

Writers & Artists

Contributed by Scotty Bones

The Absinthe Alchemist's Gallery of Famous Writers & Artists Does Absinthe Make Writers, Artists, And Bohemian Hipsters More Creative? Or Does Absinthe Make Them Crazy?

Absinthe and creativity are linked in the popular imagination. Does absinthe make writers, artists and bohemians more creative? Thujone compounds in wormwood are responsible for absinthe's creative buzz. There are also other herbs and spices in absinthe that contribute to the feeling of happiness and well being that absinthe drinkers experience. While absinthe has a very distinct buzz, it's safe to say that it never made anyone crazy, though many absinthe drinkers were crazy and tragic figures, as you will read below. See Absinthe Research and News and Van Gogh's Ear pages for the real deal on absinthe.

Ernest Hemingway

(Cicero, Illinois, July 21, 1899-Ketchum, Idaho, July 2, 1961) Papa Hemingway was a man's man, which meant fighting, playing with guns and knives and drinking, especially absinthe. His famous quote, uttered in Cuba, "Got tight last night on absinthe. Did knife tricks," is especially endearing. Though he made it to Montparnasse about a decade too late for legal absinthe, perhaps there was still a bottle or two floating around. He met F. Scott Fitzgerald at the famous Dingo Bar, also a favorite haunt of Aleister Crowley, in 1925. Together they must have tracked down some Green Fairy. Some of Hemingway's characters drink absinthe, such as David in *The Garden of Eden*, and Robert Jordan in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, for whom absinthe "took the place of the evening papers, of all the old evenings in cafes, of all the chestnut trees that would be in bloom now in this month..." Sadly, at the end, after Jordan has fallen from his horse and broken his leg, he reaches for his flask and finds the absinthe gone.

Hemingway committed suicide in Idaho, shooting himself in the head with a rifle. Pablo Picasso

(Malaga, Spain, Oct 25, 1881-Mougins, France, April 8, 1973) Picasso was a giant of 20th century art. He lived in Barcelona and Paris in the early years before finally staying in Paris for many years. He hung out with many artists and entertainers, frequenting Montmartre, a popular drinking zone, and Montparnasse, an area in the 15th arrondissement of Paris filled with cafes and artistic ferment during the Crazy Years (Années Folles) from 1910 to the start of World War II. Though I know of no absinthe quotes attributed to Picasso, he did enjoy his drinks and smokes and he made several pieces on the theme of absinthe. His last words were "Drink to me, drink to my health, you know I can't drink any more. back to top

Edgar Allan Poe

(Boston, Mass, Jan 19, 1809-Baltimore, Maryland, Oct 7, 1849) Though the master of the macabre had some problems with alcohol and maybe with drugs, the claim that he drank absinthe, from Barnaby Conrad III's book *Absinthe: History in a Bottle*, appears to be unsubstantiated. First, Baudelaire, who claimed that "alcohol was essential for Poe's writing", never met or corresponded with Poe. Second, since absinthe became popular amongst Parisians, the mythical *heure verte*, only after French troops returned from the conquest of Algeria (1844-1847), Poe was about to die as it was entering the US. He had moved to New York in 1844 and would have had no contact with his alleged co-drinkers. Third, John Sartain, the man claiming to have drunk absinthe with Poe, in his *Reminiscences of a Very Old Man*, gave the date of their partying as May 1852, after Poe was dead. Though the notion of Poe as an absinthe fiend is appealing, it just isn't true. His death, however, was odd. He was found delirious in the street in Baltimore, wearing another man's clothes. He died three days later without having divulged what had happened. Damn, Poe should have been an absinthe fiend!

Amadeo Modigliani

(Livorno, Italy, July 12, 1884-Paris, Jan 24, 1920) Amadeo Modigliani began painting at an early age. At the age of 16, he contracted tuberculosis, which would haunt him for the rest of his years. He is said to have excelled at painting nudes early on. Indeed, "when not painting nudes, he was occupied with seducing the household maid." In 1903, he moved to Venice where he first smoked hashish. Modigliani moved to Paris in 1906 and within a year he had assumed the look of a vagabond, taking absinthe and hashish. He supposedly drank a potent form of absinthe known as *mominette*, made from potatoes. (Probably not true) His outrageous behavior (stripping naked at parties) and affairs were shocking even within bohemian circles. His partying, coupled with his tuberculosis, finally did him in. He died of tubercular meningitis at the age of 35.

