A TYPOLOGY OF ARTISTS FOUND ON JACKSON SQUARE
IN NEW ORLEANS’ FRENCH QUARTER

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ABSTRACT

The principle subjects of this paper are the Jackson Square artists of New Orleans. Interviews were conducted with 42 artists who paint and sell on the Square. Others in the art community were also interviewed. Based on these interviews the authors created a typology which identified the following types of Jackson Square artists: 1) The Worker, 2) The Escapist, 3) The Serious Artist, 4) The Artist/Houseperson, 5) The Craftsperson, and 6) The Would-Be-Artist. These types were differentiated on the bases of the need to make money, seriousness about their work and their artistic and career aspirations, having art in galleries, skills level, and reasons for working in Jackson Square. This typology may be used for purposes of comparing artists in other locales and in other markets. Discussion of relationships between artists, consumers, gallery owners, and the public are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Art and artists have been the topics of several sociological studies (Adler 1976; Albrecht, Burnett, Griff 1970; Baroody-Hart, Farrell 1987; Becker 1974, 1976, 1978, 1982; Duncan 1966; Ethridge, Neapolitan 1982; Forsyth, Palmer 1995; Manfredi 1982; McCall 1978; Mukerji 1979; Neapolitan 1985; Simpson 1981; Sinha 1979; Stebbins 1977, 1979). Some studies (Becker 1974, 1976; Duncan 1966) have focused specifically on the organization of art worlds and/or art as the product of social activity. At a micro level, Baroody-Hart and Farrell (1987) studied artistic activity as a means of coping with the isolation of prison, separating the serious and non serious artists. Ethridge and Neapolitan (1985) carved out a typology of “craft” artists. Adler’s (1976) research identified the “academic” artist as a distinct artist type, as did Becker’s (1982). These artists were concerned with technique as well as with public demand. They placed more emphasis on knowledge of conventions and techniques of the art world and less on their own production of original art. Becker (1978) distinguished between three segments among craft media workers: 1) the craft segment, which attempted to serve or satisfy an audience; 2) the art segment, which was indifferent to the audience; and 3) the combined art/craft segment, which shared conventions of both but remained distinct from each. Dinneen (1981) also found three types of craft media workers, which were very similar to those identified in Becker’s (1978) study: 1) production workers who made nearly identical items; 2) artists who worked some creativity into every piece; and 3) designer crafts people who incorporated elements of both art and craft into their work. Sinha’s (1979) study described potters who produced redundant art because it sold while McCall’s (1978) work was primarily concerned with achieving an understanding of the social location of the female artist.

Becker’s later study (1982) developed four artist types: 1) mavericks or avant-garde professionals; 2) folk artists or traditional craftsperson; 3) naive artists; and 4) academic artists. Along the same line, Stebbins (1979) earlier distinguished between dabblers, amateurs and professionals. Interestingly, Stebbins found the productions of amateurs to be in response to their own standards, while the products of professionals were more in response to the demands of the market. Stebbins’ dabblers were just seen as not being serious about their work. The professionals had higher levels of skill and/or training, were more self confident about their art, and were more likely to identify themselves as artists than were either dabblers or amateurs.

Studies of artists continue to raise questions not only about the processes developed to produce artistic products but the characteristics of the artists themselves as well as their publics. We are particularly interested in seeing how a sample of artists who paint and sell art on Jackson Square in New Orleans compares to those from other locales. We also wish to discover the sources of recognition for these artists.

ART AND SOCIETY

In preindustrial society the dominant strata of society granted social recognition to artists and their work. Artistic success meant receiving a commission from a member of the elite group. The dominant class ordained the chosen artist with proof of success and social prestige, and to the extent that they established the values recognized by society as a
whole, gave them a valued societal role. But they also, in a sense, governed the work of the artist. (See Schapiro (1964) for a discussion of the relationships between patrons and artists.) Those who were not successful in this manner were considered to be on the bottom stratum as artists. These outcasts could, however, point to one area of success, that of freedom to express themselves in their painting.

