

Why Johnny Can't Paint

By Katherine Gordon Rice

Throughout most of human history, education in the arts was considered an intrinsic part of any education worth its salt, and its value as a part of the curriculum was not in doubt. Certainly we are familiar with the value of the arts to the ancient Hebrews, Romans and Greeks, among others.

One of Texas's own Native Sons put it this way:

“In the long history of man, countless empires and nations have come and gone. Those which created no lasting works of art are reduced today to short footnotes in history's catalog. Art is a nation's most precious heritage, for it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a Nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Classical education has always included literature, poetry as well as prose, “letters,” architecture, music, drawing, and the like. As recently as the Victorian era, *all* educated persons could play an instrument, recite poetry, sketch, watercolor and speak several languages. Understanding these fundamentals of culture were not thought beyond any normal person's grasp, nor were they reserved for a few prodigies.

Why have we “dumbed down” our education system so that today's college graduate knows less about many things than a Victorian school girl? (Who, incidentally, was taught at a fraction of the cost!)

I believe it is because, in the minds of many, art is considered a parenthetical subject; fine if you have the luxury of materials and time, but easily and harmlessly deleted from the curriculum when resources are scarce. Civic leaders tend to view cultural activities as amenities rather than necessities to the health of community life. Our educational system that, at best, enshrines the arts as the province of the elite and, at worst, ignores the arts altogether, naturally produces people who view the arts as belonging to someone else, or as having little relevance or value.

Sadder still, many Americans view with suspicion an “art world” that seems intimidating, alien and even disreputable.

I would not claim that this is solely the fault of our educational system. In part, the chasm that divides our society is the fault of the art industry. Modern art has largely ceased to speak to the average person, and has instead become a navel-gazing monolog by artists, for artists, about the process of making ‘art’ and how mis-understood we all are. The average working man can hardly be blamed if he finds a dead bird glued on canvas (and self-importantly labeled ‘art’) incomprehensible, repellant, and even insulting.

An educational system that encouraged and developed the production of ‘real’ art could go a long way toward bridging this gap and would have many additional benefits. By ‘real’ art I mean art that is a meaningful communication between the artist and his audience.

Arguably, there is sound reason to enrich every person with an appreciation of the arts. The arts are important as subjects in themselves. As mentioned, the arts provide the only lasting creative legacy of any society or culture. And after all, what is an artist? Simply a person who contributes things of unique value to the world. If every person all over the world today composed an inspiring song, wrote a great novel, or painted a beautiful picture, the world would only be a better, more beautiful, more satisfying place in which to live. That would be a very good thing, in and of itself.

But the arts have much more to give.

Study of the arts aids in the acquisition of practical skills, and it enhances a person’s understanding of other subjects -- and of *himself*.

Research on the development of the brain consistently demonstrates the power of training in music and other art forms to improve spatial, reasoning and other cognitive skills. For example, pre-schoolers who were given piano lessons scored thirty-four percent higher on tests measuring spatial-temporal ability, which, of course, is useful in acquiring skills in languages, math, and science.

Another well-established body of evidence shows that schools with strong arts

programs regularly gain benefits like:

- Intensified student motivation to learn,
- Better attendance among students *and teachers*,
- Increased graduation rates,
- Improved multicultural understanding,
- Renewed and invigorated faculty,
- More highly engaged students (which traditional approaches fail to inspire as we know all too well),
- Development of a higher order of thinking skills, creativity, and problem-solving ability; and
- Greater community participation and support.

Moreover, the arts contribute to family unity and growth. Attending cultural events, visiting museums or working together on creative projects provide positive shared experiences that forge bonds of communication and trust between family members. Remember the old saw, “The family that plays together, stays together”? It’s really true. And for the individual members of a family, the positive psychological benefits of any creative endeavor make for a happier life. This satisfied individual is then able and willing to interact in more positive ways within the family. A particularly meaningful example would be a cheerful, productive teenager who can reasonably look forward to life as happy, contributing adult. Obviously this person is much easier to live with than a sullen, withdrawn (hopeless) teenager.

Arts education is incomparably effective in reaching an ‘at-risk’ teenager because it places the responsibility for his choices and life squarely on his own shoulders. It gives him the tools to forge a future of his own choosing, thereby freeing him from hopelessness.

The value of the arts in reaching those who have not succeeded in traditional school programs is illustrated by the work of Tom Stand of the Phoenix House drug rehabilitation center. He says,

“I have been in the classroom on a daily basis for twenty years, and if there is one thing I have learned as a teacher, it is that the arts are the soul of the education program. The arts are a way of

getting the students back on the education track. Some of them come to us as early as twelve years of age and stay for 14 to 18 months. In this time we are able to repair a lot of holes in their past education, give them the confidence necessary to feel success in an academic setting, so they can continue their education at a regular public school when they graduate from the drug rehabilitation program. Some are now aspiring to enter the Los Angeles High School of the Arts or enroll in art programs at the college level when they leave us. This is a very positive legacy for students who come to us with nothing but a series of 'F' grades on their report cards and a lot of absenteeism. The arts are a definite part of the turn-around process."

Why is art education so important? People are born with certain "giftings" or "intelligences". These traits, capacities or talents appear in clusters. The good news is, ALL people have them in varying degrees and diverse groupings. That is to say, calling a person a "dummy" is not only cruel and unhelpful, but incorrect. Because the mind is a multifaceted, multi-component instrument, intelligence cannot in any legitimate way be captured in a linear measurement.

