The Case for Aesthetic Literacy

All students should learn the language of art to add meaning to their lives.

GEORGE SYKES
That most graduates of public schools have not acquired the skills and critical faculties needed for aesthetic literacy is one of the most glaring deficiencies of American education. The public's unawareness of this lapse represents a persistent misunderstanding of the arts and the role of aesthetic education in schools.

Aesthetic education refers not only to arts education programs in which talented or interested youths take art, music, drama, or other courses in the fine or performing arts. At best these studio-arts classes reach a minority of the total school population. Just as physical education classes are meant for all, not just athletes, so should aesthetic education be conceived. The Rockefeller Report, *Coming to Our Senses*, cogently makes this point:

We endorse a curriculum which puts "basics" first, because the arts are basic, right at the heart of the matter. And we suggest not that reading be replaced by art but that the concept of literacy be expanded beyond word skills.

One argument for expanded art programs in elementary and secondary schools is that graduates will be adult consumers of the arts—the museum and concert-goers of tomorrow—and should have some cultural experiences in school. While endorsing this view, I propose that aesthetic literacy encompasses much more, involving modes of perception and understanding that enable those who possess them to have a vivified sense of self and the world. Aesthetic education, in other words, embodies the qualitative dimension of life, which should be as much a part of the curriculum as vocational training and other more "practical" concerns.

The arts have never been considered more than peripheral subjects in most schools because they have not, at least until recently, been central to the larger society. There are many diverse historical and cultural explanations for the long-standing low status of the arts: the Puritan admonition of the arts as sinful, the anti-intellectualism of a nation more concerned with conquering a continent, the arts perceived as the exclusive domain of the rich. Schools are expressions of the societies they serve; if art has been considered an ornament, not a necessity, it is not hard to see why art programs have been relegated to second-class status in American schools.

Beyond that, schools have been organized around principles of scientific management and business organization that have limited sensitivity to the arts. The recent emphasis on behavioral objectives and the back-to-basics movement, combined with declining enrollments, school closings, and tight budgets, has made the prospects for aesthetic education less sanguine than ever. It is not that the practical, product-oriented education of measurable outcomes is not important, but to argue that a balanced curriculum demands that the "three R's" be humanized. Otherwise, American schools will become the utilitarian repositories of facts Charles Dickens so memorably satirized in the opening of his novel *Hard Times*:

Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!

While most students will not become artists, they can be taught to respond to

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Beyond visceral reactions limited re
crucial. Without language, a work of art
the classroom? The key conceptual insight in aes-
thetic education would seem to be that the arts are process rather than product-
oriented. Too often, in art and music ap-
preciation courses, or in English lit-
classes, the arts are taught as finished products—completed symphonies,
paintings, and poems. Students learn "about" the products of culture much as they learn "about" the Great War of
1914. But if students are to truly engage in the arts—and aesthetic education demands engagement—they need to be
brought closer to the conditions in
which art is created.
Picasso spoke of painting as "the re-
sult of a series of destructions." The
open-ended, unpredictable stages of the
creative process are attested to by many
artists. Ben Shahn, in his book The
Shape of Content, discusses the "biogra-
phy" of one of his paintings. Titled
"Allegory," it depicts a flaming, lion-
like beast hovering over four prostrate
children. The immediate source of the
painting, according to Shahn, was a fire
in Chicago in which a black man lost
four children. But in the process of
painting his picture many other ideas
and approaches suggested themselves:
childhood memories of two fires involv-
ing his family in Russia, thoughts of
other disasters, images of wolves and
other beasts, universal symbols of fire,
other images of injustice and poverty.
As the painting evolved, most of these
ideas were discarded. The artist, says
Shahn, is two people at the same time,
the imaginer or producer, but also
critic—and "the critic within the artist
is a ruthless destroyer." 13

If creating art involves dialogue be-
tween imaginer and critic within the
artist, students, given direction by
the teacher, might also engage in dia-
logue with a work of art. Why did
Shahn choose the images he depicted?
Why did he title his painting "Alle-
gory"? What are other symbols of fire
and destruction? Students could be
asked to create their own symbolic rep-
resentations of fire with other asso-
ciations—in the Promethian legend,
for example, fire symbolizes creative in-
elligence rather than destructiveness.
Students could write or illustrate their
own myths, fables, or allegories. The paint-
ing could be related to other art forms,
such as Langston Hughes' poem, "Rain-
sin in the Sun," which similarly treats
themes of racial injustice.

The point is that art should open stu-
dents to the manifold possibilities inher-
ent in the creative process rather than
being presented as a "given." Students
need to be given the tools to become
responsive critics themselves.

Ideally, students should have a wide
range of art experiences—attending
plays, dance programs, jazz sessions,
museum exhibitions, and so on—and
artists should be invited to come to the
schools. But such direct experiences,
invaluable as they are, remain limited
for many students because of geogra-
phy, expense, and other factors. There
needs to be frequent contact with the
arts in the daily classroom.

American studies, western civiliza-
tion, and humanities courses, for exam-
ple, have encouragingly integrated the
arts into their curricula. However, the
arts in such courses are often presented
as cultural products or reflections of a
cultural epoch without also attending to
them as autonomous works. In social
studies and foreign language classes a
stronger cultural emphasis would be
welcome. (Long remembered is the
rainy day my French teacher in high
school showed her Impressionist slides,
the only exposure to art I had in high
school or college. Yet, out of this lim-
ited experience came a lifetime love of
painting—as good an example as any
that the educational "payoff" cannot
always be determined, measured, or
predicted by a unit test.)

In English classes students should
engage in writing poems, short stories,
and other kinds of writing to express
their ideas and feelings but also to un-
derstand better the expressive power of
language. Students can be asked to
sketch their environment in many
courses so that they can more clearly see
the world around them and gain a mea-
sure of visual literacy. Teachers, in
other words, need themselves to be re-
sponsive to the aesthetic qualities of
their subjects and to allow students to
confront them in their classrooms.

Engaging students in the joy and dis-
covering of the arts is a difficult task at
best. So many factors militate against
aesthetic responsiveness in schools: an-
tiseptic classrooms, the pressure of
grades, rigid schedules, a curriculum
dominated by predetermined behavioral
objectives, and, worst of all, wide-
spread indifference to the arts in and out
of school. What is at stake is not just
another course in the curriculum but the
recognition that the qualitative dimen-
sion of life, the sense of who we are as
human beings, has a place in general
education.

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2Elliot W. Eisner, Educating Artistic Vi-
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3Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (New