



# THE THRIVING ARTIST MANIFESTO

**Jeff Goins**

**“The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.” — Michelangelo**

In 1995, an American professor made an unusual discovery.

At Syracuse University in Florence, Rab Hatfield was trying to match the scenes of the Sistine Chapel to the dates Michelangelo had painted each of them. Since the artist had received commissions in various installments, the professor thought there might be a paper trail.

So he went to the city archives. Surprised at how easy it was to locate five hundred year old bank records, he began reconstructing a more accurate timeline for how the most famous ceiling in the world came to be.

And that's when he saw it.



“I was really looking for something else!” the professor yelled into the phone from his office in Italy, decades later. “Every time I run across something, it’s because I was looking for something else, which I consider real discovery. It’s when you don’t expect it that you really discover something.”

With a PhD from Harvard, Professor Hatfield had begun his career at Yale in 1966 before moving to Syracuse University in 1971, and in all that time of teaching art history, he had never encountered anything like this. What he found in those records was not what you would expect to find digging around in the bank account of an artist, even one whose fame would grow with each passing century.

“I don’t know how much you know about Michelangelo,” he told me, “but usually they taught us that he kind of struggled like Vincent van Gogh.”

For centuries, this is what historians believed about the great Renaissance master. He was just another Starving Artist, struggling to make ends meet. Michelangelo himself embraced this image, living frugally and often complaining about money. He once wrote in a poem that his art had left him “poor, old and working as a servant of others.”

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But it turns out he wasn't telling the truth.

When Rab Hatfield dug into those old bank records, the truth about the Renaissance's most famous artist was finally revealed. He was not struggling at all. He was not poor. And he was not starving for his art—a fact we have been getting wrong ever since.

Michelangelo was, in fact, very rich. One record showed a balance of hundreds of thousands of dollars, a rare sum of money for an artist at the time. When he saw those figures, the professor forgot all about the Sistine Chapel. With his curiosity piqued, he went to see if there were more bank records. And there were more—many more. In the end, Professor Hatfield uncovered a fortune worth roughly \$47 million today, making Michelangelo the richest artist of the Renaissance.

And to this day, this is a story that surprises us.

We are accustomed to a certain story about artists, one that says they are barely getting by. But Michelangelo did not suffer or starve for his work. A multimillionaire and successful entrepreneur, he was in the words of one journalist a “pivotal figure in the transition of creative geniuses from people regarded, and paid, as craftsmen to people accorded a different level of treatment and compensation.”

In other words, the master sculptor and painter wasn't just some art school dropout struggling for his art. He was a rainmaker.

When I asked Rab Hatfield what Michelangelo's millions meant for us today, he said, “I don't think it means a whole lot.” But I disagree. I think this changes everything.

# Birth of a Myth

Two hundred years after Michelangelo died, Henri Murger was born the son of a tailor and concierge in France. Living in Paris, he was surrounded by creative geniuses and dreamed of joining them but grew frustrated with his failure to find financial security.

In 1847, Murger published *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, a collection of stories that playfully romanticized poverty. The result was some literary acclaim, persistent struggle, and an untimely end to a penniless life. The book limped along after the author's death, being adapted first as the opera *La Bohème* and later as a film, eventually achieving widespread acclaim with spinoffs, including *Rent* and *Moulin Rouge*.

Murger's *Scènes* launched the concept of the Starving Artist into the public's understanding as the model for a creative life. To this day, it endures as the picture for what we imagine when we think of the word artist. The story of the Starving Artist overshadows the quiet, relatively unknown tale of Michelangelo's success and has become our most popular understanding of what's possible for creative people—which is to say, not much.

Today, we find the remnants of this story nearly everywhere we look. It is the advice we give a friend who dreams of painting for a living, what we tell a coworker who wants to write a novel, or even the tale we tell our children when they head out into the real world. Be careful, we say ominously. Don't be too creative. You just might starve.

But the story of the Starving Artist is a myth. And like all myths, it may be a powerful story, one we can orient our entire lives around.

But in the end, it is still just a story.

Thanks to the power of this myth, many of us take the safe route in life. We become lawyers instead of actresses, bankers instead of poets, and doctors instead of painters. We hedge our bets and hide from our true calling, choosing less risky careers, because it seems easier.

Nobody wants to struggle, after all, so we keep our passion a hobby and follow a predictable path toward mediocrity.

But what if you could make a living as an artist? What would that change about the way we approach our work and how we consider creativity's importance in our world today? What would that mean for the careers we choose and the paths we encourage our kids to follow?

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creativity's importance in our world today?

In the early Renaissance, artists did not have reputations for being diligent workers. They were considered manual laborers, receiving meager commissions for their work. Michelangelo, however, changed that. After him, every artist began to see a “new pattern, a new way of doing things,” in the words of William Wallace, professor of art history at Washington University in St. Louis. Michelangelo “established the idea that an artist could become a new figure in society and have a higher social standing, and also that they could become financially successful.”

Michelangelo did not need to starve for his creations, and neither do you. When the painter of the Sistine Chapel amassed an incredible fortune and secured his legacy as one of history’s masters, he broke the glass ceiling for future generations of artists. Today, however, his contribution has been all but forgotten. We have bought into the Myth of the Starving Artist, thinking of artists as unfortunate Bohemians who struggle at the lowest end of society.

