

*Emphasizing the*

## **Humanities in the Visual Arts Program**

THE teacher of the visual arts is confronted with a really exciting challenge when he works with faculty and parent groups who agree that the arts should play a continuous role in the general education program from kindergarten through the senior high school.

Such a situation is likely to exist only if the arts are understood as a broadly contributing area in daily living. Perhaps the most obvious needs can be met in the studio program where each child has opportunity to become personally involved in individual creative work. The faculty of the Ohio State University School has asked more of its arts program, however. Increasingly greater attention has been given to the role of the arts in providing a richer environment for school living.

Recently an experimental program has been developed in the junior high of University School for the purpose of furthering an appreciation and understanding of the arts. Generally speaking, the aim of the program might be best described as one of helping students to develop an active concern for the importance of the visual arts in their daily living. The environmental and incidental type of enrichment will always be a basic part of the arts program. There has been for

many years, however, a recognition of the fact that there is also a need for a continuous effort of a more structured nature in somewhat the same way that the well-established laboratory program in the arts contains both incidental and continuously structured aspects from the kindergarten through the twelfth grade.

### **Behaviorial Goals Are Curricular Guides**

We know that mere exposure to the arts is not enough. An awareness of the "process" of art or of the underlying meanings and relationships within the arts can best be developed through experiences chosen with the deliberate intention of stimulating certain types of attitudes and understandings.

Curricular experiences have been selected in terms of their potential influence in helping each student to behave in ways which indicate his growth toward:

Expression of interest in the general field of the arts

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- Active concern over the place of the arts in personal living
- Active concern over the place of the arts in public living
- Anticipation and enjoyment of experiencing something new to him in the arts, if not enjoyment of the art form itself
- Ability to value firsthand contacts with artists or with original works of art over secondary sources of information
- Ability to recognize the weaknesses as well as the values in various types of reproductions of art
- Ability to discriminate between informed opinion and personal prejudice in a critical discussion of the arts
- Knowledge of and respect for the arts in the local community
- Respect for the contemporary as well as the traditional in the development of the arts
- Understanding that a true respect for the traditional never involves copy of the surface aspects of the work
- Understanding of the complexity of detail which is combined to make the totality of a work of art
- Ability to see subject matter or surface form as only one aspect of the total aesthetic experience
- Ability to see the significant meaning which is expressed through a work of art
- Ability to accept difference in critical opinion as a challenge to further study rather than as a frustrating influence
- Ability to understand the artist as a human personality who is striving for expression in his own forms rather than as a creator of ultimate perfection
- Appreciation of the developmental pattern of growth in the life of an artist
- Appreciation of the process as well as of the product of the creative act
- Ability to find appropriate value in a variety of aesthetic experiences even though the completeness and quality of the works of art may vary greatly in degree
- Ability to use a larger and more meaningful vocabulary for the purpose of richer communication within the field of aesthetics
- Willingness to express personal feeling about the arts while keeping an open mind toward experiences which can help to make opinion more soundly based
- Becoming more personally involved in increasingly broader and deeper aspects of aesthetic living.

### A Point of View Is Basic

Obviously, in the development of a program of the visual arts which provides richly meaningful aesthetic experiences, there is no preconceived body of knowledge to be learned and, as a result, no preconceived sequence of material should be presented.

Looking at art is one of the fundamental experiences which is provided for the individual and the group. But looking at what and under what conditions? The original work is of course the work of art and whenever possible it should be seen and examined as such.

Local exhibits, traveling exhibitions, and local architecture help the student to understand the importance of such elements as material, brush stroke, surface texture, and scale. It is only after rich experience with the actual work that reproductions can be appreciated for what they are. It is only after such rich experiences that we can expect a child to look at a reproduction of a painting and to question why he cannot determine the type of paint which was used or the size of the canvas because he has learned that those things make a difference to him. If he has never looked at and felt the effects of hand-finishing on the stone of a great building, he can hardly be expected to want to see a detail when presented with an overall photograph of a building. If he has never compared sculpture of rough and polished stone or of metal selected so that it might weather by rust-

ing, he cannot be expected to look for surface detail in the slides which are presented in class. The teacher must, of course, be so well aware of the importance of seeing that he is able to select visual materials that make these qualities as obvious as possible when originals are not available.

