

The Way of Excellence
... OR
The Adventure of Mastery

Max Landsberg

I feel indeed honoured to be speaking here tonight as the Royal Society of Arts celebrates its 250th birthday.

Although we are here at the Birmingham Book Fair, you will be very pleased to know that I am not going to talk about any of my books!

Now, a lot has happened in the last 250 years since the RSA was founded (and no: I am not going to summarise the events of the last 2 ½ centuries !!).

But a lot can also happen in just 50 years – the typical “workspan” of a human being.

And that’s what I do want to talk about tonight – what we can achieve in our own lifetimes ... and more specifically **HOW we can achieve excellence in whatever field we have chosen to pursue**. How we can become a master of our profession – and how we can help other people to master theirs.

Often when searching for clues, to learn how people can achieve greatness, we look to famous leaders: famous generals, famous politicians, and sometimes famous business people.

But I have always felt there is something dodgy about looking to those people – for often their acclaim rests too heavily on their final triumph, their last term in office, or (in the corporate world), their last year’s financial performance.

So tonight I would like to take a different tack. As we search for clues about how to master our fields of endeavour I would like to share some clues from the lives of a rather unique group. And that group consists of the world’s greatest painters.

Uniquely, they have left a detailed trail along their journey of development. If you wanted to, you could trace every brushstroke as they painted their way to greatness. They have left a uniquely visible, visual and indelible trail as they mastered their art. They could not rewrite their own personal history, for they had already painted it !

So, tonight I want to share six lessons we can learn from these masters (old and not so old), and also suggest some ways we can apply those lessons in our daily lives and in the daily lives of people we may be called on to help or to advise.

I plan to speak for no more than 30 minutes, and then for us to have a discussion.

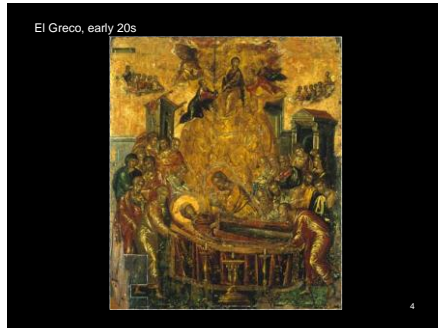


First let's **see** what we mean by "development".

Let's start with some **before and afters** - some early works by the painters, and then some later ones.

Our first painter is **El Greco**.

Born in Crete in 1541, El Greco started his career as a painter of **icons**.



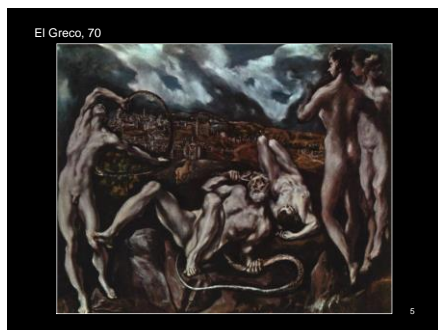
This El Greco's his **earliest known work**.

At that time, as you may know, icons were painted to **strict formulae** – they were literally traced and then painted in by numbers. El Greco's **early work** was typical of these formulae.

Yet within a few decades El Greco had developed dramatically.

In fact, both Picasso and Cezanne would later say that **the whole of modern art** had started with El Greco.

Here is an example of that later style...



This is called **Laocoon**.

The tortured soul is the man who told the Trojans what was inside the Wooden Horse of Troy. He is wracked by pain because he is being crushed to death by serpents, as a punishment.

The painting is a **masterpiece**.

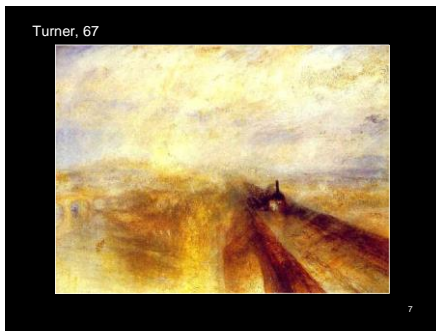
But how on earth did El Greco progress to such mastery?



