Chapter 8
The Artistic Composite

8.1. Overview

In the chapters so far, the data from the interviews, biographies, questionnaire, and work observation was taken apart and arranged into meaningful concepts. The concepts were linked with each other through hypotheses and these in turn were clustered into different aspects of the artist – the mind, the personality, the choice moment, and the environment. The present chapter attempts to pull all these ideas together to suggest a model to describe the process by which artistic development and achievement takes place. Prominent researchers have done this earlier to describe the antecedents of creativity. Gardner, in his book Creating Minds, paints a portrait of an Exemplary Creator (EC). He says that EC comes from a locale slightly removed from the actual centers of power and influence of society, but not so far that she and her family do not know what is going on. EC’s family is neither very wealthy nor in dire financial straits and life for the young creator is reasonably comfortable in a material sense. The atmosphere at home is more correct than warm and although EC has close ties to one parent, she feels ambivalence too. EC’s family values learning and achievement about which they hold high expectations. EC’s areas of strength emerged at a young age and her family encouraged these interests although they are ambivalent of a career that falls outside of the established professions. As an adolescent or a young adult, EC has already spent a decade in mastering the domain of her choice and has simply outgrown her family and immediate locale. She therefore ventures forth to test herself in a place which is seen as a center for activities in her domain. Sometimes EC proceeds directly to work in her chosen domain or else she may flirt with a number of options until some crystallizing moment occurs. She eventually discovers a problem of special interest that promises to take the domain into uncharted waters. This Gardner says is a highly charged moment. From here on EC must work on her own, but she craves both cognitive and affective support without which she may suffer a breakdown. In some cases, EC succeeds in making at least one major breakthrough. Around this time, she works nearly all the time, making tremendous demands on herself and others, choosing perfection in her work over perfection in her life. She is confident, able to deal with false starts, proud, stubborn and reluctant to admit mistakes. Having got into the flow of creative achievement, EC will work always to retain that feeling of flow, perhaps leading to further creative breakthroughs in her lifetime.

Csikszentmihalyi cites the Renaissance as a perfect example of artistic and creative achievement. He explains the flowering of great art in Europe between 1400 and 1425 by saying
that domain, individual and field all came together at this point. Domain moved ahead because ancient methods of building and sculpting were discovered leading to, for example, a gigantic dome over the Santa Maria Novella, a cathedral in Florence. The prolific construction and decorative sculpting was made possible because Florence had become a very wealthy city first through trading, then through manufacture of wool and other textiles and finally through the financial expertise of its rich merchants. On the eve of the Renaissance, there were a dozen major bankers in the city, and it was the wealthy of the city, its leaders who got together and decided to make their city intimidatingly beautiful. They did this not just by spending money, but became intensely involved in the process of encouraging, evaluating and selecting the works that they wanted to see completed. They had a talent pool to select from because there were individuals who had already committed to artistic areas, had invested effort in learning technique and were ready to create masterpieces.

Both the authors paint a picture of a creative composite. Gardner’s picture has a sharper focus on the individual, whereas Csikszentmihalyi’s is more of a long view taking into account macro developments around creative achievement. What they have in common is that they both look at exceptional, domain-changing creative achievement as a means to understand how creativity works. This research too has a greater focus on the individual and his or her immediate environment rather than macro political and economic forces. But the study is about artists as a group and while Gardner’s and Csikszentmihalyi’s descriptions pertain only to outstanding creators, this research looks at other mid-career artists too. The insights generated by this study are around the process by which an individual becomes an artist. The questions asked at the start of the research were as follows:

- Are there common patterns in the MI profiles of artists?
- How does it happen that some individuals choose to live artistic lives?
- What kind of early experiences and growing up environment contributed to creating these individuals?
- Is there any other common factor among artists that could answer why they became artists?