While still important, those from the dominant strata of society no longer bestow recognition and patronage as they did in preindustrial society. Instead, money from various sources now plays a key role in the destination of prestige and proof of success. But the artist of today is still torn between two conflicting sets of in­

sistent demands. The artist must earn a living but at the same time the artist wants to secure liberation or salvation as an artist. At one extreme we find the outcast or starving artists, who are contemptuous of the means by which success can be achieved. At the other end we find those artists who adapt their product to the needs of the market. In between these ends of the continuum are other confusing but factual aspects of this occupation and the marketplace.

Many artists who do not succeed in the market take a polemic against the system saying that those who have made it have prostituted themselves to the system. The “success” of those who sold out, then, may become the equivalent of “failure” as a true artist. They are not liberated hence they are not true artists. The failed artist may see him/herself as a success as an artist. This idea is clearly a part of the self concept of the artist; to be free to paint what one wants is the badge of the artist. The public on the other hand faces dilemmas in the purchase of art because, like other indicators of status, price influences and confuses the concept of beauty (Crane 1992; Hall 1992; Lamont, Fournier 1992; Moulin 1987).

A functional theory of art would purport that art is a means of stratification for both buyer and artist. The artist is aristocratically inclined. Art is bought for show. However, since there are conflicting standards about the quality of art, the stratification system is often dependent on the advice of galleries/dealers, the current vanguard of social rank.1 Buyers are often influenced more by positive reference groups than necessarily by the group to which they actually belong, hence they aim high. This is a basic component of the American stratification system generally called the demonstration effect. This effect induces dissatisfaction with one’s possessions when one is exposed to goods of better quality. Buyers then are confused by the clutter of values that prevail in the world of art. In attempting to make up their mind in buying art they see high prices as a guarantee of aesthetic quality. Being in a gallery “assures” the buyer that art is worth the high price. Only the established artist can command high prices outside of a gallery.

The sidewalk painter attracts the clients with the lowest income compared to other buyers of art. Such buyers of art often behave like the buyers of established paintings, except that their incomes are lower. The motivation for buying art is to find a painting that occupies a place of distinction in the hierarchy of aesthetic worth (Moulin 1987).

Since, however, there are no objective guarantees of value in contemporary art, they look for other guarantees: the dealer’s competence... reputation and the comfort of a high price. (Moulin 1987)

The individual artist must somehow accomplish a number of things within the art world. He/she strives for a successful career but what are the terms of success—money, autonomy, or both? The individual buyer of art must find value in paintings but the only available objective indicator of value is a higher price.

When the evidence from historical and primitive societies is considered, it is doubtful whether there is any situation in which the audience is not differentiated in terms of power to judge art. Once we know the basis for such hierarchies in criticism, we can understand the forms taken in the judgement of art. Judgement of some kind is always being made, and this judgement in its final effect does much to determine art. In this kind of analysis it is important to know who is assigned the right to criticize; what institutions assume the guardianship of criticism; how these institutions defend their roles in competition with other institutions...for purposes of analyzing structural aspects of art as a social institution three components or elements have been distinguished namely artist, public and critic. (Duncan 1966)

This study investigates the artistic world of
the Jackson Square artists, the various motivations they have for working in an outdoor milieu, the variations in the subcultures of these artists, and the mechanisms employed by artists and others to interpret the value of the art produced on the Square.

METHODOLOGY

A variety of qualitative methods were used in this research. The project started with the use of a key informant who served as both a source of information and a contact for the scheduling of interviews with other artists. Forty-two Jackson Square artists were interviewed, at work on the Square, over a two year period. Occupational life histories were obtained in nine of these interviews. In addition, two "former" Square artists who still keep licenses (one now paints in the Florida Keys; another does construction work in New Orleans) were also interviewed. Many hours of observation were recorded by the authors over this two year period. In addition, reflective observation was used by one of the authors who was a resident of the area for eight years and has visited Jackson Square often since moving from the area several years ago. In addition to the artists on the Square several other members of the larger art community were interviewed: chairpersons of art departments of universities in the area, artists who do not work on the Square, a manager of an art gallery, an art curator in a museum, and many buyers of art on the Square.