Next is **Turner**.

This is an early watercolour – more of a **lid for a chocolate box**

... and less of the Turner we now think of...

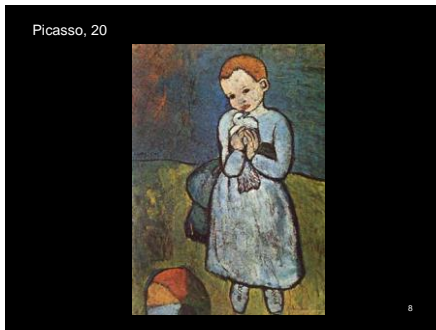


Yet here is a **later work** by Turner – *Rain, Steam and Speed*, painted 50 years later.

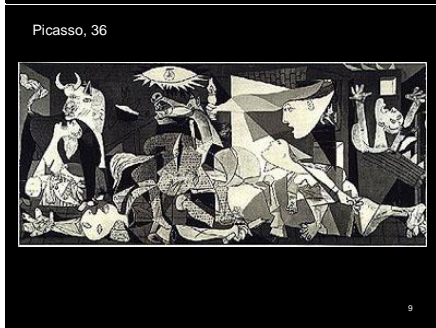
Clearly a masterpiece in **expressing lighting and the forces of nature**.

But how did Turner progress to such mastery?

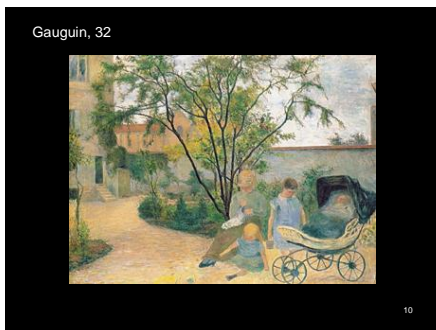
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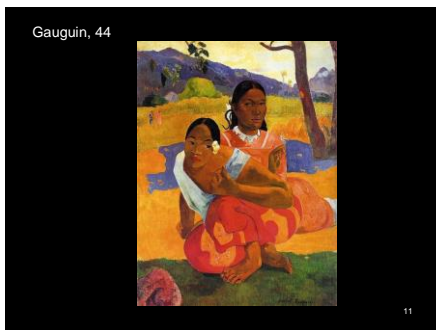
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Our third example is **Picasso**, born 1881.

Of course, Picasso was a genius - so **even his early works had an arresting power....**

But how about the power of Guernica ?

Just 16 years after the earlier painting, Picasso had progressed to this.

But how on earth did Picasso progress to such mastery?

Now we are with **Gauguin** – a late starter, since his first career had been as a stockbroker.

This is an early **painting of his family**.

Good perspective, but the colours aren't much to write home about.

Yet **just 12 years later**, he's producing **masterpieces**.

How on earth did Gauguin progress to such mastery?

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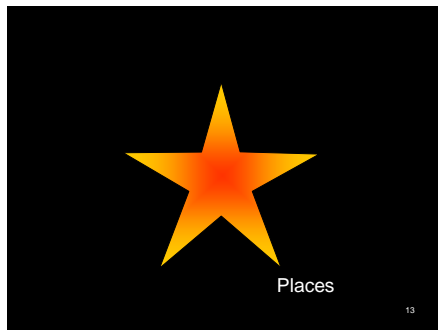


As I mentioned earlier, painters provide a very clear picture of their **'professional development'**, as I hope you would agree...

Now, in charting the professional growth of these painters, I believe there are **six essential ingredients** that contributed to their success.

As I spend a few minutes on each of those ingredients, I think **you will see** there is a **remarkably close parallel** to the ways in which **we too can** become masters (or mistresses) in our own chosen fields ...

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The **first essential ingredient** is **PLACES**.

All the great artists travelled a lot, and lived in many different places.

They did not just meet new people – they absorbed their surroundings, and observed with the artist's **gimlet eye**.

Travel broadens the **mind** ... but it can also **broaden the skill**.

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Take **El Greco** ...

