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Art of Pain: The Expression of Self-Destructive Tendencies and Psychological Conflicts in Art Creation and Market Performance

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Master in Art Markets

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Abstract

My thesis looks at how self-destructive behavior and psychological struggles affect both living and deceased artists' work and its value in the market. I will explore how the emotions they express in their art connect with collectors, making their pieces more desirable. I also look into how the art market builds and sells the image of the "tortured genius" to increase the worth of their works. Additionally, I will focus on how today's focus on mental health affects how people view and invest in these kinds of artworks, and how an artist's mental state shapes their style and market success.

Keywords

Suffering artist, self-destructive, Pain and Creation

Resumo

A minha tese analisa a forma como o comportamento autodestrutivo e as lutas psicológicas afectam o trabalho de artistas vivos e falecidos e o seu valor no mercado. Explorarei a forma como as emoções que expressam na sua arte se ligam aos coleccionadores, tornando as suas peças mais desejáveis. Também analisarei a forma como o mercado da arte constrói e vende a imagem do “génio torturado” para aumentar o valor das suas obras. Além disso, também abordo o modo como o foco atual na saúde mental afecta a forma como as pessoas vêem e investem neste tipo de obras de arte, e como o estado mental de um artista molda o seu estilo e sucesso no mercado.

Palavras-chave

Artista sofredor, auto-destrutivo, Dor e Criação

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1. Introduction

The sources of inspiration and the stories behind the artists' creations endow the artworks with captivating imagery. In the history of art, works brimming with passionate emotions often leave the most indelible mark. People are constantly drawn to the stories of “suffering geniuses”. Representative self-destructive artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, Yayoi Kusama, and Ren Hang have drawn inspiration from their psychological traumas and tumultuous life experiences to create artworks rich in profound value. The art world is also very fond of the painful stories of this type of artist. When a piece of work is sold at an auction house for an astronomical price, the most eye-catching part on the brochure is often the creator's mental struggle, addiction history or tragic ending, as if pain has become the most important highlight of the work. This phenomenon has become a common occurrence in the art market. The personal hardships of artists are no longer merely a simple source of creative inspiration but a key element directly involved in promoting and shaping the market value of their works.

This thesis aims to dissect this unique “marketing system” in the art market: how are the narratives of psychological trauma and spiritual predicaments ingeniously transformed into real money? We will integrate multiple perspectives such as psychology, economics, and tracing historical roots to deeply study the entire mechanism by which the personal pain of artists is processed into public consumer goods. This thesis will focus on examining how institutions such as auction houses, as well as critics and mass media in the art market,

leverage their authority to meticulously create these narratives of suffering, ultimately achieving a dual harvest of cultural prestige and economic benefits.

1.1 Background of the study and statement of the problem:

The connection between artistic creation and mental distress has a profound cross-cultural historical background. For instance, in Eastern Buddhism, there is the strict ascetic culture (Heruka, 2010; Strong, 2001; Thondup, 1996); in Japan, there is the fearless spirit of sacrifice of Bushido (Nitobe, 1908); and in Western Christian culture, there are classic images of Christ and the suffering of martyred saints (Castelli, 2007). Furthermore, the heroic figures depicted in ancient Greek tragedies were often experiencing suffering and sacrifice (Graves, 1955). These historical and cultural backgrounds all provide an aesthetic foundation for the image of suffering in art. However, the systematic transformation of psychological pain into commercial assets has been meticulously constructed by the art market. The image of the “suffering artist” is no longer merely a cultural metaphor but has evolved into a narrative strategy that is repeatedly utilized by the market and has a clear commercial purpose.

This phenomenon in the art market can’t help but make us rethink the value of artworks.

When collectors are willing to pay a high premium for the works of artists with a record of mental illness, are they paying for the aesthetic experience or consuming a symbolized painful life? How can intermediary institutions such as galleries, auction houses and art museums strike a balance between respecting the personal experiences of artists and the market’s thirst for touching stories? More importantly, is there an ethical boundary in the

process of transforming an artist's private psychological trauma into commercial value? How can we build a market ecosystem that values creation but does not consume pain?

1.2 Core research question:

This study centers on the core issue of “how does the art market transform artists' psychological pain into economic value?” and conducts an analysis from three interrelated dimensions:

Firstly, from a historical perspective, it is necessary to trace how the cultural narrative of “the connection between creativity and pain” has developed in a global cross-cultural context, as well as how the art market has utilized a cultural Angle to construct commercial narratives.

Secondly, focus on the market operation mechanism, analyze what strategies institutions such as galleries and auction houses use to transform the life traumas of artists into economic value, and pay attention to how the media accelerates the dissemination and amplification of this process. Finally, delve into the ethical dimension and reflect on the potential impact of commercializing psychological pain on living artists, society's perception of mental health, and the understanding of the essence of cultural creativity.

1.3 Theoretical framework and methodology:

To systematically study the aforementioned problems, this paper will discuss the Construction of Painful Commercial Narratives from the following multiple theoretical perspectives. By leveraging Bourdieu's “field” theory, it will analyze how symbolic capital participates in constructing this narrative in the art market, and by applying Foucault's

concept of “clinical gaze”, this paper interprets the market’s observation and classification mechanism of the artist subject. It will also examine the connection between the psychology of pain and creativity from the psychoanalytic perspectives of Freud and Jamison, and it introduce Schiller’s narrative economics to explain how painful emotional stories drive market behavior.

In terms of methods, on the one hand, we analyze the transaction data of specific artworks in auction houses to examine the correlation between the artist’s painful narrative and the price premium. On the other hand, conducting critical discourse analysis on materials such as auction catalogues and exhibition texts allows to decode the narrative strategies within them. Through in-depth case studies of artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, Yayoi Kusama, and Ren Hang, the research will also reveal the influence of their psychological and emotional states on their artistic styles, as well as their market performance.

1.4 Chapters summary:

Based on a clear understanding of the core issues and methodology, this study will conduct specific arguments through four in-depth chapters:

Chapter Two first introduces the theories of Bourdieu, Foucault and others, and combines the painful commercial narrative cases of artists such as Van Gogh, providing a preliminary understanding and theoretical framework for the “painful genius narrative” in the art market.

After establishing the basic theoretical framework, Chapter Three turns to more in-depth

research perspectives such as psychology, philosophy, and economics, critically examining the true connection between mental states and artistic creation, and providing more references for interpreting market narratives. Chapter Four, by studying the ancient cross-cultural level, establishes a cultural and psychological consensus on “painful geniuses”, and further analyzes how painful geniuses are transformed into specific narrative strategies in combination with the dissemination mechanisms of the contemporary market. Ultimately, Chapter Five, as the concluding chapter, not only summarizes the operational mechanism of the commercialization of pain but also further explores the future development of the art market, such as the impact of mental health issues and ethical reflections on the art market.