Description of Sample

Interviews were conducted with 42 artists who paint and sell on Jackson Square. Twenty-five of the artists were female and 17 were male. All of the respondents had at least a high school education; 19 said high school was their highest level, 22 had received a bachelor’s degree and one had finished a trade school. Thirty-five of the respondents had received formal training in art while seven had received no training before coming to the Square. The average number of years working on the Square was 15, with a range of two to 30 years. Most artists had been coming to the Square for 12 to 17 years.

THE JACKSON SQUARE ARTISTS

New Orleans’ Jackson Square is the location for the largest continuous display of art in the United States, and one of the largest in the world. There is no written history of these artists, so any research regarding their beginnings must be obtained through oral histories obtained from the artists and residents of the area. There have been artists on Jackson Square for over 100 years, but the colony of artists that exists today had much later beginnings. The history of the present organization of artists who work on Jackson Square began in the late 1940s. An art school located in Pirate’s Alley, an area adjacent to the square, became a gathering place for artists. Artists who worked in the area began to sell their art in front of the school. In the 1960s the artists formed a committee to limit the number of artists who can display their art and to regulate the type of art allowed. Licensing procedures were also begun. For the 200 licensed artists who create, display, and sell their art in this location there is no qualification for getting a license, and the only other stipulations are that all art must be original and that it must be
Table 1: Description of Artist Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type I: The Worker</th>
<th>works at any job in which he/she can make money needs to make money with his/her art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type II: The Escapist</td>
<td>has come to the Square to hide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III: The Serious Artist</td>
<td>has art for sale in galleries has a high level of skill has a goal of getting off the Square considers art a career has a studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type IV: The Artist/Houseperson</td>
<td>has a high level of skill does not need to make money with his/her art considers art a career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type V: The Craftsperson</td>
<td>has a low level of skill considers art a retirement activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type VI: The Would-Be Artist</td>
<td>has a low level of skill considers art a career</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

created on the Square. This latter stipulation is supposed to produce an atmosphere of artistic creativity that will attract tourists, who enjoy coming to watch these artists at work (Forsyth, Palmer 1995).

A TYPOLOGY OF ARTISTS
Basis for the Typology

The data, as shown in Table 1, suggest six artist types: The Worker; The Escapist; The Serious Artist; The Artist/Houseperson; The Craftsperson; and the Would-Be-Artist. These types are based on the following characteristics of the artists and their art: 1) the need to make money with their art; 2) seriousness about their work (i.e. they aspire to be successful artists, and to have their art recognized by others in the art community); 3) having art for sale in galleries; 4) level of painting skill; 5) reasons given for coming to the Jackson Square art community; and 6) artistic endeavor as a career.

Type I. The Worker.

Workers have minimal painting skills. For them, working on the Square is just another job. When a better job comes their way they will leave. They may do "souvenir art" (authors' term), such as that done by two artists who paint scenes on 100 year old slate from the roofs of French Quarter homes. Generally, Workers have other skills such as a wood, leather or stone craft and may be employed periodically as masons or carpenters. Many keep their Jackson Square license as a sort of union card, as they move between artist and other jobs.

These comments are from a Worker who keeps his license to paint on the Square but is currently working in construction:

I am really a much better carpenter than I am a painter. I have painted scenes on slate... people buy it. You always find a couple of people on the Square with that gag.

Other Worker comments are presented below:

...365 days of the year the motivation is food and shelter. Rarely does the need to show others what you are made of as an artist surface. Jackson Square is especially good for artists for income as opposed to other cities where one must be a waiter or postal employee and be a part-time artist.

I don't feel bad about this stuff I sell...the only original art is probably done by three or four year-olds. When you get past that there's no more original art...if it sells that's great...If it doesn't sell, I'll be a carpenter next week.

The hours are flexible...you work when you want. It is a good way of getting through school and it is a great work environment...I basically see it as a fun job...an experience. I really don't consider myself an artist, although I will continue to paint for money if I cannot find another job or need supplementary income. (From a college student who paints portraits on the Square.)

There is nothing prestigious about being on
Type II. The Escapist.

