

An Analysis of Vices and their Effect on the Artistic Performance of Selected Artists

"Apart from the wheel, opium is man's only discovery," (Picasso, in a meeting with Cocteau, 1953)¹. Drug use has been a prevalent factor in the creative process of numerous artists throughout time, contorting their minds and perhaps contributing to some of the most famous pieces in history. The correlation between vices and the artistic result of these by renowned artists is a fascinating interrelationship. The influence of substances on artists' creative processes has been the subject of controversy and captivation, as one questions if the intentions are mere desire to expand one's mind or is of a self-destructive nature. This essay will delve into the lives and artistic styles of various artists whose drug use is publicized and will explore the impact of these vices on their work. Examining this complex relationship between substance abuse and the creative mind is essential when analyzing certain pieces in order to fully understand the dark context of their creation.

Several of the most celebrated pieces in history were created under the influence of various substances. In the late 19th century, Vincent van Gogh, an artist plagued by inner turmoil, sought solace and creative inspiration through artistic expression and the captivating allure of absinthe. It was during his stay at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, that Van Gogh embarked on the creation of what would become one of his most celebrated masterpieces, "The Starry Night." This mesmerizing artwork unfolds a tranquil nocturnal scene, with celestial bodies swirling above a village. The glowing stars and crescent moon come to life through the hundreds of small brush strokes, covering the canvas with dynamism and emotional intensity. Van Gogh's celestial orbs seem to dance with a hypnotic motion, evoking awe and wonder. It's as if he sought to encapsulate the very essence of the universe on the canvas. While the precise substances Van Gogh consumed remain uncertain, historical accounts suggest that absinthe, a potent alcoholic elixir, played a pivotal role in his creative process. Commonly referred to as the "Green Fairy," absinthe boasts thujone, a chemical compound with psychoactive properties, believed to induce hallucinogenic effects that may have shaped Van Gogh's visionary artistic style. Under the sway of absinthe's influence, Van Gogh's perception of the world appeared to undergo a drastic change, empowering him to convey his emotional turbulence onto the canvas with an unmatched intensity. "The Starry Night" demonstrates his affinity with nature and the cosmos, a testament to the enduring appeal of Van Gogh's work that has lasted centuries. Another global familiar name was well-known to dabble in opium consumption during the creation of his works. Pablo Picasso, a pioneering figure in the realm of modern art, sought innovation and broke away from the constraints of artistic conventions. One of his most iconic and revolutionary creations, "Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)," emerged during a period of intense experimentation and depression. Painted in 1907, this provocative artwork redefined the boundaries of figurative representation. The composition depicts five female figures, their bodies angular and fragmented, each exuding a sense of power and eroticism. Picasso's sharp, jagged lines and dissonant colors challenge

¹ Goldberg, J. (2018, May 4). *The complicated relationship between opium and art in the 20th Century*. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-complicated-relationship-opium-art-20th-century>

traditional notions of beauty and aesthetics. During the time of "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)," Picasso was known to indulge in alcohol and engage in experimentation with psychoactive substances, including opium and hashish. These substances, with their capacity to alter perception and heighten sensory experiences, likely influenced Picasso's unorthodox approach to representation and his groundbreaking Cubist style. The influence of drugs is evident in the disorienting and fragmented nature of the artwork, as if Picasso sought to shatter traditional artistic norms and explore new dimensions of visual expression. "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)" heralded a new era in art, serving as a catalyst for the Cubist movement and inspiring countless artists to embrace abstraction and varying perspectives. While certain drugs can certainly promote creativity and expression, the potential for catastrophic effects on the mind and body are imminent.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, a prominent figure in the contemporary art scene of the late 20th century, was a prodigious artist whose work continues to captivate audiences internationally. His art was meticulously intertwined with his life and reflected the nature of his human experience boldly. His background, artistic style, and extensive drug use played a pivotal role in shaping his artistic legacy and the messages conveyed through his iconic paintings. Born on December 22, 1960 in Brooklyn, New York, Basquiat demonstrated an innate talent for art, which was encouraged by his mother, who recognized his potential early on. Raised in a multicultural and artistic environment, Basquiat's surroundings profoundly influenced his creative sensibilities. Tragically, his childhood was marred by the divorce of his parents, eventually leading to a deep sense of abandonment and the desire to flee his living situation. At the age of seventeen, he left home and began his life living on the streets, using graffiti art as a form of self expression. Immersing himself in the vibrant culture of downtown Manhattan during the 1970s-1980s, Basquiat experienced the harsh realities of urban life during a time of significant social and economic changes in New York City. He found refuge among fellow street artists, musicians, and writers as the crime rates and homeless population surged in the area. Living on the streets exposed him to a significant amount of poverty, drug addiction, and violence, encouraging him to spend this era honing his artistic skills and establishing himself as a graffiti artist under the pseudonym "SAMO", meaning "Same Old Shit". SAMO's work quickly became a prominent presence throughout the city, characterized by its cryptic and provocative statements that critique society and consumerism.

