

A Source of Meaning

Arts in the school and the culture.

OURS is an age of accomplishment, a time of unparalleled development. The telephone, radio and television have made communication almost instantaneous; the train, automobile and airplane have made travel rapid and comfortable; methods of machine fabrication have made possible an endless output of products at low cost; atomic fusion promises to make available unlimited energy for man's use. Not only are we feverishly continuing to explore our own world, but we are now venturing into space.

We have controlled—and in some instances obliterated—diseases that have scourged mankind from the beginning of time. No one of any sensitivity can fail to be moved at the number and variety of man's achievements, at his increasing knowledge about and control over nature. Equally, if not more impressive, has been the stunningly cumulative rate of recent

achievements. We expect that everything will continue to become larger, more costly and more productive.

The brief accounting above is only a small sample of recent accomplishments. Yet it is representative in that all the developments which are included are in physics, medicine and technology. It is areas such as these that have engaged the interest and energies of contemporary man—and his support, too. Scientific and technological pursuits have not only intrigued him as never before, but they have become enmeshed with his survival. So we view our fantastic achievements with reverence and dread; we are by no means certain that we can control our newly created strength. We are proud but uneasy, accomplished but not fulfilled.

It is true, of course, that not all of man's recent achievements are in science and technology; his genius is also manifest in humanistic pursuits. Painters, sculptors, playwrights, composers and dancers are active and productive, and it is to our credit that increasing

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attention is being paid to them and their work. Yet compared with the scientist, the extent to which the works of the artist engage us is profoundly different. Even the nature of technological achievement encourages support for technology. A suspension span on a bridge that is 500 feet longer than any built before is an immediately recognized accomplishment and is notable and newsworthy. The same is true of a first flight into space, a new altitude record, a new drug, a new method of production. In the scientific fields we generally have at hand criteria for judging at once the significance of a particular undertaking.

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No such criteria exist for evaluating accomplishments in the arts. Unprecedented size in a painting or sculpture is no measure of its merit. Although its dimensions may be used for publicity, few people are deluded into confusing size with quality. The significance of any work of art cannot immediately be assessed; only time will tell. The arts, depending as they do upon the constant development of new standards and styles (which usually involves the rejection of current or accepted standards), are only in a narrow sense cumulative in their development. The sciences are clearly cumulative so that not only are we able to assess at once the significance of developments but even to anticipate them.

But here is the problem: accomplishment is not fulfillment. Our technological age has given us an undreamed of power and abundance, but not spiritual serenity or inner harmony. As our control over nature increases, so do our fears. The means for living the good life are at hand, but we have failed to give the good life any valid meaning.

We have in the arts a source of meaning, for one of their major functions is that of giving value and meaning to life. Their bases are always human experiences. They serve no narrow useful purpose, for they are ends in themselves; they observe, comment, intensify, fulfill. They are directed, primarily, not to men's minds, but to their feelings. They tell us, or help us to discover, who and what we are and what we believe in. They mould our feelings and our vision. In the culture as a whole, the arts serve the vital function of providing subjective meanings for objective knowledge, in maturing emotions to ensure sane behavior. We have neglected the arts at our peril.

To a degree that is remarkable both in similarity and shortsightedness, the situation in the schools reflects the situation in the culture. Although there are some outstanding exceptions, the arts have been, especially during the past decade, under heavy pressure in school systems at both the elementary and secondary levels. Mathematics, the sciences and foreign languages have been given an increasing part of the school time. While art is still a part of the program in the elementary grades, the time devoted to it has been curtailed and competent help to the classroom teachers—and pupils—has been reduced or denied. Any required work in the arts past the eighth grade is rare, past the ninth grade, unheard of. In most senior high schools, it is practically impossible for a college-bound student to include an arts course in his program regardless of his interest or ability. We are thus denying to these young people the chief value-giving areas in the curriculum.

The effects of these pressures are powerfully stated by Macmurray:

Now, any education which is fully conscious of its function must refuse to treat human life as a means to an end. It must insist that its sole duty is to develop the inherent capacity for a full human life. All true education is education in living.

But the effect of concentrating upon the education of the intellect to the exclusion of the education of the emotional life is precisely to frustrate this purpose. . . . It will inevitably create an instrumental conception of life, in which all human activity will be valued as a means to an end, never for itself. When it is the persistent and universal tendency in any society to concentrate upon the intellect and its training, the result will be a society which amasses power, and with power the means to the good life, but which has no correspondingly developed capacity for living the good life for which it has amassed the means. . . . We have immense power, and immense resources: we worship efficiency and success; and we do not know how to live finely.¹

The emphasis on the arts in education must, at this point in history, be placed on their human and value-providing rather than on their technical or functional aspects. This does not mean that these latter are unimportant; only that they should be given a secondary role.

Value-Giving Emphases

What are some of these value-giving emphases? In as brief a statement as this, there is a danger of oversimplification because the necessary amplifications or qualifications are excluded. The reader will have to supply some of these himself. It should be pointed out, however, that each of the various arts areas, while having values in common, also have some that are unique. There are pro-

¹ John Macmurray. *Reason and Emotion*. London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1950. p. 75-76.

found differences to be found in the values deriving from music when taught as a performing art (as in singing or orchestral ensembles) and the visual arts with their emphasis on the creation of an original product. The subject matter that can be drawn on in dance is vastly different from that in painting. The following statements will, because of the author's background, apply chiefly to the visual arts.