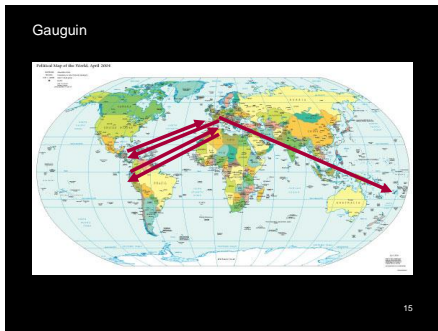
He was born in Crete; moved to **Venice** aged 26; then to **Rome** three years later.

There he became a **pupil of Titian**, though was influenced more by **Michelangelo**.

Seven years later he was off to **Toledo**.

And all this was in the mid 16th century, **when few people ventured beyond the edge of the village green**.

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Gauguin probably holds the **record for airmiles** – or rather **seamiles**.

Born in **Paris**, he spent his childhood in **Peru**.

Then several trips to **Central America**, before his famous relocation to **Tahiti**.

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Turner's travels

<i>Age</i>	42 Netherlands and Rhine
15 Admitted to RA School	44 Italy
15 West Country	47 Scotland
18 S. Wales	50 Holland, Rhine, Belgium
20 S. England, S. Wales, IoW	54 France
26 Scotland, Lake District	56 Scotland
27 France and Switzerland	57 Paris, meets Delacroix.
34 First of many visits to Petworth	59 Moselle and Rhine. Margate
36 Italy	61 France, Switzerland and Italy
	65. Venice
	66,67, 68 Switzerland
40 (End of war with France)	69 Switzerland, Heidelberg, Rhine
	70 France

16

What about our very own **Turner**? Here's a list of just **some of his travels**.

And if it hadn't been for the **Napoleonic Wars**, he'd have probably travelled twice as much.

Now, **even before the internet**, travel was sometimes virtual !

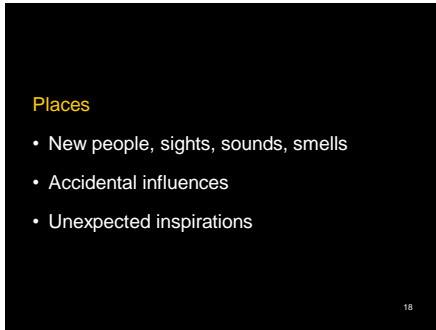
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Van Gogh's painting on the left was inspired by (or rather, *copied from*) the painting on the right – by **Hiroshige**, whose ukiyo-e wood block prints had just been **imported into Europe**.

So **travel can be virtual**, too...



So this is our first essential ingredient: **PLACES**.

Crucial to the development of the great artist is an **exposure to many different PLACES**.

Provided we remain observant, being in new places, , gives us:

. New people, sights, sounds, smells

. **Accidental influences**

. **Unexpected inspirations**

All of these things can boost **our own** professional development:

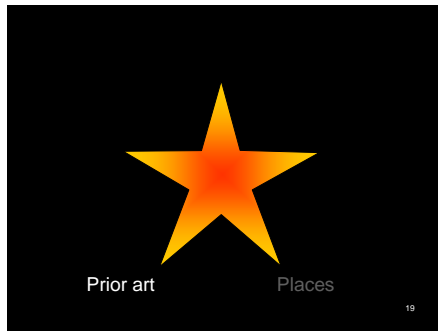
. If you are a **marketing manager**, you will have learned a lot by seeing the marketing campaigns used in other countries

. If you are a **teacher**, you will have learned a lot by spending times in other schools

. If you are a **publisher**, you will become a master by having worked in many different publishing houses, not just **one**

There are **many ways** we can travel. The main thing is to **do lots of it**, and **stay alert** to what you are presented with.

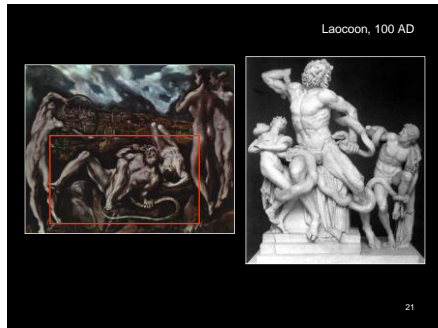
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Now let's explore the second ingredient... studying **Prior Art**.