By integrating these methods, this paper aims to link theories such as psychology and economics with the practical activities of the art market, gain a deeper understanding of the psychological trauma of artists, the connection between their artistic creation and the specialized narrative means and commercial value of the art market, and enable us to further understand the construction process of the narrative of painful geniuses. And think critically about this business system of the art market, thereby hoping to promote the healthy development of the art market.

2. From Theory to Artist Case Studies: A Construction Analysis of the Myth of Painful Geniuses

How can an artist's personal pain be transformed into powerful commercial value? First of all, we need to delve deeply into how pain is gradually endowed with market value through a sophisticated theoretical mechanism. We need to rely on two sets of theories as the core perspective: Firstly, Pierre Bourdieu's "field" theory can help us see how the art world operates delicately by using the method of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1993). On the other hand, Michel Foucault's "clinical gaze" theory reveals how humans are regarded as objects for the analysis of knowledge and economic systems (Foucault, 1973). When these two theoretical frameworks are jointly applied to the case studies of artists, it will be found that the label of "tormented genius" has been carefully constructed by the market.

2.1 Theoretical perspectives of "field" and "clinical gaze":

Bourdieu's concept of "field" regards the art world as a structured social space (Bourdieu, 1993), in which different roles such as artists, dealers, critics and collectors are constantly competing for various forms of capital in the art market. However, the narrative of pain plays a special role here, which is what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital", it can be transformed into economic value through the accumulation of reputation and social recognition. When an artist's life records mental illness or traumatic experiences, this information itself transforms into a kind of cultural capital, elevating his works in the art market.

This transformation process is also inseparable from the “Consecration” theory proposed by Bourdieu (1984). Consecration refers to the social behavior in which cultural products acquire legitimate value through collective recognition by authoritative institutions. In the art field, auction houses, museums and galleries are precisely the core institutions that hold this power. For instance, when Christie’s auction house devotes extensive writing to the psychological predicaments of artists, or when MoMA curates a retrospective exhibition organized around mental illness, they are actually conducting a kind of “Consecration” operation, formally confirming the pain in biographies as part of artistic value. Through this ritual, painful narratives spread widely in the art world, continuously accumulating symbolic capital, and eventually being transformed into tangible economic capital through market transactions.

Foucault’s analysis of power and observation provides another profound framework for understanding the commercialization of artistic pain. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault, 1973), he proposed the concept of “clinical gaze”, pointing out that modern medicine transforms people into analyzable knowledge objects through a specific way of observation. What is important is that this kind of gaze is not a passive act but an active construction of classification categories such as normal and pathological, healthy and diseased, rational and abnormal.

The art market ingeniously employs this logic, giving rise to a unique “painful genius” business model. The art market captures the traces of psychological abnormalities from the

creations and behaviors of artists, and through this “commoditized gaze”, shapes them as a symbol of genius creativity.

2.2 Artist case studies:

Outstanding and typical “painful genius” image artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, Yayoi Kusama and the Chinese photography artist Ren Hang, through the study of their cases, can deeply understand the commercial process of the art market in constructing such narratives, and more profoundly reflect how pain narratives obtain huge commercial value Create wealth and influence for the market.

Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh, born in the Netherlands in 1853, had his artworks ignored during his lifetime and suffered from poverty and hardship. Modern psychiatric studies suggest that he may have suffered from several conditions, including bipolar disorder and temporal lobe epilepsy, although definitive conclusions remain elusive (Blumer, 2002).

Van Gogh left behind a large number of letters. More than 600 letters between him and his brother Theo provide precious materials for understanding his mental state. These letters recorded his inner pain and symptoms of severe anxiety (Jansen, Luijten, & Bakker, 2009). It is worth noting that during his time at the sanatorium (from May 1889 to May 1890), despite experiencing multiple psychological crises, Van Gogh still created approximately 150 works (Pickvance, 1986).

Among them, “The Starry Night” (1889) was created during the sanatorium period. The thick accumulation of pigments (impasto technique) forms a unique three-dimensional texture. Van Gogh himself described the rotating sky in the painting as “turbulent” in the letter (Van Gogh, 1889/2009).

It is worth mentioning that Van Gogh’s experience at the Sanatorium in Sao Paulo (from May 1889 to May 1890) has been repeatedly emphasized by major art institutions. When describe this period of history, they often emphasize the number of works created during this time, with about 150 pieces produced in less than a year. At the same time, they consciously match specific paintings with psychological crisis events recorded in archives (Pickvance, 1986).

From the perspective of Foucault’s theory of power, the Sanatorium in Sao Paulo played the role of cultural certification in the case of Van Gogh. Medical records, the symptom descriptions recorded by Dr. Peron, and so on, have established a connection between Van Gogh’s works and his pathological symptoms for later generations and provided seemingly objective medical evidence. When the exhibition catalogue quotes the doctor’s professional judgment on “acute manic episodes accompanied by visual and auditory hallucinations”, it is actually borrowing medical authority to seek a scientific explanation for its artworks (Sweetman, 1991).

It is worth pondering that contemporary neuroscience has been making a continuous stream of retrospective diagnoses about Van Gogh. From temporal lobe epilepsy to various hypotheses of porphyria (Blumer, 2002), each new diagnosis is providing new materials for major institutions and constantly reinforcing Van Gogh's image as a painful genius.

Van Gogh's image of pain is deeply rooted in people's hearts and is also closely related to his sister-in-law, Johanna van Gogh Bunge. After her husband Theo's death, Johanna inherited a large number of paintings and letters. From the 1890s to the 1920s, she did not rush to sell these works but instead lent them to major exhibitions and actively built relationships with influential art critics, and most importantly, she systematically organized and published Vincent's letters (Luijten, 2019; Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). Using Bourdieu's theory, Johanna has effectively accumulated symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993). The joint efforts of art authorities such as museums, authoritative critics and book media have greatly enhanced Van Gogh's reputation and prestige in the art market. From this case, we can perceive that the establishment of symbolic capital largely does not rely on the spontaneous charm of individuals, but rather benefits from a set of ingeniously coordinated institutional operations. This remind us of Bourdieu's (1984/1993) argument, in which he profoundly revealed that "the existence of an art work is based on the collective belief that knows and acknowledges its value".

However, this narrative model of Van Gogh has also been subject to various critical discussions in recent years. The Art Newspaper once published an article titled "Ten myths

about Vincent Van Gogh”, specifically to debunk certain biographical anecdotes about the artist that were exaggerated by the media and inconsistent with the facts, emphasizing that neither Van Gogh himself nor his artworks should be labeled with images such as the “suffering madman,” and that we should instead acknowledge both the real difficulties caused by his mental-health problems and the intrinsic artistic value of his work (Bailey, 2020).