Aleister Crowley

(Royal Leamington Spa, England, Oct 12, 1875-Hastings, England, Dec 1, 1947) Aleister Crowley, the "wickedest

man in the world," began life in a family of Plymouth Brethren, an evangelical Christian movement. His rebelliousness earned him the title "The Beast" from his mother. He studied English literature at Cambridge and soon began reading books on occultism and mysticism. Though Crowley didn't graduate, he went on to become possibly the most famous practitioner of magick ever. Crowley used various drugs (laudanum, opium, heroin, ether, alcohol, cocaine, hashish) to induce visions. Aleister Crowley was no stranger to absinthe, penning his famous essay *The Green Goddess* in *The Old Absinthe House* in New Orleans. Of absinthe, Crowley said, "It is as if the first diviner of absinthe had been indeed a magician intent upon a combination of sacred drugs which should cleanse, fortify and perfume the human soul." One legend has it that Ian Fleming wanted to recruit Crowley into the British secret service during WWII to infiltrate the Nazis and distribute fake horoscopes. Addicted to heroin, Crowley died from a respiratory infection at seventy-two years. [back to top](#)

Oscar Wilde

(Dublin, Ireland, Oct 16, 1854-Paris, Nov 30, 1900)Oscar Wilde came from a well-off Dublin family and was an outstanding classics student. During his studies at Oxford, he became part of the Aesthetic movement, which believed in making an art of life. He was also associated with the Decadent movement and began to wear his hair long and decorating his room with objets d'art such as peacock feathers, lilies, sunflowers and blue china. Wilde became one of the most prominent aesthetes in England. Fond of hashish, opium and alcohol, Wilde was "a terrible absinthe drinker, through which he got his visions and desires." Oscar Wilde's love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas ended in a scandalous trial in which he was sentenced to two years hard labor for gross indecency. Upon release, the broken and broke Wilde lived his final years in Paris under the name Sebastian Melmouth, "enjoying the pleasure he had been denied in England." On his deathbed, he "insisted on drinking absinthe." Oscar Wilde died from cerebral meningitis in Paris.

Arthur Rimbaud

(Charlesville, France, Oct 20, 1855-Marseilles, France, Nov 10, 1891)Immortalized in popular culture in Bob Dylan's song, "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," Arthur Rimbaud began life as an exceptional student and gifted writer of verse. By age 15, he had become an anarchist and a drinker, wearing shabby clothes and hair to shock the local populace. He is said to have cultivated lice on his head to throw at priests. He wrote that he attained poetical transcendence through a "long, intimidating, immense and rational derangement of all the senses." Absinthe would come in handy for that. Rimbaud returned to Paris in 1871 at the invitation of Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine. They became lovers, consuming absinthe and hashish and living wildly in Paris. Later, in *A Season In Hell*, Rimbaud wrote of his "odd partnership" with Verlaine, his "pitiful brother." Rimbaud abandoned writing and began travels in 1875 that took him far from Europe, eventually becoming a successful merchant and gunrunner in Ethiopia. In 1891, he returned to France due to synovitis in his right knee. His leg was amputated on May 27 and he died from complications in Marseilles on November 10.

Paul Marie Verlaine

(Metz, France, March 30, 1844-Paris, January 8, 1896)Paul Verlaine was educated in Paris and then joined the civil service. All the while he wrote poetry, first publishing in 1867. He fell in love with and married Mathilde Mauté. In September 1871, he received the now infamous letter from the young Arthur Rimbaud. After Rimbaud's arrival in Paris, he essentially abandoned her and their infant son to gallivant with the young poet. Living wildly, drinking absinthe, Verlaine and Rimbaud traveled to London. Upon their return, Rimbaud attempted to return to Paris and a drunken, outraged Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the arm, wounding him. He was sent to prison and converted to Catholicism. Later, he took up with a young English fellow, Lucien Létinois, while teaching in London. He was wrecked when Lucien died of typhus. Verlaine spent his last years in poverty, drinking and doing drugs. [back to top](#)

Vincent van Gogh

(Zundert, Holland, March 30, 1853-Auvers-sur-Oise, France, July 29, 1890)Absinthe entered Van Gogh's life after he began his artistic career late at the age of 27. He was a quiet boy during his youth. After a short career working for art dealers, he followed his growing desire to become a pastor. He became a missionary in a poor mining district of Belgium, living in squalid conditions. His father was not pleased and considered having him committed to a lunatic asylum. He began drawing around this time. In 1885, he moved to Antwerp, Belgium, painting and subsisting on bread, coffee and tobacco. It was there that Van Gogh fell into heavy absinthe drinking. Moving to France in 1886, he spent two years in Paris, then from February 1888 until July 1890 in several locations in Provence. Van Gogh's mental and physical conditions deteriorated until he shot himself in the chest on July 27 and died two days later. Of all the possible diagnoses for Van Gogh's illness, one includes his use of alcohol, particularly absinthe. (See [Van Gogh's Ear](#) page for further discussion.)