As his graffiti became more recognizable, it caught the attention of the art world and public alike, gaining recognition for its raw energy and unique voice. Basquiat was able to channel his emotions, frustrations, observations, and political opinions through the street art movement of the time. His homelessness provided him encounters with various subcultures and marginalized communities that significantly influenced his artistic perspective and would forever diversify his paintings. Catching the eye of influential figures within the art scene, Basquiat gradually transitioned into the role of a contemporary art sensation, with his paintings being featured in galleries and museums. While his career began to gain momentum, so did his reliance on substances. What started as marijuana and cocaine use to cope with the tumultuous struggles of his family and homelessness, escalated to far more dangerous substances. The increasing pressure of his success became overwhelming and he craved an avenue of escape, a way to numb his internal feelings of anxiety and isolation, tapping into altered states of consciousness. This coping mechanism led him to the use of heroin, one of the most addictive

drugs to fall into infatuation with. The firm grip of addiction took a severe toll on his personal relationships, physical health, and overall well-being. Heroin use inflicts severe health repercussions, both short-term and long-term, on individuals ensnared by its attraction. Initially, users experience an intense euphoria accompanied by a sense of relaxation and detachment from reality. However, the high is short-lived, yielding an onslaught of detrimental effects on the body. Physiologically, heroin induces respiratory depression, slowing down breathing to dangerous levels that can result in life-threatening consequences, including fatal overdoses. Long-term use leads to a cascade of health issues such as collapsed veins, heart infections, liver and kidney damage, and gastrointestinal complications. Mentally, heroin alters brain function, impairing decision-making and judgment while fostering compulsive drug-seeking behavior. The drug's grip on the brain is formidable, instigating intense cravings and fostering addiction, making it immensely challenging for users to break free from its clutches. Beyond its immediate health effects, heroin profoundly impacts broader well-being, shattering families, relationships, and communities. The dangers of intravenous drug use, such as sharing needles, can propagate infectious diseases, including HIV and hepatitis.

Basquiat's drug use has been the subject of intense debate and scrutiny amongst art critics and scholars. The main question posed: Did the drug use act as a source of inspiration or a hindrance to what could have been? Many believe the altered state of consciousness contributed to the raw emotional intensity and impulsive energy that is evident in his pieces. While this may be true, the interplay between his drug-induced highs and the bellowing lows was a continuous struggle that undoubtedly influenced the emotional turmoil depicted in his paintings. Often, Basquiat would become entranced in the intensity of his drug-induced state and work in long, uninterrupted bursts of creativity. His addiction seeped into the canvas as drugs, mortality, and addiction were incessant repetitions seen throughout his creations. A haunting example of this is his piece, "Untitled Skull", an exploration of the fragility of human existence that included enigmatic symbols such as crows, arrows, and cryptic phrases. Depicted by jagged lines and brushstrokes, heavy black outlines, and bold vibrant colors, the piece evokes a sense of urgency and intensity. Skulls were a common motif seen in Basquiat's work, urging viewers to confront the ephemeral nature of life. Furthermore, Basquiat's use of bold colors and frenetic lines in "Untitled Skull" can be seen as a reflection of the altered states of consciousness induced by drug use. The intense, vibrant hues and the seemingly erratic brushstrokes may mirror the overwhelming sensory experiences that drugs can produce. Despite the legendary influence of Basquiat's work during the 1980s neo-expressionist movement, the drug-induced masterpieces may not have been worth the ultimate result. On August 12, 1988, at the age of only 27, he succumbed to a drug overdose that ended his life. The mystique of his untimely death only added to his abstruse persona, elevating him to the status of a cultural icon.

