

ART NEWS

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What's wrong with U. S. art schools? By Mercedes Matter

A distinguished painter and experienced teacher draws up an indictment of current practices in teaching art

A young person studying art today steps into a particularly confusing situation. The extraordinary kaleidoscope of events of the twentieth century, of movements following so closely one upon another, of extremes absurd and great, of ideas canceling each other out and of recurrent Dada and anti-art, all this breaks at his feet in waves of cynicism, jaded feeling and no-belief. He is very easily infected with a sense of futility. In fact if he is a keen observer, and asks the deepest questions, he may be even more particularly vulnerable. In this rapidly shifting panorama, where is he to find any sense of enduring value? Everything moves so fast; the changing of the avant-garde is as swift as the time to make something real is slow; the surface of the scene is as noisy and variable as the resistance of one artist of conviction is stable and quietly unyielding; but he, too, may be flung into the spotlight of fashion to add, it would seem, yet another moment of change. The fact that he needed an old-fashioned lifetime of focused persistence to approach what he wanted may not be evident to a student.

Does art school help him to get his bearings or does it let him down? Allowing for the variability of contacts and circumstances, I think it generally is designed to let him down—in the most drastic way.

One can ask whether art is something which can be taught at all. Many painters, even though they do teach, think not and claim schools are a waste of time. But having learned so much myself from direct contact with painters, with Hans Hofmann in a school situation and from artists' talk as well as their work, I find it perfectly natural for someone further along in experience to bring insight to someone eager to learn.

But today one could ask whether art education has not become obsolete. Why bother with that painfully slow education of the senses (which, traditionally, took years of schooling as well as a life-long effort) in order to hang a piece of plumbing on the wall? If art can depart from the nature of something made through a process of individual sensibility, if it can stop at mere gesture, or at an idea presented raw, if it can be an object found or an inside joke, it seems as though the education appropriate to it would pass over into another field than the traditional one of the studio.

And this is precisely what is happening.

Art education tends toward its own destruction by having eliminated the substance of its existence—the very soil in which the seeds of learning take root for a student of art—which is work, the continuity of work in a studio. Take this away and the art has been taken out of the education, and the art school becomes ready-made for the Ready Made. The

one ballast conceivably available to a student, that of a deep immersion in his own work, carefully is denied him. He is cast into the arena to deal with art and history, at best, on an intellectual level. Today, it is possible for a student to go through art school and gain an acute perception of "what is going on," a fairly intelligent grasp of the situation, and yet have never departed a single step from his original naïveté of vision. In old-fashioned language, he never will have "learned to draw." His eye and his hand will have remained as puerile as his intellect will have become sophisticated. The irony is that this does not leave him ill-equipped for making the scene; he can capitalize on his naïveté, becoming a self-conscious primitive, or he can hide—perhaps behind a fluid, unhindered manipulation of the picture plane or a mystical space of Nothing; behind a pile of junk or a can of soup. And who will know the difference? Will he know the difference? Will he know what he has chosen to forego?

Such questions could only arise because art education has departed so far from its inherent purpose and functions as to have reached a point of absurdity. It would be well for those involved to take a good look at what is happening.

The old academy considered itself the custodian of traditions, the guardian of the proven against the threat of change. It made specific demands not amenable to bluff or evasion; it required certain disciplines of the eye and hand which, though often superficial in conception and violating feeling, nevertheless required effort and persistence, an attitude of rigor. Students were condemned to hard labor, to the tedious copying of casts, to the monotony of day after day irrevocably devoted to drawing, painting, sculpture. Long works were only occasionally commented on by instructors, who came in once or twice a week.

The atmosphere was one of silence, remote from the world. A dim cold light filtered down from the skylights high above, gently illuminating the lifeless surfaces of the casts and the immobile figure of the model; dust gathered on still-lives softly harmonizing their colors; time seemed to stand still.

All this, of course, has been swept away to fit the pace of the times. The new art school upholds the Tradition of the New—it dare not slip a moment behind the-avant-garde. Pressure and haste prevail. Far from being a place apart, it mirrors the world outside. Fluorescent lights have been installed, shattering color and emptying space with their livid brutality; the halls are filled with people running to and fro, from one class to another, and from every room comes the voice of an instructor pouring out a version of his subject capsuled to meet a time limit. Classes change from one room to another at least every three hours; everything changes continually; nothing is allowed to stay put; if there is a model at all, it is for one short period divided into shorter times of active poses. Silence is rare. Even a relatively quiet room is never without the intrusion of the instructor—for instruction no longer punctuates the student's work, it replaces it.