Emile Zola

(Paris, April 2, 1840-Paris, Sept 29, 1902) Born in Paris, Emile Zola passed his youth in Aix-en-Provence. His writing career was controversial from the beginning, beginning with his criticism of Napoleon III, who made himself Emperor, and ending with his front-page criticism of the French president's handling of the divisive Dreyfus affair. Many of Zola's novels deal with violence, alcoholism and prostitution within the Rougon-Macquart family. In *L'assommoir*, the character Boche had heard of a cabinetmaker who had danced the polka until he died. He had drunk absinthe. (Interestingly, the 1970 Penguin Classics edition features Edgar Degas's 1876 painting *Absinthe*.)

In *Nana*, we find two young ladies lounging on a bed who "Sometimes on such afternoons as they (Nana & Satin) had troubles to retail they treated themselves to absinthe in order, as they termed it, 'to forget.'" Zola died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a blocked chimney.

Edgar Degas

(Paris, July 19, 1834-Paris, Sept 27, 1917) Born into a fairly wealthy family, Edgar Degas began painting early in life. Though he showed his paintings in Impressionist exhibitions, he did not like being grouped with them and disdained the "Impressionist color fleck" and painting "en plein air." His anti-Semitism led him to break with his Jewish friends during the Dreyfus Affair. By the 1860's, he began painting scenes of real life, including café life. Edgar Degas frequented the Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes, the setting for his 1876 painting *Absinthe*, also known as *Dans Un Café* or *The Absinthe Drinkers*. It caused quite a stir and the writer George Moore remarked "What a slut!" upon viewing the despondent Ellen Andrée. Always a bachelor, Degas spent his last years nearly blind, "aimlessly wandering the streets of Paris" back to top

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

(Albi, France, Nov 24, 1864-Malromé, France, Sept 9, 1901) Stunted early in life by broken legs that never healed properly, the deformed Toulouse-Lautrec captured the decadence of Belle Époque Paris, especially the Moulin Rouge, in his art. A heavy drinker, Toulouse-Lautrec quaffed copious quantities of brandy and absinthe, sometimes mixed together as the infamous Tremblement de Terre, or Earthquake. He had a special hollow cane that he kept topped up with booze. The symbolist painter Gustave Moreau remarked of Toulouse-Lautrec's genius: "His paintings are entirely painted in absinthe." Dead at 36 from alcoholism and syphilis, possibly from a prostitute that he met at the Moulin Rouge, his last words were "Old fool!" shouted at his father.

Charles Cros

(Fabrezan, France, Oct 1, 1842-Paris, Aug 9, 1888) Charles Cros, the man who supposedly drank twenty absinthes a day, was a poet and writer as well as an inventor. He improved color photo process in photography and telegraph technology. He even had plans to build the first telegraph, the paleograph, when Thomas Edison scooped him and built one first. He was also interested in communicating with other planets, most notable Mars and Venus. In 1869, he presented a "Study on the means of communication with the Planets". Believing pinpoints of light on Mars and Venus to be cities, he lobbied the French government to build giant mirrors to communicate with those planets by burning giant lines in their deserts. Though he never achieved success, he is honored through the Académie Charles Cros, which gives prizes for musical works.

Alfred Jarry

(Laval, France, Sept 8, 1873-Paris, Nov 1, 1907) "Merdre!" shouts King Ubu in 23-year-old Alfred Jarry's new play, *Ubu Roi*. The equivalent of shouting "Shite!" in church, it causes a scandal in 1896 and Jarry instantly becomes famous and notorious. After the *Ubu Roi* incident, the ever absurd Jarry moved into an apartment, on floor 2 __, that was subdivided horizontally à la Being John Malkovich. Jarry rode around Paris on a bicycle and drank his absinthe straight, not wanting to foul his "holy water", his "essence of life", with water, that base liquid used for washing laundry. In his later years, Jarry continued to drink excessively and took to carrying a loaded pistol. Jarry also invented the philosophy of pataphysics, which deals with "the laws that govern exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one." Alfred Jarry died from tuberculosis, exacerbated by drug and alcohol use. After Jarry's death, Picasso bought Jarry's pistol and wore it around Paris at night. Picasso also acquired many of Jarry's manuscripts.

