



The Artistic Influences that Made Artists Artists

BY [Ann Landi](#) POSTED 05/27/14

Hank Willis Thomas, Pat Steir, Deborah Kass, and others reflect on their early encounters with art and the childhood experiences that shape their work

When [Ellen Harvey](#) was a small child living with her family in Frankfurt, her parents regularly took her to art museums all over Europe. In France, she saw [Rogier van der Weyden's](#) *The Last Judgment* (1445–50) in the [Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune](#) in Burgundy; in Italy, she found Botticelli's [La Primavera](#) (ca. 1477–82) and [Birth of Venus](#) (ca. 1485) in the Uffizi Gallery in

Florence. “Those trips marked when I felt I wanted to be an artist, and it’s at that point that I began to draw obsessively,” Harvey recalls, adding that a reproduction of *The Last Judgment* hangs in her Brooklyn studio and she has kept the tattered catalogue for the Uffizi collection for decades. “I wanted all that incredible detail and heightened sense of realism. The sort of narrative drama those paintings had was a huge part of my life going forward, and I’m still very inclined toward narrative.”



Pat Steir “almost passed out” when she saw Cézanne’s *The Bather*, ca. 1885, at MoMA. MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, LILLIE P. BLISS COLLECTION

Harvey, who shows at [Locks Gallery](#) in Philadelphia, describes her early encounters with works of art as life-changing. As she has developed into an artist, she says, the masterpieces she experienced at the tender age of five or six remain with her. And it turns out she is not alone: a survey of more than two dozen contemporary artists based in the United States turned up similar memories of art, seen or experienced in youth, that have persisted in their own work— influencing the artists’ thinking or studio practice or providing powerful examples of how to live as an artist.

For artists whose parents had cultural interests, the most common early enchantments took place in an art museum. Throughout [Pat Steir’s](#) 1940s childhood in New Jersey, for example, her father bought books from [Skira Editore](#), one of the first presses to reproduce the works of both old and new masters for general consumption. Steir, who knew she wanted to be an artist from the age of four or five and now shows at [Cheim & Read](#) in New York, remembers the primitive nature of the four-color printing process, then in its infancy. “All the colors had an orange or green cast,” she says. “I thought I could never be an artist, because how could I control the green and orange colors? It seemed hopeless.”



Pat Steir
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Then Steir’s dad took her to the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, and she saw Cézanne’s *The Bather* from ca. 1885. “I almost passed out,” she says. “It wasn’t all green, it wasn’t all orange. It was totally human, a little distorted, a little off—and perfect. I looked at it, and I said, ‘I can do that; I can be human.’ That’s what I do in my paintings, I try to be human.”

When Galerie Lelong artist Petah Coyne was a child in Oklahoma City, her mother frequently took her to the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska. But it wasn’t until later, as a sophomore in high school, that she discovered a cast of Degas’s *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (1881), which had recently been acquired by the museum. “I was stunned because it had fabric on it, and ribbon in her hair,” Coyne says, “and I thought, ‘This is amazing!’ It changed my whole idea about sculpture.” Inspired by the work, the artist spent her teenage years experimenting with the lost-wax process used to cast Degas’s sculptures, and today, decades later, she still sees a direct connection between her work and his. “Here I am doing wax and fabric—and the Joslyn now has one of my sculptures in these mediums.”



A recent work by Steir, *NAPLES YELLOW AND MICA*, 2013.
COURTESY CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK

Another artist who can see a direct connection between her current work and works of art she experienced in her youth is Deborah Brown, who resides in Bushwick, Brooklyn, where she runs Storefront Ten Eyck gallery. When she was eight years old and living in Washington, D.C., she accompanied her mother to a loan exhibition of van Gogh paintings at the now-defunct Washington Gallery of Modern Art. The painting that knocked her over was Almond Blossom from 1890; she later attempted to reproduce its “electric-blue background and crazy white branches” in her third-grade painting class. But she dropped the canvas, still wet, face down in the dirt on the way home—a traumatic experience. In recent paintings, Brown has

consistently re-created the vibrant blue of van Gogh's canvas, juxtaposing it with bristly forms reminiscent of the master's almond branches.