It has been widely believed that adult roles depend largely on the flowering of a single intelligence. In fact, however, nearly every cultural role requires a combination of intelligences. Thus, even an apparently straightforward role, like playing the violin, transcends a reliance on musical intelligence. To become a successful violinist requires bodily-kinesthetic dexterity, spatial and temporal skills – like rhythm, the interpersonal skills of relating to an audience and, in a different way, choosing a manager. A career in politics requires an interpersonal skill, a linguistic facility, and perhaps some logical aptitude. Also, while an individual may not be particularly gifted in any one intelligence; yet, because of a particular combination or blend of skills, he or she may be able to fill some niche uniquely well.

Along with intelligences, people have certain personality types. You are perhaps familiar with human personality theory. Sometimes these are described as the "D-I-S-C" or the Golden Retriever, the Otter, etc. People can be combinations of two or more of these personality types.

Taken in combination, the areas of 'giftedness' combined with personality traits

and personal taste, render a person more or less suited for certain occupations.

Thus, a person might have a high degree of creativity, good abstract reasoning capabilities, fascination for pattern, color, and shape, small-scale eye/hand coordination, a high tolerance for solitude, and a love of the outdoors. This person might make a tremendous landscape painter (and, conversely, a very poor corporate tax accountant).

When we leave out arts education, we leave out the education necessary for a significant part of the population to develop their gifts and talents and to become contributors to the common good.

So, the proper role of education is to develop various kinds of intelligences and to help people reach vocational goals that are appropriate for their particular mix of intelligences and personality traits.

Unfortunately, our present system is failing in this seemingly straightforward endeavor for a number of reasons. One is that there is a generally lack of recognition of the presence of multiple intelligences. Curricula are often based on the linear “IQ” theory of human learning that inordinately values skills in mathematics and language, while heavily discounting other kinds of intelligence.

Tight budget constraints have also conspired against art education in recent years. When it becomes necessary for school districts to cut back, arts programs are often top of the list of dispensable items.

The first significant setback for the arts came with the heightened emphasis on science and math following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, when the U.S., nervous about its standing in the Cold War, asked a generation of students to “buckle down.” That ominous phrase didn’t automatically signal an end to arts education, but more often than not, when school boards listed the “frills” that might be sacrificed in the interests of competing with the Soviets, the arts were among the first to go. Evidently nobody correlated the excellence of Russian dance, art and music with their abilities in math and science.

What does a pared-to-the-bone art budget look like in our schools? Picture a harried, underpaid teacher who is required to give students at least 20 minutes of

‘art’ in a week. Trying to fit in 20 minutes of art is difficult in a week already packed with government-required subjects and masses of paperwork. If she is lucky, she has a dedicated classroom, but often she must go room-to-room with a pushcart for supplies. She had little or no formal art training herself, and she gets her art curriculum in a nicely pre-digested form from a national publisher.

What is she going to teach? She is naturally going to choose those ‘projects’ which are 1) easily understood, 2) easy to grade, 3) easy to clean up and 4) easy on the supplies budget. Painting goes out the window because it fails criteria 3 and 4 right off the bat. She feels insecure about her own ability to draw, so that’s out. What’s left? Things like gluing two cotton balls together, coloring them yellow with powder paint in a brown bag and adding a ‘beak’ and ‘feet’ pre-cut out of felt. Voilá! A baby chick! Easy, cheap and topical for the Easter season. The only thing wrong with it is that it has no merit for teaching creativity because all the students baby chicks are meant to come out looking just like Teacher’s. It teaches zero understanding of -- or skill in -- the arts. But the requirement is met and students can go on to the next subject.

Another reason that our present system fails is the myth of the “starving artist.” The idea persists that there is little or no market for original artwork, that only a tiny fraction of artists can hope to make a living, and that encouraging students to pursue artistic careers is to doom them to a life of poverty and frustration. This becomes a self-perpetuating problem as teachers, administrators and parents who were never taught to value art pass along their ignorance to the next generation. They don’t know the opportunities that exist, and therefore assume that none do.

This creates a pernicious tendency to encourage -- or even pressure -- those with artistic giftings towards more ‘practical’ careers for which they are poorly suited. But young people with a passion to express themselves artistically who are given no hope for being able to do so become depressed, angry, and unproductive. They also have a pronounced tendency toward addiction, early and random promiscuity (in an attempt for validation), and even violence.

As humans, we must be creative or we will be destructive. When we ignore this, when we devalue or delete arts education, we pay a terrible price.

Our society loses the benefit of our God-given talents and strengths, our value as potential contributors as civic leaders, family members and taxpayers. Worse still, there is the immeasurable loss in human terms of the joy, productivity and prosperity that could have been.

As a society, we are forced to assume an un-necessary and intolerable burden in terms of ‘cleaning up the mess.’ We pay the high price of carrying unproductive citizens financially with unending welfare programs that breed more hopelessness and dependency, and we must fight an ongoing battle to treat their addictions and protect others from their destructive tendencies.

We need urgently to renew and reorganize our investment in our young people. A country whose well-being is based on our ability to stay productive, to solve problems creatively and to work together in unity needs to equip its people accordingly. The cost of providing creative encouragement is tiny in comparison to the enormous cost of failing to do so.