

Why the Arts Are Essential

Through great works of art, students can gain pivotal insights into their common political and cultural heritage and, at the same time, into their own personal struggles.

Reporting on the "unlikely success" of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, *The New York Times* titled a summer article "Sometimes a Serious Book Wins the Best-Seller Game." Both Bloom and Hirsch powerfully call Americans back to our cultural legacy. The cheering fact is that everywhere about us in recent years we have seen a yearning for such a reaffirmation, a quickened appetite for a cultural and educational restoration.

In my first major study as Secretary of Education, a report on elementary education titled *First Lessons*, I wrote that "the arts are an essential element of education, just like reading, writing, and arithmetic. . . . Music, dance, painting, and theater are keys that unlock profound human understanding and accomplishment" (p. 35).

Arts education, however, is weakened if we fail to understand its serious place in the education of our children. Now, I rather like Chesterton's dictum that anything worth doing is worth doing badly, so of course it is important that all children have first-



Great works of art, such as Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, illuminate the past and help us understand the present.

hand experience of the arts—of painting, of performing in a dramatic production or on a musical instrument. Yet as I wrote in *First Lessons*, "Finger-painting and playing on flutophones may be terrific ways of getting young children to try art—but curricula which feature such activities to the exclusion

of Mozart and Michelangelo underestimate students' capacities" (p. 35).

We all would benefit by seeing arts education in a large context. Not only do the arts convey in part what it means to be human; the arts also give coherence, depth, and resonance to other academic subjects. One of the

primary tasks of our schools should be to train our young people to know, love, and respond to the products of the human spirit in music, dance, drama, and the visual arts. Surely it must be possible for them to emerge from their years of schooling with their eyes, ears, heads, and hearts attuned to what is lastingly beautiful in their cultural heritage. Let me suggest four reasons why great works of art are part of our common culture and why it is important that children learn about them.

First, great works of art form an incomparable record of our past, the evolution of our society. The ancient cave paintings of France and Spain give us a glimpse of the Paleolithic world. The Cathedrals of Notre Dame and Canterbury represent for us the mind of medieval man. Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* shows us the determination that caused and won the American Revolution. These things are a reflection, or a manifestation, of the history of our civilization and its achievements.

All students, then, should know some of these works for a simple reason: they cannot understand the present if they have no understanding of the past. If we cut them off from our culture's past, we automatically make youth aliens in their own culture. And that makes them ill-equipped to succeed in or even understand the world around them.

Second, great works of art are part of our common culture in that they are among the finest expressions of the values we cherish as a people. And as such, they are a principal means of transmitting those values from generation to generation. In the lines of the Parthenon we find respect for order and harmony. We learn something about love for knowledge and rational

inquiry in Holbein's *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, about compassion and forgiveness in Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. We learn something about the power of expression in a Picasso or a van Gogh, or in Beethoven's music. And we learn about the sacredness of our freedom in the Statue of Liberty.

President Eliot of Harvard once said that in the campaign for character, no auxiliaries are to be refused. It seems to me that we should not refuse art as an ally in teaching our children about character or about the principles we Americans have in common. This is not to say that all art is didactic. Nor is it to say that art should be used to indoctrinate. But we can say that frequently great art implicitly communicates the beliefs we share and the character traits we value. Like great literature and great lessons from history, we should not hesitate to hold up works of art as examples.

Ralph Ellison once wrote that many American children—from all backgrounds—have not "been trained sufficiently to preserve those values which sustained their forefathers and which constitute an important part of their heritage." The values that we succeed in transmitting to a child are twice as likely to predict success in school as the child's family income. It is obvious to me, then, that art can be a great ally in the education of our children.

Third, art is an important part of the common culture because it, like the humanities, provides us with salient examples of the breadth, depth, and complexity of human nature. And art, no less than philosophy or science, addresses a challenge to the intellect. The great works of music, sculpture, painting, engraving, and all other forms of artistic expression engage the mind, teaching lessons about order,

proportion, and genius. Is it difficult to imagine that some children will first come to appreciate their own capacity for precise thought and economy of expression not simply in literature or science, but in the grace and beauty of art? Like the humanities, great art can give us a feeling for virtue and excellence, as in Michelangelo's perseverance in transforming the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

My fourth and final reason for teaching art as a part of the common culture is really an appeal for the aims of democracy. Our country was founded so that our citizens could enjoy in freedom the best of civilization. The great works of art are among those products; and we should offer to all American students, wealthy and disadvantaged alike, the opportunity to know them. That legacy of the Founders is their common birthright, as equal shareholders in American democracy.

We live at a perplexing moment, when some claim that our artistic traditions are exhausted, while others claim that art has never been more needed, both as a source of pleasure and as a source of synthesis in our fragmented world. In my judgment, our artistic traditions are far from exhausted; art is indeed sorely needed, both in education and in American culture at large, as a quintessential expression of what we are as a civilization. □

Reference

Bennett, William J. *First Lessons: A Report on Elementary Education in America*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1986.

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