Learning from our predecessors.

Examining **in detail** how other people had solved similar problems to the ones we face.

Here is **El Greco's Laocoön** again.

Let's take a look at that **central figure**.

Did El Greco invent that **tortured pose**, with **desperate eyes** and **sagging jaw**?

No !! He copied it from a bronze statue **originally cast 1500 years** earlier.

El Greco had studied **Prior Art**; he had studied his **Precursors**

...

How much do WE really study people from whom we might learn – to help us in our daily jobs and endeavours?

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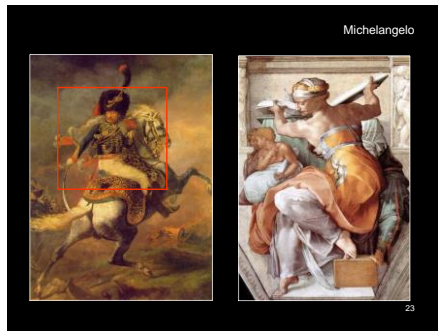


How about this painting of a **Hussar of the Imperial Guard** by **Gericault** (painted in the early 1800s)?

That **twisted pose** looks just a bit too **exaggerated**.

Haven't we seen it before somewhere? ...

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Yup – Gericault probably **nicked it from Michelangelo's Libyan Sibyl** from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel !

Gericault had spent years in the **Louvre slavishly copying Old Masters**, then spent **several years in Rome**, where one of his **favourites was Michelangelo**.

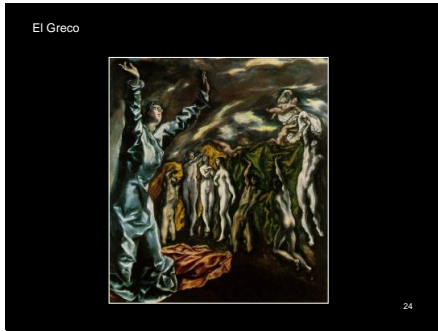
More than a coincidence? Probably.

Devotion to learning from earlier experts? Definitely.

“But surely” I hear you murmuring, “that is OLD artists”– **surely modern artists don't study like that**.

Well, let's **go back to El Greco** and see how far we can trace him forward ...

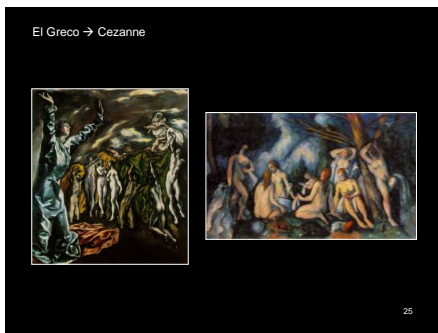
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This is one of El Greco's **later works**. The opening of the Seventh Seal – a biblical theme.

Did any **later artist ever study** that painting for inspiration ?

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Well yes.

On the right is **Cezanne's Bathers**, painted **300 years later**.

The **feel of the sky and background** are remarkably similar.

Cezanne had done his homework.

As he wrestled to express **feeling and emotion**, he had studied **his Old Masters** carefully, and **from them** had drawn **inspiration and examples**

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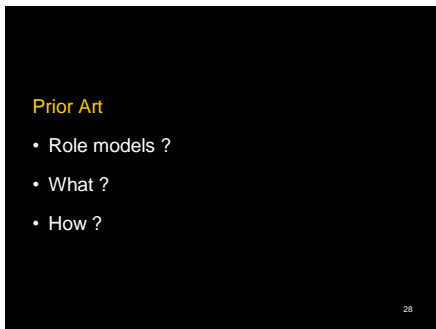


And a **closer look** reveals some of the poses to be almost **identical**.

This was just **one of the links** that was later to have **Picasso** **remark** that

"El Greco was the **father of all modern painting**" ...

