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The teaching of Visual Arts in General Education
in the United States of America

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THE TEACHING OF VISUAL ARTS IN GENERAL EDUCATION
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

This report will describe the present position with regard to the teaching of the visual arts in the schools of the United States of America. It will, of necessity, be superficial, because of the limitations to length of the document. It would be well, at the outset, to define the scope of this report. First, it will deal almost entirely with education in the visual arts in the elementary and secondary grades in public schools; that is, with the art education provided for children between the ages of six and seventeen in tax-supported schools. This is not to ignore the existence of many private and parochial institutions, but they provide for only a minority of school-age children. College and university education will be discussed, chiefly in relation to the training of teachers, although some brief mention will be made of other developments at that level.

Secondly, this report will describe present conditions under which teaching in visual arts is carried forward, and the forces and agencies that are fostering or impeding development. In discussing major emphases in the teaching of visual arts, however, the report will deal with those directions and developments in instruction which are considered to typify desirable practice and, in that respect, will be somewhat in advance of typical practice. It should be kept in mind that in the United States, with its varied geography and its broad range of economic and cultural resources, there is also great variation in the quality and character of the instruction provided in art education. This is further heightened by the policy of decentralized control which characterizes the American educational system.

Third, it will deal almost entirely with art in general education, not with technical or specialized training for talented students.

Statistics will play a minor rôle as few exist regarding instruction in visual arts. Generalizations will be based upon prolonged and close observation of art instruction over large areas of the country, not only by the author but by other art educators. These observations are

presented with assurance of their validity, but they cannot be backed up with objective statistics because these do not exist in any comprehensive form. Several projects are under way to assemble such data but the results are not yet available. Though the author is indebted to many others in forming his beliefs and his outlook, he nevertheless assumes full responsibility for all statements which appear in this report.

The Cultural and Educational Climate Regarding Instruction in Visual Arts

At present, two opposing sets of conditions exist within the United States which determine the educational and cultural climate in which instruction in visual arts in schools is proceeding. These must be briefly reviewed in order to understand, not only the advances and difficulties encountered in arts programmes, but also the reasons for many of the current emphases.

During the past six years, since the close of World War II, art education has passed through a period of significant development. As if in response to some compelling need, greater numbers of people than ever before are turning to the arts. In adult education programmes, for example, enrollment in arts classes exceeds that in any other area. This development does not find its accurate counterpart in school systems because children are not allowed to select their activities with the same freedom as are adults. But, nevertheless, there has been a conspicuous increase in the place accorded to art in school programmes and in the numbers of people responsible for carrying it out.

Support of art activities has come from a variety of sources. The general educator is becoming aware of the fact that the visual arts are a basic component of the total educational experience. Child psychologists and developmentalists are urging that a healthy and well-developed personality cannot be achieved without the creative growth and insights provided by the arts that deepen the emotions, clarify meanings, and produce individuals of dignity and integrity. The accelerated tempo of our mechanization, our movement toward greater standardization in all aspects of life, and the piecemeal nature of most jobs have all tended to dehumanize our culture, to suppress or ignore the contributions or importance of the individual, and to rob most people of the deep personal and social satisfactions that come from their labours. These factors have been critical in giving rise to a growing demand for and participation in art and art activities. In addition, the present world tension, the cold war, the pervasive fear of atomic attack, the dissonance over our country's rôle in world affairs, all present the individual with the necessity of finding some activity which will give him stability and balance.

Many of these forces and conditions which have caused people to turn to the arts have also, however, been strong deterrents to their development. Even though a predominantly scientific and technological age has the greatest need for the humanizing contributions of the arts, the prestige of technology hampers their widespread acceptance. Furthermore, a culture which is preoccupied chiefly with material accomplishment and with raising an already high standard of living will accept with difficulty the personal, spiritual and emotional satisfactions which are the primary contributions of the arts.

These factors also basically affect education in visual arts. At present, a vastly increased percentage of our national income is going for military and related expenditures. Indeed, the whole of education is affected as competition increases for what is left of the tax dollar. Because the arts cannot contribute in any directly demonstrable way to defense, their support in the schools is further jeopardized.

The times are difficult but still hopeful, for the progress which has been made during recent years is proof of the vitality of the arts in education. They must assume an increasingly aggressive rôle even though the competitive struggle for recognition into which the arts are thrown makes demands upon them for which they are, by nature, ill-equipped. The case for art education will rest, however, on the validity of the contribution which it makes to the lives of growing boys and girls.

