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The Importance of Education in the Arts

A Transatlantic Perception 1916-1980

Teachers are perhaps more prone than most to the illusion that nothing really changes, and as they get older in the service this illusion is apt to deepen. At least in the United Kingdom, however, one who can look back over the decades of a career that began before the war sees how much has changed for the teachers of the arts. Cammaerts contemplates the symptoms of that change and diagnoses for us its scale. Looking at the present and the future, however, he isolates with a sure-handed simplicity the uncertainties and problems that remain. Is creativity really an accepted objective in an age increasingly obsessed with the production of wealth? Can good taste be taught? How does one manage the bridge, in adolescence, from spontaneity to technical discipline? How should a child who has a rare gift be provided for in the arrangements of a school?

When one accepts an invitation of this kind, to write on a subject about which most of your readers know a great deal more than you do yourself, it is wonderful how the subject becomes for a long time a conscious element in your day-to-day thinking, indeed in your day-to-day search for experience. So for most of this winter I have been referring back, consciously — while walking, while travelling by plane or train, while waiting for sleep or arousing from sleep — to this essential and important subject. Quite a substantial file of documents has come together from my normal experience as a teacher during this time, to await the moment when I would sit down to write the paper. These documents are not part of a process of research; they would have been acquired in the normal course of my professional duties whether I had undertaken the commission or not. They consist of

1. A draft set of resolutions prepared for the European Conference of the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP), on "Preparation for Cultural Life," Malta, November 1979.

2. "The Visual Arts in Secondary Education." An exhibition at the Dartington New Gallery, January 2nd-21st 1980.

3. Conference of Devon Local Education Authority, "The Arts in Education," held at Dartington Hall, January 2nd and 3rd 1980.

4. "Drama at Teign School." A paper describing the drama work at a neighbouring School, January 1980.

5. "Drama at Knowles Hill School." A paper prepared in December 1979.

6. "Drama and the Creative Arts," Wilcombe Middle School, February 1980.

7. "Art in Education." An international seminar held in five centres, including Rolle College, Exmouth, from 17th February to 1st March 1980. A British Council course, with teachers from 18 countries including Canada.

8. Programme of Devon Youth Orchestra concert at Rolle College, 28th December 1979.

9. Catalogue of an exhibition of pupils and teachers of Art held in Exeter, January 1980.

10. Report on the work of a Writer in Residence living and working at Rolle College, September 1979-July 1980.

11. Programmes of performances by a professional dance group working at Rolle College as a base, October 1979 to March 1980.

12. Programmes of three professional drama groups who have performed at Rolle College during this period.

These have been collected at random during this period, and of course during the same time there have been Jazz and "Pop" groups playing in the College who do not print their programmes, new books of fiction and poetry which have been flowing into the library, photography, ceramics, sport, and games, and countless other aspects of cultural activities in the environment which have touched on my consciousness or passed me by.

So I live, as I approach the forty-fourth year since I started teaching and the final year, in an environment of school and college in which creative expression of one kind or another is happening all round me day by day. My neighbours, colleagues and friends have witnessed the wild storms and dramatic sunrises of the south-west coast of England with an excitement greatly enhanced by the consciousness of man's creativity.

A personal history: growth of education in art

I was enormously privileged to be born into a family where music, literature, drama and the visual arts were part of the profession of direct members of my family. My father was a poet and art historian, my mother had been a Shakespearian actress, my maternal grandmother sang Brünhilde at Bayreuth, a brother and sister were also professional actors. I married the daughter of an architect, for whom design and visual harmony was an essential part of living. I was determined to live surrounded by beautiful things.

As a pupil at school I spent countless stolen hours listening to the records of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. As a student at Cambridge I had a cup overflowing with visual and musical experiences, and the great pleasure of getting to know one of the greatest of English educational administrators of his time, Henry Morris, then Director of Education of the County of Cambridgeshire. While I was still a student Maxwell Fry was building Impington Village College just a few miles from the City of Cambridge, and Henry Morris was insisting that the first need of children was to be surrounded by beautiful things.

As a young teacher, just before the war, in the drab grey environment of South London, I was sharply reminded of the child's thirst for beauty. For many of my pupils the only beautiful thing they had ever seen had been the great Crystal Palace fire of 1937, and whenever I gave them a free topic to write about a large number returned to that experience.

