

POSTMODERN ART EDUCATION: AN APPROACH TO CURRICULUM

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The idea of progress. Historical modernism is grounded in the belief that culture and society have a progressive, evolutionary development based on the advance of science and the cultivation of human reason. By the late nineteenth century, the progress notion was given scientific sanction by Darwin's explanation of evolution. Some even applied Darwin's notion, "survival of the fittest," to justify the competitive business and elitist social practices of the day, thus creating the doctrine called social-Darwinism. However, social-Darwinism was not a scientific theory, but an ideology that expressly favored the well-to-do social classes of the day.

Such modern ideas of progress are also reflected in the professional fine art community, where presumably each generation of artists makes advances in the expressive potential of their media. Beginning in the late 19th century, progress in fine art became equated with the movement away from the conventions of representation associated with the academic art of

previous centuries. These conventions were abandoned in the late 19th century because artists viewed the academy as a constraint on their originality. This came to be seen as the basis for artistic progress.

British art critic Roger Fry wrote at a time when Darwin's theory of evolution had already met with wide acceptance. Fry succeeded in persuading his professional contemporaries that abstract art had validity and was an advance over previous art because his audience had already accepted the notion of progress as a guiding principle in the evolution of human culture. By relying on this principle of progress, he could explain how Cezanne's compositional designs were an aesthetic advance.

Currently, people tend to be less certain that new art indicates progress over older art. Perhaps more individualistic and abstract styles merely estrange public audiences resulting in a loss of socially shared content. Certainly there was a prevailing belief that modern artists were not "of their time," but "ahead of" their time: that they were making the art of the future, and that at some point, their time would come, though as Gablik noted

To the public at large, modern art has always implied a loss of craft, a fall from grace, a fraud or a hoax.... It remains one of the more disturbing facts about modernism that a sense of fraudulence has, from the start, hung round its neck like an albatross. (p. 14)

The avant-garde. Embedded in the idea of progress is the related idea that cultural growth is the product of an artistic and intellectual elite, an avant-garde who devised new social forms or lifestyles and also new forms of art. Their cultural role was to construct new forms of reality that would enable progress to take place. These innovative forms were to challenge the beliefs and assumptions of the public. Hence, the expectation existed that the public would initially misunderstand the new ideas or the new art; though, with the passage of time, they would gradually become receptive to these advances. The presence of forms of art that are considered in advance of the public at large has given many art teachers their reason for teaching: to bridge the cultural gap between the public and the vanguard.

Modernist models of aesthetics. Discussions of modernism tend to focus on two models of aesthetics: formalism and expressionism. Formalism was advanced early in the century by Bell (1914) and Fry (1925). Expressionist theories were advanced by Croce (1913/1922) and Collingwood (1938). The two views also figure in the critical writings of both Greenberg and Rosenberg in their support for Abstract Expressionism during the post-World War II era. Greenberg's (1961) support "was based on a progressive, evolutionary formalism" (Freedman, 1989, p. 222). He considered the elimination of subject matter from art an advance in the his-

tory of art. He described art as being "beleaguered by mass culture" in need of reform around "those values only to be found in art." "Content [was] to be dissolved so completely into the form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not in itself,...subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague" (Burgin, 1986, p. 11). Greenberg's view, like that of his formalist predecessors equated stylistic progress with a search for purity. His interpretations and judgments of various artist's works were predicated on this view of progress and reflected his stress on "the ineluctable flatness of the surface. . ." (p. 14).

Rosenberg also supported Abstract Expressionist painting but tended to equate the style with the existentialism that pervaded postwar intellectual thought. However, it is not that a doctrine best accounts for the Abstract Expressionist style, but the fact that American postwar painting could find critical support by both formalist and expressionist criteria within an argument for a progressive history of art.

Primitivism. Late in the nineteenth century so-called "primitive" art was seen as a new beginning for art. Modern art, being a new style, was sometimes equated with primitivism. It was thus no accident that modern painters such as Klee and Picasso appropriated motifs from other cultures as well as from the art of children. The impact of primitivism on modern art can be linked to the colonialism of the 19th century by the dominant powers of Europe and America. Large collections of "primitive" artifacts were assembled in ethnographic museums where they could influence such artists as Picasso and Klee. Primitive art was a dawning art, young in a cultural sense and thus vital; whereas the older art of European academies was seen as a dying tradition that had run its course.

