envelops whatever it touches; ... he leaps

ahead of his century, and it is powerless to follow him.’ (Diderot, 1980, p. 213). The essence of creation was to broaden the horizons, to pave the path for other creative people who strove to transform the inward and outward. At that time the main idea of creative work was to develop not only the personality of the artist, but also life of the society and the material world, while the reason was proclaimed to be the basis of creation process.

At the Age of Enlightenment, scientific endeavors that helped to obtain and organize the knowledge about the world became an ideal of creative work. The aim of an artist was to transmit this knowledge and to affect people’s minds with the help of his mighty intellect. An ‘insane artist’ could hardly help in educating the public.

Analyzing the concept ‘insanity’, Georg Hegel suggested his typology and divided madmen into the following categories:

- mentally deficient people, who are passive and detached from the real world;
- foolish individuals who are not able to focus and live in an imaginary world full of their fantasies;
- frantic people who have completely lost the contact with the reality (Vavilov, 2015b).

Insanity is a feature that turns a person into something inhuman and because of this it has to be studied thoroughly in order to be eliminated later.

In this period, extensive discussions about what should be considered ‘normal’ began.

Earlier, the libertines, the prostitutes and the homeless were referred to as insane. At the Modern Age they were gathered in work-houses and compelled to labor for the benefit of the society. As a result, they split into two groups – those capable of collective labor and those who were incapable. The second group of people gradually was started to be called ‘insane’ (Foucault, trans. 2006).

An artist is a person who is definitely incapable of collective labor. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an artist started to appreciate his uniqueness and individuality. In the epoch of Romanticism, an artist was a genius who stood against the rubble. He would never do a routine work along with others. The primacy of reason (as the world’s basic principle and as something which was used to guide a person) was overshadowed. Irrational forces came to light and the romanticist started to fight with them. His creative work was an attempt to harness the chaos, to cope with the nature’s fury and not to be destroyed by insanity.

In the Romanticism, an artist was neither insane, nor normal (in every sense of the word). He balanced on the brink of insanity and knew that he would have to pay for his audacity. He also knew that the price would be very high. It might be insanity. Or death (Kiryushkina, 2016).

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the work of S. Tissot became increasingly popular. He suggested that creative people who had to complete mental work on a regular basis were at risk: ‘mental work is a very dangerous and perilous matter’ (Diderot, 1980, p. 65).

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, psychiatrists made a significant contribution to the interpretation of insanity inventing a term ‘mental disorder’. It is a state of mind ‘in which a person can not control their will’ (Foucault, trans. 2018). A madman governed by unreasonable will, mixes up the real and imaginary worlds. But what is real? What criterion should be used to distinguish a real world from an imaginary

one? The Rationalists believed that this criterion was reason. But starting from the Kantian philosophy, reason was dispelled. Its power was insufficient. For example, a man, who is suffering from hallucinations, cannot distinguish them from the reality. His brain produces the images that he perceives as real ones. Is there evidence that the images seen by 'normal' people do reflect the reality?

Some philosophers started to see the criterion for distinguishing real and imaginary worlds not in the human reason, but in the creative intuition of a genius. For example, according to Schopenhauer (trans. 2017), a genius is born when a powerful intellect which is free from the will combines with a passionate soul which is able to concentrate on the subject. The intellect of an ordinary man is subordinate to his will (his personal concerns, interests, feelings etc.). However, the intellect of a genius is separated from his personality, it is free. As a matter of fact, it is an ordinary man who is insane while a genius is a rare exception. His passionate nature seems to be abnormal in the eyes of an ordinary man, but actually, it is not. This ambivalence is an enigmatic essence of a genius.

## 7. Conclusion

In the modern world, there are some changes in the meaning of many cultural universals. That is why, there is a need to redefine some of the terms. The article attempted to clarify how the concepts 'artist' and 'insanity' were interpreted during the period of time from Antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the conducted research it can be concluded that during almost the entire period (except for the Modern Age) the concepts 'artist' and 'insanity' were not mutually exclusive.

In Antiquity, people believed that poets created their works, while being inspired by gods or the Muses. In the Middle Ages, the genuine creation process (as making something new) was forbidden by the church, and any creation was believed to be inspired by supernatural powers. Frantic people were thought to be led by the Devil and the results of their activity (if there were any) could not be acknowledged by society. 'The blessed' (quiet) madmen were considered to be the closest to God, but they remained passive and did not create anything. In the Renaissance, an artist tried to develop his human nature, including his reason, to the fullest. The demonstration of abnormal behaviour could be interpreted as a consequence of his super-sanity, his access to the hidden esoteric knowledge. So only in the Age of Enlightenment, the figures of an artist and a madman became mutually exclusive.

Thus, in their creative work, an artist is often led not by reason, but by the unconscious irrational motives.

Abnormal behaviour of a creative person, as well as his non-conventional viewpoint and powerful emotions, draw attention of many people (the attention that is so valuable in the modern world). And his talent (along with advertising and Media support) helps to keep this attention.

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