The skills of the Escapists vary. What differentiates them from other artists is that they have come to the square to situationally withdraw (Forsyth 1986). They do not sell their art in galleries nor will they attempt to participate in the larger world of art outside the Square. Most make a subsistence income, living a "starving artist" lifestyle. One 44 year old woman had been on the Square drawing for almost 15 years. She fits nearly perfectly the act of escaping to the Square. She returned to school in 1972 and graduated in Social Welfare. An art history professor suggested art as a profession. Before coming to the Square, she was a panhandler on the streets of the French Quarter where she sold poems. She became friends with one of the artists on the Square and he taught her how to draw portraits. She is diagnosed as a manic-depressive, so the lifestyle of being a Jackson Square artist does not complicate her life. In her own words:

I am a manic-depressive so the Jackson Square scene is low stress and something I can handle.

Another Escapist, a former architect, told of the following changes in his life:

I no longer wanted to be in a dog-eat-dog high pressure world. I knew I could draw so I tried it a few weekends. My family and I changed our lifestyle so that we did not need a lot of money.

Another artist told of getting away from relationships that had not worked out:

Things weren't working out for me up North career-wise or romantically. It was going nowhere. I thought the first thing that I wanted to be was an artist. The second was travel. So, this was my first stop and things worked out for me here.

Type III. The Serious Artist.

Serious Artists come to the square with a high level of skill. They are constantly trying to improve their skills as artists. In addition to working on the Square, all have their work for sale in art galleries. All have participated in art shows, contests and other events in which one can display and promote art outside the Square. Each has a studio in which to do more serious work. In essence, they are all motivated to move beyond the Square with their art work and are trying to do just that. Serious Artists are able to support themselves through their art. They come from varied backgrounds, but they have the common belief that art is a career. This includes some artists who may move on to other places to paint and then return to the Square.

Responses from Serious Artists:

I used to be an architect and there are some artists who come from advertising or graphic art. I haven't got a market for my larger work...I have a studio with a bunch of pieces in it and I take people up there sometimes and they'll commission me to do work.

I get commissions from many people. That is when I do my best work.

I have a degree in fine arts (BA). I have painted in the Square for 19 years. I am out here everyday. I started by wanting to be a portrait artist in a hotel. I have at least one show a year. My wife is my agent. If I see a serious buyer of art out here, I take them to my studio to see my better work.

My father was an artist, a professor of art at the University of Michigan. I have four sisters who also are artists. And at one time or another, all have worked out here. I majored in art at Loyola University here in the city. I have several pieces in galleries in New Orleans, Houston, and Mobile.

My goal is to work in a studio and sell my art in galleries and never be on the Square.

I have my own gallery. I only come out on the Square on weekends, holidays, and big tourist days...I have art for sale in galleries in New York and Dallas.
Type IV. The Artist/Houseperson.

Artist/Housepersons have good skills and are motivated to improve as an artist, but do not see art as a career. They are economically dependent on the income of their husband/wife and do not see a point when their art will contribute significantly to their family income. They feel accomplished if their art pays for supplies and transportation to work. Typically these are middle class suburban women who drive into the city each day they work on the Square.

Responses from Artist/Housepersons:

I went to Memphis Art academy. My husband's an engineer. We were transferred from Memphis to Baton Rouge, then to Oklahoma City and we've been here for 15 years. I've studied art, I still do. I go to places to study. I have teachers come in. My grandmother was an artist so my family has always encouraged me to paint. First, I painted in oil. But now, my major medium is watercolor. I do not make much money ... we live on my husband's income.

My art is really not a hobby. I've always painted and sold my work. I've taught lessons. It's a supplement...my husband supports me. I pay for all my supplies and all my painting trips.

I have been a portrait artist for 12 years. I took a two-year course at a trade school. I am out here approximately four days a week ... my husband has always been the main breadwinner...before this I was a housewife and mother for fourteen years. And prior to that I had done bookkeeping and accounting. I am getting restless. That's sort of why I was planning to go into painting. I'm getting a little bored with the portraits, so I thought I might try branching out into painting and maybe do the portraits a little. I don't know yet. Portraits pay my expenses, it will be awhile before my painting can do that.