Several concepts came up in answer to these questions and the inter-relationships between these concepts were described by hypotheses in each of the preceding discussion chapters. Before combining the different hypotheses into a single model, the hypotheses are recapitulated in Table 8.1. They are not entirely presented as they were, but are combined to express concepts more clearly.
Table 8.1: Outlining the hypotheses generated in this study of the artist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Artistic Mind</td>
<td>Musical intelligence is very important to artistic life irrespective of the nature of art practiced. But if the nature of the art does not directly involve music then a very high order of musical intelligence may not be called for. Similarly, Kinesthetic intelligence is also important to artistic life, not only for dancers, but also for many other artists. Visual-spatial intelligence is deeply important to those whose art requires spatial skills, but does not feature as relevant for other artists. The Personal intelligences are a generic ingredient necessary to artistic success or to success in any field. Linguistic, Logical-mathematical and Naturalist intelligence are not very relevant to defining the Artistic Mind, although when present, they may support the expression of other intelligences. The development of Linguistic, Logical-mathematical, Naturalist, Musical and the Personal intelligences is impacted by learning, practice and exposure. Environment therefore influences the development of these intelligences. There is also a converse relationship where those gifted with these intelligences look for environments or shape their current environments to enable the expression of their gifts, thereby developing their specific mental capacities further. Extensive training and social approval are important to developing musical intelligence. Age (and probably experience) is an important factor in intrapersonal intelligence.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Artistic Personality</td>
<td>Identity for the artist is more fluid than for non-artists. It is continuous and self-defined. For the most part it dominates their overall sense of identity even where they perform other roles or even have other jobs or careers. The Artistic Personality is characterized by a set of traits including Independence, Dealing with Uncertainty, Tenacity/Challenge, Flexibility/Flow, Variety-seeking, Pride and Authenticity. It is the cluster of these traits together that better distinguishes the artistic group from non-artistic groups than any of the traits working alone.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Artistic Choice</td>
<td>The choice to lead an artistic life coincides with an at least partial resolution of the search for identity. The moment of choice is usually preceded by some powerful crystallizing experience and is a charged one, much more so for artists than other mainstream fields of work.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Artistic Environment: Role of Artistic Heritage</td>
<td>Artistic Heritage in the family background is important to enable entry into a domain at an early age as well as easy entry into a field either through the family’s professional connections or community network. Early entry into a domain contributes to the possibility of greater creative achievement, especially in a highly structured domain. Access to Field can also happen through the family’s community contacts for those without Artistic Heritage, or through self-developed professional contacts, but the struggle this way is much more intense.</td>
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By synthesizing the hypotheses, I have put forth in this chapter a tentative theory about artists and their lives, a sort of recipe for the development of the artist. As is usual in a cookery book, the ingredients for preparation are first defined before the process of cooking is described.

8.2. Ingredients of artistic achievement

8.2.1. The Artistic Mind. This refers to the cognitive capability of the artist. As per the findings of this research, in terms of the MI framework, it is manifest primarily in Musical, Kinesthetic and Visual-spatial intelligence, supported by the Personal intelligences. Of these Musical appears to be the most important no matter what the art domain chosen, followed by Kinesthetic. Visual-spatial is more specialized, necessary depending on the kind of art practiced. Naturalist intelligence does not add to or detract from this mix and despite popular belief in a relationship between art and mathematics logical-mathematical intelligence does not either. Linguistic intelligence is to an extent necessary for the literary arts and may add to the flavor for those artists using a lot of language in their work. The personal intelligences are a general ingredient much like salt, needed in practically every kind of achievement. It is possible, based on these concepts to create ideal profiles for different kind of artists. By comparing an individual’s profile with these ideal profiles, it can be possible to help that person identify strengths and potential areas of weakness and counsel them towards suitable developmental opportunities. It is a useful way to spot artistic talent quite early.

Cognitive capability like some types of food needs to be matured suitably before it can be applied with success. This research has found that suitable learning opportunities, exposure and practice can impact this maturation process. The impact of training and exposure was clear in the case of Musical, Linguistic, Logical-mathematical, Naturalist and Personal intelligence, but not so in the case of Kinesthetic and Visual-spatial intelligence. Among the interviewees, almost all of the research participants had some exposure to physical training in dance, sport or just exercise. Similarly, they had all been exposed to at least a hobby level drawing and painting class at school. Since there were not significant differences between individuals on the exposure that they had, it was not possible to estimate the impact that it could have had on intelligence. But if we look at the overall picture of mental ability, the case is strong for saying that cognitive capability can be impacted by training, practice and exposure. The kind of learning opportunities available are, in turn determined by the family and immediate social environment. The artistic mind is not defined only by musical, kinesthetic and visual spatial intelligence. But the cognitive potential for art is manifest in these intelligences which can be reached from the outside – to measure to some extent and to influence by suitable developmental opportunity. Once the intelligences differentiate in the
mind creating areas of strength in musical/kinesthetic/visual-spatial intelligence or combinations thereof, they become a key ingredient for artistic achievement.