Art education in the modern sense was tied to the "discovery" of child art, which was seen as a form of primitivism in its own right, especially in the juvenile art classes of Franz Cizek. Today's teachers may be totally unaware of the cultural significance that child art had in the minds of its early proponents. They may continue to encourage free self-expression without realizing where these ideas originated and what relevance the practice may have had in the time and place of origin.

Abstraction. Early modernism moved quickly toward increased abstractness, until it became the pursuit of pure formal relationships capable of evoking aesthetic experience. This search for purity was seen as a rejection of the materialistic culture that had grown up in the industrial world. Formalism in this context was a way to reform art. It also had become the basis of an assumed universal aesthetic, the common denominator for all the world's art. This can be seen in the teaching of elements and principles of art by such individuals as Arthur Dow and also in the teachings of the Bauhaus masters. Today it is questioned whether the claim to be a universal

aesthetic is warranted, though this tradition lives on in a number of current textbooks. The impulse to pursue abstraction is akin to reductionism in science with its tendency to break down complex phenomena into simpler parts.

Universalism. The search for a universal reality that lies at the core of all understanding may have been one of the reasons that artists ventured into abstraction. In art the universals were believed to be the elements and principles of form that underlie the diversity of innumerable styles from all over the world. Though there was diversity, modern artists strove for an international style. This was most apparent in the field of architecture.

Creative destruction. Harvey (1989) notes that modernism has within itself an image of "creative destruction," that in order to create a new world one is forced to destroy much that has gone before. The cubist image of humanity was achieved by processes involving an analysis of form coupled with its rearrangement to create a new unity. Sculptors of the postwar era used a cutting torch to dismember old or wrecked automobiles, the parts of which were reassembled to produce art. Throughout the 1950s, School Arts Magazine offered numerous lessons based on the idea of "making art from scrap." Similarly one can see in the urban renewal projects of the 1960s a tendency at work requiring the destruction of urban landmarks in order to create a renewed environment. It was not uncommon for individuals to justify the resulting destruction as the price paid for progress.

The functions of art. Within the modernist view there are conflicting views concerning the functions of art. From one perspective, works of art are regarded as phenomenally distinctive objects whose point and purpose is to give the viewer aesthetic experience. From another perspective, art is to therapeutically free both artist and viewer from the unhealthy effects of society. A third perspective, held by many modern artists, is that art is to free society from the constraints of conservative middle-class views by the creation of objects that shock and expose those views to ridicule. In *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe (1975/1989) questioned the sincerity of the latter aim, as it was a middle-class patronage that ultimately sustained the artist and assured the success of the art.

Trivialization of popular culture. In championing a striving for purity in art, critics such as Clement Greenberg advocated the view that modern artists should be disdainful of the imagery of popular culture and commerce. Books on modern design decried the lack of good taste in the bulk of mass produced items. In fact, Laura Kipnis redefined modernism "as the ideological necessity of erecting and maintaining exclusive standards of the literary and artistic against the constant threat of incursion and contamination" (1986, p. 21). Referring to popular visual culture as "kitsch," Greenberg dismissed it as an unfit subject for serious study in favor of the high art of the avant-garde. When artists such as Warhol and Lichtenstein

began to appropriate imagery from popular culture and commerce, Greenberg and many others within and without the fine art community had difficulty accepting this as art.

Kipnis (1986) suggested that the appearance of a number of books on popular culture by both social and art critics is one of the indicators of the passage from the modern to the postmodern, and Seymour Levine (1988) showed how cultural distinctions between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" forms of art accompanied the formation of social class hierarchies. For instance, Shakespearean drama was a popular entertainment form throughout most of the 1800s in the U. S. and did not enter the exalted domain of high culture until the turn of the century. The differentiation among entertainment forms into high and low forms paralleled the development of social classes based on wealth. This suggests that the rejection of popular or lowbrow arts in modernist criticism and art curricula had little to do with their level of aesthetic excellence or cultural importance.