And Picasso should know ...



Because Picasso (on the right) himself drew inspiration **from that same picture by Cezanne** (on the left)

Now the similarity of **poses** becomes even greater, the **flatness and compression** into the plane of the picture continues.

So the main point here is that the Great Artists clearly spent a lot of time studying what we can call **Prior Art**

This is our second essential ingredient for professional growth and excellence.

It sounds easy – but how much **do we do this in our own daily professional lives?**

I'd like to offer three questions for your own self-assessment:

- . **First**, who are your **professional** role models? Have you **found them yet?** Can you **name them?**
- . **Second**, What is it that makes them so **excellent?** Can you get **close enough** to see what the **source of their magic** might be?
- . **Third**, how can you incorporate their lessons into your daily work life?

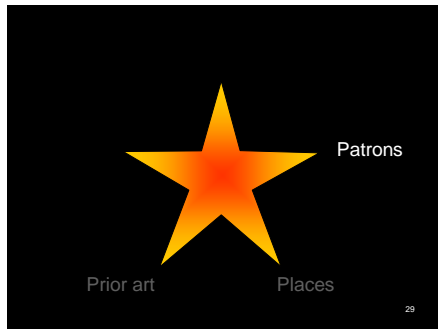
>>Pause

Now I'd like to turn to the third essential ingredient – patrons.

Patrons play an **extremely interesting role** in the lives of artists.

One view is that patrons are “**people we work for**”.

In that sense they are **a bit like the traditional definition of a boss** or the organisation we work for.



But a **better view** of a patron is perhaps “someone who gives us an **opportunity to do some work we enjoy, and gives us the excuse to hone our craft.**”

I think definition **allows us to have a new and refreshing view of our modern-day work ...**

... if we see our **boss or our employer as ...**

“someone who gives us an **opportunity to do some work we enjoy, and gives us the excuse to hone our craft.**”

Here is an **example** (and I hope you’ll allow me a brief deviating from painting into **architecture**) ...



This is the **Burj Al-Arab hotel** in Dubai. It is taller than the **Eiffel Tower**, and nearly as tall as the **Empire State building**.

But it is also (in my opinion) one of the **most beautiful buildings in the world** – from whatever angle you view it.

Unfortunately my **expense account** has never been big enough to allow me to stay there!



The architect was someone called **Tom Wright**.

And the hotel was **commissioned** by Sheik Mohammed, the ruler of Dubai.

He was the **latter-day patron**. As you can perhaps **guess from the shape of this building**, Sheik Mohammed is a **keen sailor** !!The point here is a **very simple** one.

I would bet you anything that Tom Wright **learnt a lot from designing that building**.

But he only got to design the building because he had found a patron.

All the great artists managed to find patrons, **and so should we!**

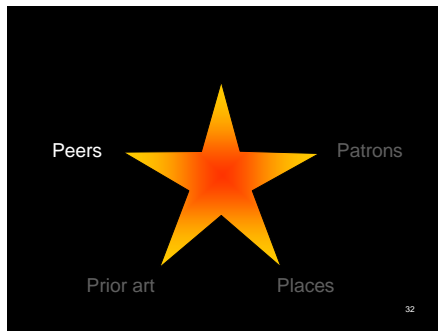
Of course, in the early stages of one's career, one has to **take on jobs that don't seem so glamorous**.

But the **crucial ingredient of artistry and of becoming a master** is the ability to **learn even from the humblest of roles**, and transmute that **base job into some sort of gold !**

That way you can create a **virtuous circle**, and eventually have the most generous patrons knocking at your door.

So **Patrons was the third essential ingredient** of professional development.

The next ingredient is a **different group of people**. People who are your **peers** ...



A story

When I was working at a consulting firm called **McKinsey**, one of my jobs was to **help the new joiners to get the training they needed**.

And one of the things they needed to know was how to do detailed modelling on a **spreadsheet program**.

This was about **fifteen years ago**, and there were **fewer trainers than there are now**.

I took too long to find an external trainer.