8.2.2. The Artistic Personality. This is another important component of artistic potential. Specifically, the traits of Independence, Dealing with Uncertainty, Tenacity/Challenge, Flexibility, Variety-seeking, Pride and Authenticity are important characteristics of the artistic personality. More importantly, it is this bundle of traits together that gives the distinctive flavor to the artistic personality. What it leads to is an artistic identity that is fluid, evolving, powerful, dominant and self-defined. It is possible that other people than artists share some or even all of these traits – scientists and even some sports persons come to mind. Similarly, it is possible that some other individuals than artists be gifted with musical, kinesthetic and visual-spatial intelligence. But put together the cognitive potential of these specific intelligences and the personality traits mentioned above and a good deal of artistic possibility is created.

8.2.3. The Artistic Choice. This decision point is critical to the making of the artist. Without this even those with artistic potential may move into non-artistic spheres of work and life. It is the meeting point of individual and environment. It is a charged moment surrounded by high temperatures that serve to melt together the ingredients of artistic potential and environmental factors. Completion of schooling and other experiences of adolescence and young adulthood bring the choice to a head through resolving the question of identity, by providing a somewhat satisfactory answer to the question, “Who am I”. The environment prompts the individual to think and decide an answer to the question and this resolution of identity is often preceded by important crystallizing experiences that deeply impact the young artist’s psyche. Once melted, the ingredients blend well together and mixture can be poured into a new mould of artistic commitment.

8.2.4. Artistic Commitment. I cannot say that this is one decision. It is a series of choices made on an everyday basis to continue investing large amounts of time, effort and other resources towards an artistic end. It might involve learning in-depth the rules of a domain, if that has not already occurred earlier in life. It might involve quitting alternate activities that take energy away from the art. It is marked by a continuous effort to establish oneself in the chosen domain despite obstacles and is often accompanied by a change – moving to a new location, leaving home and living on one’s own, making new contacts and friendships, leaving old jobs and taking up new kinds of work, etc., and the impact of this is felt by the artists as well as their families/immediate circle of people. For commitment to translate into artistic achievement, the entire mix needs to be baked in a suitable oven. What makes for an appropriate oven includes diverse factors such as the nature of the domain itself, the way the art makes its way to the field and the age at which the artist begins work.
8.2.5. **Structure of the domain and age at start of training.** The amount of structure present varies depending on the artistic domain that one chooses to work in. Certain domains such as Indian Classical Dance/ Music are highly structured. There are many clear rules that need to be learnt, there is usually precedent for what can be done and what is not acceptable. The boundary of work within the discipline is clearly drawn. The art world agrees explicitly on what is good quality work within a discipline, there are sub-disciplines within each silo and the relationships between people working within this domain are patterned by pre-existing guidelines. Other disciplines, for example film, certain genres of dance or painting, are less structured. Innovation is much more important and the art world is a lot more receptive to a wide variety of experiences. The greater the amount of structure in a domain, the longer it will take to master its rules and produce something that the art world considers of value. Therefore, to work in such a domain, the artist is better off beginning his/ her training at a very young age, preferably while still in primary school (less than 10 years of age). There are artists who begin late and still manage to do quite well. But the odds are stacked up against them and the effort or resources involved to overcome these odds will be exceptional. As per the patterns found in this research, those coming from a strong artistic heritage are more likely to start their training young. If they are working in a structured domain, this puts them at a definite advantage because well before they reach the point where they make their choice, they have invested in and mastered the rules of the domain and are free to concentrate on other aspects of their art such as finding a suitable field to showcase it.

8.2.6. **Access to field gatekeepers.** Family and the immediate social circle features as an important contributor to the making of an artist. It not only contributes to personality and cognitive development of the artist, it also provides a way to access the field. In most cases, artists gain their initial access to the field through their relatives or people from the same social community. It does not matter whether an individual comes from an artistic family or not. Even if the family is not involved in the arts, they can assist their artistic ward to get work, perform in front of a good audience, and even access prominent critics and impresarios. That is, they can access for the artist the gatekeepers of his field. Without this support, the struggle to achieve something of artistic merit is much greater and the probability of quality output correspondingly reduces.

