

I N S E A

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION THROUGH ART

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"THE FUTURE OF ART EDUCATION"

Opening Address by:

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This First General Assembly of the International Society for Education through Art is an event which many of those present today will welcome as the formal recognition of a cause for which three generations of teachers and philosophers have fought with fervour. There are many causes that have been equally long in fruition - we might say, indeed, that the greatest causes call for the most persistent effort, and that the greatest cause of all, which is the cause of universal peace and charity, is still infinite in its perspectives. This cause of ours, though subordinate to the greater cause entrusted to Unesco, does represent, in our view, a primary or basic necessity, a bedrock without which the structure of universal peace would be insecure. We believe that education through art is education for peace - that it is a method of education that predisposes human beings to creative and therefore peaceable activities, an education that maintains between human beings relationships of mutual aid and at the same time prevents or excludes relationships of mutual hatred.

In the modern world it was Schiller who first enunciated the truths upon which our philosophy of education is based; and Schiller's is the first name to be evoked with pride on such an occasion as this. He perceived, even more clearly than Plato, that there can be no formative achievement in education that does not work within each unfolding personality as spontaneity and creativity. Schiller was the first to realize that each stage of growth in the child is a discovery of form within the free play of sensuous perceptions, and that only as the individual proves capable of enjoying the beauty of form, does it prove possible to establish freedom in the State and ethical virtue in the Race. "To grant freedom by means of freedom is the fundamental law of this kingdom".

We could evoke many other names on this occasion, but our present duty is to look forward rather than backwards, and to consider in what directions, and with what practical aims, the International Society that we have founded is henceforth to develop.

The principles that animated those who were instrumental in bringing the Society to its present fledgling state were set forth in a Preamble to the Draft Constitution. They were six in number, and I should like to repeat them now, adding my own commentary on each in turn, with the hope that the more clearly and the more realistically we hold these beliefs, the more likely we are to guide the affairs of our Society towards the accomplishment of its aims throughout our community of nations.

The first statement of the Preamble, "that ART is one of man's highest forms of expression and communication", is a modest truism as it stands. I would rather say that there is no form of expression that does not owe its effectiveness precisely to its form. Whether we think of expression as a system of linguistic signs, or as images that appeal directly to the senses, art, as the shaping power of the imagination, is involved. The scientists claim to have invented machines that will do our thinking for us. But these are machines into which are fed matters of fact. The machine may mince and masticate these facts until it produces another all-embracing fact - a statement or a statistic beyond human computation. But man is not a machine and his most human characteristic is his imagination - a faculty that enables him to dissociate the image from the object, to combine images arbitrarily, and in this manner create fantasies that lift mankind above the world of facts, into the world of aspiration. Man in his most human moments dwells in a phantasmagoric realm where magic prevails, a magic that conjures out of the void that surrounds him, images of a new reality, communicating hope and exaltation and joy.

Our second belief is that "creative activity is a basic need common to all people". This need is basic because it is creative of signs and symbols, of those elements by which men communicate one with another. How, we may ask, did man first become conscious of the form and limits of the visible universe? Conscious, too, we might ask, of the intangible realities beyond his powers of rational conception? Man's expanding consciousness of reality, we must answer, was step by step, the creation of symbolic forms to represent feelings and intuitions; the creation, that is to say, of plastic images that correspond convincingly to the nature of those feelings and intuitions. In this manner the first words were created, as poetry; in this manner the first songs and dances were created as ritual, and in this manner the first pictorial images were projected as sculpture and painting. These primal actions of symbolic form made possible myth and magic; made possible the first science and the first philosophy. But always the primal act was creative, an act of art; and it is our belief that the primal act is still an act of art, and that all human progress whatsoever depends on the preservation of creative vision and metaphoric skill in the individual and in a people.

From these general considerations we pass in the third principle enunciated in the Preamble to a very precise claim in the spheres of psychology and education. It is stated that "education through art is a natural means of learning at all periods of the development of the individual, fostering values and disciplines essential for full intellectual, emotional, and social development of human beings in a community". I have emphasized some of the words in this statement that call for particular comment, but the general and all-inclusive nature of the claim should not be missed. We must dissociate ourselves entirely from any suggestion that our Society is concerned in some narrow professional sense with what is usually known as "art education" - that is to say, with the education of a minority for the vocation or profession of artist. It is equally important - indeed, since there is more ambiguity at this point, even more important - to make it clear that we are not especially concerned with methods of teaching art as a separate subject in the school curriculum. We have, indeed, our views on such problems, but they are only incidental to our fundamental belief in the general educative value of the creative activity as such, and our claim is, in