When she was eight years old, Deborah Brown saw van Gogh's *Almond Blossom*, 1890.
YOUNGNA PARK

Van Gogh, in fact, turns up in the memory banks of numerous contemporary artists—perhaps because so many parents of a certain era were mad about him, and an abundance of fledgling painters and sculptors grew up surrounded by framed prints of his work on the walls of their homes. Cora Cohen, Peter Reginato, and Tom Otterness all recall early encounters with the Post-Impressionist genius. “I found a print recently in a flea shop that was a reproduction of the same one we had in the house, and I bought it,” says Otterness; while Taos, New Mexico–based artist Kevin Cannon recalls that “my father and my aunt, who worked for UNESCO, came back from Europe with this stuff, including two van Gogh prints with drawbridges that were so popular at the time. I used to stare at them constantly.” Cannon believes that many budding artists latch on to van Gogh because “he made sense. He had this element of cartoons and comic books—the graphic quality he absorbed from Japanese prints—that offers something kid-like” to a young person.



Van Gogh's *Almond Blossom*, 1890.
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM, VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION

Like the van Gogh prints, objects that artists saw at home often filtered into their subconscious in intriguing ways. Kids, after all, don't make a big distinction between kitsch and fine art. Jacquelyn McBain, who paints meticulous, hyperrealistic flora and fauna, vaguely recalls the prints hung on the walls of her nursery. "They were the kinds of things you would have in a room for a baby. I have no recollection of the details, but the memories are extremely vivid, and they're also translucent—they only happen behind closed eyelids, but they've recurred throughout the years," she says. "I've always wondered why flowers are so potent in our religions, but I hadn't realized that they were significant images for my own personal ontology."



The bristly forms in Brown's 2013 painting *Tête (Infanta Maria Teresa)* evoke the master's almond branches.
COURTESY LESLEY HELLER WORKSPACE, NEW YORK

McBain also remembers her encounter with an abundance of taxidermied animals at her great-grandfather's cabin on Big Lake in Wisconsin. "So many of the things I fell in love with as a child would not be considered politically correct now," she reflects. Same for the trinkets favored by the father of Chicago-based artist [Phyllis Bramson](#), which she remembers from when she was growing up in Wisconsin. "He loved bawdy objects," she says, recalling one particular painting in the house that "showed a Chinese woman with prominent breasts," and an ashtray in the shape of a nude. "But we also had beautiful Chinese wallpaper in the dining room," Bramson adds. "These are the things I was looking at. I was exposed to a very large amount of peculiar imagery, which I've really used in my work."

Brad Kahlhamer, who was born in Tucson, Arizona, was exposed in his early years to the works of the late Ettore “Ted” DeGrazia, the local eccentric who had apprenticed with Diego Rivera but was best known for images of Native American children. Kahlhamer’s father told him that DeGrazia drove out into the desert to make paintings, and, perhaps because the young artist had just gotten his first bicycle, DeGrazia seemed to represent “a level of freedom.” For Brooklyn-based artist Deborah Kass, whose work is marked by a playful, Pop-art sensibility, it was comic books and issues of Madmagazine that profoundly affected her. “I thought I wanted to be a cartoonist after I found my first Peanuts books,” remembers Kass, who shows at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York and says she learned how to draw by copying the characters in the Charles Schulz strip. “In the third grade I started doing my own comic strips.”