8.3. **The making of an artist**

All these six ingredients contribute to making the artist. The Artistic Mind and Personality generate Artistic Potential which can then be translated into Artistic Commitment if the choice is made to be an artist. With the support of the family and community, this commitment can then translate into Artistic Achievement. I have arranged these links in the chain into a three stage
model of artistic development. Although the suggestions appear simple, each point has several implications discussed in this segment.

8.3.1. Stage One: Artistic Potential. It may not be possible to set out to create an artist. But this research has thrown up some ideas on what to look for in children so as to spot talent early. The MI framework is a very useful way to estimate the strength areas of a child. Artistic talent can be spotted early on by watching for expression of musical, kinesthetic and visual-spatial intelligence along with interest in art-related activities. Of these, musical intelligence has emerged as most crucial to artistic life as well as most easily impacted by training and exposure. Therefore, an environment with lots of music in it, live concerts, recorded music and some training can go a long way towards developing not just musical intelligence but general artistic potential. This covers the cognitive aspect of artistic potential. Equally important is the personality of the artist. Keep in mind that many of the traits discussed such as Independence and Dealing with Uncertainty go against the grain in a tradition school system where methodical planning and obedience to rules are rewarded. Identifying these patterns of behavior within the context of artistic talent becomes crucial to helping the child coping with demands of an environment that does not complement his/her natural gifts. Just the traits without the creativity or just the intelligence without an interest in art would not lead to artistic potential. It is both combined as represented in Illustration 8.1.

Illustration 8.1: Creation of Artistic Potential

There is a trend in education today to expose children to as many hobby classes as possible. Depending on the economic comfort of the family, they are enrolled in everything from roller skating to swimming to dance class to music and so on. The hobby classes are fun to do and may
help give individuals a peek into what activities in a domain look like, but that is all. They may result in small everyday artistry, which adds color to life and they are also useful to identify areas of strength and interest in very young children (below ten years of age). But all the artists in this research fastened upon one main area of interest very early in life and worked hard to develop that aspect of their mind and personality. The focus in art education therefore needs to be on immersion in a discipline, if it is to open greater possibilities for the individual. The role of the family in selecting an area of interest, in enabling a long-term focus on a single discipline and giving the child opportunities to explore the different intelligences to locate his/her strengths, is therefore critical to creating artistic potential.

8.3.2. Stage Two: Artistic Commitment. This is the stage where the exposure and training given to the child and his or her own beliefs, ideas and interests meet. Commitment could occur as early as when the individual is 14-15 years of age, usually coinciding with the completion of schooling. In an urban, middle-class environment where graduation is considered a basic qualification and an insurance against economic uncertainty, potential artists may continue shopping around until they complete their graduation in Arts or Engineering or so forth. Their specialization may take shape only at the post-graduate level. The factors that influence Artistic Choice and convert Artistic Potential into Commitment are described in Illustration 8.2.

Illustration 8.2: Conversion of Artistic Potential to Artistic Commitment

For artists, this is a time charged with passion and uncertainty. This is where they will have to work the hardest and where they will need support the most. For artists coming from non-artistic backgrounds, it is especially difficult because this is the time they are also learning the rules of the domain. Emotional support from family and friends during this stage is important. Unfortunately, this is the time when many families, having invested in training their children in a domain, stop them from pursuing that art further. Irrespective of whether one chooses to practice their art
commercially, there is no reason why those who are interested should not continue involvement in the art well into adulthood. All the artists interviewed had support from their families despite any misgivings that they may have had about the stability of an artistic life. It was due to this support that they could stay with their chosen form and eventually deliver products of artistic value.

