

For Art's Sake

BY ANGELA RIECHERS

“Without art there is an incompleteness which nothing can overcome.”

– W. G. Whitford, University of Chicago School of Education professor, writing in *The Elementary School Journal*, October 1923

As long ago as 1749, Benjamin Franklin wrote about the importance of art education in his pamphlet *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*, yet art ed wasn't introduced into most public school curriculums in the U.S. until 1821. At that point, art education was added mainly to teach young people a vocation or enhance their moral development, or as a way to socialize new immigrants, not because art was considered worthy of serious study in and of itself. For example, music was made part of the curriculum because it would “improve singing in the church service.” This secondary status persisted over time, with art incorporated into elementary education mainly as a means of building a wider range of cognitive, social and emotional skills in support of learning the other, more “serious” disciplines like math and science.

There is still a widespread tendency to consider the arts as leisure-time luxuries rather than useful subjects, perhaps because they often don't lead directly to lucrative career opportunities. Consequently, in today's dreary economic times, when schools have to fight for every dollar in their budgets, arts are often one of the first things to go. Although childhood arts education rates rose steadily throughout most of the 20th century, in its final decades they began to slip. Today, the statistics are sobering. In 1982, 65 percent of all 18-year-olds had received some art education, but by 2008 that figure had dropped to 49 percent. When broken down by race the numbers are even more depressing: over the same 25-plus-year period, the number of African-American and Hispanic students receiving art education fell by nearly half, to an average of just 27 percent (down from 50 percent).

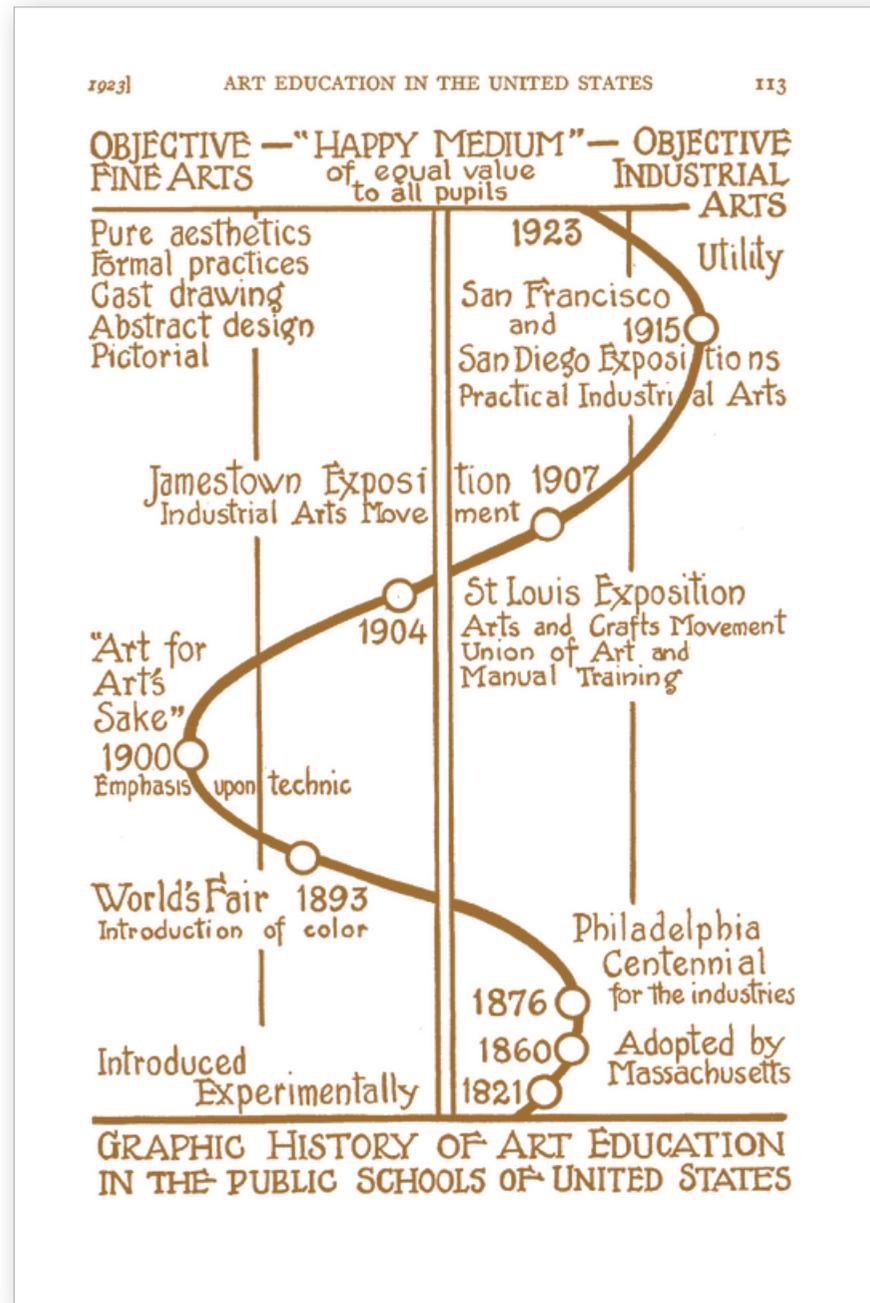
Yet studies have consistently shown that an arts education benefits individuals in many ways, creating a deeper engagement with learning for students at risk of academic failure and even leading to higher test scores. Children who received art training are not only more likely to attend college and graduate, they are also more inclined to register to vote, get involved in volunteer work and, perhaps most important of all, be steadily employed. The Obama administration has made a gesture toward funding the arts in our schools: In May 2011 the federal government released a publication, *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*, that led to the creation of Turnaround Arts, a public/private initiative that will award \$14.7 million over three years to eight low-performing public schools scattered across the country from Massachusetts to

Oregon. The rest of the nation's schools will largely be left to the mercy of state and local school districts; the districts will then determine what kind of funding, if any, they can afford to allocate for arts training as well as what kind of classes the schools can offer and which teaching methodologies they will employ.

