

Bohemianism

“Lise, the Bohemian” by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. 1868

The loose hair, black, the hoop earring, the peasant style blouse falling off one shoulder, all evoke society’s view of gypsies. Bohemia is in what we now call Czechoslovakia, thought to be where many gypsies were. Gypsies were viewed both with sharp disapproval (and often outright persecution) because they didn’t fold into the society around them and with romanticism, because they didn’t fold into the society around them. The Romantic view was fed by the fact that gypsies tended to be nomads, traveling in caravans. (Ah, the open road, adventure, colorful clothing, musical flair, passion)



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohemianism>

The term Bohemian has come to be very commonly accepted in our day as the description of a certain kind of literary gypsy, no matter in what language he speaks, or what city he inhabits A Bohemian is simply an artist or "littérateur" who, consciously or unconsciously, secedes from conventionality in life and in art. (Westminster Review, 1862 ^[4])

*The impish American writer and Bohemian Club member, **Gelett Burgess**, who coined the word blurb among other things, supplied this description of the amorphous place called Bohemia:*

"To take the world as one finds it, the bad with the good, making the best of the present moment—to laugh at Fortune alike whether she be generous or unkind—to spend freely when one has money, and to hope gaily when one has none—to fleet the time carelessly, living for love and art—this is the temper and spirit of the modern Bohemian in his outward and visible aspect. It is a light and graceful philosophy, but it is the Gospel of the Moment, this exoteric phase of the Bohemian religion; and if, in some noble natures, it rises to a bold simplicity and naturalness, it may also lend its butterfly precepts to some very pretty vices and lovable faults, for in Bohemia one may find almost every sin save that of Hypocrisy. ...

His faults are more commonly those of self-indulgence, thoughtlessness, vanity and procrastination, and these usually go hand-in-hand with generosity, love and charity; for it is not enough to be one's self in Bohemia, one must allow others to be themselves, as well. ...

What, then, is it that makes this mystical empire of Bohemia unique, and what is the charm of its mental fairyland? It is this: there are no roads in all Bohemia!

One must choose and find one's own path, be one's own self, live one's own life.

(Aylloh, 1902^[15])

“Bourgeoisie”:

the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes. Therefore, anti-bohemian, romantics, ‘gypsies’ rebels, etc. Merriam Webster

So, to be bourgeois means, besides pertaining to the middle or merchant class, to have one’s principle desires centered on being comfortable, respectable, and safe: in accordance with the group. What happens to the authentic self in such a set of expectations?

from *The Guardian*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/bohemia-underground-david-hockney>

“The word [bohemia] and the concept have lost traction; but in the 19th and 20th centuries, the bohemian was a well-known figure, locked in a love-hate relationship with the philistine bourgeoisie.

Bohemians were artists against society, their art too far in advance of middle class taste to sell. As a result, these self-chosen outcasts were often penniless, yet they transformed their poverty into a costume of defiance, flaunting their rags and cast-offs. They were out to shock: the outrage of straight society was their lifeblood. (emphasis mine)

Some lived spartan lives devoted to new experiments in art, but others developed themselves as outrageous or eccentric characters, an unconventional way of life their sole artistic creation. Dedicated to failure, the bohemians soon discovered to their horror that their way of life was a huge success, speedily taken up and turned into a “lifestyle” by the industrial capitalism most of them despised. By the 1890s the bohemian districts of Paris had become tourist attractions and the artists who had lived in Montmartre were forced to flee an area transformed into a cheery parody of their outlaw dissidence.

Time and again commercial imitations, from George du Maurier’s bestseller, [Trilby](#), to Puccini’s [La Bohème](#) undercut the genuine bohemian way of life. The greedy mill of consumer capitalism devoured every new trend that came its way and sold it to the very people from whom the bohemians tried desperately to set themselves apart.

So from very early on bohemia was swathed in nostalgia. The “real” bohemia was always in the past. Suburban consumers could steal the bohemian style. It may prove harder to steal the bohemian soul. Bohemia, after all, is not a geographical location, but a state of mind. **To be a bohemian was to reject all conventional ways of looking at things, to explore the forbidden and to turn the world upside down, politically as well as artistically.**” (emphasis mine)

Bohemia, the real place—size and boundaries changed constantly over the centuries



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