



SYNTHESIS

What Can Business Learn from Art?

How to focus on accomplishment over achievement

by Scott Berinato

LOOKIT, I DON'T know what they titled this essay, but I'll bet it says something about art over there, and your first instinct, as someone seeking serious business content, may be to flip the page or scroll by. But I beseech you: Read on. If you made it to this sentence, I know you harbor at least a scintilla of curiosity, so I will now reward you with a secret that all those hardos who mock soft topics aren't privy to: Understanding how art gets made, and why, is a path to accomplishment and mastery—yes, even in the corporate world.

I've considered this in my own work of writing, editing, and advising on information design and data visualization, but a few new books and, surprisingly, a TV show have helped me crystallize why those of us in business need to learn from the arts—instead of being allergic to the idea. Last point first: The allergy stems from a misunderstanding of the artistic process. Most of us think of it in divine terms: mythic and miraculous, thus neither instructive nor useful. The artist ponders until lightning strikes, and out comes *Gatsby* or *Guernica*.

In *The Work of Art*, the former *New York* magazine editor Adam Moss acknowledges the power of that notion but then deletes it. His book mixes interviews of more than three dozen artists (writers, painters, composers, comedians, designers) with images of their work and, crucially, their work in progress. We see sketches that inform Frank Gehry's whirly architecture; pages of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics, well worked over; and even a text message thread in which the music producer Thomas Bartlett solicits collaborators. This is arduous, disheveled, iterative work—as messy as building a business case.

The creatives also talk about problem solving, communication, and collaboration—skills I'm told are very helpful in workplaces, too. So you start to see that you can learn from art and artists. What they're doing isn't so different

from what you're trying to do. Hell, Kara Walker even shares part of the PowerPoint she presented to the group that commissioned a sculpture from her. Art is basically product development. Or, as one composer says, it's "more like being a carpenter than like being God....What we do is a craft." The product—whether it's a mural, a song, a dance, or a joke—may seem miraculous, but its creation is not. It was born from the same effort you might put in to find mastery in your own work.

Mastery is the obsession of the *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik in ***The Real Work***. He excavates seven traits that define the highest achievement, from performance to intention to action and more, and tells moving stories from realms as varied as baking, dancing, boxing, and driving. In an engaging set piece, Gopnik explains what magicians mean when they talk about "the real work": the "accumulated craft, savvy, and technical mastery that makes a magic trick great." It's not who does the trick first, or who does it best, necessarily, but who did the work to master it.

In delving into how hard it is to do the real work in any pursuit or profession, he exposes why mastery is elusive. When he describes the dizzying complexity of putting on a Broadway musical, for example, it's not hard to apply his description to any business context: "A seven-person creative team of equals is called war." And yet, that's what it takes to launch a show, and people do it because when they nail it, the thrill is unparalleled—and what they've put into the world matters. "We all know the real work in whatever field it is we've mastered," Gopnik writes. "It's shorthand...for the

difference between accomplishment and mere achievement."

He carries this sentiment into a tiny, 60-page companion tome, ***All That Happiness Is***, in which he explains that achievement is merely completing a task, the reward for which is often another task, whereas accomplishment is "the engulfing activity we've chosen, whose reward is the rush of fulfillment, the sense of happiness that rises uniquely from absorption in a thing outside ourselves." He notes, too, that accomplishment is egalitarian. "Every enterprise, every job, every short-order recipe—everything we do can be done more or less beautifully." Whether it's plumbing or building rockets or leading a team, the real work involves some artistry.

Is your work about artful accomplishment? Probably not. Gopnik notes that "our social world conspires to denigrate... accomplishments in favor of the rote work of achievement." This is in part why mastery (and happiness) feels out of reach for many.

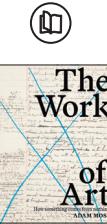
I thought of this while binge-watching the long-running British TV series ***Grand Designs***. The show follows people over several years as they attempt to build bespoke homes. The host, Kevin McCloud, trained in design and architecture, gets the homeowners to lay out their vision, strategy, budget, and timeline early on (and sometimes can barely hold back a laugh at their confidence). Much goes wrong, and viewers get to revel in those travails, while anyone who sees the world through a management lens recognizes all the tropes: poor process, conflicting visions, bad compromises, sunk costs, and so on. Then, about two-thirds through, you recognize that these

people aren't just trying to achieve the task of building a house; they are trying to accomplish a feat of architecture. McCloud hails the nobility of the pursuit, however it turns out, and as an observer, you acquire a grudging fondness for the enterprise. Maybe you wish you could accomplish something like that.

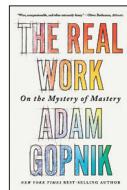
Businesses and businesspeople could be more like the *Grand Designs* homeowners, or the teams behind Broadway musicals, or Frank Gehry, or magicians. But first they'd have to turn away from the maniacal focus on achievement: Hit the numbers. Grow the bottom line. Get the promotion. The whole idea of stakeholder capitalism is that companies ought to have grander designs, and I suspect we all know this. Our favorite case studies are about leaders and organizations really trying to accomplish something. Sometimes, as with Steve Jobs or Oprah, we might even suggest they're artists in their own way. But in our minds they're outliers, possibly myths.

Earlier I glibly compared art to product development, but that wasn't entirely fair or accurate. The process of creating art may look like your plans for an innovative new offering, or your attempt to devise a growth strategy, or even your effort to build a profoundly effective financial model. But those are just achievements. Artists, craftspeople, are striving for accomplishment. I suspect you want to, too. After all, you didn't flip past this little essay. And in that small act you've already done a bit of the real work. ☺

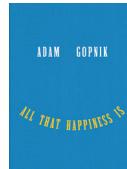
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The Work of Art
Adam Moss
(Penguin Press, 2024)



The Real Work
Adam Gopnik
(Liveright, 2023)



All That Happiness Is
Adam Gopnik
(Liveright, 2024)



Grand Designs
Naked
Television
(UK Channel 4)

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