While drugs directly led to the demise of Basquiat, other renowned artists have integrated substances into their creative process that, while diminishing their quality of life, did not end their legacy so early. This can be seen in the life of another iconic artist, Jean Cocteau. Jean Cocteau, the trailblazing French artist, poet, filmmaker, playwright, and novelist, left an indelible mark on a diverse array of artistic disciplines. Born into an affluent family on July 5, 1889, in the Parisian suburb of Maisons-Laffitte, Cocteau's upbringing immersed him in a world of culture, literature, music, and the arts. From a young age, Cocteau exhibited precocious

talent, and worked to develop his gift for drawing and writing. In 1909, his debut collection of poetry, "La Lampe d'Aladin" (The Lamp of Aladdin), garnered early acclaim. This success foreshadowed a career characterized by innovation and creative exploration. While considered a leading figure in the artistic world, he was also extremely divisive due to homophobia and his desperation for attention. Some critics also discredited his work across so many mediums, as he failed to master any single discipline, while others praised his ability to expand his focus past one type of expression. A versatile artist, his style transcended easy categorization, encompassing poetry, literature, theater, film, visual arts, and ballet. His oeuvre contained surreal landscapes, fantastical realms, and mythological narratives, skillfully blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. Throughout his illustrious life, Cocteau collaborated with pioneering artists like Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani, whose influence enriched his artistic pursuits. A master of visual arts, Cocteau's canvas unfolded with a number of mediums, harmonizing classical mythology, emotive human depiction, and enigmatic symbols into breathtaking masterpieces. However, despite the grandeur of his artistic journey, Jean Cocteau's life also encountered shadows. His dalliance with drugs, particularly opium and morphine, intertwined with his art and personal encounters, shaping his artistic vision.

Opium, originating from the poppy plant, holds immense potency as a potentially addictive narcotic. It is known for its ability to alleviate pain and induce sedation, a reputation established over centuries of use. The ramifications of opium on the psyche and consciousness are intricate, subject to fluctuations contingent on variables like dosage, individual tolerance, and consumption modality. In the realm of creative expression, some individuals assert that opioids, including opium, foster heightened creativity. However, these affirmations stem predominantly from personal experiences and subjective viewpoints, rather than verified scientific evidence proving any definitive enhancement in creative output. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance to discern the implications associated with opium use. The grip of addiction looms ominously, accompanied by detrimental health effects that can far outweigh any hypothetical creative benefits that individuals may perceive. In the pursuit of creative endeavors, one must weigh the allure of inspiration against the potential for irreparable harm. In the 19th century, artists and intellectuals in Europe and the United States embraced recreational opium use, drawn to its sedative and pain-relieving qualities, which offered a much-needed reprieve from the demands of everyday life and an intriguing gateway to seek inspiration and altered perceptions. During this era, opium, found in diverse forms like the opium and alcohol concoction known as laudanum, was readily accessible. Extending its appeal beyond medicinal purposes, it captivated the creative elites who were eager to explore its mesmerizing effects. Artists, drawn to its potential to enhance creativity and introspection, turned to opium as a means to tap into their subconscious and fuel their artistic expression. The drug's influence was believed to induce dreamlike visions and heighten sensory experiences, fostering a desire to explore unconventional artistic styles and subjects. Opium dens, where the drug was smoked or ingested, became social hubs where artists, writers, and bohemian circles congregated. These opium dens, particularly prevalent in major cities like Paris and London, became emblematic of the 19th-century artistic subculture. However, while opium provided temporary respite, it came at a great cost. Many artists fell victim to addiction, and their lives unraveled as a result. The negative consequences of opium use began to be recognized, leading to increased regulation and the eventual prohibition of the drug.