The Master of Arts in Teaching program at SVA urges graduates to keep all of this in mind as they venture into a daunting educational landscape beset, as it is, with many potential obstacles: public school hiring freezes, a generally poor economy with a high rate of unemployment, and a focus on test scores at the expense of less easily quantifiable achievements. Rose Viggiano, MAT chair, has taught at the College for more than three decades and can attest to the results of budget cuts and test-score mania on arts education. “When the economy is strong the arts thrive—they're back in the swing,” she says. “When school budgets are cut, the arts are the first to go. In our culture the arts are not supported because schools are driven by assessments and test scores. The problem is you cannot measure the arts, and this makes non-artists nervous.”

Public start-ups and private and charter schools often offer better options for art teachers than do public schools with minimal arts requirements. In New York State, for instance, a student needs just 2 credits in art (which includes not only visual arts but also dance and music) to be eligible for a secondary school diploma. Not surprisingly, many arts educators look for positions at schools where the arts are given a larger role in the overall education picture.

Andrew Willgress received his MAT from SVA in the spring of 2007 and was able to extend his student teaching experience—a degree requirement—into full-time work right after graduation. He now teaches at the Gotham Professional Arts Academy, a New York City public high school that welcomed its first class in the fall of 2007. Gotham is a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of schools that measure student progress via performance-based assessments rather than standardized tests, and require at least 5 arts credits for graduation. Willgress got the job despite a citywide hiring freeze because Gotham was a brand-new school. He helped develop its arts curriculum from the ground up, and after some growing pains (only 27 students instead of a projected 82 enrolled that inaugural year because the New York City Department of Education had failed to include Gotham on the list of high schools it provides to graduating middle schoolers), the school now



A CHART FROM *THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL JOURNAL*, OCTOBER 1923, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, "designed to show graphically the trend of art education in the United States since its introduction in 1821. The vertical lines in the center are intended to represent the 'happy medium' of art training, a type of art training of equal value to all pupils in the public school no matter what their future vocations may be. The serpentine line, fluctuating from one objective of art training to another, suggests where emphasis has been placed in art teaching up to the present time."

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attracts more and more students interested in attending, solely because of its focus on the arts. Features of the program include a comprehensive freshman foundation year that covers 3D design, sculpture, drawing, perspective and theater. The school maintains a close educational connection to the Whitney Museum of American Art. "The relationship we have with the Whitney is really important," Willgress says. "I'm over there with my kids six to eight times a year, while as a school we get around 15 to 20 groups there a year. Some of the kids are there on a weekly basis, depending on which classes they're enrolled in. Last year we had a big gala where the students presented their PBAT [performance based assessment task], which is a graduation requirement, in conjunction with the Whitney Biennial, and so they're able to go into the museum after hours and present to a crowd almost as if they were museum educators."

Keri Eisenberg, a former advertising agency art director, found her way to a fulfilling position as an arts educator through a very different route, one that involved some trial and error. After receiving her MAT from SVA in 2010, she used Craigslist to land her first teaching job—at the High School for Innovation and Advertising in Media, in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. The school was created in 2008 with a mission to teach students a viable trade in advertising (similar to the 19th-century model of teaching art as a vocation), but it soon became apparent that the school culture didn't truly nurture the arts. Students were uninterested and disruptive, and money was so tight that Eisenberg found herself stranded for three months without computers while she was supposed to be teaching a class in Photo-shop. "The students were screaming at me," Eisenberg says. "It was just so hard, and I was getting no support from the school or the principal. One of the other two tech teachers wouldn't even talk to me. It was really challenging and I was frightened going there every day; the school is in a tough neighborhood, and I ran into some incidents on the way to work that weren't good."

When a friend recommended her for a position at the private Saddle River Day School in Saddle River, New Jersey, Eisenberg jumped at the chance. Classes there are small—between three and 12 students—and the kids are more engaged. As Eisenberg puts it, "They sit and they listen and they want to learn." Budgets for the arts programs are much better, too. Eisenberg has been able to create her

own curriculum, teaching branding to fourth and fifth graders by having them design, among other things, logos for T-shirts and business cards. In nearly all her classes she stresses the importance of communication in contemporary media-rich culture. Eisenberg says, "In today's world everything is very visual. Students need to learn how to get a message across even if they're not going to be artists. They can be a lawyer or a doctor or businessman but they're going to have to learn how to communicate using visuals."

Certainly, as our culture becomes more visually driven and less text-reliant, arts training will benefit students in many important, practical ways. Buried on page 28 of *Reinvesting in Arts Education* is the by now familiar observation that the arts are useful because they create flexible thought processes needed in many areas of life and learning:

Many high school graduates lack the skills to make them successful in post-secondary education and later in the workforce. These are sometimes referred to as 21st-century skills, or habits of mind, and include problem solving, critical and creative thinking, dealing with ambiguity and complexity, integration of multiple skill sets, and the ability to perform cross-disciplinary work.

While any positive political attention directed toward arts education is welcome, this particular argument takes us straight back to the 19th century, when music was included in the public school curriculum so that children would sing better in church. Until the arts are recognized as valuable in and of themselves, not seen as aids to improving overall academic performance or, worse, as luxuries to be cut at the first sign of financial distress, arts educators will continue to fight an uphill battle for funding and cultural support. Fortunately, the sort of artist who decides to become a teacher also tends to be someone with enough fervor that the many logistical difficulties along the way become secondary to the greater endeavor. As French poet and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (*The Little Prince*) wrote, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."