In fact I took so long that **something very interesting happened ...**

... the **new joiners started to teach each other !!**

Some were **real experts** in nearly every aspect of the spreadsheet program. **Others just new a few special tricks**.

But by working together as peers, they **started to teach each other**.

And they ended up **learning far more quickly from each other** than any outsider could have matched.

This **mirrors the fourth ingredient** of how the great artists developed.

Far from being tortured an isolated geniuses, they **typically had many artistic friends and peers...**

... with whom the **exchanged ideas**, by whom they were **inspired**, and with whom they often **competed**.

The **Impressionists** provide one of the best examples ...



This is ***The Boating Party*** by Renoir.

Renoir was **just one of the many Impressionists**, and a few of his **peers** are in this painting.

The Impressionists **leant from each other**.

How is this **relevant** for our **own professional development**?

Again, the answer is rather **obvious but few of us do enough of it**:

- . First, make sure we are **networking enough with our professional colleagues, actively learning from them, and contributing to their own growth**
- . Second, if we are in a more **senior position**, make sure we are **creating enough opportunities** for the **junior people to meet their own peers** and **for them to learn from each other**.

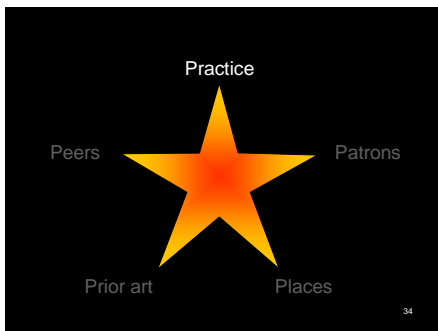
Essential ingredient number 5:

Practice.

Practice makes perfect. But **just how much practice** did those great artists do?

A lot.

I'd like to give a brief **illustration** ...



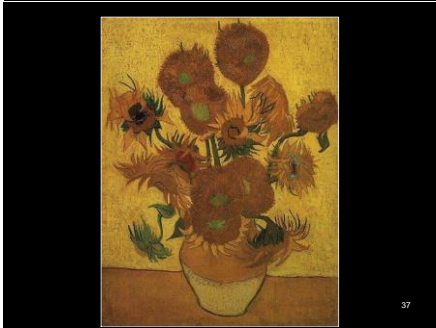
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Does anyone recognise this painting?

Yes – **Van Gogh's sunflowers. But which one?**

This one hangs in the **National Gallery**

Does anyone recognise this painting?

Yes – Van Gogh's sunflowers. But which one?

This one hangs in the **Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam**

Does anyone recognise this painting?

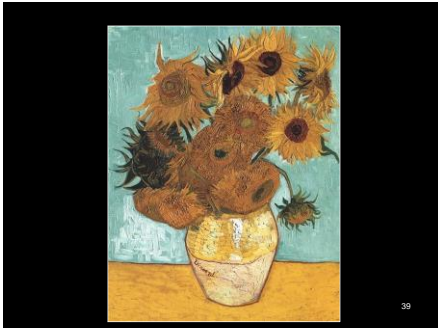
Yes – Van Gogh's sunflowers. But which one?

This one hangs in **Sompo Japan Museum of Art in Tokyo**

How about this one?

Philadelphia Museum of Art

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USA – private collection.

Formerly in Yokohama - destroyed by fire in the Second World War

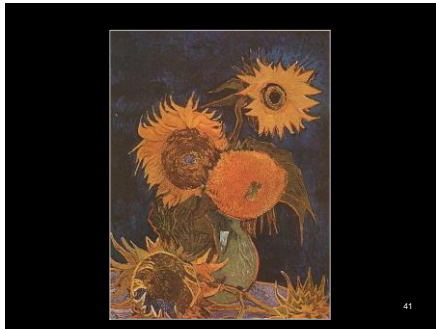
How many versions of The sunflowers are there? **Eleven**, at least.

I think you get the picture !!

Van Gogh did **not just slap some paint onto the canvas** – he **practised**; almost obsessively.

In fact, I thought you'd like **some more examples** – just in case you thought it was **Van Gogh's madness** that made him practise so much ...