Rarely do we think of creatives as wealthy or successful, even cracking jokes about the wastefulness of art degrees and theater classes. We have heard how pursuing creativity is not a safe career move, whether that means chasing an interest in literature, music, or some other endeavor.

All my life, I heard it from well-meaning teachers, friends, and relatives. The advice was always the same:

- Get a good degree.
- Have something to fall back on.
- Don’t quit your day job.

Creativity, though a nice outlet for self-expression, is not some thing we think a person should go “all in” on for a career. Because, odds are, you’ll starve, right?

The truth, though, is quite different. Sometimes an artist does succeed: a singer releases a platinum record, an author hits a bestseller list, a filmmaker launches a block buster. We tend to dismiss these moments as rare instances of an artist getting lucky or selling out. But what if that wasn't the whole picture?

When we look at history's most famous artists, we see something curious. It's the same thing we observe in the lives of creatives making a living today. When we hear the cautionary tales and warnings about what it means to be an artist, there's an important truth we must embrace:

You don't have to starve.

The world needs our work—whether that's an idea for a book, a vision for a start-up, or a dream for a community—and you shouldn't have to struggle to create it.



# The Thriving Artist Manifesto

I want to offer a very simple but challenging argument:

Real artists don't starve.

Making a living off your creative talent has never been easier. The idea of the Starving Artist is a useless myth that holds us back more than it helps us.

Today, with more opportunity than ever to share our work with the world, we need a different model for creative work. The Myth of the Starving Artist has long since overstayed its welcome, and what we need now is a return to a model that doesn't require creative workers to suffer for their art. We need a New Renaissance.

The world needs our work—whether that's an idea for a book, a vision for a start-up, or a dream for a community—and you shouldn't have to struggle to create it. We all have creative gifts to share, and in that respect, we are all artists.

But what does it mean to be a “real artist?” It means you are spending your time doing the things that matter most to you. It means you don't need someone else's permission to create. It means you aren't doing your work in secret, hoping someone may discover it someday. The world is taking you seriously.

Do you have to become a millionaire like Michelangelo? Not at all. The goal here is to build a life that makes creating your best work not only possible but inevitable. And so, we must exchange this idea of a Starving Artist with a new term: **Thriving Artist**.

If you don't want your best work to die with you, you must train yourself to think and live differently than the ways we've been told artists behave. Don't starve for your art. Help it thrive.

Inspired by the Michelangelo story, I was curious to see if there were other artists who were thriving. What I discovered was that not only was a New Renaissance possible, it was already here. I encountered creatives in nearly every field who weren't starving at all. These artists may not have known of Michelangelo's riches, but they embodied his same approach to creative work and followed a similar set of principles I've now captured. Here they are, the principles every Thriving Artist lives by — the Rules of the New Renaissance:

1. The Starving Artist believes you must be born an artist. The Thriving Artist knows you must become one.
2. The Starving Artist strives to be original. The Thriving Artist steals from his influences.
3. The Starving Artist believes he has enough talent. The Thriving Artist apprentices under a master.
4. The Starving Artist is stubborn about everything. The Thriving Artist is stubborn about the right things.
5. The Starving Artist waits to be noticed. The Thriving Artist cultivates patrons.
6. The Starving Artist believes he can be creative anywhere. The Thriving Artist goes where creative work is already happening.
7. The Starving Artist always works alone. The Thriving Artist collaborates with others.
8. The Starving Artist does his work in private. The Thriving Artist practices in public.
9. The Starving Artist works for free. The Thriving Artist always works for something.
10. The Starving Artist sells out too soon. The Thriving Artist owns his work.
11. The Starving Artist masters one craft. The Thriving Artist masters many.
12. The Starving Artist despises the need for money. The Thriving Artist makes money to make art.

# Next Steps

How does this work for us today?

First, we must master our mindset, tackling the internal challenges and conflicts we face to break out of the Starving Artist paradigm. Whatever our work—whether it's in banking or baked goods—we can't change our lives until we change our minds.

Then, we must master the market, exploring the importance of relationships in creative work and how to usher our art into the world. It really does come down to who you know, not just what you know.

Finally, we must master our money, looking at what it means to make a living off our work so that we can use money to do better work.

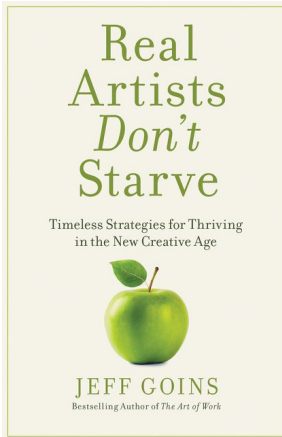
Being a Starving Artist is a choice, not a necessary condition of doing creative work. Whether or not you starve is up to you.

I hope this manifesto emboldens you to join the ranks of the New Renaissance, embracing Michelangelo's belief that you can live both a creative life and a prosperous one, declaring to yourself and to the world that real artists don't starve.

**At least, they don't have to. 📖**



# Info



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### About the author

Jeff Goins is a full-time writer living in Nashville with his family. This manifesto was adapted excerpt from his new book, *Real Artists Don't Starve*, which is now available wherever books are sold. Follow him online at [goinswriter.com](http://goinswriter.com).

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