

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Hidden Genius and the Myths of Creative Life Cycles

Based on BFI Working Papers 2018-05 ("[Hidden Genius](#)") and 2016-28 ("[Creative Life Cycles: Three Myths](#)") by David Galenson, professor in Economics at the University of Chicago

KEY TAKEAWAYS

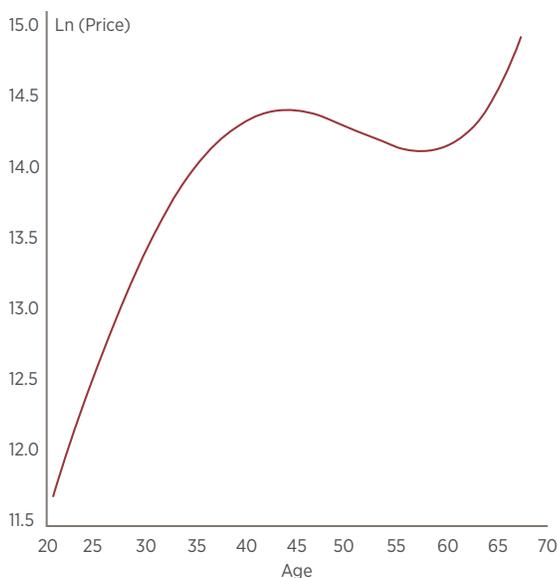
- ✓ Young artists often explode on the scene with conceptual innovations
- ✓ This has given rise to myths associated with the primacy of youth in the arts
- ✓ Experimental artists, on the other hand, make contributions throughout their career
- ✓ The influence of experimenters, across intellectual disciplines, is often unrecognized in their lifetimes

It's good to be young if you plan to explode onto the scene of your chosen creative market and change your art forever, whether as a painter, poet or filmmaker. Young conceptual innovators are often embraced by critics and consumers and celebrated for the rest of their careers on the merits of that initial contribution. On the other hand, those artists who experiment throughout their careers and offer numerous subtle but no less important advances in their art, are mostly overlooked and may never achieve the success of their youthful counterparts—at least while living.

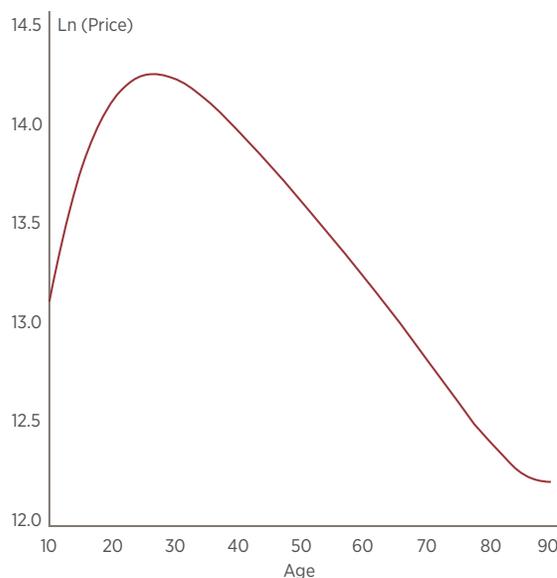
These and other insights into art markets are revealed in recent work by UChicago professor in Economics David Galenson, including two papers, "[Hidden Genius](#)," and "[Creative Life Cycles: Three Myths](#)." Galenson's work not only reveals the common misperceptions that experts and others have when it comes to creativity, but also the inherent bias against older artists that such myths intensify. Galenson has written extensively on subjects relating to art, creativity, and art markets, and his work includes four books on the subjects, with another in preparation.

In "Hidden Geniuses," Galenson refutes the conventional wisdom—held by many psychologists as well as art connoisseurs—that the elderly are past their creative prime. He reviews the careers of film directors Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, artists Auguste Rodin and Rembrandt, and writers Robert Frost and Irving Berlin, to reveal how these experimental innovators continued to hone their art throughout their careers. In so doing they influenced their peers in ways that were often overlooked in their time. Their new techniques were often considered as mere improvements in craft or as nods to commercialism. In some cases, it took the advocacy of a prominent and well-accepted member of the arts community to champion their cause, as in the case of the French director Francois Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock.

Age-Price Profile for Paul Cézanne



Age-Price Profile for Pablo Picasso



This bias toward big innovations in art is reinforced by a predisposition to celebrate the contributions of the young. These young artists, like Picasso, Jean Luc-Godard, T.S. Eliot, and Bob Dylan, were not undeserving of the attention they received, but in many cases the reputations of such young conceptual innovators rests solely on their early work.

The impact of these young geniuses also propagates three myths, according to Galenson: that creativity is greatest in youth, that wisdom hinders creativity, and that every discipline has a single peak age of creativity. In “Creative Life Cycles: Three Myths,” Galenson cites research that reveals that experimental innovators—like Darwin, Cezanne, Twain, Woolf—do their greatest work late in life, that their wisdom increases their creativity, and that virtually every intellectual domain has great experimental old masters as well as conceptual young geniuses. For Galenson, these persistent myths of creativity and stereotypes of older artists reflect—and reinforce—a damaging ageism that is prominent in Western culture.

The insights Galenson gains from an analysis of art markets apply to other intellectual disciplines. He employs a theory of creativity that recognizes the presence of conceptual (young geniuses) and experimental (old masters) that also applies in other intellectual disciplines. As Galenson notes, important scholarship can be as nuanced and detailed as the inductive discoveries of Darwin, or as clear and abstract as the deductive discoveries of Einstein. It is important to recognize the presence of both conceptual young geniuses and experimental old masters in all intellectual activity.

CLOSING TAKEAWAY

The impact of young geniuses propagates three myths: that creativity is greatest in youth, that wisdom hinders creativity, and that every discipline has a single peak age of creativity.

READ THE WORKING PAPER

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Hidden Genius

bfi.uchicago.edu/Galenson-WP-201805

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