Brad Kahlhamer and his painting *Greatest Geronimo*, 2013.
MITCH EPSTEIN; COURTESY DEGRAZIA FOUNDATION, TUCSON

Sometimes, the artwork an artist sees as a child ends up shaping him or her in less obvious, more abstract ways, simply by suggesting the vast possibilities of making and thinking about art. New York artist Cora Cohen was entranced as a child by Picasso’s *She-Goat* (1950) sculpture at MoMA, which is made up of such disparate parts as a palm leaf, a wicker basket, and ceramic jugs, all cast in bronze. “I spent a lot of years working with materials that were outside of the standard studio practice,” Cohen says. “The *She-Goat* may have given me permission to do that.” Similarly, Orly Genger remembers seeing Robert Rauschenberg’s “Combines” as a child. “When I saw those, I realized I could do whatever I wanted,” explains Genger. “There were no rules. That thought was totally mind-blowing.”

Oliver Herring, meanwhile, was most inspired by German master Joseph Beuys in high school, and had an epiphany about art making after hearing Beuys speak in 1982 at

Germany's Mannheimer Kunstverein. "I completely understood what he was talking about even though it was high-concept stuff," Herring says. "It was part of his strategy to make art as accessible as possible—it wasn't just for the intelligentsia—and that experience had a very profound impact."

Hank Willis Thomas's encounter with Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" (1940–41) as a freshman in high school was equally as powerful. "The idea of having a narrative showing a people going through these experiences, the individual as well as the collective, really affected me because it wasn't just about images, it was about the story," says Thomas, who is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. When Thomas was putting together his own series, "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008" (2005–8), he appropriated ads focusing on African Americans "as a way to track blackness in the corporate mind." It was, he recalls, a means to create his own Great Migration, tracing "the history of marginalized African Americans to wherever we are today, and that's a direct correlation to my experience with Lawrence as a young adult."



Kahlhamer was influenced by Ettore DeGrazia's depictions of Native Americans such as *The Losers*, 1936.
©BRAD KAHLHAMER/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

For [Elaine Reichek](#), historical re-creations of real interiors were the source of future inspiration. When she was a child of eight, her parents were renovating a large Colonial Revival house in Brooklyn, and they took their three kids to the [period rooms of the Brooklyn Museum](#) for design ideas. “The set-up is a kind of labyrinthine structure,” the artist remembers. “You can peer through a glass, and there’s a projection of the self into some kind of stage set.” Reichek’s own installations, including the [recent reenvisioning](#) of her 1993 work *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* at the Jewish Museum in New York, reflect her early fascination with period rooms and what she describes as “the inauthenticity and nonlinear construction of history.”

By far the most astonishing connection between art seen as a child and made as an adult belongs to [David Kimball Anderson](#), who was raised in Los Angeles and whose photographs and sculptures evoke the personal significance of particular items he encountered on road trips or visits to foreign cities. His method, he says, of connecting with objects as channels for emotional memory originated in the barbershop where he got haircuts as a child. Hanging on the wall, Anderson recalls, was a painting of a covered bridge in New England. “It drew me in, in its object-ness, and in its emotional attraction, which was fall in New England,” he says. “What’s important here is that it affirmed geographical DNA. Though I was residing at the time in the southern California desert with hardly a deciduous tree in sight, the painting was very meaningful for me.”

In fact, Anderson had been adopted at birth, and at around 32 years old he discovered that his real mother was from New England—from Greenwich, Connecticut, to be precise. “The image of the painting came back immediately,” he says. Today, the motifs and objects that crop up in his mature work—stock tanks, chairs, a field of sunflowers, a clover leaf painted on the side of a trailer—are all intended “to convey the esthetics of place,” just as that painting of a New England bridge had a special emotional resonance for him when he was young.

For most adults, memories of childhood are slippery and elusive things—they can be vivid, hazy, or wholly inaccurate—but for an artist, early experiences of the visible world may be deeply woven into the subconscious in ways that carry over into the creative process. “I think your affinity for forms and color happens early,” says Brown. “The visual vocabulary that impressed me when I was a child is still something I’m trying to incorporate in my work.”

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