Seeing involves much more than surface detail. The important aspect of looking at a work of art is to search for the significance for which the artist made it. From what background and under what circumstances was it created? Who was the artist and what kind of person was he? Why did he create what he did in the form in which we see it? Our best source of information is the artist, himself. We learn that he is an ordinary human being with some special insights and abilities. He can seldom explain any act or work as an exact cause and effect relationship. In fact, we learn from him that there is real danger in assigning verbal reasoning to everything we see.

We begin to sense that a work of art evolves from a complexity of circumstances, some of which we can identify and understand but which form a total experience that can be appreciated in a variety of ways from a variety of depths of involvement and viewpoint. Obviously, it is seldom possible to talk with the artist, but we may read what he has written or we may read interpretations of his statements written by people whom we know have studied his work with the greatest possible care and scholarship. Most often we find that with effort on our part the work of art speaks for itself. When we look at many works and compare one with another, we begin to see pattern and growth in the production of one man that could not be identified by looking at only one item. When we com-

pare a landscape by Constable with one of Van Gogh, we discover that the paintings are expressions of two entirely different views toward life and toward nature.

Learning to see and to understand require more than dependence on first guesses or on first impressions of pleasure or dislike. As we become more aware of the variety of aspects which must be considered and of the variety of interpretations which are possible, we begin to develop respect for the methods of research. We also begin to use some of the tools of the historical method so necessary to a student or critic of the arts.

As the student becomes involved in a program of rich looking experiences, he finds that he needs to undergo personal growth and change of attitude. He learns the importance of deep involvement on the part of the observer and the importance of approaching a new experience with an open and inquiring mind. He learns that a difference of critical opinion does not indicate superficial judgment or personal whim. He discovers the importance of informed judgment in the field of aesthetics and begins to feel the need of developing a vocabulary of the arts so that he can communicate with others through meaningful reference to artists and art forms. He learns to discriminate between experiences in the arts. He develops an understanding of the role of our small campus gallery in comparison with a larger and more comprehensive museum of the arts. He expects to find widely divergent values in a one-man show of the recent work of a local artist and in an exhibition of old masters in one of our nation's major art collections. He learns that understanding and appreciation are not necessarily related to personal enjoyment. But he also discovers

that after he loses his guilt feelings about not liking some aspect of the arts, understanding and enjoyment can grow together in a very natural and rewarding way.

The atmosphere for learning is a vital part of the experiences which are provided. When the following conditions were being met we felt that progress toward the general goals was assured.

Questioning and thinking were of greater importance than a statement of fact.

Student opinion was accepted, respected, and used as the basis for the development of deeper understanding.

The importance of informed opinion was beginning to be felt.

Student interest could redirect the selection of materials within the general structure of the program.

Interests and areas of study were being opened and broadened with no attempt to close them off as "finished."

In our field of concern students were beginning to feel themselves involved as active participants in the study.

The visual arts were being presented as a field for interesting discussion and study rather than as a system of facts to be learned.

### A Look Ahead

We feel that significant progress is being made toward defining a program of the visual arts which emphasizes the humanities. Nevertheless, we are challenged to build even more soundly in the future. As we broaden our concerns and as we find answers to new questions, we hope to be better able to share our ideas with other groups of professional people who are interested in working toward similar goals.

The first question which needs to be kept in mind is whether the stated goals are as well defined and as inclusive as

they need to be in order to serve as guidelines for the building of the program.

A second and more obvious question, or cluster of questions, involves the selection of materials and experiences for the structuring of the program. Are some materials so appropriate and so rich in their possibilities for value development that they might be collected into a resource file? Are some experiences so rich that there should be a provision made for regular inclusion in the program?

A third area of questioning which calls for further study and research involves the forms of assessment and evaluation appropriate to the program. How can informal observation of behavior be directed toward more productive ends? How can informal observation be recorded so that it can be of some cumulative use in the study of individual and group development?

One overall question which must eventually be answered concerns the placement and extent of the program in the total school curriculum. Should the extension proceed in a gradual way until the entire school program is involved? If one greater point of emphasis is retained, are the seventh and eighth grades the most likely placement for the attainment of the desired behavioral goals?

It has been interesting to discover that the success of the program has already led us to provide experiences more consciously at the sixth and ninth grade levels.<sup>1</sup> It soon becomes obvious that the school has a responsibility to respect and to further the development of patterns of behavior which it so intentionally nurtures.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the developing program see: Jeanne Orr. *An Experimental Program in the Visual Arts*. Columbus, Ohio: Center for School Experimentation, College of Education, Ohio State University, 1962. (Mimeo graphed, 37 p.)

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