Check out Jarry's "The Crucifixion Considered As An Uphill Bicycle Race" compared to J.G.

Ballard's "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered As A Downhill Motor Race." [back to top](#)

Charles Baudelaire

(Paris, April 9, 1821-Paris, Aug 31, 1867) Charles Baudelaire began his literary career in 1839, but his first volume of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal* wasn't published until 1857. Its themes of sex and death caused a scandal. Baudelaire and his publisher were prosecuted for offenses against public morals. After his publisher went bankrupt, Baudelaire's financial difficulties increased. He went to Brussels where he smoked opium and drank excessively. In 1866, he suffered a stroke and paralysis. He died two years later.

Ernest Dowson

(London, Aug 2, 1867-Catford, England, Feb 23, 1900) As a young man, Ernest Dowson attended Oxford, where his friend Arthur Symonds said "his favorite form of intoxication had been haschisch (sic)." Later, he worked with his father at his dry-docking business, all the while writing poetry, partying and going out to music halls. In 1889, he fell in love with, and dedicated much of his verse to, an eleven-year-old girl and was crushed when she married someone else. Perhaps he was thinking of her when he uttered his famous quote, "Absinthe makes the tart grow fonder." In his short life, the poet Ernest Dowson produced a small but significant body of work, often associated with the Decadent movement. In his memoir of Ernest Dowson, Symonds also said that "Without a certain sordidness in his surroundings he (Dowson) was never quite comfortable." Indeed, Dowson "drank the poisonous liquors of those pot houses of London's squalid East End and in Paris Les Halles took the place of the docks." Dowson died of alcoholism and possibly tuberculosis at thirty-two.

Edouard Manet

(Paris, Jan 23, 1832-Paris, April 30, 1883) Born into a wealthy family, Edouard Manet began studying painting after failing the exam to join the navy. After opening his own studio, he adopted the style of realism, painting beggars, singers, café scenes, gypsies, etc. In 1859, he painted *The Absinthe Drinker*, which scandalized proper society by depicting a common man drunk on absinthe. He became friends with impressionist painters such as Degas, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Cézanne and Pissarro. He was also supported by Zola, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Baudelaire. He died from syphilis that he picked up in his forties. [back to top](#)

Johnny Depp

(Owensboro, Kentucky, June 9, 1963-????)

As a child, Johnny Depp practiced self-harm as a reaction to the stress of family problems and insecurity. He went to Los Angeles to pursue a musical career and ended up becoming an actor. After becoming a teen idol for his role in the T.V. show *21 Jump Street*, Depp settled into a career of playing quirky, iconic roles in film. In the movie *From Hell*, Johnny Depp plays the role of detective Frederick Abberline, a historical character who investigated the Jack the Ripper murders. Depp's Abberline is addicted to opium and absinthe. Of absinthe, the real Depp was quoted as saying in the Swedish magazine *Expressen*, "I hated cocaine but I used to like Absinthe, which is like marijuana; drink too much and you suddenly realize why Van Gogh cut off his ear."

Marilyn Manson

(Canton, Ohio, Jan 5, 1969-????) Goth and industrial shock rocker Marilyn Manson started life as a Christian schoolboy but went on to become a controversial musician and actor. As would be expected, his work relies on weirdness and shock value for its effect. At Marilyn Manson's 32nd birthday, the burlesque stripper and showgirl Dita von Teese arrived with a bottle of absinthe. They ended up "on the floor" and Manson later proposed to her. They married in 2005 and divorced in 2007. Of his supposed heavy use of absinthe, Manson said, "I think I was trying to get to that place where you think and behave like a child or a lunatic. Sometimes the doors need to be opened. That's why so many writers and creative people in the past fell prey to it." He is supposedly coming out with a faux absinthe (without *Artemisia absinthum*) called *Mansinthe*.

Dita von Teese

(Rochester, Michigan, Sept, 28, 1972-????) Dita von Teese was fascinated with old cinema and the classic retro style from a young age. She is a classically trained ballet dancer, and studied costume design in college. In her teen years she

developed a passion for lingerie. At nineteen, she began stripping in a local club where her family lived in Orange County, California. Bored with the unimaginative acts of other strippers, she developed her vintage style act that evolved into a unique burlesque act. Dita von Teese does one act in which she strips inside of an absinthe glass and rubs herself with a sponge that looks like a sugar cube. Of her romance with Marilyn Manson she said, "I brought a bottle of Absinthe on our first date. One minute we were just friends and the next we were on the floor... It's amazing how Absinthe makes you lose your inhibitions." back to top