My sensitivities had been aroused as a child, as a student, and as a young teacher, but I was among the privileged. These things could not be taught except by access to experience, and this had to be done against the ugliness, the drabness of Industrial England in the 1930's, in the environment of ugly schools and ugly paint colours, the drab green and chocolate dados designed to save cleaning and redecoration. Up to the outbreak of war we struggled in an inept and haphazard way to stir the sensitivities of our pupils, by reading and acting, and by handling artefacts, but at that time progress was very slow and the shadow of the ugliness of inevitable war tended to swamp all other sensitivities.

After the night or war came a bright dawn. I returned to teaching as Head of a school in the New Town of Stevenage some 30 Miles North of London. The vision of Henry Morris had influenced many of his successors, and artists of many different disciplines turned their attention to education. Hundreds of thousands of people were given the chance to move from their shattered and increasingly ugly inner city centres to a bright new environment where the air was clean, the grass was green, and the woods and fields were nearby. Splendid new schools were built with bright light colours, and artists like Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth gave some of their greatest work to decorate this brave new world. Just on the edge of the perimeter of my school was a new secondary

school with Henry Moore's wonderful family group of father, mother and child just outside the front entrance of the school. A quiet three-minute walk allowed us to visit this great work, where the mother's breasts were given a bright sheen by the stroking of many pupils' hands. The local councillors, some of them, complained about the cost: one farthing in every hundred pounds of capital outlay on the school.

The Art Department of the school was staffed by two young teachers from Corsham Court who trained artists as teachers. The Art Department was responsible for arts and crafts, for decoration of the buildings, for choice of curtains, for planting and cutting flowers, for everything that made up the visual satisfaction we wished to provide for our pupils. A 'pictures for schools' exhibition was held every year at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, and we were able to go and buy pictures by young artists to adorn the walls of our schools. Thanks to the idealism of the Chief Education Officer, John Newsom, the County Treasurer, and the County Architect, a movement was started which I believe cannot be stopped.

My own experience was related to the work of the teachers and administrators in one small area of England, but the movement I am writing about was not an eccentric or unusual one. I have found visual traces, read articles, seen photographs, heard music, attended plays and dance sessions in all parts of Europe, in the United States, and in Africa which have demonstrated the worldwide spread of this movement. One of my most valued friends was a teacher of art in a segregated school for blacks in Phoenix, Arizona, now a distinguished university professor of art education. In a small village under the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in a thatched hut you can find the works of one of Tanzania and Kenya's most exciting visual artists and teachers. The teachers of the fifties and sixties were alerted to this central task of educating the senses, the sensitivities, and the emotions.

The tide has perhaps turned for a time. There is now a real danger that these ultimate values may be deprived of resources. The great change at the end of the World War was that formal education initially based on the economic needs of the industrial world became recognised as a human right. We recognised a new dimension to the meaning of the word civilisation. I do not believe that that vision will be lost.

Do we yet have acceptance of creativity?

There remains much to be done. The social failure of many new towns and estates has produced a disillusionment with the architectural achievement of the immediate post-war period, but the consciousness of teachers has been alerted, the barriers which once made things of beauty the reserve of privileged classes have been dented if not destroyed.

Today we are menaced by contraction, falling rolls, and a materialistic approach to providing educational resources, which threaten us in all countries. Education must be shown to pay dividends, and the dividends are expected to come in the shape of students who fit into the wealth-producing needs of our societies. The great value of aroused sensitivities does not figure prominently in our education debates.

At our Devonshire Conference in early January, Mr. E. A. Goodman, Chairman of the Schools Council Art Committee, gave an impressive analysis of the needs of schools today. I asked him to let me have his speech to send to you instead of my paper, because I felt he had expressed the heart of the problem better than I could hope to do. Fundamentally his message was this. Unless you care for and arouse the pupil's sensitivities and emotions he will not want to learn. All efforts to educate the intellect and the manual skills will fail, unless you first pay attention through creativity to the basic motivation of the child. Even if other motivations succeed, the scientist and the mathematician or technologist will be of less use, less effective, and less of a scholar if his sensitivities have been neglected. Putting the argument on the most materialistic plane, if you neglect the arts you will not get the wealth-producers of quality that you are looking for. This argument sets aside the even more important one of the quality of life of all our people, but it is a valuable one and one that can be demonstrated to those who are condemned to count all the pennies that are, eventually, our educational resources.

I remember being involved in a discussion about restoring a very beautiful Queen Anne manor house which was the central building of the City of Leicester College of Education. A Councillor who was anxious to help said, "Please can someone tell me just how beautiful is the old Hall?" A good question, and we must have the answers.

Barnett Freedman, the English war artist, was asked in a meeting, "How do you judge the quality of a painting?" He explained that if you saw a beautiful flower you bent down, held it between your fingers, and sniffed at the perfume. He explained that he entered a room where there was a painting and sniffed with his eyes; if he liked the smell then the picture was good. We cannot readily quantify the responses of our sensitivities. Much that is beautiful to one is incomprehensibly ugly and hideously noisy to others. Standards of aesthetic enjoyment cannot be absolute; and above all, as a child or a youth struggles with his own creativity, his work will pain and sometimes shock others.

In the 1950's when early rock and skiffle was exciting the young, there was a great surge of desire among them to make their own music. Teachers of music at the time in this country often rejected these efforts and discouraged them. In my own school I had to encourage a group to meet after 7 o'clock in the evening, when the music teacher had gone home.

When I was a young teacher in South London I taught in a boys' school. At the neighbouring girls' school the girls were told not to associate with the boys.

One or two of us had to hold a secret play and poetry reading society on Saturdays to bring the boys and girls together. Such devices are not necessary today, but we still have to defend the sanctity of creativity against many attacks from those who are insensitive or do not comprehend the painful struggles towards creativity. The eyes and ears and emotions are accepted readily by most teachers as senses which need the attention of teachers; the other senses of touch and smell are more often neglected and yet they must not be neglected.

One of my heroes as a child was a good-looking young man who worked in a fishmonger's shop; another of my intense emotional joys was to visit the London Zoo. Fifty-five years later the smell of dead fish or of the monkey house at the Zoo give me intense pleasure. Every poet knows that enjoyment of the written word is intensely enhanced by the pleasures of the senses.

Some outstanding difficulties for teachers

There are many problems which still need careful examination by teachers. There are still those who think that 'taste' can be 'educated'. They are inclined also to think that 'taste' can be spoilt so that, for them, reading 'bad' books or listening to or making 'bad' music can leave the child unable to appreciate finer or more subtle things. My own view from experience is that this leads to serious contradictions; different children from different environments must reach sensitivity through different routes, and for many children the essential starting point is to read anything for pleasure or to make or listen to any kind of music. The skiffle club members of my school in Stevenage now enjoy a vast, catholic range of music.

The second grave difficulty for the teacher, which has often not been solved, is the transition from the marvellous creative spontaneity of the child to the need for technical discipline which will allow a preservation of some elements of spontaneity. In this country art teaching went through a painful period when, having seen the wonderful results of the spontaneity of the child, the teacher did not dare to interfere as the child became an adolescent.

Many excellent teachers have resolved this problem, but many children's early enthusiasm is dampened by a rule of thumb application of technical skills at too early a stage. The pupils' need for technical skills seems to be closely related to puberty, and so will vary by some two or three years from one child to another. Much teaching of creative activity is done in groups of the same age, yet at this transition stage only individual teaching can be successful.

The third problem I would identify is the specially gifted child. We have to make an effort to diagnose rare creative gifts. It is not part of the normal equipment of the teacher, and many teachers may never encounter such exceptional cases. In a large school there should be at least one teacher who has had special training in diagnosis of this kind — or it may be that the school must rely on out-

side help — but all schools must be aware of the problem and be prepared to accept its challenge and its difficulties.

There is much in this paper that is personal, and I wish to avoid applying the particular to the general. If we accept Mr. Goodman's thesis, and I certainly do, then we are led to one or two fairly obvious conclusions. All teachers must have highly developed sensitivities; certainly they cannot help a child unless they understand what he is about. There is no way to arouse sensitivities except through experience, and all sensitivities are enhanced by active participation. And the sensitivities and the emotions are part of a whole; if sensitivities are to be fully aroused our classrooms must be full of laughter and tears of anger and forgiveness and love.