Paul Gauguin

The artistic trajectory of Paul Gauguin is also worth exploring. His life evolution from a securities agent to self-exile and drifting to a foreign land was predestined, but he also consciously shaped his experiences into the image of a “savage” (Thomson, 2010). The psychological turmoil experienced by the artist is manifest in his work in a direct manner. In “Vision After the Sermon” (1888), the artist employs a blood-red, flat sky and rigidly devotional gestures. These elements reflect the artist’s growing disillusionment with European bourgeois society and his agonizing search for true spiritual meaning. In 1891, he began to distance himself further from the artist’s environment, opting to relocate to the serene and remote Tahiti to reside and create. His Tahitian period work “When Will You Marry?” (1892) presents an idealized “primitive paradise”, depicting vivid and simple images of Tahitian women. However, Eisenman (1997) believes that what is revealed in it is more of his colonial fantasy about Tahiti rather than the real indigenous culture. Mathews’ (2001) research focused on the way indigenous girls were depicted in the paintings, arguing that the work more reflected Gauguin’s racist color towards indigenous people and was full of

sexualization of indigenous girls.

Gauguin's richer and more vagrant personal life made him a controversial artist in the art market, and his active marketing of his painful narrative methods further contributed to his success in the market after his death. His European agent, George-Daniel de Monfreid, helped him strive to maintain his artist image in Paris. The correspondence between the two also deepened Gauguin's image of the sacrifices he made for art - leaving his family behind, enduring poverty, and suffering from tropical diseases (Mathews, 2001; Thomson, 2010).

Gauguin's autobiographies, "Noa Noa" (1901) and "Avant et Après" (1903), also feature meticulously constructed self-narratives that reveal his true psychological distress and further solidify his artistic image (as cited in Reilly, 2024). His two suicide attempts in 1898 and 1903 were also extensively recorded and reported (Mathews, 2001). This approach of transforming life traumas into biographical capital makes it difficult for the art market in later generations to separate Gauguin's works from his life experiences when evaluating his works. This narrative approach also vividly demonstrates that artists or their agents use tangible or intangible pain as symbolic capital and as a tool to accumulate reputation in the artistic field. At the same time, the media in the art world exaggerated his broken friendship with Van Gogh and portrayed him as a man who would do anything to pursue perfect art and travel far away from home. As Solomon-Godeau (1989) pointed out, this narrative portrays European male artists as romantic legends of self-awakening achieved by integrating into "primitive" culture. This framework has been repeatedly used: from museum exhibition walls to

academic works and even auction catalogues, similar scripts are being repeated. The title of the “Gauguin: A Spiritual Journey” exhibition at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in 2017 itself defines the artist’s journey across the Pacific as a spiritual pursuit (de Young Museum, 2018–2019). It is precisely through the process of “consecration” artists that art institutions accumulate more symbolic capital. The reason why collecting Gauguin’s works can bring prestige is precisely because these works are regarded as models of transforming the pain of life into aesthetic value (Bourdieu, 1993).

This combined narrative approach created Gauguin’s image as a painful artist, with the aim of transforming personal suffering into one of the most powerful currencies in art history.

Edvard Munch

Edvard Munch’s artistic career was closely linked to his tragic childhood experiences. The death of his mother and his sister, along with the shadow of tragedy in his family, always haunted him (Christie’s, 2019). This connection has greatly shaped his gloomy artistic style. Munch once said, “Disease, madness and death are the black angels that guard my cradle and accompany me throughout my life” (National Gallery of Australia, n.d., para. 3). This also consciously developed his personal tragic artist image. Munch’s early works were deeply influenced by his childhood trauma, especially during his golden period of creation in the 1890s, when his exploration of death and loneliness became more profound. The iconic painting “The Scream” (1893) was born during this period. Munch suddenly felt mentally broken while taking a walk at dusk by chance. He saw the blood-red sky and the entire earth

seemed to be crying out in despair (Sotheby's, 2012). The distorted lines and strong color contrasts in the work materialize this sense of collapse and despair, creating one of the most powerful works in the art history. Inspired by his childhood sorrows, Munch created the work "The Sick Child" (1885-86), the gloomy tones expressed his grief and despair (Yang & Wu, 2012). In 1908, Munch moved into a sanatorium to recuperate from his alcoholism and mental breakdown, and during this period his work ceased to be solely in the shadowy style of the earlier period, becoming more peaceful and serene overall. During this period, works such as "The Sun" (1911) and "Spring Plowing" (1918) emerged. He began to change the subject matter of his paintings to beautiful rural landscapes, depicting his renewed sense of life (The Art Story, n.d.).

Looking back on Munch's artistic career, it is not difficult to find that Munch himself was consciously using his own bumpy experiences to promote the painful narrative of the art market, integrating trauma into his creations. His works are like visual autobiographies, all conveying the influence of his life experiences on his creations. In addition, both the art market and the mass media have been exaggerating Munch's image as a "suffering genius". When marketing these works, auction houses such as Sotheby's always emphasize Munch's personal tragic experiences. This approach also further enhances people's emotional resonance, exercising Bourdieu's "Consecration" (Bourdieu, 1993; Sotheby's, 2012).

In addition, in 1974, there was an autobiographical film titled "Edward Munch", directed by Peter Watkins, which specifically depicted Munch's own childhood mental trauma and tragic

image (Watkins, 1974). This film, which lasts approximately three hours, combines the forms of documentary and feature film, embodying the characteristics of the “limited production field” described by Bourdieu (1993) : such cultural products do not pursue commercial success in the mass market but accumulate symbolic capital through artistic innovation.

The value assessment of Munch’s works in the art market is also worth paying attention to. Those paintings that profoundly reflect psychological pain and internal conflicts maintain extremely high commercial value. In 2012, “The Scream” was sold at Sotheby’s for approximately 120 million US dollars, breaking the auction record. Created in 1902, “The Girls on the Bridge” was sold for approximately 54 million US dollars at Sotheby’s auction in 2016, confirming the continued favor of the art market for “painful narratives” (BBC News, 2012; Tully, 2016). This value preference is not accidental but the result of the combined effect of different cultural fields: art institutions, mass media, etc., jointly shape Munch as a typical representative of the “painful genius”. When this symbolic capital accumulates to a certain extent, it will be transformed into actual economic capital at the auction. These exorbitant sale prices are direct evidence of the art market’s sustained investment in narratives of suffering.

Yayoi Kusama

Yayoi Kusama was born in 1929 into a traditional family in Matsumoto, Japan. Her growth experience profoundly influenced her artistic path. She was once diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and other symptoms, which were manifested as what she

described as “obliteration hallucinations” - the experience of constantly multiplying dots eventually devouring the entire visual space. In 1977, after numerous suicide attempts and what she called “psychological exhaustion from a struggle with infinity”, Kusama was admitted to Seiwa Psychiatric Hospital in Tokyo and has been living there ever since (Kusama, 2015).

