

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 71: Bohemians

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:06

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. New episodes will premiere every Thursday through to December. We hope you stick around to listen. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

David Weir 00:34

Hello, I'm David Weir, professor emeritus at the Cooper Union, a private college in New York City. After teaching literature and film for some 30 years there, I'm now writing books about cultural history that I hope will appeal to both academic and general readers. My most recent book is *Bohemians: A Very Short Introduction*. Originally, the people who call themselves bohemians were writers; poets and novelists, sure, but also journalists who adopted the persona of the wandering Roma from the Kingdom of Bohemia in Central Europe. (The people once called Gypsies.) They adopted this identity to capture a sense of how free they were to move around from place to place without worrying about tomorrow.

David Weir 01:25

They started out in Paris in the 1830s and 1840s, forming communities and neighborhoods like the Latin Quarter on the left bank of the river Seine, one of the first many Bohemias in major cities. Today, the Bohemian mixture of dedication to art and commitment to an unconventional lifestyle seems as much myth as reality. But that hasn't stopped people from trying to live the myth of the bohemian artists on the margins of proper society.

David Weir 01:57

My interest in bohemians is part of a broader interest in the relationship of artistic cultures to the age of modernity. In the 19th century, modernity involved three parallel, interconnected developments. First, the reconfiguration of social classes, the rise of the bourgeoisie. Second, the realignment of political power, the growth of Republican governance. And third, the transition to new economic models, the development of capitalism. "Bohemianism," the term coined by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, was

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one response to these developments. A mixed response, really, since bohemians were in many ways anti modern, except in their attitude toward art, which acquired value paradoxically, if it was not accepted by the emerging bourgeois class.

David Weir 02:53

My work aims to fill out the picture of the cultural response to modernity that I have also previously examined in my other Very Short Introduction, *Decadence*. Bohemians and decadents have a lot in common. Both groups are anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist, but occupy very different social realms. Bohemians would be working-class if they had regular employment, which they don't, whereas decadents either are, or pretend to be, aristocrats. Bohemians and decadents overlap in a lot of ways, but they live in different neighborhoods.

David Weir 03:33

That last observation is one of the keys to understanding bohemian culture. Bohemians almost always reside in a low-rent neighborhood of a major city and migrate from one down-market address to another. Famous bohemian neighborhoods include at least three in Paris in addition to the Latin Quarter. That area near the Louvre Museum called the Impasse du Doyenné (impasse means "dead end") in the 1830s, then the central hill of Montmartre from the 1880s through the 1910s, and, finally, the region of Montparnasse in the 1920s and 1930s. But Paris served as the model for other Bohemias in other major cities.

David Weir 04:23

The Schwabing section of Munich was known as the "Bavarian Montmartre" at the turn of the 20th century. Prior to World War I, the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City was called "America's Left Bank" and "Gotham's Latin Quarter." What these and other bohemian neighborhoods have in common is that they seem separate from the cities they are in, removed from more respectable bourgeois districts. Bohemians choose such neighborhoods because there the rent is cheap and the morals are loose.

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David Weir 04:59

Morality is another key to bohemian character. Bohemians flip the script on bourgeois respectability. In Bohemia, irresponsibility becomes a virtue, and so does self-indulgence, even self-destruction, which was first achieved mainly by alcohol. One bohemian quipped, "Wine is a red liquid, except in the morning when it is white." Later, regular drug use became a feature of bohemian life. A group of bohemians in mid-19th century Paris formed a Club of Hashish-Eaters, meeting at an old hotel and hallucinating once a month for several years. A good hashish high allowed them to experience the vagabond life of the wandering bohemian without ever leaving the hotel.

David Weir 05:53

Bohemian morality also involves what their bourgeois contemporaries would call immorality, especially with regard to sex. The original bohemians, almost all men, were not the marrying kind to say the least, and their attitude toward women clashes sharply with contemporary attitudes. Even though one of the first bohemians was the female novelist who wrote under the name George Sand, the role of women in Bohemia in the mid-19th century was limited mostly to that of muse, model, or mistress. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, however, a number of important female writers and activists, such as the novelist Fanny zu Reventlow in Schwabing and the birth control advocate Margaret Sanger in Greenwich Village, made significant contributions to their respective Bohemias. Sexist attitudes toward women on the part of those early bohemians brings us to a third key element of Bohemia that is rather unfortunate. In keeping with their mostly anti-modern stance toward everything except art, bohemians, for some time tended to be political reactionaries.

David Weir 07:09

For example, the poet Théophile Gautier, who was involved in several bohemian groups, wrote in 1834, "The two greatest things in the world are royalty and poetry." That said, bohemians do not have a consistent politics, but the combination of an anti-modern sensibility and an extreme sense of individualism, along with their loyalty not to the nation but to the neighborhood, aligns them closely with the anti-statist ideology of anarchism. Anarchism is not the same thing as anarchy. It's possible to be unruled, but not unruly. And from the mid-19th century on, many Bohemians were also anarchist.

David Weir 07:59

Full-fledged anarchist communities, however, are somewhat rare, but the Paris Commune is a major exception to this general observation. In 1871, the municipality, or commune, of Paris seceded from the nation of France and went to war with the recently-formed government known as the Third Republic. The anarchist community lasted only about two months before being brutally put down by military forces under the command of the French President. As many as 10,000 people loyal to the commune either died in the conflict or were summarily executed after, and many more were imprisoned by the state for years. Not all of these communards called themselves bohemians, but many did, including the artist Gustave Courbet.

David Weir 08:50

The association of major artists like Courbet with both anarchism and bohemianism is an important development in art history for two reasons. First, the kind of art practiced in Bohemia could now be understood as revolutionary; art acquired value as a form of political activity. Earlier in the 19th century, Bohemian culture was separate from society, with bohemians practicing art for art's sake. The infusion of politics into art that came with a commune meant that now bohemians were more interested in art for life's sake.

David Weir 09:32

The second reason the association of artists with bohemianism is important to art history is that it brought about a change in the very nature of the idea of the artist. Earlier, Bohemia was mainly a phase that artists went through on the way to broader appreciation and acceptance by both the art establishment and the general public. Now, Bohemia was not so much a stage in artistic development but a condition or identity that persisted after the artists became accepted and successful. As Courbet himself said, "Even in our civilized society, I must live the life of a savage. I must break free from its very governments. Therefore, I have just embarked on a great wandering and independent life of the bohemian." This attitude has persisted to this day. The sociology of the contemporary art world still forms along the lines of mainstreams and margins, cultures and countercultures, insiders and outsiders; all very much a part of the bohemian heritage.

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David Weir 10:45

Does Bohemia still exist? As recently invented words like "Bobo," "boburbian," and "fauxhemian" suggest the old idea of the bohemian as someone content to live an impoverished, but artistic life on the margins of society may not be possible to realize today. "Bobo" stands for "bourgeois bohemian," and "boburbian" redefines the bohemian as a resident of the middle-class suburbs rather than a member of the urban underclass, both less than authentic incarnations of the 19th century original, that would seem to justify the epithet "fauxhemian," or "fake bohemian." But I am not so sure. If you look further into this field, you can come to your own conclusion. Who knows? You might even discover that you are a bohemian yourself.

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