

Growing Up In The Arts

Frank Oppenheimer, Exploratorium

Reprinted from "The National Elementary Principal, Vol 56, Number 1, Sept/Oct 1976

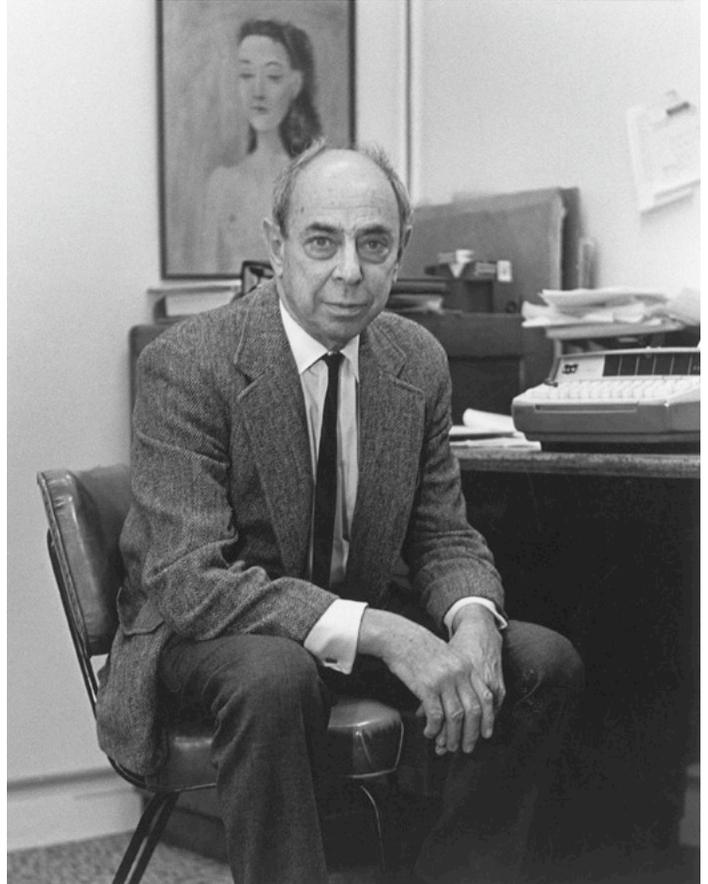
Dr. Oppenheimer was invited to participate in the Rockefeller Foundation Forum on the Arts in Education, which was held in New York City in October 1975. He was unable to attend the forum but replied at length to Junius Eddy's letter of invitation, spelling out his experiences with the arts and some of the lessons extracted from those experiences. Here is Dr. Oppenheimer's letter. The Editors

I regret that it is impractical for me to come to New York next week to attend your conference on art education. But here, as I promised, are some of my reflections on the subject.

I must start with a disclaimer. I have never even attempted to teach anyone how to draw, paint, or compose. There is a great deal that I do not understand about art. In particular, I have no notion of why music is so important to people. I know that it is important and that it changes people's lives and feelings, but I do not know why or how.

Many of the formal aspects of the graphic arts must have an impact in much the same way music does. For example, I know that Turkish people are moved by elaborate formal and nonrepresentational grilles and mosaics similar to the way I am moved by music. But I do not understand why these elaborate and infinitely varying geometric forms have such an impact. I have wandered around Istanbul with Turkish friends, and I know that this form of art can be very important.

I grew up as a disciple of Roger Fry, and I still retain the conviction that the form and discipline imposed by the medium are essential elements in all forms of art. I, therefore, believe that an awareness of the role of form and discipline should develop through the process of art education. Yet I have no



suggestions about how this awareness can or should be developed.

There are some aspects of my education in music that are probably relevant to education in the graphic arts. I am a flute player but not really a trained musician. I started learning the flute at the age of fifteen because I heard a flutist playing the theme of some piece at one of Walter Damrosch's concerts for young people, and I was captivated by the sound of the flute. My flute playing was not at all connected with school. The important aspect of this education concerns the circumstances that nurtured a self-motivated education.

First, my parents took me seriously. They bought me a flageolet that was chromatically versatile but simple to play. I learned to play

German folk songs that pleased my father. Then he found a fine flute teacher who agreed to take me as a pupil and who recommended a well-made flute.

Second, the deficiencies in my music background frustrated my progress in flute playing, and so my teacher beat a sense of rhythm, timing, and phrasing into me while teaching me to play the flute.

Third, I joined the New York Flute Club in order to participate in a social setting that included professional musicians, expert amateurs, and novices - a setting in which I could make friends and establish norms.

Finally, opportunities developed for me to make music with other people and to play for people who enjoyed listening to music.