fact, that an education based on creative activities is a natural means of learning - I personally would say the natural means of learning. This claim is based on the fact that learning is a psycho-somatic process. We may memorize facts by rote, by mechanical repetition, but we learn to do and make by imitation and habit, and our aptitude in such learning is not accumulative but selective, and selective along a progressive scale determined by the perception of economy and rhythm of movement, and of balance and proportion in form. Discipline might be defined as the acquisition of an instinctive sense of form, of form in every sphere of activity - even in logical thought and mathematics. We can, of course, learn a partial discipline, and thus be partially educated - a mathematician may be clumsy with his fingers, and philosophers do not usually, as Nietzsche would have them, dance on light toes. But our claim is that an education through art is a complete education, an education that would foster all the values and disciplines essential for a full intellectual, emotional and social development. The lop-sided specialist would become a thing of the past, as monstrous as a man born with one eye.

This is not the occasion to pursue such speculations into their psychological details, but that a correlation of physical and psychical faculties is possible and indeed natural was as obvious to an ancient philosopher like Plato as it is to a modern scientist like Pavlov. Discipline is nothing but a conditioning of the human organism to some pattern of action or habit. We can condition the human being to an inhuman pattern of tyranny or slavery; we can also leave the human being to condition himself to a chaos of sensations. But we claim that there is a universal pattern of beauty, and that if human beings are conditioned to this pattern, then they will develop serene hearts and harmonious intellects, and live at peace with each other in a society that is itself an expression of natural order. It is because the patterns of aesthetic discipline are universal that their realization promotes social harmony. Beauty, in so far as we serve it, is Unity.

The fourth principle of the Preamble is merely another way of describing the social aspect of education through art. By developing ease and harmony of expression between man and man, we learn to trust one another, to share experiences, and generally to develop that community of thought and aspiration which constitutes a culture. We have only to look back on the great cultures of the past to realize that the force that kept them together for so long was a creative force - they flourished so long as they continued to express themselves in vital symbols. But when these symbols became clichés, and men became blind to beauty and originality in thought and expression, then immediately the culture declined and by an infallible law of human history, the civilization then perished. Art is not, as it is often called, a grace of civilization: it is the rhythmic beating of the heart of a civilization, and when that beat loses its rhythm, the civilization is doomed.

The fifth clause of the Preamble is concerned with co-operation and coordination, and in its wording it perhaps implies a division of education into independent domains of discipline and research a little at variance with the inclusive claims made for the discipline of art in the third clause. It is true, of course, that in the day-to-day conduct of a school or college, one class must be taught history and another geometry, and that these two domains of study have little or nothing in common. But art is not a third domain to be

combined with each independently: it is an all-pervasive method of learning that unites all studies to a common discipline. It can dramatize both history and geometry, and make of every subject a spontaneous activity, a creative play in which the learning comes because it must, as the mind's response to rhythmic movement or to significant pattern.

Finally, we come to the belief in what we are doing here today, and intend to do in the future - the belief that we can, by appropriate organization, by propaganda and by example, demonstrate the truth of our beliefs to the rest of the world. We shall, in our meetings this week, discuss ways and means of putting our beliefs into practice, and I cannot anticipate our decisions. I shall again confine myself to some general observations of principle.

Our first duty is to remember that we have been established with the aid and advice of Unesco, under the assumption that we are dedicated to the same ideals of international co-operation and world unity. We are here to exchange ideas, to report sectional progress, with the hope that all may benefit from the contribution of each. Our principles are universal, not only in the philosophical sense of that word, but also in the literal sense. Art, in spite of many claims to the contrary, is not nationalistic - least of all the art of children. Art in its origin is a human faculty, and from prehistoric times until our own time, has been manifested in symbols of universal validity. It is true that these symbols may incidentally acquire the attributes of a particular race or religion, and that Buddhist art, for example, may seem as strange and unmeaning to a Christian as Christian art may seem to a Buddhist. But this is due in each case to the intervention of a veil of prejudice - a veil which we should strive to remove, not in order to show that art is everywhere the same, but rather that it has two aspects, the eternal and the temporal, which can be easily distinguished when the veil is lifted. Perhaps the most surprising discovery of those who have studied children's art in recent years is that art begins, genetically speaking, by being universal, and only gradually acquires a differentiation according to nation or creed. Up to the age of seven, or even nine, no specific distinction can be observed between the drawings of children from any part of the world. The child is human, and already in childhood expresses itself in a universal language of symbols. This seems to me to be a striking demonstration of our common humanity to which sufficient attention has not been given. Surely such a basic unity of feeling and expression in the children of all nations points to a solid psychological basis upon which we may base a human world united by natural bonds.