The Structure and Control of American Education

There are three main levels - elementary, secondary and college - in the American educational system. Elementary and secondary education, in most instances, extends over a twelve-year period, although the number of years assigned to each may vary. In some systems, the elementary level includes grades one through eight; secondary, nine through twelve. In other systems, the elementary level extends from grades one through six; junior high school, seven through nine; and senior high school, ten through twelve. In many communities kindergartens are included for five-year olds and in some there are pre-schools for younger children. There is also a growing movement to extend upward the system of public education by adding a thirteenth and fourteenth year to the senior high school. These two years can also be counted as the first two years of college for students studying for a degree. Practically all schools are co-educational.

In most instances classes in the elementary grades are under the direction of a classroom teacher who is responsible for all or almost all of the learning experiences of the pupils, art included. In a minority of schools, however, a specially trained teacher is responsible for art instruction. At the secondary and college levels instruction is given over to specialists and, instead of one teacher, a student may have five or six in one day.

The control of education is almost entirely decentralized, each community having its own school board which manages and regulates the school system. The states have considerable responsibility for the school programme and in addition look after such matters as attendance laws, certification of teachers, and building regulations. Curricular materials which are helpful to teachers are also published by many of the states. The federal government exerts no control over education.

This decentralization means that each state and community has considerable freedom in setting up school programmes. If there is great variation, there is also a healthy flexibility. Increasingly, the individual teacher is being given greater freedom to determine the kinds of experiences which are carried on in his class. This is true especially in art, where it is urged that the experiences and interest of young people be used as the basis for activities. Thus the rôle of the teacher is crucial in determining what the art programme will be.

Major Emphases in Education in Visual Arts in the United States

Some of the present main emphases in education in the visual arts in the United States are here presented and discussed. These are found very often in well-developed school programmes and are characteristic of present trends.

The development of a healthy personality is the primary concern. The children who attend our schools should emerge as healthy, well adjusted individuals, who have faith in their individuality and integrity, have emotional depth and stability, and place the highest premium on those human values and feelings that are fundamental to any real culture. They must be individuals who can get along with others, who are capable of respect, devotion and love. These are, indeed, concerns not only of education in visual arts but of all education. But the contributions of the visual arts to such an outcome are fundamental.

Experience in visual arts find validity in the development of the individual. The experiences which an individual has must be organized into a philosophy of living which he finds acceptable and workable and which contributes to society as a whole. To be sound and valid, this philosophy must be arrived at through his own efforts and discoveries. Visual arts, by their nature, provide many of the experiences which enable individuals to make satisfactory and dynamic adjustments. Through graphic expression, the meanings of experience are clarified and intensified; those peculiar and individual values which are needed for healthy growth are sought out and explored; through the more practical arts, the environment is beautified and enriched. In all these activities the value lies in the significance of the experiences to the individual, in the development of meanings that are important to him, in their contribution to his own development.

The uniqueness of the individual is accepted as basic; each develops in his own way; each requires different experiences for optimum growth. Each person, furthermore, is endowed with creative potentialities. Mass techniques of instruction, therefore, cannot be used as they would make impossible of accomplishment the major contribution of the arts. The importance and integrity of each individual is strengthened by placing upon him the chief responsibility for the selection and planning of meaningful activities. In this process, the teacher has an important rôle, but he becomes a guide rather than a master. Group processes also are important, in which the individual works co-operatively with others for a part of the time. But even in these situations the selection of the activities is arrived at through joint planning by both the pupils and the teacher.

It follows, then, that it is not possible to establish in advance a definite series of activities and experiences in the arts which are to be followed by all students. Instead, activities must be selected which will contribute most to the development of the individual and the group, and in relation to current interests and needs. The long-range growth of the students must always be kept in mind by the teacher who has a guidance function in giving a sound basis to the interests and activities of the students. Activities are selected, then, which are deeply rooted in the experience of the students, have vital meaning for them, and can therefore serve as bases for intense creative expression.

Creative expression is the cornerstone of all art experience. Activity in the arts has meaning to the individual only if it is engaged in as a creative enterprise in which procedures are undertaken and results are achieved that contribute directly to growth and development. Each experience must enable him to make discoveries about himself and his world and should result in increased understanding and awareness. In brief, the experience must be a creative one. The values, moreover, are largely those which result from the process rather than from the product. It is what happens to the student during the activity that is important, not the product of the activity. This does not mean that product can or should be overlooked, for the deep satisfactions which result are important. But in the evaluation of any art experience, the consideration of product is secondary. The emphasis on what happens in an art experience means that products are judged in relation to the individual and upon the sincerity and integrity of his expression, not upon adult or a priori standards of what the results should be.

