

1980s: MATERIAL WORLD

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It's Never Too Late: 20 Art-World Superstars Who Only Found Success Long After Others Would Have Given Up

Sometimes it takes a while to hit your stride.

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Judy Chicago didn't debut her major work, *The Dinner Party*, until she was 39. Photo by Rachel Murray/Getty Images for Visionary Women.

All too often these days, it seems like art-world success comes only to the young. Fresh-faced painters out of Yale land major gallery representation. Wunkerkind dealers and auctioneers are racking up money before they can grow stubble. And all the hot young curators seem to have been born in 2001.

But not everyone finds their voice so early. Outside the art world, JK Rowling didn't publish *Harry Potter* until she was 36. The husband-and-wife team behind *Zagat* didn't quit their legal gigs to focus on restaurants until they were 42. And Stan Lee was 38 by the time he published his first comic book.

There's lots of evidence that visual artists in particular often need extra time to hone their crafts. Need convincing? Consider these major figures, each of who took a winding path to art-world fame.

Vincent van Gogh didn't go to art school until he was **27** years old. By then, he had already pursued other careers, including one as a teacher at a boarding school.

Georgia O'Keeffe studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York, but didn't hit her stride until she was exposed to the art of Arthur Wesley Dow. She didn't have her first show, at Alfred Stieglitz, until she was **29**.

Edward Hopper didn't sell his first painting until he was **31**. It turned out to be something of an *annus mirabilis* for the artist: the painting, *Sailing* (1911), was displayed at the seminal Armory Show in 1913.



Jerry Saltz, Pulitzer Prize-Winning New York Magazine Senior Art Critic, gives a talk at the 2018 Frieze Art Fair. Photo by Amber De Vos/Getty Images for New York Magazine.

Mary Cassatt didn't exhibit with the Impressionists until she was **34**. That alone is impressive. But consider the fact that she was also an American making her way in Paris, and you see the depth of her achievement.

Jackson Pollock moved to New York when he was 28. He wasn't featured on the cover of *LIFE* magazine until 1949, when he was **37** years old.

Judy Chicago didn't debut her major work, *The Dinner Party*, until she was **39**. On its inaugural international tour, only two US museums would show the provocative work.

Jerry Saltz was a long-distance truck driver who tried (and failed) to become an artist and later to open his own gallery. He didn't turn to criticism until he was **41**. In 2018, [he won the Pulitzer Prize \(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jerry-saltz-pulitzer-prize-1267016\)](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jerry-saltz-pulitzer-prize-1267016).

Lee Krasner didn't get a solo show until 1951, when she was **42**, having toiled in the shadows cast by her famous husband, Jackson Pollock. (He died in 1956 and her career took off.)

Stan Lee, the man who gave us *Spider-Man*, began drawing superheroes when he was **43**. His partner, **Jack Kirby**, was **44** when he created *The Fantastic Four*.

Willem de Kooning fetches seven and eight figures at auction today. But during much of his career, he couldn't pay the rent and was forced to work as a house painter. He only had his first solo show, at Charles Egan Gallery, at **44**.



Michelle Obama and Amy Sherald unveil Obama's portrait at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images.

Paul Cézanne was the main inspiration for the failed painter character in his friend Émile Zola's 1885 novel *L'œuvre*. The real-life artist didn't get his first solo show, with dealer Ambroise Vollard, until he was **56**.

Anthony McCall (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/anthony-mccall/>) gave up his art career to make a living in graphic design— only to be selected for the Whitney Biennial in 2004 at age **58**.

Grandma Moses didn't get discovered by an art dealer—who spotted her work for sale at a country drug store— until she was **80**. She had only begun painting a few years earlier.

Amy Sherald was **43** when Michelle Obama commissioned the artist to paint her official portrait. Her work turned out to be an enormous success: when it was on view at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, the museum's attendance grew by 300 percent (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/amy-sherald-interview-1281740>).

Noah Purifoy didn't start building (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/are-these-11-american-art-landscapes-worth-saving-141122>) his Outdoor Desert Art Museum until he was **72** in 1989. He worked on it until his death in 2004.

Howardena Pindell didn't have her first museum survey (<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/howardena-pindell-1566139>) until 2018, when she was **74** years old.



Yayoi Kusama Photo by Andrew Toth/Getty Image.

Louise Bourgeois didn't create her iconic *Maman* sculpture, which was part of the inaugural exhibition at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London, until she was **88** years old.

Carmen Herrera sold her first painting (<https://news.artnet.com/market/carmen-herrera-turns-100-303360>), at **89**. Since then, she's had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art and currently has a show on view at City Hall Park in New York.

Yayoi Kusama didn't have a survey of her work, at New York's Center for International Contemporary Arts, until she was **60**. Her fame has grown exponentially since then.

Luchita Hurtado has been painting for over 70 years, but only earned major recognition when she was included in the 2018 Hammer Biennial. At the time, she was **97**.

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