Another artist/houseperson was obviously very concerned with the status of her children and husband and not her role as an artist.

I paint on the square two or three times a week. I have three sons. I have twins that both have degrees in art. One of them lives here in New Orleans and is really doing well with posters. He does City Classic posters. And I have one who lives in New York. He's an artist but he's a musician primarily. My younger son is a computer scientist. My husband's an engineer.

Type V. The Craftsperson.

Craftspersons are generally older people who came to the Square after retirement. They have minimal skills and are constantly trying to improve their technique. They may take some art courses to improve their skills, but art for them is a hobby, a leisure role. All of these individuals travel part of the year to art/craft shows. There they sell their production of both art from the Square and craft objects, which include mostly wood crafts. Their wares have been termed "useless garbage" by other researchers (Neapolitan 1985).

Responses from Craftspersons reflect a leisurely view of their role as artists.

I'm 65. I started painting when I was fifty. I have no formal art education. I know nothing about the history of art except what I've happened to hear. I started so late in life I didn't want to waste time with all of that. I wanted to paint, period, when I started, so that's what I've been doing for the last 15 years...I took six months from one teacher in her home one day a week, where I learned the basics. Then I dropped her and found another teacher that taught me about color. And from there on I've been on my own...I was still an office worker when I started...I am basically retired.

None of my work appears in galleries. I don't know anything about galleries. I'm not that kind of artist.

We have an RV [recreational vehicle]...we go to craft shows all over the United States...my husband and I both paint and do wood craft. We are on Jackson Square about 12 days a month. The rest of the time we travel around the country. This is a retirement for us...I don't consider myself an artist...arts and crafts just happen to fit our lifestyle.

Stebbins (1977, 1979), Ethridge and Neapolitan (1985), and Neapolitan (1985) have researched the marginality of this type of artist to the art world. The craftsperson places little value on uniqueness and creativity. This puts them in a marginal position to the art world because of the value of both of these concepts.
VI. The Would-Be Artist.
Would-Be Artists came to the Square with little skill but with a goal to be an artist. All are taking art courses or are enrolled in art degree programs at universities. They are avid readers of art magazines, regularly attend art shows and visit art galleries.

I am always trying to improve my skills. I try new techniques. I am constantly asking questions of the better artists on the Square... I go to art museums and shows and visit art galleries. Everything I do is geared toward improving my painting. I am barely making it now and I know it is because my paintings are poor. One day I want to be living very well from my painting.

I came here with little art skill, but with a great deal of intent to learn... A guy taught me to do portraits... now I am selling some paintings. My goal is to be recognized as a good artist and have an MFA from a leading university.

Obviously artist types are not static; artists may evolve from Would-Be to Serious. One woman originally came to the Square to get away from a failed relationship (Escapist). Her reasons for being there are now different as she has become a Serious Artist.

I'm originally from Pennsylvania. My parents have a turkey farm. I went to high school in Pennsylvania. I went to the University of Miami in Florida... I moved to Boston for about seven years... had a bad relationship. Then I moved down here about 13 years ago to get away. I've been out here 12 years and before that I just piddled around. I just wanted a place to hide then. I just came. I didn't know anything about the Square. If things worked out here, fine. If they didn't I would move on. But I felt comfortable here. I really love it here. It gradually became more serious, more full-time. Last year I traveled twice to Pennsylvania to work in some art and craft shows. I went at Christmas to work in a shopping mall and did some portraits. I take art history and painting courses. I take business classes. On a whole, I think people really admire you for being an artist. I really get a positive response.

DISCUSSION
This research has focused on one occupational group, artists, within one specific work place, Jackson Square. Occupations and professions have generally been seen as influential subcultures. Persons who work at the same kind of job are seen as having much in common. They receive about the same income, speak the same jargon that is associated with their kind of work, and probably belong to the same associations. As a consequence each profession or occupation lays the foundation for various subcultures. Membership in a specific work subculture is seen as creating similar interests, lifestyles, and views of the world (Gilbert, Kahl 1987; Pavalko 1988; Ritzer, Walczak 1986).