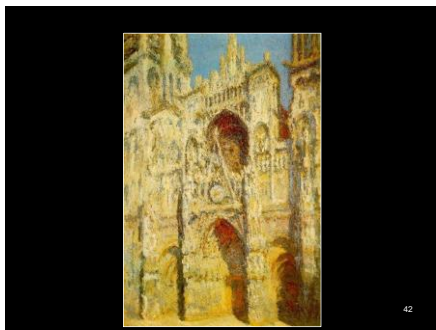
So before **looking at the role of practice in our own development**, let's take a brief look at some more examples of repeated practice ...



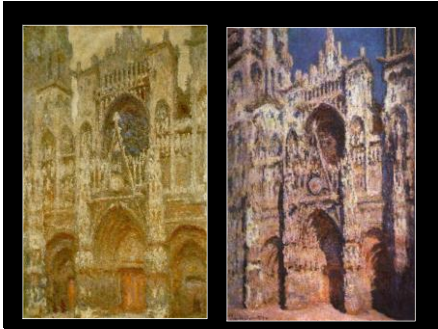
Monet's painting of **Rouen Cathedral**.

As you know, Monet was **fascinated by lighting**.

As you have guessed he **did not paint just one version,,,,,**



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Two more versions. So many in total ?

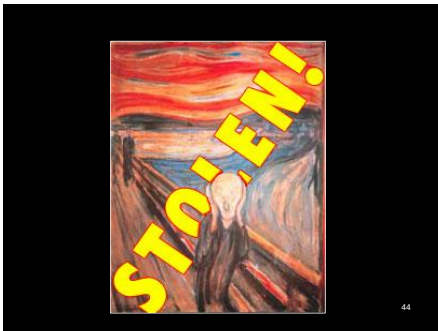
18 !!

Monet went back year after year to the **same apartment above the same shop** as he **practiced his art.**

How many of us do that much practise ?

As you can tell, I got kind of **interested in this practise thing...**

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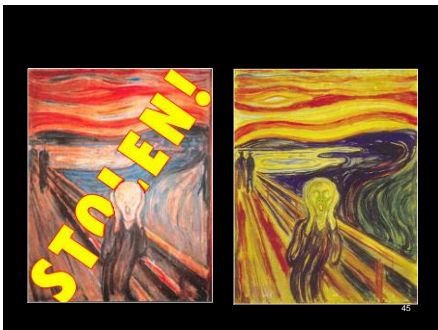


Recognise this?

Yes – that famous **Scream by Munch**, stolen earlier this year.

When I heard the story I had a sense of **déjà vu.** Hadn't this painting been stolen before?

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Nope – it had been **one of the other** versions that Munch painted that had been stolen earlier !

One of the **four** other versions !!!

But how about the **REALLY great masters?**

How about **M i c h e l a n g e l o ??**

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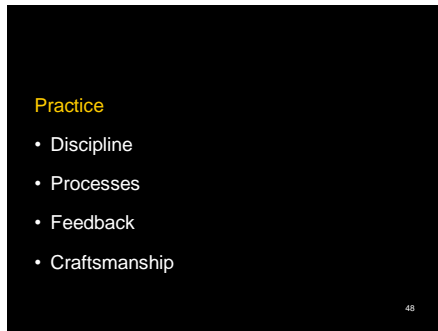
The Virgin of the Rocks – its hanging in the **Louvre** (unless its been recently stolen !!) ...

But wait a moment. Wasn't this painting in the **National Gallery just last week?** ...

Yup – **Louvre** on the left. **National Gallery** on the right.

Even Michelangelo did that practice thing !!

And you don't just knock one of those off in an idle weekend !



I may have laboured this point too much already.

We all know that practice makes perfect.

And we all practice our **hobbies** a lot – the golf swing, the tennis stroke, the painting classes, the guitar playing.

We do all the things mentioned on this slide.

But how much do we **consciously** practice our professional work?

Some of us more than others, probably.

But just imagine if we put **as much practice into running meetings, or writing reports, or giving feedback** to the people who work for us !!!