Skills are taught as the need for them arises in relation to creative activity. For many students, where the urgency of expression is great, skills will emerge or be learned as the activity progresses. In many instances, however, some training in skill must be given, but always as the need arises in relation to some necessity of expression.

The student's awareness of his cultural heritage in the arts is extended through contact with and consideration of great examples from the past and the present. It is felt, however, that deep understanding and appreciation are possible only if an individual has first had meaningful experiences in art creation. The belief is also quite generally held that sound appreciation must also begin with an understanding of the contemporary world.

Art experiences are essential for all individuals at all school levels. If, as is being demonstrated, creative activity in visual arts is essential to full personality development, it is a logical corollary that all students in school should have opportunity for such experiences. Theoretically, at least, and to an increasing extent in practice, art is accepted as one of the basic components of education, a type of experience which should be available to all. It is, however, only in the elementary grades that this principle has been given wide application. Nevertheless, at the secondary and college levels, there is a growing realization that the arts can contribute to the development of adolescents and young adults, as well as young children, and the arts themselves are being given a rôle of greater importance at those levels.

Many areas and media are included within the definition of visual arts. The concept that everyone is potentially creative and that the basis of creativity is deeply felt experience, has brought with it a significant broadening of the scope of visual arts in the schools. No longer is the field limited to painting and drawing, activities often thought of as synonymous with art education. Now, with every student in school in need of creative activity, each with his rich resources of personal interests and experiences, instruction in the visual arts is considered to include all areas of living in which man, through forms and materials, seeks to order and give meaning to life. To the fields of drawing and painting, then, are added such areas and activities as home planning, landscape design, furniture construction, industrial and commercial design, stage and theatre design,

sculpture, carving, modelling, ceramics, jewelry and metalwork, the graphic processes - etching, lithography and silk-screen printing being especially popular at the present time - leatherwork, and other crafts. In order to carry on such a wide variety of activities many materials are needed, such as paper, pigment, clay, wood, papier-maché, stone, leather and plastics. Probably few schools carry on all the above listed activities, but great breadth is characteristic of contemporary art instruction.

In the classroom, students select the materials they need to carry forward the activity they have planned. A permissive atmosphere is established where the ideas and contributions of each student are respected. The teacher helps when help is needed. The diverse activities and ideas are the manifestation of the varied personalities and experiences of the students.

The amount of materials available varies from one place to another. Some favoured schools are provided with a good supply of excellent materials; many have only meagre supplies. In many situations, the teachers and students display amazing ingenuity in making use of all sorts of materials that offer creative and constructive possibilities, e.g. newspapers, packing boxes, and food cartons. In rural areas, many classes dig clay for modelling and pottery, and make pigments as well.

Art Instruction in the Schools

Most school systems require or recommend that some time in the elementary grades be given over to art activities. A typical recommendation is for thirty minutes per day in grades one through four, and ninety minutes per week for grades five and six. The same recommendation holds for grades seven and eight if they are included in the elementary grades. In the junior high school, art is generally required in grades seven and eight, usually two forty-five minute periods a week. Past the eighth grade, art is usually available only to those students who elect it. The number who do study it varies, depending upon such factors as the quality and usefulness of the art programme and the support given it by the school administration and community. In some high schools the number of pupils electing it is as low as five percent; in some, as high as thirty percent.

In large high schools a number of specialized courses are often available. These may include courses in pottery, jewelry, commercial design, fashion illustration, and painting. Sequences extending throughout the senior high grades are set up for those wishing to specialize in art.

No figures exist on the extent to which art instruction is available in American schools. In the majority of the elementary schools the amount of time devoted to art activities depends largely upon the interest of the classroom teacher in the subject. At the junior and senior high level, it is perhaps safe to say that in half the schools in the country no art classes are given.

There are few colleges and universities in which visual arts are general requirements for a degree, although there are many with excellent departments. The majority of institutions offer art history courses; but not all of these offer studio courses. If, however, all college art courses are taken into account, it will be found that the latter are more numerous than the former. One of the most significant developments in art

education in the United States has been the rapid increase in studio courses at college level. The acceptance of creative art courses for university credit on the same basis as established academic subjects is a further favourable development. Many institutions offer Master's degrees in various art areas, and some art courses are accepted as a considerable proportion of the work towards a Doctorate.