8.3.3. Stage Three: Artistic Achievement. It is not sufficient that an artist be talented and accomplished in his or her domain. A lot of macro socio-economic and political factors need to converge to make artistic life possible. Community networks for one are very useful here. In the urban setting, traditional community networks are getting replaced by different types of relationships, which make it harder for the artist to find avenues to display his/her art. The role of government is therefore more critical than ever. Soon after independence, the Indian government bent upon building a new identity for India encouraged the arts in many ways. Artists became the cultural ambassadors to other countries all over the world and even within India there were many schemes to promote artistic work. But the scenario has changed considerably now. There are several private organizations that undertake to showcase young artists, but the new entrants may need more than just a platform to present their work. They require constructive feedback that could improve the quality of the work they do, access to critics and connoisseurs as well as sponsors. Internship or apprenticeship opportunities for those studying at art colleges like JJ School of Art or Rachna Samsad, Nalanda Dance Research Center, National Institute of Design, FTII, etc. would be very valuable. Family contacts are of great help here. It is through the family that artists access their community where their work is valued. For those aspiring artists coming from non-artistic backgrounds, and individuals branching off from the art practiced by their parent(s), this can be a time of great learning and struggle. The role of family in translating commitment to achievement is described in Illustration 8.3.

Illustration 8.3: Translating artistic commitment to artistic achievement
Those born into an artistic heritage have an advantage if they continue in the same domain as either parent or in a domain that complements the work of the parent. They are able to debut under the protection of the parent or significant other and the process of translating commitment to achievement is smoother. As per this study, those coming from artistic backgrounds start their training early, even as young as age 3 or 4 and have simultaneous access to the field. Critics are easier on young artists making their debut than they would be on adult entrants in a field. By the time the artist is twenty, he or she has already invested a good ten of fifteen years mastering the rules of the domain and can spend energy simply positioning his/her work in the field. More than in creating artistic potential, I believe it is here in translating commitment to achievement that an artistic background helps.

8.4. Applications of this research

The idea behind stitching together the findings of this research into a three stage model was to understand the process by which an individual flowers into an artist. Based on the findings of this research it is possible to structure an arts immersion program which can run parallel to main curricula in schools. Such a program would include exposure to different arts, allowing the child to watch artists at work, interact with them, experiment with different media, experience performances and other artistic products, and be involved in artistic projects. The non-art benefits of such a program will be considerable – improved self-esteem, interpersonal skills, resilience, time management, collaboration and focus on goals. But those are not the only reasons the program should exist. Art is an end in itself. Through the program the child learns to appreciate the joy of being in artistic flow. This is a skill that can lead to a fuller, richer life for the artistic things that each individual will achieve. The three stage model can assist those who wish to help the aspiring artist – teachers, parents, counselors, etc. It is common knowledge that art is a difficult path with very little chance of material reward. But this model highlights the specific issues that the artist is likely to face at each stage in his/her personal journey.

The discovery that Musical, Kinesthetic and Visual-spatial is a cluster of cognitive abilities present in artists is a new contribution. Musical intelligence seems especially important in this mix and its role in the making of an artist needs further study. This study supports earlier findings about the artistic personality. This is important when we understand that the same traits that help the artist survive are a problem within the schoolroom – independence is harder for the teacher to handle, the need for challenge and variety may put children off routine tasks, flexibility may not be accepted in a planful and structured environment focused on productivity, and risk-taking may be discouraged. Understanding artistic types and their developmental patterns could help educators place these behaviors in a context and deal with it more effectively on a day-to-day basis.
8.5. Limitations and possibilities

First and foremost, this study was done on a very small sample of artists. Since it was exploratory in nature, not much importance was given to representative sampling. A larger scale study that represents the arts in a more comprehensive way and includes a comparable group of non-artists could help consolidate and generalize findings. Secondly, very limited data was collected from the research participants. Thorough instrumentation including personality questionnaires, interest and values inventories and controlled ability assessments for the different intelligences could yield deeper insights into the makeup of each artist. Thirdly, I realize that the ‘why’ of this research might only appeal to those who already view the arts positively. To make this research useful to a larger audience it is necessary to link it to applied domains like education and management.

On the upside, this study has opened a lot of doors and windows to further research. The Multiple Intelligences Questionnaire and the insights around its usefulness can be applied to create better measures for the various intelligences. Of these, musical and kinesthetic intelligence need special attention since existing measures of these abilities are far from comprehensive. A more structured quantitative study could be designed to test some of the hypotheses generated in this research. For example, investigating the impact of training, practice and exposure on intelligence alone could be a full-fledged project. Isolating the cluster of personality traits (as against individual traits) that separate the artists and non-artists could be another project perhaps a meta-analysis based on existing research reports. In sum, further testing of the concepts identified by this research can help in spotting talent in children, in providing for their artistic development, in bridging the gap between the arts and other fields of work such as management or education, and in viewing differently the possibilities open to people.