

# *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.<sup>1</sup>

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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aesthetic levels of meaning in literature, music, painting, film, sculpture, architecture, and other manifestations of art. Once gained, aesthetic responsiveness does more than open up a lifetime of experiences in the arts. As the ability to read provides a foundation for learning, aesthetic literacy allows individuals to grasp more fully the significance of their lives, opening up possibilities of selfhood and self-renewal that would otherwise not be available.

Elliot Eisner has reminded us that the arts involve more than one type of learning:

Artistic learning deals with the abilities to create art forms; it deals with the development of powers of perception, and it deals with the ability to understand art as a cultural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

As many writers have pointed out, arts education in American schools has been almost wholly devoted to the first—the productive—level of the arts. While playing in the band, acting in a school play, or making a bowl in ceramics class are worthwhile activities in themselves, they will not necessarily yield the cultural or critical awareness that aesthetic literacy demands. For the general student all three areas would seem to be important, but the ability to perceive aesthetic forms—understanding the language of art—is especially crucial. Without language, a work of art is not likely to communicate anything beyond visceral reactions—limited response at best.

But how can teachers fully engage their students in the arts? What should the relationship be between doing and appreciation? Can students learn the language of art, such as the metaphorical quality of poetry, without engaging in the process itself, that is, in writing poems? How can students be opened to the particular qualities of a work of art? What activities will result in the greatest responsiveness to aesthetic forms that will stay with learners after they leave the classroom?

The key conceptual insight in aesthetic education would seem to be that the arts are process rather than product-oriented. Too often, in art and music appreciation 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 result 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 “biography” 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 involving 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.”<sup>2</sup>

If creating art involves dialogue between imaginer and critic within the artist, students, given direction by the teacher, might also engage in dialogue with a work of art. Why did Shahn choose the images he depicted? Why did he title his painting “Allegory”? What are other symbols of fire and destruction? Students could be asked to create their own symbolic representations of fire with other associations—in the Promethian legend, for example, fire symbolizes creative intelligence rather than destructiveness. Students could write or illustrate their own myths, fables, or allegories. The painting could be related to other art forms, such as Langston Hughes’ poem, “Raisin in the Sun,” which similarly treats themes of racial injustice.

The point is that art should open students to the manifold possibilities inherent 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 geography, expense, and other factors. There needs to be frequent contact with the arts in the daily classroom.

American studies, western civilization, and humanities courses, for example, 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 limited 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 understand 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 measure of visual literacy. Teachers, in other words, need themselves to be responsive to the aesthetic qualities of their subjects and to allow students to confront them in their classrooms.

Engaging students in the joy and discovery of the arts is a difficult task at best. So many factors militate against aesthetic responsiveness in schools: antiseptic classrooms, the pressure of grades, rigid schedules, a curriculum dominated by predetermined behavioral objectives, and, worst of all, widespread 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 dimension of life, the sense of who we are as human beings, has a place in general education. ■

<sup>1</sup>David Rockefeller, Jr., Chairman, *Coming to Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts in American Education*. The Arts, Education and Americans Panel (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Elliot W. Eisner, *Educating Artistic Vision* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup>Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 58.

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