Yayoi Kusama’s work “The Infinite Web” series was inspired by the audio-visual hallucinations that followed her around. The repetition of the polka dots and grids gave a sense of oppression, and the endless repetition of the patterns was like a curse on her illness, constantly extending and extending, reflecting the fear and illness deep in her heart. During her stay in New York, she also created a series of soft sculpture installation works. The use of various elements such as dots and masks further demonstrated her exploration and reflection on life, identity and culture in her works, reflecting the anxiety deep in Yayoi Kusama’s heart. (Christie’s, n.d.; Ha Thuc, 2022).

One of her signature works, “Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli’s Field” (1965), creates an infinitely extending space through mirror reflection and soft sculptures covered with dots. Kusama explained this as: “Self-dissolution is achieved through infinite accumulation” . When the audience steps into this space, the perceptual confusion they experience is precisely the externalization of the artist’s psychological state: “This is how I perceive the world, endless repetition eventually melts the boundary between the self and the space” (Kusama, 2015).

Yayoi Kusama's distinct artistic style and image have left a deep impression on people. She speaks candidly about her condition and frames her practice as a form of spiritual self-healing, making her psychological struggles inseparable from her creative language. When promoting her works, the auction house highlighted her legendary life story and lifelong struggles with mental illness. This narrative strategy further heightened the market appeal of her work.

In addition, Yayoi Kusama's "Infinite Mirror Room" exhibition has caused a sensation in major museums around the world, resulting in queues for visitors. Through immersive participation in the exhibition, visitors can further experience Yayoi Kusama's creations and mental state. The marketing strategy of the museum is clearly deliberately reinforcing this narrative strategy, describe visiting the exhibition as "stepping into the world of the artist" (Hirshhorn Museum, 2017).

Ren Hang

Ren Hang, a Chinese artist, exemplifies the short but impactful career of an artist who has left an indelible impression on his contemporaries. Ren Hang's photography art has always been controversial. In his early years (2007-2012), his works mainly focused on taking nude photos of his friends. During this period, his style was bold, direct and vivid, mostly using black and white film, reflecting his exploration of the boundary between sex and the body. At that time, he had already been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and a sense of loneliness and

depression has been vaguely revealed in his works during this period (Sha, 2021).

From 2013 to 2016, Ren Hang's mental state deteriorated continuously, with recurrent episodes of depression. However, at the same time, he also entered a period of maturity in his personal artistic style. He began to explore a more avant-garde style of photography, injecting new elements such as animals, plants, ropes, and body parts into his work, creating imagery that is bold and spicy, yet at the same time depressing and suffocating. For instance, the overlapping of the characters' bodies gives a strange sense of distortion. The bright color background contrasts sharply with the model's pale skin, creating a strong visual contrast (Sha, 2021).

During this period, Ren Hang also created a large number of poems. His lines full of strong personal color, such as "Life is indeed a precious gift, but I often feel that it seems to have been given to the wrong person," deeply expressed his strong self-destructive tendency in his heart (Yui, 2023). Ren Hang's social media platforms such as Weibo have been continuously documenting his struggle with depression and recording many words that reflect his negative emotions. In February 2017, Ren Hang committed suicide due to depression at the age of only 29. After his death, Ren Hang's work drew intense attention across the art and fashion communities and sparked wide discussion on Chinese online forums. Netizens recirculated his writings from his lifetime, which generated strong emotional resonance and sympathy for his brief life. Online dissemination amplified the tragic narrative surrounding him (Wong, 2017).

In July 2017, five months after Ren Hang's suicide, his friend Zhang Ximing released a short film titled "I've Got a Little Problem" documenting Ren Hang's story. In this film, viewers gained a deeper understanding of the artist's creative journey and the days he spent coexisting with mental illness (Zhang, 2017). However, after the release of this film, it was not merely a documentary about Ren Hang, but also prompted the art market to transform personal pain into potential cultural consumer goods. Integrating Foucault's theoretical analysis, this documentary itself constructs a gazing mechanism, recording Ren Hang's psychological predicament through the camera and transforming it into an object that can be analyzed (Foucault, 1973). The narrative approach of this documentary further intensifies Ren Hang's image of suffering.

Although these artists lived in different historical backgrounds and took different creative paths, the market's commercialization of their painful experiences shows an astonishing consistency. When an artist's spiritual predicament is transformed into a marketing narrative through biographical literature, academic discourse and institutional curation, these stories evolve into a form of capital. They not only endow the works with deeper cultural connotations, but also directly translate into significant price increases in market transactions.

3. Painful Market Coding: Psychological Narrative, Economic Logic and Data

Evidence

Why are people always drawn to tragedies? Why can artistic creations brimming with personal pain continuously attract the attention of audiences and the art market? How does this kind of attention specifically demonstrate its commercial value in the art market?

Philosophers and psychologists, drawing on psychoanalytic theory and analytical psychology, have outlined the psychological drivers behind our attraction to self-destructive art. The art market leverages these insights, combining psychology with economic strategy to heighten commercial value. Using empirical market data, we can trace how an aesthetics of pain is packaged and promoted, not only as a matter of taste but as a deliberate narrative mechanism that guides audience perception and purchasing behavior.

3.1 Freud's theory of sublimation and death drive:

In Freud's most renowned psychoanalytic theory, "sublimation" describes the process by which an individual transforms inner desires that cannot be directly satisfied or suppressed into products with higher social recognition and cultural value (Freud, 1915/1957). Unlike the direct suppression of impulses, sublimation promotes the evolution of desires into broader cultural fields by "reshaping" them, thereby facilitating advanced cultural expressions such as art, science and thought. This approach enables the internal conflict between attack and destruction to be expressed in the form of cultural creation, not only alleviating the psychological conflict of the artist but also endowing the work with profound emotional expressiveness. In artistic expression, the impulse to self-harm often finds an alternative

outlet and is conveyed through violent brushstrokes, unbalanced compositions or disturbing images. The work itself seems to have become a container, carrying those destructive energies that might otherwise have led to self-destruction. This process does not eliminate internal conflicts. Instead, as Freud (1915/1957) pointed out, it provides a kind of “substitute satisfaction”, that is, through creative transformation, psychological tension is temporarily relieved. The powerful impasto technique in Van Gogh’s works is a prime example: the piercing and stacking of pigments on the canvas elevate the inner aggressive impulse into a creative artistic expression. The distorted images in Munch’s “The Scream” successfully elevate an inner pain and anxiety into a powerful visual symbol. Therefore, through art for “sublimation”, not only can inner pain be transformed into a creative driving force, ultimately achieving an effective form of expression, but also an individual’s psychological predicament can evolve into an aesthetic experience, enabling the audience to empathize with it.