>>Pause

So ... we have covered **five essential ingredients** in the way the great artists seem to have developed.

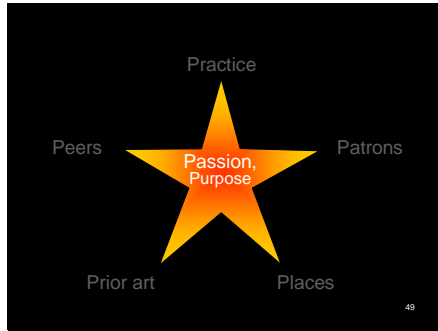
Could there be **something else, a further factor?**

I'm **not sure** about this last one.

I'm not sure whether it is **something one goes out to find**, or whether it is **something that finds you**.

I **do know** that we are **never satisfied** until we find it.

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I believe it is **Purpose – or perhaps Passion – or perhaps even Obsession.**

What did that mean for the Great Artists ?

Gericault. His **passion** was **horses.**

His purpose in life was to **paint horses** and **to ride them.**

He actually decamped from France to live near Epsom for two years ...

Just so he could be near horses !

(I always think this is a picture of **great foresight**, with that **unstable hussar...**

... looking like he's **about to fall off ...**

... for **Gericault died aged just 33 ... having fallen from a horse**

But he probably **died happy**, for he had found his **PURPOSE and PASSION.**



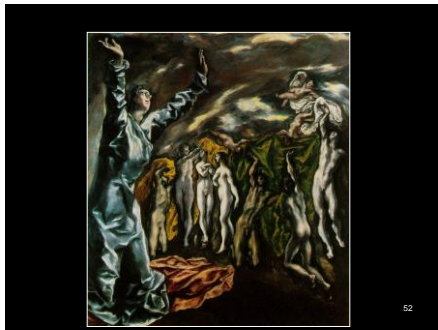
This is **Hannibal crossing the Alps** by Turner.

Turner started as a landscape topographer and landscape painter.

He too died happy, having found his **PURPOSE** and **PASSION** – to **tame the forces of nature just enough to capture them on canvas.**

To depict the **power of the wind**, the **wet of the rain**, and the **light of the sun** – all in a single painting ..

What a squall....



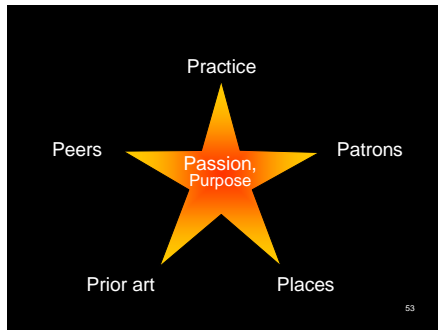
How about our friend **El Greco**, born in 1571, **started as a paint-by-numbers icon painter?**

He spent the **first half of his life trying to depict what hew saw** – **more accurately** than the icons had been depicted the world for hundreds of years.

But he spent the **second half of his life depicting not what he saw, but what he FELT.**

He realised his passion and purpose was to **paint emotions not to replicate Nature**

And in the early 1600s, that was a radical thinking. He was **centuries ahead of his time.**



As I said, I'm **not sure** about this last one.

I'm not sure whether Purpose or Professional Passion is **something you go out to find**, or whether it is **something that finds you**.

All I do know is that it seems to be the **magic key that unlocks everything else**.

Without **Professional Passion** we may develop, but we will never excel.

The only way to find – or be found by it - it is to **adventure**

In a way it is both the **both the Grail and the Quest ...**

It is time for me to **finish now**.

I thank you for having been so **attentive**.

I hope you **enjoyed some of my favourite painters**.

I'd like to **conclude with an observation from Picasso**:

He said that **“Art is a lie that points to the truth”**

>>> Pause

I hope you **agree** that the **lives of the greatest artists are a Truth that perhaps points to a deeper Truth...**

... the **six essential ingredients of which** have at least some **relevance...**

... for **how we too can become masters of our chosen fields**.