Art has been dissected into so many divisions, subdivisions and categories that its study has become a frenzied attempt to keep up with innumerable separate activities. Some tolerance still is shown for the "old-fashioned" subjects of drawing and painting, but to a modest degree; and even they may not survive very long.

A student in the modern school is not treated as a student with much in front of him to learn; he is expected immediately to express himself in freedom—or in license. A thousand evasions are open to him, or he can accept the extreme challenge this provides by making greater demands on himself than any authoritative discipline could make. But, ironically, while handing him the gift of freedom with one hand, the modern school snatches away from him with the other the circumstances in which this exacting labor of self-confronting can take place: the time to work.

What can have been at the source of such a change in art education?

The first step must have been a change in values. For whereas the academy may have stood still, it was on the ground of an unyielding value, blind as it may have been to all new manifestations. This moral conservatism gave a student something solid to push away from, which is absent from the vacuum of the modern school's amoral appetite for novelty. In terms of value, the academy never went off the gold standard; the Bauhaus did. With the Bauhaus, chairs and paintings became equal; design and art lost their distinction; the means of expression were studied separately as applicable to both. As values became indistinct, the school of fine arts lost its uncompromising position and more easily succumbed to the general order of things in America, so that instead of an Eakins as president of an academy we now have public-relations experts throughout.

Sometimes the entire activity of an art student appears to be designed—not for his own good nor even in any relation to himself at all—but for the good of the catalogue. His loss is the catalogue's gain; where he would be quietly working away to his own advantage under the no longer fashionable headings of drawing, painting or sculpture, the catalogue would have dull and empty pages. Whereas the more filled these become with well-packaged titles (and here they take on the familiar, unctuous voice of America selling people what they do not need) the faster must the student of that institution run from one class to another and the less time he can find to work.

Learning is thus spread out on an ever-widening thin surface, sacrificing depth to breadth—not of experience, since this is precisely what it excludes, but of activity. In terms of the study of art this is fraudulent and I have not found one serious student who does not sense this and resent it. For the more the study of art is fragmented, the further it gets from the central motivation which is the experience of an individual and the necessity this gives rise to, in him, to understand his means of expression. This is the source of an artist's greed to know—not the intellectual's pure curiosity for knowledge but a more focused pursuit of a particular scent born of his necessity at the time.

Teaching a student art should be to help him in his growth at the center so that his demands on himself will increase and deepen. The contrary takes place. In studying the means separately in various disparate exercises, the student cuts out color patterns for Two-Dimensional Design Monday morning and then renders the figure realistically Monday afternoon; on Tuesday he paints Abstract-Expressionism; Wednesday morning he does color setting-up exercises, but settles down to Structure in the afternoon; Thursday he has welding in "Three Dimensional Design" (we don't say "sculpture") and in the afternoon executes a painting in Egyptian style for History of Art. Friday is given to Space-Composition and Experimental Design. All these are amply interspersed with courses in the humanities; each is taught by a different instructor of varying caliber, point of view, frame of reference, etc.

This is not exaggerated. It is a wonder if a student even meets himself in the hall as he rushes by. And it seems to me that this irresponsible prying about in the means of expression themselves, separately, is indecent. It becomes an impediment to painting because it tends to replace the urge to be true, to pursue the matching of experience regardless of appearances and difficulties involved, with a concern for how things look or how well they work. A triangle discovered and wrested from the points of tension in a curving torso and

definitive of its volume becomes real to a student, becomes known as experience. A triangle cut out and juxtaposed in an arbitrary exercise is of indifferent value. A color sensation perceived and matched in equivalence within the context of experience yields more understanding of color than dozens of parlor-game exercises.