Freud also proposed the famous “Thanatos” theory in 1920, which further elaborated on the connection between painful artistic creation and self-destructive tendencies. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he pointed out that apart from the Eros drive towards life and reproduction, individuals potentially possess a destructive instinct that pursues stillness, destruction and a return to an inorganic state, namely the death drive. This drive is often expressed in compulsive repetitive behaviors, guilt, self-harm, or aggression toward the outside world (Freud, 1920/1955).

This theory emphasizes the self-destructive tendency deep in the human heart. Artists trapped

in spiritual predicaments often inject strong personal emotions into their works when creating, and the themes of their creations can always reveal the inner trauma of individuals. This repetitive thematic creation directly reflects the “death drive”.

We can observe that the death drive often profoundly shapes artistic practices with self-destructive tendencies through two core mechanisms. The first type is “compulsive repetition”, such as Yayoi Kusama’s creative classic: the dot element, whose dots symbolize the inescapable and endless recurrence of traumatic hallucinations. Secondly, the drive to death can also give rise to what Freud (1924/1961) described as “moral masochism”, that is, a self-punishment need arising from unconscious guilt. The artist unconsciously seeks the pain in creation as a punishment for some kind of internal guilt. But this gives rise to the core paradox - how does the instinct to die give rise to art? However, through the sublimation mechanism, artists can transfer this self-destructive desire into their creations, which not only makes the works more emotionally resonant but also avoids actual self-destruction. The completion of each work is the release of the driving force of destruction and the affirmation of life.

In conclusion, psychoanalytic theory provides us with a profound theoretical foundation for understanding the “art of pain” : artistic creation is not only an expression of pain, but also a high-level form of expression of pain, and a process of elevation for artists. Artists incorporate their personal pain and suffering into their creations, transforming their self-destructive tendencies into art, thereby evoking a strong resonance among viewers. It is

precisely this emotional intensity and sense of reality that endow artworks with lasting and profound market appeal.

Lacan's concept of "jouissance" (1966/1980) offers a complex understanding of the market dynamics of self-destructive art and provides another perspective on the basis of Freud's theory: beyond the pleasure principle, humans do not always pursue only pleasure; even deep down, they have a pursuit of pain. This complex inner desire also provides another perspective to clarify why audiences are attracted to tragic art.

3.2 Extreme emotions and creativity: understanding the art of pain from a psychological perspective:

Psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison, in her book "Touched with Fire" (1993), delves deeply into the connection between bipolar disorder and creativity. By analyzing historical cases and conducting rigorous data sorting, Jamison ultimately discovered that many renowned artists in history were accompanied by extreme psychological problems and emotional distress: they often demonstrated active and abundant creativity in a manic state, but the subsequent depressive period plunged them into a deep emotional abyss of depression and pain.

In Jamison's data, the focus is mainly on the group of British writers and artists. The survey results show that more than one-third of this group have received treatment for obvious mood disorders, and among the poet group, this proportion even reaches half, which is much higher than the incidence rate of bipolar disorder, which is about 1%, and major depressive disorder,

which is about 5%, in the general population. This data highlights the significance of emotional disorders among artists and people engaged in creative work (Jamison, 1993).

Jamison's argument is supported by several mutually corroborating levels. First of all, the statistical trend, which is astonishingly consistent in different fields such as poetry, painting and music, is hard to simply deny as a coincidence. Secondly, there is evidence of time: many artists' most outstanding works are precisely created during their emotional outbursts, and their creativity is directly driven by the emotional cycle. Finally, emotional disorders themselves can stimulate a person's cognitive patterns, such as more flexible thinking and more acute perception, and these changes are precisely the psychological states most needed for creative work.

It is worth mentioning that Jamison also highly agrees with and quotes the viewpoint of psychiatrist Nancy Andreasen (as cited in Jamison, 1993), emphasizing that it is not bipolar disorder itself that creates artistic excellence, but rather a highly sensitive and distinctive way of perceiving the world that enables artists not only to possess creative potential beyond that of ordinary people, At the same time, it is also more likely to be trapped in emotional disorders.

Jamison's theory is widely influential, yet it has consistently drawn criticism. Schlesinger's "The Insanity Hoax" (2012) directly points out the core weakness of the "genius and madness" theory: methodological flaws and confirmation bias. She pointed out that rigorous large-scale

research only shows a weak correlation, and the so-called strong correlation stems from the excessive exaggeration of extreme cases. This myth has become popular because it meets the market's demand for the narrative of "painful geniuses" and can effectively enhance commercial value. But its social cost is huge: it romanticizes mental illness, hinders treatment, and mystifies creativity, ignoring its essence. In the long run, these dynamics risk distorting the healthy development of the art industry.

The interpretation at the psychological level provides a theoretical foundation for the painful genius, while economic theory offers real data on the commercial performance of self-destructive art in the art market. Economist Robert Shiller's "Narrative Economics" (2019) theory, which also provides crucial support for understanding why the image of a painful genius has been so successful in the art market. Schiller pointed out that the influence brought by creating a contagious story is unlimited.

This kind of narrative dissemination is like a pandemic, ignited by "super disseminators", such as authoritative institutions or prestigious critics in the art market. When a narrative gains sufficient influence, it will generate what Shiller calls "narrative immunity", that is, resistance to critical voices. Even though there have always been critical voices in the academic circle, this narrative of painful geniuses will not disappear. Therefore, a good story that can evoke a strong sense of empathy in the audience also has unlimited commercial potential. The art market precisely takes advantage of this idea to create powerful narratives about the lives of distressed artists, evoking people's sympathy and compassion, and further

elevating the value of artworks.

3.3 Empirical data analysis:

Beyond the theoretical support of psychology and psychoanalysis, art-market data offers a more direct view of the public's strong interest in works marked by struggle and pain, and shows how "Narrative Economics" converts that interest into remarkable commercial value.

Van Gogh must be one of the most typical artists who embody the market value of painful trauma in art. Although he was unknown during his lifetime, the value of his works rose rapidly after his death. In 1987, his "Irises" was sold for 53.9 million US dollars. In 1990, "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" was sold at Christie's in New York for 82.5 million US dollars, setting a new record for global art auctions at that time. In 1998, "Self-Portrait Without Beard" also set a high price record of 71.5 million US dollars (as cited in Sina Collection, 2015). His work has had a profound impact on the art market, driven not only by Van Gogh's intrinsic artistic value but also by the posthumous marketing of the "tortured genius" narrative.