In such highly expressive art activities as drawing, painting or modeling, a student has opportunity for intense personal statement to a degree not possible in more functional fields such as industrial or commercial design. In a world in which everyone is constantly bombarded by stimuli from a wide variety of sources which seek to mould one's feelings, a person must have a chance to clarify and state his own feelings. In a use-oriented culture, it is essential that all pupils perceive the importance of undertaking activities which serve no practical purpose but are pursued only as ends in themselves.

Through reacting in visual statements to one's environment, a person discovers the world. He becomes sensitized to the marvelous beauty of nature's forms, colors and textures, and to the wonders of man's creations. In the process of setting down what he sees and reacts to, he makes decisions that both reflect and form him. And, if allowed any freedom, his product is a projection of the values he holds. He discovers the world and makes it a part of himself; he discovers, knows and forms himself.

Being value statements, expressive products in the visual arts are threaded through with emotionalized reactions. In fact, no other area equals the arts in the opportunities for constructive involvement with one's emotions. Two

sketches may be identical in subject matter but worlds apart in content: a tree can be invested with strong, frail, benign, menacing, lonely, or loved qualities by an artist of any age.

The arts have no corner on creativity, but they are unsurpassed in the opportunities they offer for divergent thinking. And being creative with emotionally-laden material is different from being creative in highly objective areas.

The arts place premium on uniqueness and individuality. A picture which is a copy is worthless either in a classroom or in a museum. The only acceptable product of an art experience is one in which the ideas of the creator are given unique and aesthetically organized form. In our culture, the taking over by the machine of the fabrication of most products has reduced to a few articles those on which an individual leaves his direct imprint. In fact, the artist is one of the few workers in an industrialized society who alone controls his product. In a world threatened by regimentation and conformity, the importance of a curriculum area in which unique statement is demanded and in which a person is solely responsible for the form and content of his product, cannot be overestimated.

Structuring the Arts

How do we organize the arts in education? This question is as difficult as it is basic. There is not, within the creative arts, any built-in structure of content that could be used as a basis for program organization. Certain aspects of the arts do demand definite sequences. An example is found in the technical processes. In the graphic processes, one must prepare, ink and print a plate in that order, but these steps can only contribute tech-

nical, not artistic, excellence. In clay work, one must prepare, form, dry, fire, glaze, and then fire again if one is making a piece of pottery. But here again, this order is almost entirely a technical and only slightly, if at all, an aesthetic matter. Color theory is a tightly structured body of information, but knowing it is no insurance of good color usage. In fact, it probably has very little relationship to color effectiveness.

The subject matter of art offers no clue for organization. There is probably no more difficult subject for drawing than the human figure and it has been a favorite of great artists in most periods of history. But it is also the favorite subject of preschool and kindergarten children when they first make recognizable drawings. Now there is an enormous difference in quality between a five-year-old's drawing of a person and that of a mature artist, but the subject is identical. In art history, there is a chronological structure in dates. But knowing when a cathedral was built may have no relation to one's appreciation of it.

Role of Interests

Some bases for organization are provided by special and mature interests. Prolonged study of fields such as advertising or industrial design is certainly not to be undertaken before the last years of senior high school or junior college. When considered at these levels, the various factors involved in the fields can be identified and studied. Some processes which are complex or use heavy or dangerous materials such as welded sculpture or etching should also be left until students are reasonably mature.

Structure in the arts is not, then, to be found in the arts areas themselves, or at least not in any significant aspects

of them. The real structure is to be found in the experiences with which they deal. But this is highly individualized and scarcely apparent to a teacher. It is indeed only a highly mature student or a professional artist who is aware of the relations among his own various art experiences.

Yet, effective instruction in the arts must have unity which will give coherence to a series of experiences and this responsibility falls to the teacher. We know that general students cannot be turned loose with the general admonition to "create something." They must, somehow, be touched and given not only an awareness of their experiences which they can draw upon but also assurance that their experiences are worthy of being bases for creation. It is students' lack of faith in themselves which poses the greatest difficulty in art instruction.

Materials and Processes

When pupils' interests are still rather generalized, as in the elementary grades, a sensitive teacher can discover common interests and use them. But any activity which is used must be sufficiently open-ended so as to be useful to the variety of temperaments and experiences found in any class. Technical processes are a splendid focus for activities—as, for example, linoleum block printing—but the teacher must realize that the heart of the experience lies, not in the technical process, but in the sensitivity and intensity of the prints which the students create and in the effect of the experience on the student. A teacher also sees to it that in every class program there is consideration of activities involving various materials, subject matter, and approaches.

With more mature general students,

as in the secondary grades and junior college, a greater emphasis can be put upon materials and technical processes, for these challenge adolescents and young adults. Here, special and careful help needs to be given in skills and techniques, for with their critical skills developing at a much faster rate than their expressive skills, students at these levels are easily lost to the art class. But the increased potential of adolescents means that they should have opportunity for experiences of depth and intensity.

One of the most common—and harmful—practices in art teaching is reliance on a succession of superficial experiences. Students certainly are not touched by such practices; a superficial experience cannot be an art experience. Adolescents are capable of prolonged effort and the lives they lead can provide richly varied content for intense art production. If a student is deeply involved, his class experiences organize themselves, for he sees in every finished product the seeds of many potential succeeding ones. At this level, too, increasing diversification is possible within a classroom. In the junior college—and for select high school students—there should be some study of the philosophy and chronology of art, for the horizon of the student should be extended into the world of art.

But it should be repeated that the most useful bases of organization of art lie within the student rather than within the subject. Processes, level of difficulty, materials, all play their part in organizing and unifying the experiences of a class and the individuals in it, but these are always secondary. If the reservoirs of experience are tapped, the organization of art becomes infinitely effective and infinitely varied. The arts then make their essential contribution both to education and to life.

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