This is merely one illustration of the kind of truth we can establish by scientific research and disseminate throughout the world. But we shall need institutions in which such research can be carried out, and men and women prepared to work in such institutions. I do not think that we can conduct the proper business of this Society merely by meeting in an annual congress and listening to a number of unco-ordinated papers. The people who can attend such congresses are an arbitrary minority, leading busy lives in diverse fields, and though cultural contacts are always valuable, especially on the personal level, the need in the present case is for a programme of research and experiment on an international scale. I would say that in order to prove our thesis - the thesis that creative activity should be the basis of all education - we need more than

institutes of research. We need experimental schools in different parts of the world where our theories can be put to the test. But before we can establish the schools we must find the teachers, and the first necessity is therefore a training college for teachers in this new method of education.

I must not give the impression that nothing has yet been done. On the contrary, almost in every country of the world one finds a small group attempting to realize our ideals. I know, from personal contacts, that such groups exist here in France, in Great Britain, in the United States of America, in Canada, in New Zealand, in Germany, in Austria, in Italy, in Brazil, in Cuba, in Argentina and in Japan. I am sure that our colleagues here in Unesco could add to the list. We already represent, therefore, a world-wide movement in education, and our immediate duty is to co-ordinate the efforts of all these separate groups. We must give encouragement to those who struggle along in an unsympathetic environment, and we must begin to build up from our common experience a fund of knowledge that will give irresistible force to our arguments.

We shall need funds - substantial funds - and I do not hesitate to use this opportunity to appeal to those foundations of great wealth that have been established with an educational directive. Those directives are often of very wide scope - they are not limited to one country nor usually to any particular aspect of education. But attitudes to education tend to fall into conventional categories, and the attitudes of these foundations in this respect are no exception. Education, it is assumed, is either primary or secondary, religious or secular, humanistic or scientific. One body of opinion seeks in education a solution for illiteracy, another a solution for international misunderstanding, another the prevention of juvenile delinquency or crime. To the representatives of these sectional interests it will no doubt seem that we too represent a sectional interest, that of art in education. But our claim is precisely that we do not represent such a sectional interest, but that we seek to rebase all forms of education on a new principle, or at least, that we would introduce into all forms of education a new method - education through art. We believe that we have good psychological grounds for maintaining that the methods of education should be reorientated, so that the full range of human faculties, sensuous no less than intellectual, creative no less than constructive, should be brought into play, developed harmoniously, to the end that all men conform to the patterns of beauty, which alone in this world of conflicting interests, are objective, universal, and unitive.

We must reject with all our force the possible charge that we are impractical idealists. That we are idealists we proudly admit; but our idealism is grounded on evidence no less than on aspiration, and for every belief we will present a base of irrefutable facts. We cannot produce a new race of angels in this wicked world; the raw material we have to mould is imperfectly constituted. But even the wicked, we believe, will relent if submitted to aesthetic discipline, and moral virtue is the positive result of habitual enjoyment of beauty. As Schiller said in his last eloquent letter: Man is finally not content that things should please him: "he wants to give pleasure himself, at first indeed only through what belongs to him, but finally through what he is". "Just as form gradually approaches him from without, in his dwelling, his furniture, his clothing, it begins finally to take possession of Man himself, to transform at first only the outward but

ultimately the inward man. The lawless leap of joy becomes a dance, the shapeless gesture a graceful and harmonious miming speech; the confused noises of perception unfold themselves, begin to obey a rhythm and weld themselves into a song." It is the triumph of form over material chaos, over moral chaos, and finally over social chaos. "Though need may drive Man into society", Schiller continues, "and Reason implant social principles in him, Beauty alone can confer on him a social character. Taste alone can bring harmony into society, because it establishes harmony in the individual. All other forms of perception divide a man, because they are exclusively based either on the sensuous or on the intellectual part of his being; only the perception of the Beautiful makes something whole of him, because both his natures must accord with it. All other forms of communication divide society, because they relate exclusively either to the private sensibility or to the private skilfulness of its individual members, that is, to what distinguishes between one man and another; only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all." (Twenty-seventh letter, trans. Reginald Snell.)

Such is the universal principle or natural law upon which we base our philosophy of education. We are secure in our possession of that philosophy, but it will be an immense task, first to convince the sceptical majority, who hold a different philosophy of education; and second, to work out the practical methods of our aesthetic education. We are met here in a First General Assembly to work out a practical programme of procedure. A list of ten propositions has already been circulated, and other propositions may be added at our discretion. These propositions already cover a very wide field of organization, publication, propaganda and research. They need a supporting structure of men and women dedicated to this work; and those dedicated persons need the support of many national and of one international institute, through which permanent contact may be maintained, and by means of which all individual members of the Society may contribute effectively to the single purpose of the Society, which is, through the unifying power of the Arts, to seek to establish universal peace.

Herbert Read