The value of Paul Gauguin's work is also noteworthy, in 2015, Gauguin's Tahitian painting "When Will You Marry?" was purchased privately by the Qatar Museums for an exorbitant price of approximately \$300 million (Cascone, 2015), setting a new record for the art market. In addition to this astonishing price, Gauguin's later works, "Where Do We Come From? What are we? Where Are We Going?" is a treasure of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and other Tahitian paintings have sold at Christie's and Sotheby's for tens of millions of dollars.

Edvard Munch is also another distinct example of the art market. In May 2012, a pastel original of Munch's work "The Scream" was sold for 119.9 million US dollars at Sotheby's in New York, setting a new record for the auction price of artworks at that time. This transaction price far exceeded the previous estimate of 80 million US dollars, causing a sensation and attention in the art world (Michaud, 2012).

Yayoi Kusama, as a living contemporary female artist, has also performed outstandingly in the art market with her works. "The Infinity Net" series, which was sold for only a few hundred dollars in the early years, has seen its price soar rapidly in recent years: At Christie's Hong Kong auction in 2014, a single piece of "Infinity Net" was sold for a high price of 7.1 million US dollars (Christie's, 2023). The abstract painting "Flowers" from 2023 was also sold for nearly 67.25 million RMB (Hurun Report, 2024). Her market performance also demonstrated the power of narrative.

The young Chinese artist Ren Hang gained sustained international attention after his death, with his photographs appearing regularly at major auctions such as Christie's. In 2023, a 2014 work sold in a Christie's online sale for USD 15,120, far exceeding its USD 4,000 to 6,000 estimate. In European galleries, his photographs are typically priced between EUR 5,000 and 7,500. Due to the scarcity of his works, the market value is also higher, and his tragic death magnifies the narrative of pain (Artsy, n.d.; Christie's, n.d.).

The integration of psychoanalytic theory, economic theory and market data profoundly reveals how the art market utilizes and creates painful narratives to transform them into economic value. Although there is still controversy over the connection between creativity and mental illness, the market still skillfully exploits the controversy to achieve the purpose of narrative marketing. Just as Schiller's narrative economics reveals, those stories about "painful geniuses" have powerful dissemination and economic influence. Market data also confirms this point, showing that works certified to be related to painful experiences often achieve stable and significant price premiums. Overall, the art market is a complex and dynamic system. To truly understand the manifestation of this self-destructive art in this system, we must not only acknowledge the real existence of psychological pain in creation, but also be vigilant against the commercialization trend of it being simplified into a sales label.

4. The historical foundation and dissemination mechanism of the “painful genius”

image

The analysis in this chapter will focus on the ancient cultural aspects of humanity, such as Buddhism from the ancient East, the spirit of Japanese Bushido, and Christianity and ancient Greek culture from the West, in order to explore how cross-cultural roots provide a deep narrative soil for “Painful Geniuses”. In addition, the previous chapters have already introduced how the narrative of painful genius is constructed. This chapter will further explore the means of narrative communication in contemporary society, especially traditional film and television biopics, streaming media and social media platforms, to analyze how they contribute to further intensifying the painful image of artists and dialectically view the impact brought about by this approach. Meanwhile, by further exploring Art Brut as an anti-market art concept, it has also been favored by the art market in recent years. The art market has commercialized the concept of “anti-market” and disseminated it to the public, demonstrating a powerful narrative marketing ability.

The phenomenon of the contemporary art market “pricing” psychological pain actually has a profound historical origin. For centuries, there has long been a cultural tradition in both Eastern and Western cultures that links spiritual suffering with creativity - the great images in religious culture and literary stories that endure hardships for faith provide potential templates for the narrative models of the current art market.

When we try to understand why Munch's works full of personal trauma can set sky-high records at auction houses, we need to be aware of the cultural roots accumulated by history, which have enabled the narrative of "suffering breeds greatness" to resonate deeply among the collector community. What art institutions do is to utilize this cognitive model deeply rooted in historical culture to package the personal tragedies of artists into modern legends that conform to the narrative structure.

4.1 The narrative soil provided in a cross-cultural historical context:

Buddhism

In Buddhist culture, enduring hardships is regarded as a path of spiritual practice leading to wisdom and truth. Buddhism emphasizes cutting off worldly ties and not conforming to the corrupt ways of the world in order to achieve enlightenment.

The ascetic culture of Buddhism also provides us with many classic examples. For instance, Shakyamuni Buddha experienced many twists and turns on his path to enlightenment. He practiced ascetics for six years, suffering from hunger and cold, and was even rescued by a shepherdess after fainting, all in pursuit of a way out of suffering. Eventually, he achieved enlightenment and liberation under the Bodhi tree (Strong, 2001). The life of the renowned Tibetan Buddhist saint Milarepa exemplifies suffering's transformative power. After causing multiple deaths through black magic, he submitted to extreme asceticism under his master Marpa, repeatedly building and dismantling stone stupas, enduring physical punishment, and living in solitary caves for long periods while subsisting on nettles until malnutrition turned his body greenish (Heruka, 2010). His later masterpiece, "The Hundred Thousand Songs",

expresses the spiritual realization he attained through these arduous trials. Jigme Lingpa also underwent rigorous asceticism and retreat meditation. He spent three years meditating alone in a completely dark environment, during which he received the “Longchen Nyingthig” teachings. This experience set an important precedent for reshaping extreme psychological states into catalysts for spiritual revelation (Thondup, 1996). Inspired by his experience of ascetic meditation, he created his autobiography “Dancing Moon in the Water”, which also reflects the creative model in Buddhist culture that regards suffering as the source of creation. The story of Nubchen Sangye Yeshe, an important Buddhist figure who practiced asceticism in many caves, serves as a classic example of this principle. When the ruler Langdarma sought to destroy Buddhism, Nubchen Sangye Yeshe demonstrated his immense supernatural powers to intimidate the persecutors. These examples reflect the profound emphasis Buddhist culture places on suffering as a path to inner purification and enlightenment. Such extreme penance is believed to cultivate a deep awareness of the world, unlock powerful creativity, and ultimately help individuals realize their fullest potential.

Christianity

The core story of Christianity: The crucifixion of Jesus also emphasizes the concept of the “Tortured Genius”, highlighting the value concept of martyrdom and ultimate redemption. Early in Christianity, the church began to promote the spirit of martyrdom, and by the Middle Ages, Christian art often depicted scenes of martyrdom in which the protagonists were often suffering, just as Sebastian was pierced by an arrow, Catherine was broken by a wheel, and Lawrence was roasted on a grill, they were regarded as sacred, beautiful yet painful beings

(Castelli, 2007). The cross carried by Jesus endows the suffering people with a sacred halo and is the most typical symbol of Christian culture. Such painful narratives have also endowed the people of later generations who have suffered for lofty goals with a profound religious and cultural foundation.