As a commercial commodity art is controlled by commercial dealers and motives and the fashion of the moment. A commodity of fashion is relatively short lived. If the artist does not wish to starve he/she cannot be independent of the market. The commercially successful artist is necessarily a slave to market demands, manufacturing a commodity in response to these demands. It makes commercial dealers the supreme arbiters of art, compelling artists to adapt themselves to their requirements. These dealers impose their taste and judgement upon the public and strongly influence art development. Thus, contemporary art may sink to the level of a commodity value. Eventually the public and artist themselves see it this way. This brings all art, including that of "old masters" to this level of monetary worth. The standards of true art thus become confused (Sorokin 1941).

We have demonstrated that artists working in one locale have different motivations, skills, and aspirations regarding their art work and thus belong to different subcultures. The one common theme is the Jackson Square locale. The Jackson Square artists are guided in various ways by their relationships with the buying public, gallery owners, and their own economic aspirations. Creating and selling art on Jackson Square becomes a type of symbolic interaction subject to the vagaries of numerous variables including the characteristics of artists, consumers, gallery owners, trends, fads, economic climate, season of the year, and a host of microecological factors (e.g. prime location on the Square). The Jackson Square milieu is thus an organic social and economic network containing a diversity of artistic perspectives and artistic skills and represents an eclectic mix of producers and product. The typology we have created serves
to inform others, researchers as well as the buying public, that a seemingly coherent subculture positioned in one working locale is really a complex, diverse, and symbolically obtuse environment.

One goal of this research was to describe the types of Jackson Square artists so that subsequent researchers will be able to recognize them and perhaps proceed in a more refined way with their own research. This research can also serve as a heuristic device for research on artists in other locations, possibly leading to the construction of a typology of locales (e.g., tourist, colony, schools, etc.). We are curious, for example, about the similarities/differences between the artists around Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco and the Jackson Square artists in New Orleans. Does each locale possess an eclectic mix of artists? Are the motivations, skill levels, and relationships with the gallery owners and the consumer the same? Are there different motivational and occupational paths to Ghiradelli Square than to Jackson Square? Does the typology described herein have utility for understanding the Ghiradelli Square or other artists? Does locale (e.g., Southern vs. West Coast) determine the types of artists who work there or do the same types of artists proliferate regardless of locale?

Other questions which arose during this research concern the floating values associated with art work and the social construction of economic value. Clearly art work as a commodity does not have a fixed value and is one of several areas where communities must be developed for worth of a particular work of art (see Smith 1989 for a challenge to the neo-classical economic position of rational calculations as determinants of price). More information is needed in order to reveal the processes and idiosyncracies associated with establishing prices for various types of art work. Studies of art dealers in particular would offer crucial insights into the vagaries of art work production, marketing, and distribution and would tell us more about how we establish, modify, and reconstitute values (economic as well as social).

**NOTES**

1 Michael J. Parsons (1987) argues that one’s understanding and appreciation of art can be viewed as passing through progressive cognitive stages (similar to those outlined by Jean Piaget and later adapted to moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg). Taking the position that we do not know much about how people “make sense” of art, Parsons (1987) says that what art enables us to understand is “not necessarily what the artist sought consciously to communicate.” Even though the interpretation of art is subjective and dependent on personal affirmation, the higher the cognitive developmental stage of one’s accounting of aesthetic experience, the more reasonable, defensible, and adequate one’s appraisal of art. In the highest stage identified by Parsons (stage five, autonomy), which is at the highest, postconventional, level, the responsibility for judgement of art may still rest with the self but “the responsibility is toward others...It is important, therefore, to talk with others about works of art and the common situation”. Furthermore, at stage five and with a postconventional style "we can distinguish between judgement and preference". Critics, dealers, and gallery owners who are at stage five render judgements of art based upon expertise and their knowledge of the “common situation” of art whereas those at less advanced stages rely on preference alone in their appraisals of art. Kuspit (1988) raises similar ideas about the subjective aspect of critical evaluation, particularly when connected to “fresh” as opposed to “mature art.”

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