During college, at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, I continued taking flute lessons for a year; I also became a member of the Baltimore Bach Club. We listened to records once a week and pursued our mission to bring public chamber music concerts to the then rather barren musical scene in Baltimore. Each year, a group of us went to the Spring Bach Festival in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Thus my music education involved a lot of listening to music and contacts with people who took music seriously and who played and composed it. This personal involvement and training led to a lifelong thread of playing the flute alone, for my own pleasure, and of playing with a group, for other people's enjoyment. Such ideal conditions will rarely be available to students, but it seems to me that art education must provide, to the greatest extent possible, the supportive and reinforcing environment described in my personal experience.

My learning about painting was also, except for one incident, completely nonschool. I do remember drawing a tree - probably in the second grade. The teacher explained to me that I had left a little cavity at the top of the trunk where the branches parted. She said that the cavity would fill with water and the tree

would rot and die. She was a very good teacher, because I then began looking at trees to discover how the branches do separate from the trunk in order to avoid this difficulty. Apart from this one drawing, I cannot remember any art activity or art learning in elementary school, high school, or college. But a lot of learning took place outside school.

When I was about twelve or thirteen, I went to Greenwich Village once a week to do charcoal drawings of people and still life, but most of the drawings were of fire escapes and the "toits de New York." To this day, I remain highly sensitive to and moved by the views from the back windows of city houses. I remember feeling at home with charcoal and fixatives, and so on. Later, when I was about fifteen, my brother and I spent several weeks on Nantucket Island learning to reproduce with oils on canvas board the very special forms and colors of the island. At that time, we also learned about brushes and linseed oil and about colors - the way the colors mixed, and their names: burnt umber, cerulean blue, yellow ocher, and so forth. However, I have never become an even marginally competent sketcher or painter.

The main thread of my art education came through a different pathway than through doing it. My mother was a serious painter before her marriage, but she painted only occasionally during my memory of her. Throughout my early childhood, our house had a static collection of her paintings and a few sentimental or allegorical prints. When I was about ten, my parents bought their first painting, a large dark Panini full of ruins. For the next eight years their collection grew, and I was able to watch and participate in the evolution of their taste, knowledge, and involvement with paintings. I remember sitting in private rooms of Tannhäuser, Wildenstein, and Durand Ruel listening to their comments and those of unctuous dealers about paintings. At the age of twelve, my parents took me to Zurich to see an extensive collection of van Gogh paintings, and a few years later, by special arrangement, we saw the Barnes collection in Philadelphia. I remember their participation in the beginnings

of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. On Saturday afternoons, I would "do" the galleries on 57th Street with my dates. My parents became special friends with J. B. Neuman, and through him they became friends and partial sponsors of Max Weber.

During college in Baltimore, this kind of exposure to the arts continued. I spent much time in the Baltimore Museum of Art, where I got to know the wonderful Adele Breeskin and also Etta Cohn and her collection. Just after college, I worked for about eight months in the physics department at the University of Florence and spent every Thursday afternoon in the Uffizi.

I have recounted this abbreviated summary of my own education in art and music to emphasize the enormity of the task you have set for yourselves at the conference to which you invited me. Even with the exceptional opportunities that were afforded me, there is much more that I could have learned about art and music - and, in fact, am still learning. Since I have never taught art or music, I will try to find any lessons that can be extracted from my own experience. I believe that there are some.

In the first place, art must be made to seem important. An appreciation of its importance, however, cannot be cultivated entirely in the classroom. Furthermore, I think that the private emotional importance of graphic art to the individual may not arise in early childhood. It is, therefore, not clear to me whether it can or should be taught at this stage of development. This teaching process is a matter that I know very little about, but I would like to find out what has been learned.

It is evident that art education involves a social process as well as a private one. The social process should include all the resources of a community - not just the schools. It requires contact with people who take art seriously, people who make it, live with it, sell it, display it, and who write and talk and think about it. Art, like music, can be enhanced when people join together to create it or to enjoy it (but not to the exclusion of private study, which has

occurred in the case of school bands).

Any venture into art can be incredibly frustrating and confusing. Art education, therefore, probably needs to have more support and encouragement than any other form of education. The support must come from parents, teachers, friends, and, whenever possible, from strangers. Encouragement must also come from the tools of art. Learning to play on a junky musical instrument is a surefire way to kill interest and incentive. I believe the same situation must be true for graphic arts. For example, an inadequate selection of murky colors can be deadly, and good, durable paper is essential. Moreover, the specialness of art can be appreciated and heightened through an enjoyment of the tools and accoutrements of the artist.

It also occurs to me that the way in which art is displayed, both for learners and professionals, ignores and even obscures an essential feature of art; for instance, if one picks the best single example of work done by a number of different children or artists to display on a schoolroom wall or in a gallery, the implication that art is a progressive and cumulative endeavor in discovery and creation is lost. This cumulative property of art exists in both the work of an individual artist and in the historical movement of art.