Opium's hallucinogenic and brain-slowing properties beckoned Cocteau into states of altered consciousness, dissolving the boundary between reality and the sublime in his paintings. While the majority of his works were influenced by surrealism, Catholicism, psychoanalysis, and cubism, they were also the result of a severe opium addiction. Plagued with depression the majority of his adult life, Cocteau relied on an escape from realities of the natural human experience. He believed the euphoria of opium was superior to anything else and while he attempted numerous times to end his obsession, his return to the drug would happen within mere months. Attempting to boast of his control over the situation, he exclaimed to his diary that he never exceeded ten pipes a day. During these enchanting drug-induced states, magic was created on the canvas. Exploring the depths of the subconscious, his art manifested fantastical imagery, capturing the essence of dreams and the mysterious interplay of emotions. He fought to depict the human psyche, incorporating symbols and motifs that resonated with his opium-induced visions. Similar to Basquiat, the influential nature of the substances was displayed in his technique. His brushstrokes were expressive and energetic, directly reflecting the uninhibited and emotional nature of his subconscious mind. Battling his addiction for the majority of his life, at an older age, he stepped away from the drug in pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. Ultimately though, his detrimental habits caught up to his health and he passed away on October 11, 1963, at the age of 74.

Edgar Degas, the celebrated Impressionist artist, was known to have used opium and laudanum to manage health issues and possibly enhance his artistic process. Degas faced various health challenges, including deteriorating eyesight, which impacted his ability to create. To cope with physical discomfort and emotional distress, he turned to these substances for relief. Edgar Degas was born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas on July 19, 1834, in Paris, France and was a pivotal figure in the Impressionist movement. Similar to Picasso's journey, he received a classical education and showed early promise in art, having studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Degas began his artistic journey with a focus on historical and mythological subjects but later shifted his attention to scenes of contemporary life, earning acclaim for his innovative approach to painting and his mastery of light and movement. Degas was a prolific artist who excelled in a variety of media, including oil painting, pastel, sculpture, drawing, and printmaking. His subjects ranged from ballet dancers and horse races to intimate glimpses into the lives of Parisian brothels. His fascination with capturing the dynamics of human movement and his astute observation of daily life earned him the reputation as a keen observer of modern society. While his original purpose for delving into opium use was to alleviate physical discomfort, recreational use followed and assisted in the inspiration of some of his pieces. Art historians speculate that it might have influenced his artistic choices and style. Opium's capacity to induce dreamlike states and heightened emotions could have infused his artworks with a sense of introspection and emotional intensity. Degas' incorporation of drug use into his life was a reflection of the cultural context of the 19th century, as previously discussed. One example believed to have been influenced by opium use is Degas' painting titled "Woman with Chrysanthemums". In this captivating artwork, a woman is depicted seated on a sofa, surrounded by vibrant chrysanthemums. The composition exudes a sense of languor and introspection, with the woman's dreamy gaze and the flowers' vivid colors accentuated by the softness of Degas' brushstrokes. Opium's sedative properties may have influenced the tranquil

atmosphere of the painting, as the subject seems enveloped in a reverie, lost in thought amongst the intoxicating allure of the flowers. The emotional intensity and the sense of contemplation that permeate the artwork are suggestive of the impact that opium's influence could have had on Degas' creative process.

