
Teaching the Arts of Design

Author(s): Walter Gropius

Source: *College Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring, 1948), pp. 160-164

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/773109>

Accessed: 09-02-2016 20:09 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Art Association and Taylor & Francis, Ltd. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College Art Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

sional enthusiasm in the intellectually mature may be trusted to correct aridity. The intellectually immature should not be trusted to teach art—indeed, they should not be trusted to teach. Surely an age which has invented semantics will not be repelled by significant form; and I urge that art will not be granted its proper place as a mode of study until art teachers end the fallacy that it is a mode of amusement for one's leisure hours, a collector's hobby, a specialist's private park or a therapeutic in psychosomatic wards. Art is a mode of knowing, and should be forever so analyzed.

TEACHING THE ARTS OF DESIGN

By Walter Gropius

THE general indolence of people towards the Arts and the prevalent methods of education in design seem to be interdependent. Constructive evidence through education must be offered to make people believe again in the basic importance of art for their daily lives. But as long as we consider the problems of art to be a matter of individual feelings which cannot be objectively defined as to standards of value, we cannot expect them to be recognized as basic for educational progress. The spiritual implications of art in society are to be redefined and, with the help of the scientists and using their methods of precision, the social and psychological components of art—not only the technical ones—are to be determined by a distinct order of values and meanings.

Basic order in design needs first of all a denominator common to all, derived from facts. A common language of visual communication will give the designer a foundation of solidarity for his spontaneous expression in art; it will free him from the sad isolation which he is suffering from at present since we lost the common key for understanding the visual arts.

In music a composer still uses a musical key to make his composition understood. Bach's well-tempered clavichord, our conventional system, serves as the common musical key for the western world. Within the framework of only twelve notes, the greatest music has been created. Limitation obviously makes the creative mind inventive.

In architecture the "golden mean," the "modules" of the Greeks, the "triangulation" of the Gothic builders give evidence that in the past also optical keys have existed, serving as common denominator for the working teams of early builders.

Walter Gropius, former director of Bauhaus and internationally famed as architect, is Chairman of the Department of Architecture at Harvard University.

For a long period, however, no common denominator has guided our expression in the visual arts. But today, after a long, chaotic period of *l'art pour l'art*—so utterly unrelated to the collective life of man—a new language of vision is slowly replacing individualistic terms like “taste” or “feeling” with terms of objective validity! Based on biological facts—both physical and psychological—it seeks to represent the impersonal cumulative experience of successive generations. Here also roots true tradition.

In modern architecture and design there is a hopeful beginning of an objective approach towards a language of vision. At least we are able today to feed the creative instinct of a designer with the knowledge of visual facts, such as the phenomena of optical illusion, of the relation of solids and voids in space, of light and shade, of color and of scale; facts instead of arbitrary, subjective interpretations or formulas long since stale.

Order of course can never become a recipe for making art. Intellectual art is sterile, and no work of art can be greater than its creator. The intuitive directness, the short-cut of the brilliant mind, is ever needed to create profound art. But a language of vision will provide the impersonal basis as a prerequisite for general understanding; a key system of design will serve as the controlling agent within the creative act of the designer.

Yet before it can become common to all, like that in music today, it must be made valid through general education. This goal cannot be reached by theoretical knowledge alone, which must be combined with continuous practical experience.

It is an old wisdom that education should provide experience as well as knowledge to form both the emotional and the intellectual faculties of the individual. To educate balanced habits of thought and action has been also the original aim of the curricula of higher learning in the Arts and Sciences.

During the industrial upheaval of our society, however, education has been narrowed by the over-valuation of the analytical mind, of book wisdom and of fact knowledge, while the importance of practical experience and of forming creative habits has been rather neglected. This is particularly evident in the Arts. The belief that the Sciences are of greater importance than the Arts has impoverished American culture. If the current civilization of expediency is to be succeeded by an indigenous culture, a correction of our educational system is needed which should give the Arts as much weight as the Sciences. Only then can both the emotional and intellectual powers of the human mind be correlated to act as *one* and to remain in balance like the liquid in communicating vessels.