Science, as well as art, is cumulative - but in a very different way. In science, the accumulation is obvious because it results in an ever expanding, coherent body of knowledge and experience that is accepted, more or less in its entirety, by the scientific community. Moreover, it can be summarized in textbooks and in encyclopedic articles. There is no such unified, condensable body of art; although it does share with science the property of having a moving forefront of perception, discovery, and synthesis. Both artists and scientists can relook at parts of nature that they or others have looked at before. They do not record what they find, however, unless something is there that has not yet been expressed to their satisfaction. The art of the present is built on the past, but it

is not a repetition of the art of the past, even in the work of an individual artist, when it may be stylistically similar.

Some way must be worked out, especially for young children, to display their art in a way that emphasizes its evolving character. Nowadays, conceptual artists complain that too much emphasis is placed on the individual and isolated work of an artist. I agree with their complaint, but I believe that they have reacted to it in a sterile way. The quality of the process in art should be shown by displaying flowing streams of art. There are usually many alternate ways of selecting particular pieces for such streams. If learners of art were fully aware of these flows in themselves and others, they would be more interested in what they are doing and learning. Retrospective art shows are mounted only for already famous artists, and even these are often spotty in terms of illustrating evolution.

I do want to talk here about a current trend toward the trivialization of art. Artists have contributed as much toward this disturbing trend as have its interpreters. When people assert that we need more science, they say so with a conviction that more science will have an effect on the way people live and solve their problems. But when they say, "This city needs more art," they usually mean only that the art will make the city prettier, much as they might say, "This city needs more trees." When people say that children can and do express themselves through art, they think of its impact on the expresser, on the child. They do not understand that the child's art could change the feelings and behavior of parents, teachers, or other children. Such expression is seen as a type of psychic therapy and not as a vital means of communication.

There are ways of thinking about the activities involved in science and art that suggest parallels between them without denying their essential differences. Both art and science start with an awareness of simple patterns in experience, whether within oneself, or as a part of a relationship with the external world. Both art and science record and elaborate

these simple patterns and express them as either the sketches of a painter or the empirical "laws" of the physicist. But both physics and painting include a stage beyond simple pattern recognition and recording: both order, sort, and combine the perceived patterns and thereby discover patterns of patterns that are perceived at this higher level - frequently as a result of astonishing intuitive leaps. These patterns of patterns, works of art and theories, show that elementary patterns, which had appeared as disconnected and unrelated, actually combine to form a unified experience that provides a broader and deeper view of nature and of the way people react within it. In science, these patterns of patterns, these theories, lead to the discovery of new things that are happening around us. They also serve as a guide to the means we can use to cope with and react to the good and the unpleasant ways that nature impinges on us.

Why then do city planners not look at paintings in order to learn how to design rich city environments? Why don't architects look at a Cezanne to design cafes in which old men play checkers together? Why don't people look at portraits to find more meaning and wonder in the transformations that occur in aging faces and bodies? Or on a simpler scale, why don't people realize that paintings enable us to see the world in a new light and to find pattern and structure in objects and scenes that, without art, have been perceived only as a shapeless, amorphous, and emotionless background?

People have overemphasized the idea of validity in science, and they treat the collective "right answer," which is proclaimed to be science, with dry respect. They are not aware of the extent to which theories are modes of imagining, or that theories serve more as guides for exploration than as statements of absolute truths. But even more dramatically, people have denied the existence of validity in art because there can be no proclaimed collective validity in this endeavor. Yet each artist makes choices, does over things that seem wrong, and even starts afresh when previous work has led into a blind alley. How can one deny validity in the face of admitting

the possibility of mistakes and false starts?

With best wishes for your conference.

Another contributing factor to the trivialization of art, to the lack of conviction that art communicates important and valid perceptions, may stem from the way people react to the forefront of art. Neither students nor the general public are expected to extract meaning from a contemporary issue of the *Physical Review*. Their education starts with reexpressed ideas of Newton, Galileo, and Faraday. But contemporary artists tend to either sneer at people who cannot extract meaning from their works or, alternately, deny that their works have meaning, insisting that they should be appreciated as meaningless aesthetic experiences. An abysmal contradiction in terms! (I do not imply any verbalized meaning when I talk of meaning.)

Frank Oppenheimer

This current attitude has permeated art education. There is no longer a felt need to start children (or art students) with simple pattern perceptions and long-ago discovered ways of recording them. Art is not taught to students in a manner that heightens awareness of the world around them or of themselves; nor is it taught as a way to relate to and make their world more accessible. It is not taught as a process to learn, discover, and communicate what has been learned. It is not taught as a way to unify separateness. Rather, it is too often taught, as science is also taught, as a nonexperiential and hollow mimicry of what artists (or scientists) are publishing at the forefront of the field.

The realization by art teachers that it can be destructive to tell children that their efforts are right or wrong has led students to believe that there is no way in which they can find out for themselves about the rightness or wrongness of their efforts. They are not even encouraged to believe that they can convey something important through their paintings.

The process of setting all this down has made me feel more like a fraud than ever.