In conclusion, the use of drugs by famous artists, notably opium, absinthe, and heroin, has long been a subject of fascination and debate. Throughout history, numerous creative minds sought solace and inspiration through these substances, seeking to unlock the hidden recesses of their imagination and elevate their artistic expressions. Opium's allure as a sedative and visionary catalyst beckoned artists like Edgar Degas, Jean Cacteau, and Pablo Picasso, possibly influencing their emotive styles and introspective works. Similarly, heroin, with its potent effects on the mind and body, captivated artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and injected a sense of urgency and raw emotion into their art. While some artists may have experienced temporary bursts of creativity under the influence, the long-term consequences of drug use were often detrimental, leading to addiction, health issues, and tragic loss of life. The attractiveness of altered states of consciousness, intertwined with the artistic process, remains a complex and enigmatic aspect of creative history. It serves as a reminder of the human desire to transcend ordinary boundaries and tap into the extraordinary realms of imagination. However, the cautionary tales of famous artists' struggles with addiction, and its detrimental impact on their lives and art, emphasize the importance of pursuing creative expression through healthier and sustainable means.

References

- (PDF) absinthe: Behind the emerald mask - researchgate. (n.d.).
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/16443641_Absinthe_Behind_the_Emerald_Mask
- Authorship Original Biography Author Owen Keehnen
Biography Edited By Victor Salvo
, Original Biography Author Owen Keehnen, & Authorship Original
Biography Author Owen Keehnen Biography Edited By
Victor Salvo Resources Coord. (n.d.). *Jean
Cocteau*. Legacy Project Chicago.
<https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/jean-cocteau#:~:text=In%201923%2C%20after%20the%20death,an%20account%20of%20his%20addiction.>
- Cotton2011-05-01T00:00:00+01:00, S. (2011, May 1). *Vincent Van Gogh, Chemistry and absinthe*. RSC Education.
<https://edu.rsc.org/feature/vincent-van-gogh-chemistry-and-absinthe/2020272.article>
- Drug (ab)use in the Art World*. Hickman Design. (2023, April 21).
<https://hickmandesign.co.uk/blog/history/drug-use-in-the-art-world/>
- Goldberg, J. (2018a, May 4). *The complicated relationship between opium and art in the 20th Century*. Artsy.
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-complicated-relationship-opium-art-20th-century>
- Goldberg, J. (2018b, May 4). *The complicated relationship between opium and art in the 20th Century*. Artsy.
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-complicated-relationship-opium-art-20th-century>
- Heidi Moawad, M. (2020, November 14). *Drugs and creativity: Fact or fiction?*. Neurology live. <https://www.neurologylive.com/view/drugs-and-creativity-fact-or-fiction>
- James C. Harris, M. (2008, June 2). *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Archives of General Psychiatry. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/482726>
- Nakhaee, S., Ghasemi, S., Karimzadeh, K., Zamani, N., Alinejad-Mofrad, S., & Mehrpour, O. (2020, April 17). *The effects of opium on the cardiovascular system: A review of side effects, uses, and potential mechanisms - substance abuse treatment, prevention, and policy*. BioMed Central.
<https://substanceabusepolicy.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13011-020-00272-8>

PL, W. (n.d.-a). *Hector Berlioz and other famous artists with opium abuse*. Frontiers of neurology and neuroscience.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20375523/#:~:text=It%20is%20used%20as%20an,on%20their%20creativity%20and%20productivity>.

PL, W. (n.d.-b). *Hector Berlioz and other famous artists with opium abuse*. Frontiers of neurology and neuroscience. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20375523/>

Solomon, T. (2020, December 22). *Jean-Michel Basquiat's enduring fame: Why the '80s Art Star remains relevant now*. ARTnews.com.
<https://www.artnews.com/feature/who-was-jean-michel-basquiat-why-was-he-important-1234579679/>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2021, April 13). *What are the long-term effects of heroin use?*. National Institutes of Health.
<https://nida.nih.gov/publications/research-reports/heroin/what-are-long-term-effects-heroin-use>

Wikimedia Foundation. (2023a, May 26). *Jean Cocteau*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Cocteau

Wikimedia Foundation. (2023b, July 18). *Edgar Degas*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Degas

Wikimedia Foundation. (2023c, July 20). *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Michel_Basquiat