Emotional faculties cannot be trained by analytical methods of the

Sciences but by creative disciplines as in Music, Poetry, and the Visual Arts. It is characteristic of the current trend that most influential educational plans published in recent years treat the visual arts rather casually, not at all as a discipline belonging to the central core of education. Aren't we too over-confident of the benefits from intellectual training? The visual arts are being taught by historical and critical methods of "appreciation" and "information" instead of through direct participation in the techniques and processes of making things. Aesthetic "ressentiment" has generally displaced a creative conception of Art. But Art, being the product of human desire, and inspiration, transcends the realms of logic and reason. It is a field of interest common to everybody, as beauty is a basic requirement for civilized life. Isn't it then a fallacy to expect that both historical and analytical approach alone produces creative ability? Can we afford to disregard the great potential source of promoting creative ability through direct participation in the making of our visible surroundings? Making is certainly not a mere auxiliary to thinking. It is a basic experience indispensable for the unity of purpose within the creative act. It is the only educational means which interrelates our perceptive and inventive faculties. But today the work of imagination has become suspect and discreditable if it cannot be made subject to scientific reasoning. The trend of spiritual development in the past, however, has always been determined finally by the vision of the thinker, the poet, the artist—not by materialistic intellect. Since education has almost neglected the disciplines which form emotional habits through practical experience, it has bred split personalities whose "head is not more native to the heart."—(Hamlet.) A disrupted world seems to be badly in need of the synthetic action of the artistic mind, of the man of vision, to become an integrated whole again.

The present program of general education should then be widened to include initial experience in the Arts, especially in the art of design, and simultaneously to develop a common language of vision understood by all. That in turn would have its beneficial effect also on the specialized training of the professional designer by putting the emphasis of his work equally on shop and field and on the science of design.

If we compare teaching the arts of design in the past with our present methods of training, the discrepancy becomes apparent at a glance. In the past design was developed from apprenticeship in shops—today from the platonic drafting board. What used to be auxiliary only for the maker of things—paper design—has become the central discipline of the designer. This shift of emphasis from learning by doing to intellectual discipline,

or from the workshop to the classroom, is typical for the present educational methods in design. But can an architect become a master of his craft without previous experience with tools and materials or, for that matter, an industrial designer who has to understand the complicated methods of industrial production? Paper design is but an auxiliary discipline to represent one's ideas sustained by the know-how of an illuminating experience in building and making.

A continuous training of basic manual skill in experimental workshops combined with disciplines in the fundamentals of surface, volume and space, and of composition—derived from objective findings—should therefore be developed on all levels of general education. Both the reinstatement of shop practice and the introduction of scientific courses leading to a common language of visual communication are basic requirements, I believe, for successfully teaching the arts of design.

This training should start with a general preliminary course aimed at coordinating the elements of handwork and design. As the beginner does not yet know the relationship in which he stands to the world at large, it would be wrong to put the "trade" idea or any specialization at the beginning of his training. The "human being" in its natural readiness to grasp life as a whole should first get a comprehensive view of the vast field of possibilities for expression lying before him. The customary training in mere drawing is not sufficient as a preparation. Drawing and painting are certainly most valuable means of self-expression but paper, pencil, brush, and water color are not enough to develop the sense of space so necessary to freedom of expression. The student should be introduced first, therefore, to three-dimensional experiments; that is, to elements of "building," of composition in space with all sorts of materials. Such experiments in materials—for example, observing the contrast between rough and smooth, hard and soft, tension and repose—will help the student to discover for himself by exercise of his hands the peculiarities of materials, their structure and textures. Working with materials, the student begins simultaneously to understand surface, volume and space. In addition to some technical skill, he develops his own form-language in order to be able to give visible expression to his ideas. After he has absorbed the elementary studies he should then be ready to attempt compositions of his own invention.

The aim of such art work is to widen the personality rather than to provide professional skill. Its success will depend greatly on the qualities of the design teacher who, by encouraging and stimulating, must release the student's own imagination, opposing with objectivity any reproduction or

imitation of other people's conceptions, including his own. The student will then experience his capability for achieving creative short-cuts of his own mind which go beyond his preceding intellectual research work.

Such a training develops and ripens intelligence, feeling and ideas, with the general object of evolving "the complete being" who, from his biological center, can approach his problems with instinctive certainty and will no longer be taken unawares by the convulsions of our mechanical age. It will give confidence and independence and will thus enhance the productiveness and speed of any subsequent professional training. And last but not least, it will prepare the common key of understanding.

After such preliminary experience the professional designer can then start his specialized curriculum from solid ground. Still he will need the workshop and the field all along to relate the expression of his design to the realities of materials and techniques. For no designer can fully grasp the many inter-relationships of form, construction and economy from intellectual classroom courses only, nor from paper design. In shop and field, however, he experiences their synthesis in close relation to the needs of the people he serves. It is then that he will realize that his knowledge of the language of vision, his skill in construction, in draftsmanship, and presentation, are all indispensable implements for expressing the all-important social end of his creative effort.

TEACHING THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF DRAWING AND PAINTING

By Arthur Pope

WE HAVE arranged at the Fogg Museum an exhibition of some of the work that is done in our courses in what we call theory and practice of drawing and painting. It represents a kind of instruction which has been gradually developed by three generations of teachers and is rather different from the more usual way of teaching at the present time. I ask you to keep in mind that the instructors have not been, except sometimes in-

Arthur Pope, author of The Painter's Terms, The Painter's Modes of Expression, Art, Artist and Layman, is a Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard University and Director of the Fogg Museum.