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SEMINAR ON THE TEACHING OF VISUAL ARTS IN GENERAL EDUCATION

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Report from Luxembourg (ALE/Sem. 1/9)
on the Visual Arts in General Education.

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A survey of artistic life in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg shows that in the early centuries of the country's existence, art was little cultivated.

During the past century, on the other hand, and mainly in these last few years, all the arts, and particularly the visual arts, have made great strides in our country.

The causes of this comparative sterility from the beginnings of our civilization up to the nineteenth century must be sought chiefly in the unstable and shifting political conditions which have prevailed in Luxembourg all through European history.

In those days Luxembourg never knew a cultural life of her own, and even in their moments of political greatness her Princes cared little for their own small country.

Situated between the two great civilizations of France and Germany, Luxembourg felt the impact of both and hesitated to identify herself with either.

The products of foreign cultures, treasures far richer than those of our own national heritage, held pride of place with us at the expense of native work.

Another reason for our lack of artistic output was - and still is, to some extent - the smallness of our population and country. The poor unfertile soil left the inhabitants no leisure. It prevented the birth and development of artistic talent. So the people of Luxembourg have never had the immense advantage of producing renowned masters, like their neighbours, the Flemings, whose living conditions were much the same except that their population was rather larger.

Thus, tossed by the storms of politics, suffering at times from the apathy of our princes and with our barren land constantly ravaged by wars and other calamities, we were the victims of cultural poverty.

But with her admission to the League of Nations in 1918, Luxembourg came of age, and her art began to blossom. Painting first gained favour with the public, and sculpture too found its admirers, but architecture, tapestry and illustration, handicapped by lack of money and materials, failed to take a worthy place among the visual arts.

Painting, as the least costly art to practise, forged ahead and there are several eminent painters who, without exactly founding a school, have certainly marked out some paths for future generations to follow.

The arts were the province of the privileged few, and so they would have remained, but for a most fortunate enterprise which breathed fresh life into them.

This was "ART AT SCHOOL", a movement which started in 1911, but has only become a really effective influence in the last twenty years.

It had come to be realized that art was divorced from the people only because they did not understand it, and that they must receive some art education.

This encouraging impulse, however, was checked during the dead years between 1919 and 1944.

At the end of the second world war new ideas in national education burgeoned and bore fruit. Education became a prime necessity. New schemes were launched everywhere and "ART AT SCHOOL" was among their principal sponsors.

Since then, the visual arts have attained great popularity with the public, which shows increasing interest in them.

Public interest has facilitated the founding of various art institutions, with the result that art education is helping to develop an individual and yet a completely native artistic sense.

This rapid survey will, it is hoped, have thrown some light on the general position of artistic culture in our country.

What follows is a brief account of a few institutes and associations for the guidance of our national art education.

Art at School

A society founded in 1911 by Professor Jean Logelin and a schoolmaster, Jean Kohll.

President: Jos. Wagner, Honorary Director of the Athénée.
Secretary: Arthur Weydert, schoolmaster.

The society has 400-500 members, mainly recruited from primary and secondary school teachers.

Children's drawings and paintings

Since its foundation the society has organized drawing competitions. 1931-1934: Publication of instruction leaflets on drawing, encouraging the pupil not to reproduce isolated objects, but to build up a composition.

Since 1945 the society has closely followed the evolution of children's painting in various countries (particularly in France, England and America). It was the first to introduce into our schools the principles of spontaneous painting and drawing by children, adopted by Herbert Read, the Englishman, and by certain French and American teachers.

1947: Exhibition of paintings by French and Scottish children, to show teachers the results of the new method and convert them to its principles.

1949: Exhibition of paintings by French and Luxembourg children, showing that our teachers are on the right road.

As an introduction to this method:

A lecture by Mrs. Langevin, teacher of drawing in Paris.

Subject: Group-work and spontaneous expression in children.

A lecture by Mr. Duquet, teacher at Creuze (Somme);

Subject: Free expression in children and gouache painting.

1950: Teachers' Courses in gouache painting, organized by the school authorities.

1950: International drawing and painting competition for children, organized in Luxembourg in June by the Art at School Society, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of its foundation.

Influence of school environment on aesthetic education

The Society has conducted a campaign for the building of schools on modern architectural and hygienic lines.

Since its foundation it has contributed to good taste in class-room furnishings both by its gifts and by advising the administrative authorities.

Other branches of aesthetic education

Singing, instrumental music, children's matinées, dance matinées, theatre music, "The art half-hour at school" on Radio Luxembourg (songs and recitations), all help to develop the child's aesthetic sense.

Illustration of school textbooks

Old engravings of no interest to children have been replaced, at the suggestion of the Art at School Society, by pen drawings done by the best illustrators in Luxembourg and France.

Art folios have been published with illustrations of interesting or attractive subjects referred to in geography and history lessons.

Teaching of drawing in secondary education

In the secondary grade, the pupils do gouaches or water-colours of "narrative" subjects, sketches and freehand drawings from nature or casts. Perspective sketches, simple compositions in a given style, clay modelling, paper cutting and "collage", as well as the history of style from antiquity to the present day - all these have a place in secondary teaching.

Training of art teachers

Drawing is part art, part craft. Art instruction includes clay modelling, sculpture, painting techniques, studies of plants and architecture, pastel and charcoal sketches, and an extensive study of style and of the history of art. Besides the painting section, there are sections for sculpture, cabinet-making and wrought-iron work - all of them together forming the art section for the training of teachers.

Para-school activities in secondary education

Art Education.

An exhibition giving a general picture of art production in the Middle Ages was held during 1949-50 in the Athénée Hall, Luxembourg, by pupils of the upper school classes, helped by their French literature masters. Their chief aim was to show that the Middle Ages, in spite of the fact that hostile camps agreed only in despising them, were a period of striving and questioning, of dignity and, above all, of liberty. Large placards gave a brief summary of the main exhibits and the characteristic qualities of each century. About a hundred carefully chosen books, engravings and pictures were displayed. The exhibition bore visible witness to the efficacy of certain teaching methods now in favour: spontaneous co-operation by children, and group-work.

From 7 to 20 February 1950, a travelling exhibition was on view in the Athénée Hall, Luxembourg, organized by the Art Education Department, on the subject "Good and Bad Art". This exhibition was shown to teachers and pupils of all grades.

Together with their drawing teachers the pupils of the three higher classes visited various exhibitions organized in the Luxembourg State Museum during the school year 1949-50.

At the request of FIOCES (International Federation of Organizations for School Correspondence and Exchanges), the pupils in the lower classes took part in the international exhibition organized in the Musée Pédagogique, Paris, on 31 March 1950, by sending a large collection of exhibits (postcards, stamps, vignettes), illustrating the idea of international rapprochement. At the end of the school year (1950-1951), an exhibition of drawings by pupils of the three lower classes was held in the Athénée Hall. It was also visited by Primary school teachers.

Finally, for the theatrical performance organized in honour of the birthday of H.R.H. the Grand Duchess, the art section helped, on the production side, by making the masks and accessories, while the music and singing sections with their different groups (orchestra and choirs) provided the main part of the programme.