A result, also, of moving the student away from a central immersion in his work to a medley of peripheral activities is that it tends naturally to the direction of "experiment"—the most popular word in art school today. Whenever I look over the work of a student and find it lacking in any line of development, showing a total absence of self, his inevitable defense is: "Oh, but I am experimenting!" He is supposed to experiment, to shop around for a self, and there are so many possible fits—outside—anywhere more readily than in his own experience, limited as this is to the ground under his own feet. Where is the time for the tireless probing needed to reach that ground? I cannot see that there is any difference between student and artist in terms of freedom. Is not each one, at the deepest level within himself, limited precisely by his innate sensibility and intelligence and the exact degree of knowledge and experience he has accumulated to that particular moment of his life? He can do but what he can do. The promiscuity of experimenting gives him license to evade this deepest level and to achieve easier, ready-made results. But were he to pursue his own way, following Kafka's advice: "Two tasks at the beginning of your life: to narrow your orbit more and more and ever and again to check whether you are not in hiding somewhere outside your orbit," the impacts which came to him from everywhere when absorbed and digested would, in their necessary time, alter him and consequently his work.

Furthermore, the crowded curriculum tends to impose itself even with the teaching of drawing, painting and sculpture, in time-saving devices, general routines to speed up progress, arbitrary projects from one week to the other, etc. These can distract from the necessary fumbling within an individual's work when he attempts to follow, with absolute precision, the demands set by his particular experience without resorting to a priori formulas. And whenever he can pursue this shedding of externals, however slowly he may proceed, is the time of value for him, the only time in which he is in contact with himself. And this relation of the student to himself and to his work is the only valid ground for his future life in art—the reciprocal relation between artist and work in which he makes what in turn makes him what he becomes. All the sidetracks and deflections from this merely postpone the very beginning of his life as an artist. For those who will not pursue such a life later on it remains the most valuable experience they will have gained from studying art.

The academy was right in devoting a student's time to a continuous working in the studio—in drawing, painting and sculpture. There is no "problem" of space, geometry and structure, of scale, of color, light, mass, line, of movement and rhythm which is not contained in the study of these and which does not find its root in the individual's evolving in terms of seeing itself.

There may be less immediate results, since it is not a question of simple exercises separately accomplished, but, on the contrary, the carrying of everything together in an integrated growth within the student's consciousness. Learning to draw, for instance, initiates an attitude which permeates an artist's life which, contrary to the seeking of easy or quick resolutions, seeks out every resistance and obstacle to be confronted and known, in the interests of that ultimate accuracy through which reality is achieved in art. So that slowness relates to how much is taken on and how it relates back to the central growth of consciousness. A student proceeding in this way will soon overtake the others and surpass them as soon as his vision begins to form.

I have spoken only of the distraction imposed within the so-called study of art. There is also the prevalent situation of squeezing four years of college into the four years of art school to attain, presumably, eight years worth of knowledge. To study philosophy, history, physics, mathematics, literature—any of these should provide more nourishment for a student of art than the kindergarten-like side-courses within art education of which I have spoken. Only time stands in the way; for time as it is organized to take everything into account by a non-artist, takes nothing into account for an artist. Because one of his essential needs is just time not-accounted-for, time of gestation, of waiting and, above all, continuity of time with his work. So that the well-meant, well-organized four years of combined humanities and art

education usually results in an empty gesture toward one or the other, or, more likely, both.

Positive result: a degree.

This is not worth discussing here.

Having so rudely criticized things as they are, I should offer alternatives, but by now the nature of those to be suggested has been amply implied.

Restore the conditions for working which make the study of art possible.

Strip away everything but its basic, serious components: drawing, painting, sculpture, history of art.

Keep the best element which has been contributed recently—a greater tendency to choose as instructors artists whose work and thinking are alive, regardless of professional experience or scholarly background.

Have less over-teaching, less effort to educate the student by force,

by uninterrupted shots of learning without long intervals of work.

If the humanities are to be combined with the study of art, it can only be done by lengthening the period of time allocated so that the entire pace can slow down to a feasible one.

The climate of a school is finally what counts most, and this is not easily defined. Conditions should allow the student to develop the self-generating vitality that comes from the quality of the work being done. Discussions rooted in the affirmation of work do not tend so much toward negation, but stay closer to areas which are tense and relevant, mutually sharpening convictions.

The great schools, such as Gustave Moreau's or Hans Hofmann's, were permeated by the strength and passion of these men's beliefs, which they had a desire to impart. Certainly contact with artists of high caliber and conviction is the greatest good fortune for any student. Their attitudes, their insights will be the wealth a student carries away with him to rely on, to contend with and to measure himself against in his future searchings.