In history, there are also many outstanding figures who were influenced by Christian culture and unleashed powerful creativity. For example, Francesco d'Assisi in the Middle Ages suffered from physical illness for a long time. Under such difficult conditions, he still created the great work "Canticle of the Creatures". In addition, the famous philosopher Boethius was imprisoned due to political persecution, and while awaiting execution, he wrote his influential philosophical masterpiece "The Consolation of Philosophy". This masterpiece reflects Boethius's philosophical thinking on fate and free will. In summary, the experience of suffering in Christian culture is seen as a source of spiritual advancement and creativity. However, the art market ingeniously interprets the pain of artists as a sacrificial act by taking advantage of the painful philosophy in Christian culture and redefines the torment of mental illness as a sacred test; therefore, the consumption of an artist's life can be packaged as a tribute ceremony.

Ancient Greek culture

Ancient Greek culture has been devoted to depicting the heroic figure of tragedy, and this narrative is deeply connected with the spirit of struggle and suffering. For example, there are some classic cases of characters in Greek tragedy, such as the hero Prometheus, who was

imprisoned in chains and tortured day after day because he provided fire to mankind. This noble heroic image of dedication and sacrifice for others deeply influenced the cultural narrative. There is also the image of Oedipus, who experiences the trick of fate, accidentally kills his father and married his mother, and finally learns the truth and atones for his sins (Graves, 1955). This figure has left a strong touch in the ancient Greek mythology, successfully depicting the image of suffering characters, and realizing the great tragic value.

Furthermore, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato proposed the famous theory of “Divine Madness.” In the Phaedrus, he defined four forms of divine madness: the prophetic (of Apollo), the ritualistic (of Dionysus), the erotic (of Aphrodite), and the poetic (of the Muses). When discussing poetic creation, Plato has a famous assertion: “If, without the madness of possession by the Muses, one tries to enter the gates of poetry by skill alone, both the person and the work will be eclipsed before the poems of true madness” (Plato, trans.1995). The significance of this assertion is that it allows certain mental deficiencies to be seen as a sacred channel to higher truth and creativity.

Japanese Bushido and Monae Aesthetics

In the Japanese Bushido culture, the samurai spirit further emphasizes that the honor of a true warrior is obtained through suffering and sacrifice, and the samurai should bravely sacrifice and die, which is a true act of loyalty. In the Bushido spirit, “Seppuku” is seen as the highest expression of the warrior’s fearless spirit, achieving lofty moral goals at the cost of self-destruction. In the book “Bushido: The Soul of Japan”, Japanese politician Inazo Nitobe

comprehensively explained the traditional values and spiritual core of Bushido. The core of Bushido includes the eight virtues of righteousness, courage, kindness, courtesy, honesty, honor, loyalty and moderation, and emphasizes that samurai should always be ready to sacrifice or die by marauding and never yield to achieve lofty moral missions and spiritual goals (Nitobe, 1908). This Bushido spirit has also profoundly influenced the style of Japanese culture. Miyamoto Musashi was a renowned samurai, swordsman and artist in the Edo period of Japan. Based on his life's combat experiences, he created the work "The Book of Five Rings", which has had a far-reaching impact on Japanese culture. This work is not only about swordsmanship and military strategy, but also contains Miyamoto Musashi's philosophical concepts. It reflects the great wisdom and creativity of a samurai who has gone through hardships and struggles.

Japan's unique "mono no aware" aesthetic also emphasizes that things are unpredictable, and everything is short and perishable. For example, sakura in full bloom will soon withered, and beauty is excellent, but beauty is easy to age. The mourning culture of things always implies a kind of sadness and melancholy, which further strengthens the sentimentaism of beauty perishable in Japanese culture. The spirit of Bushido and Japan's most famous aesthetic of mono no aware also have a lot of integration, Inazo Nitobe in *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* also mentioned that "Bushido is similar to sakura", such as martyr feat, when in full bloom, it is in full bloom, but it is easy to fade. These two values, which are prominently representative of Japanese culture, have more profoundly shaped the aesthetic view in Japanese culture that is inseparable from death, emphasizing the beauty of the moment. Life is fleeting, but a

beautiful moment is eternal. This aesthetic view further reflects the cultural psychological feature of regarding suffering and tragedy as beauty, providing a cultural foundation for “Tortured Genius”.

In summary, religious and cultural traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Ancient Greece, and the Japanese aesthetics of Bushido and Mono no aware all convey a shared cultural and psychological consensus: suffering is a catalyst for struggle and, moreover, a great source of wisdom and creativity. For thousands of years, human society has been deeply influenced by these cultures, leading to the development of a profound empathy for the “suffering genius.”

When we examine the current operation mechanism of the art market, we will find that this “painful narrative” deeply rooted in cultural genes is also being carried forward by the continuous emergence of new communication platforms in the digital era. Whether it is the biopics of traditional films and TV series, streaming platforms, or social media marketing, the psychological struggles of artists are constantly being repackaged, further reinforcing this narrative preference and making it an important cultural currency of this era.

4.2 Narrative means of communication in contemporary society:

The film “Loving Vincent”, released in 2017, as the first fully hand-drawn animated feature film, tells the story of Van Gogh’s life from a tragic perspective, further deepening the public’s understanding and resonance with Van Gogh’s image as a pained artist. There are many similar film themes. In the 2002 film “Frida”, the physical trauma of the female artist

Frida Kahlo was transformed into a visual wonder, etc. In the Netflix documentary series “Abstract: The Art of Design”, the story of photographer Platon Antoniou is transformed into an inspiring tale of “dyslexia creating artistic uniqueness”. The emergence of these film and television works has further strengthened the public’s recognition of the artist’s image as a “painful genius”.

However, this type of narrative approach is also highly controversial. In 2018, Australian actress Hannah Gadsby explicitly criticized in the Netflix show “Nanette” the excessive promotion of the “tormented artist” myth by the art world and the media, pointing out that this practice deepened the public’s prejudice against mental illness, believing that artists must have mental illness to create great works.

The rise of social media marks a new stage in artistic narrative. Instagram reels and TikTok condense the complex life experiences of artists into dramatic segments of just a few dozen seconds. The mechanism by which platform algorithms determine the life or death of content within the first three seconds has given rise to increasingly exaggerated “hooks”. Traffic has become an important bargaining chip, systematically promoting the spread of painful narratives.

In this narrative ecosystem constructed by multiple media, the value assessment of artworks increasingly depends on whether the life stories behind them can evoke emotional resonance on different platforms. Whether it is the ancient historical culture’s emphasis on the image of

pain or the contemporary society's narrative dissemination through multimedia channels, the narrative about artistic pain is constantly being reshaped. However, the human suffering experience remains a highly infectious cultural symbol.