One of the weaknesses of American education has been its compartmentalization - the sharp lines of division between subjects. As a result there has been increased emphasis on developing a closer relationship among the various subjects and disciplines of the school programme. For the elementary teacher this presents no great difficulty for, not only does he have charge of instruction in all subjects, but he also has the opportunity to know all the students well. Many elementary teachers are doing an excellent job of relating activities in visual arts to the lives and experiences of the children in the class and to the other subjects they are studying. In the high schools, where instruction is departmentalized, this raises a difficult administrative problem, and there have been a number of attempts to organize programmes into more comprehensive units. Sometimes this takes the form of combining several subjects, for instance, the social studies and English. A more radical departure is to organize instruction around certain topics or areas of interest to the students, including the various subjects as they apply to the topic. It is in this latter plan that visual arts have most opportunity to contribute. At the college level there are a few noteworthy examples of attempts to reorganize the programme into more functional and meaningful patterns. A number of institutions have set up courses which involve consideration of all the arts in order to overcome the fragmentation which results from division of the subject into many different specialized courses. Most colleges and universities are actively engaged in programmes of curricular change and improvement.

The Improvement of Instruction

It is the constant preoccupation of art educators to improve the quality of instruction. Some of the ways in which this is done are described briefly below.

Within school systems there is generally a director or supervisor of art education who not only administers the programme but spends a considerable portion of his energies in improving its quality. Either he or one of his assistants visits and supervizes teachers in the system, especially those at the elementary level, making recommendations on procedure, planning activities, and evaluating results. In a number of systems there are teachers, usually referred to as consultants, who visit classes only at the request of the teacher. There they work with the students and the teacher in planning art activities.

Many city systems and state departments of education prepare and distribute programme guides in art. Formerly these included definite specifications on the types of activities to be carried on at each grade level, along with specific objectives, and required procedures. More recent curricular materials have been in the nature of programme guides which offer suggestions and ideas. This newer form is an outgrowth of the belief that art activities cannot be prescribed but must grow out of the interests and needs of the students.

Many systems hold institutes and teachers' meetings at periodic intervals where the improvement of instruction is the major concern. Within the last few years the setting up of in-service workshops in art has become quite common. These provide opportunity for the attendants to participate in art activities, to work directly in art materials, and to deepen their understanding of the nature of an art experience. These workshops, established chiefly for elementary grade teachers, are of brief duration, generally involving only a few work periods, and attendance is voluntary. They have proven to be a most effective device and usually more teachers apply for admission to such workshops than can be accommodated.

Professional organizations offer another important means for improving art instruction and they have recently grown enormously. The National Art Education Association, consisting of some four thousand members, is concerned chiefly with art instruction in the elementary and secondary grades and in teacher training institutions. It is made up of four regional affiliated organizations. Many of the states have art education groups as have also a number of cities and small regional areas. All these organizations hold conventions and conferences, often annually, and many have programmes of publications and services to members. Two other national organizations should be mentioned, the College Arts Association, concerned chiefly with higher education in visual arts, and the Committee on Art Education of the Museum of Modern Art whose purposes are parallel to those of the National Art Education Association, which is much smaller.

Many colleges and universities carry on continuous programmes of training for teachers already in service. Summer sessions are attended chiefly by teachers, and during the year courses are offered at hours convenient to them. Members of college and university staffs often visit communities once a week to carry on instruction for the teachers.

The Training of Teachers

A considerable number of elementary grade teachers have had little or no instruction in art during their professional training. Increasingly, however, institutions are demanding some art work as a requirement for graduation, though still many students receive none at all. Two courses, for one semester each, and meeting four to six hours a week, are usually given in those institutions requiring some art instruction. These generally involve active participation, some work of appreciation and some consideration of techniques and procedures for carrying on art activities with children. Because most art instruction is given by elementary grade teachers, an increase in the extent and quality of their training is a major problem.

Art teachers at the junior high and senior high levels and special art teachers for the elementary grades are generally graduates of a four-year course in art education at a college or university or an art school. A fifth year of study is necessary in some states to obtain a teaching license. It generally carries with it an increase in salary. The amount of training in art required for a "major" in art education varies greatly. In some instances, it is as little as one-fifth of a total programme; in other instances, well over half. Certification by the state in which the individual teaches is also necessary and these requirements vary from one state to another. There are no certification requirements

for teaching in colleges and universities. Advanced degrees however, are often necessary for promotion. Many institutions have been securing the services of prominent artists as instructors.

This, briefly, is the status of art education in the schools of the United States of America. We have made great progress but there is still much we have to do. We are aware of our many shortcomings and are striving to overcome them. Many forces are supporting us; many are impeding our growth, but the obstacles that we encounter, although numerous and difficult, do not appear insurmountable. There is an abiding faith among art educators of the importance of experience in the arts for young people. We are convinced that our contribution is a fundamental one, essential to the maintenance of a free and dynamic society based upon the worth of the individual. It is in this faith that we go forward.