

CHAZEN INSTITUTE RESEARCH BRIEF

The Art of Fame

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Greater creativity does not translate into an increased level of fame.
- ✓ Fame correlates statistically to the diversity of your personal and professional networks; it is based on the company you keep, not your product.
- ✓ By extension, who you know informs how people see you. The more cosmopolitan your networks, the more creative people perceive you to be, legitimizing you as an innovator and yielding more widespread fame.

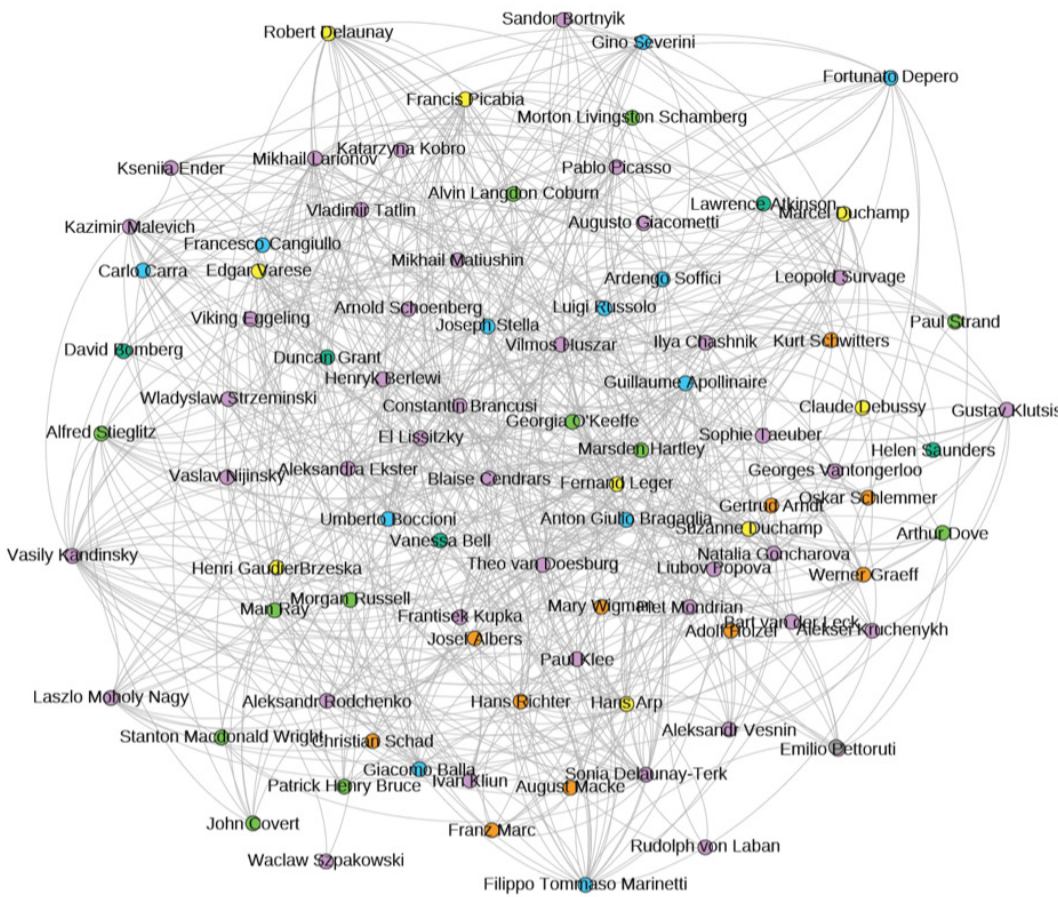
If you assume that the world’s most famous artists, actors, and influencers are simply the most creative in their field, think again. There’s another factor at play: social networks.

In “[Fame as an Illusion of Creativity: Evidence from the Pioneers of Abstract Art](#),” Paul Ingram, Chazen Senior Scholar at Columbia Business School, and Mitali Banerjee, Assistant Professor at HEC Paris, examine the link between fame, creativity, and social networks. The first-of-its-kind study reveals that social networks are actually a more reliable predictor of fame—even for artists who achieved critical acclaim long before the advent of Facebook and Instagram.

Research

The research takes note of the abstract art movement of the early 20th century, which produced wildly famous artists like Pablo Picasso, to learn what makes the difference between those creative talents that achieve great fame and those that don’t. By focusing on the implications of social ties on the level of fame achieved by 90 pioneering abstract artists (rather than famous scientists, musicians, or filmmakers) the researchers were able to see how peer relationships facilitate individual-level creative output, rather than team output.

Banerjee and Ingram started by distinguishing fame (measured by mentions in texts from the period) from related constructs such as celebrity, status, and reputation. Next, the researchers modeled each artist’s social structure based on their peer network, comprised of other innovators who knew each other through personal and professional relationships. They then evaluated these peer networks in relation to the level of fame achieved by each artist, as defined by the extent of attention they received in public discourse.



**Peer Network of 90
Early 20th Century
Abstract Artists**

- American
- German
- British
- Italian
- French
- Other

The researchers modeled each artist's social structure based on their peer network and evaluated the network in relation to the level of fame achieved by each artist.

Results

The researchers found that, contrary to conventional literature, there was no statistical support for the relationship between an artist's creativity and the fame they ultimately achieved. Neither an expert measure of creativity, nor a computational measure of an artist's novelty, calculated through machine learning, mediated the relationship between an artist's local network structure and their fame.

Furthermore, the researchers found that those individuals who possessed a diverse set of personal friends and professional contacts from different industries (an artist in a "cosmopolitan" network position) were statistically more likely to become famous. Those who had influential networks that overlapped or were more homogenous were, on the other hand, less likely to achieve wide-reaching fame.

Those artists with more diverse contacts were ultimately seen by virtue of their cosmopolitan peer groups as possessing more creative identities and, as a result of this perception, achieved greater fame.

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