4.3 Art Brut:

Art Brut, which has received increasing attention in recent years, has gradually moved from the purely cultural field into the commercial field of the art market, forming a thought-provoking value system. The concept of art brut was proposed by Jean Dubuffet. It mainly focuses on the artworks created by artists on the fringes of society, such as the mentally ill or criminals. It is an unadorned style of works, which is more primitive, barbaric and pure compared to other types of art. This concept itself expresses a completely anti-commercial ideology. Through its unprocessed artistic qualities, it conveys a rebellious spirit against the overly commercial rather than artistic nature of the art market. However, as the art market's attention to this emerging art form has gradually increased, art brut has gradually gone against its original art concept. The Collection de l'Art brut in Lausanne, Switzerland and the Outsider Art Fair in New York, created specifically for art brut culture, have made Art Brut more specialized in the art market, and inevitably subjected to the scrutiny of the mainstream art market and homogenized at the commercial level. The uniqueness of Art Brut lies precisely in its "non-commerciality" and "purity". However, dealers use "purity and non-commerciality" as selling points to construct a new artistic narrative, taking the "authenticity" in the artists' works - those marginal, non-mainstream, chaotic and painful personal experiences - as the main criterion for evaluating artworks. When this "purity and

authenticity” turns into a selling point in the market, the essence of Art Brut becomes extremely contradictory. The narrative of the market provides a space for the survival of native art, but at the same time makes the anti-commercial nature of native art more commercialized, ultimately becoming a paradox.

The Buddhist concept of asceticism, the Christian spirit of martyrdom, the tragic tradition of ancient Greece, and even the Japanese spirit of Bushido and the aesthetics of Mono no aware, many cultural traditions have long laid a profound foundation for the “definition of suffering” and have transformed into cultural contributions of public value. Entering contemporary society, this long-standing cultural logic has also been reactivated by the art market. Art institutions, film and television platforms, and social media work together to continuously reinforce the personal trauma narratives of artists, thereby achieving profit value.

However, Art Brut, which claims to be “anti-commercial”, cannot escape being “commercialized” by the market either. This seems to indicate that all cultural production at present is inevitably moving towards commercialization. Even “resistance” itself can be turned into a selling point of a product.

5. Conclusion

This study, by integrating these classic artist cases and art market data, further demonstrates that the reason why “suffering geniuses” are widely sought after is, on the one hand, due to their profound cultural traditions and the human psychological obsession with tragedy; On the other hand, it is also deeply related to the precise marketing of the art market. The art market ingeniously reinforces the narrative of artists’ painful images and has formed a unique art marketing system. In this meticulously crafted system, the painful experiences of artists are continuously processed and transformed into cultural commodities with considerable profit value.

Through the study of historical culture, it is found that although the culture of “painful geniuses” has a long history to trace back to, the contemporary art market has systematically transformed it into a commercial product. The ancient cross-cultural background of myths about “suffering”, the laying of theories such as psychiatry and psychology, as well as the sophisticated commercial system of the art market, jointly provide a role for the narrative of suffering geniuses.

A review of psychological research reveals a profound contradiction: while the scientific community is still debating the connection between art and mental illness, the market has long set aside academic disputes and actively constructed a commercial narrative of “painful geniuses”. The reason why these stories are so popular among people is that, as economics

points out, stories that can touch people's hearts themselves can create market demand.

From the perspective of the operation of the art market, galleries, museums and auction houses actually play the role as Bourdieu (1993) described "The role of "Institutions of Consecration". They package the artists' personal experiences into cultural legends through carefully designed exhibitions, catalogues and media reports.

The process by which the art market transforms pain into value is accomplished through a closely linked set of procedures, with authoritative institutions constructing stories, medical records and biographies of artists as strong evidences. The exhibitions in museums and the dissemination on social media enhance public perception. Eventually, the artworks of the painful genius achieve a transformation of benefits through the art itself. All elements together form a self-consistent value system.

However, such a business mechanism also has many critical voices. It overly magnifies the private lives of artists, reduces people's attention to the artworks themselves, and neglects the talents that artists possess. It further reveals our predicament in understanding the true value of artworks. When an artist's psychological trauma becomes a packaging gimmick for their work, are we actually appreciating the art itself or consuming a carefully packaged story of suffering? This not only tests the ethical bottom line of the art market, but also prompts us to rethink: Is there a healthier model that can recognize the creative value of artists without using their pain as a bargaining chip?

Nowadays, people are paying more and more attention to issues related to mental health, and related exhibitions have also begun to emerge in the art world. Such a transformation has also challenged the traditional narrative model of the art market towards suffering geniuses.

People are gradually realizing that painful artworks should not be a gimmick for commercial profit.

Therefore, in recent years, the art world has also begun to show a trend of transformation.

Some museums and galleries reduce the personal traumatic experiences of artists during exhibitions and place more emphasis on the messages and cultural values conveyed by the artists' works themselves. In 2024, Yale University launched an exhibition named

“Mindscapes: Stories of Mental Health through Yale Collections” is a good example. The theme of the exhibition centers on how historical artworks have shaped people's perception of mental health. It aims to challenge the stigmatizing perception of mental illness and learn to scientifically accept and deal with it (Grafe, 2024). Meanwhile, the new generation of artists, such as British artist Hannah Daisy, have obviously paid more attention to mental health issues in their works. They also seek more scientific ways to treat their personal psychological problems and no longer appear in the public eye as the traditional image of an “tortured genius” artist. This trend further indicates that artists can create outstanding artworks in a healthy mental state, rather than having to do so at the cost of personal pain.

Ultimately, this study attempts to explore a core trend: the possibility of a more humanistic

art ecosystem, rather than simplifying it into a painful narrative that can be commercially monetized.

Perhaps the future art market will completely overturn the understanding of the relationship between creativity and psychological state, and collectors and audiences will be able to further recognize the importance of an artist's mental health for the stability and sustainability of artistic creation. Although the image of the suffering genius has profound historical and cultural roots, the art world can start to re-examine its measurement system for great art and gradually strike a balance, acknowledging the appeal of pain while avoiding overusing the artist's personal traumatic experiences. This changing trend may lead to a more diverse demand for works in the art market and also raise society's expectations for a positive and stable artistic style.

Although there are strong cultural roots in history that support the artistic image narrative of "painful geniuses", and there are actual art market data indicating that artworks with painful themes have stronger commercial value, as human society's understanding and progress of mental health issues increase, this dynamic may gradually evolve. The future art market may become more diversified and inclusive along with this trend. It will not only focus on artistic narratives that depict profound suffering but also pay attention to artworks with positive, healthy and happy themes. This change has also played a very good role in the diversified development of the art market. The definition of art has become broader and more inclusive, recognizing that great works do not necessarily come into being only in pain, they can also

develop steadily in a healthy and positive state.

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