

Lutheran Homeschool Symposium
Bethany Lutheran College
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Beauty in Education

How to Instill Visual Discernment (Even if You Aren't an Artist)

Introduction

I don't believe it's an exaggeration to say that art is the least understood and least appreciated subject in school these days. And maybe not even just "these days." I would venture to say that it has been that way for a very long time. The visual arts have often been treated as a specialty subject. One must be either talented enough or privileged enough to merit studying it, or else it must be dumbed down to the level of popsicle sticks and coloring books so that everyone can participate on the same level.

When I start talking about art education, I know that I tend to sound a bit jaded, and I don't mean to. I'm standing here in front of you because even though there are problems, I know there is hope. But I can't help but express some level of disappointment for the way our culture at large—and even our Lutheran culture of education—has dealt with the subject. Although Lutheran schools pride themselves on quality in education—and rightly so—art is one area that we seem to be tracking more or less with the culture. Because craft paper and glue was my experience in a K-8 Lutheran Parochial school, and almost everyone I know has had a similar experience, whether at public or private schools. Why is it taken for granted today that a child has to attend college as an art major before learning anything substantial about art? And why do we expect proficiency in other subjects such as language, math, science, and history—even music—but not give even a little attention to the visual arts? I'm not interested in laying blame so much as in figuring out why art has so little value to educators today, and what we can do to fix that.

In order to convince someone to fix something, they first have to admit that it's broken. And, even in a world that is saturated with visual language, convincing educators to include visual arts in the curriculum is a hard sell. I suppose the obvious reason is that visual art has little utility when placed next to math and science. And even

though I could make a pretty good case for the utility of art, seeing it only as a means to an end would strip something special away from it. After all, what is the utility of poetry, drama, or music? Don't get me wrong, I think the arts are necessary—I just would hesitate to qualify them as “useful.” If they are not “useful,” the temptation is to reduce the arts to mere idle pursuits, as we often do in schools. So there's a great deal of misunderstanding that surrounds the discipline of art, and contributes to its either being cut from the curriculum, or turned into something that it's not.

How is the artistic culture in our schools broken, then? I would argue that it's broken not because it fails to turn little Picassos into little Rembrandts, but more fundamentally, because it doesn't see creativity as a valuable skill set. It doesn't strive to produce students who know how to make value judgments in the realm of aesthetics. This is primarily because it confuses “what is good” with “what I like.” In other words, children aren't learning discernment in their approach to art. As Christians, I hope you can see how damaging this is. If quality is judged solely on how an individual feels towards something, then Katy Perry and J.S. Bach can lay equal claim to “Best Musical Artist Ever.” (But every person here knows unequivocally that John Williams owns that title!) I believe an education that exposes children to artistic works of true beauty and worth is essential to helping them make value judgments throughout their lives. Any system that can't do that is in need of repair.

1. *Why is Art Left Out?*

In my experience first as a student, then as a parent and educator, I often wonder about the reasons teachers approach (or don't approach) art. But I'm aware that coming up with my own answers will tend towards generalizing, and this is the most diverse sampling of educators I've had access to. So allow me put the question to you, and we'll compare answers. If you're a teacher, either at a brick and mortar school or a home school, and you have felt any hesitation toward including art in your students' curriculum, what are some of your reasons?

Here are three that I came up with:

1. The first is maybe not on the top of your list, but it's one that contributes to its being misunderstood, and that is the **subjectivity of art**. It's impossible to know what is good and bad if your only gauge is how you personally feel toward something. Our relativistic culture has done a pretty good job of convincing us that there is no truth (“No right, no wrong, no rules for me—I'm free,” is a line from Disney's *Frozen* that

absolutely frosts me); there is no goodness; there is no beauty. There is only *your* truth. There is only what's good *for you*. And beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The pervasive notion that art is a totally subjective field is fueled in part by the fact that many of the most expensive works of art ever sold are works that most of us would “personally” find ugly. That someone would pay \$140 million for a Jackson Pollack painting must mean that someone thinks it is supremely good, and yet that is in conflict with my own aesthetic sensibilities. So who is correct? What can a person conclude except that there are no right answers, objective standards, or absolutes in the field of art?

I'm going to leave that question hanging for a moment, and we'll come back to it later. But for now, should we avoid something solely because the answers are less than absolute? If the work of a teacher is seen as instilling a set of facts in the mind of a student, then teaching something so “subjective” as art would be utterly impossible. On the other hand, if a teacher's vocation is to set a student on a life-long path of learning and discovery, in which he learns how to use reason, to determine truth from fiction, right from wrong, and good from bad (in other words, to practice discernment in all things), then teaching even something so “subjective” as art would fall right in line with that. So even though I don't believe art to be as subjective as the common perception of it, fear of that subjectivity shouldn't lead us to omit art from a child's education or experience.

2. The second reason one may avoid introducing art is that maybe **your kids aren't artistic**. Maybe if your child started drawing fully formed human beings, instead of potato people, you'd make an effort to include some kind of art instruction or appreciation in your schooling. But insofar as that hasn't happened, perhaps you feel that including art would be wasted effort—kind of like trying to teach violin to someone who is tone deaf.

Let me say that while I fully appreciate your Lutheran pragmatism, there is so much more value in an art education than ‘learning to draw better.’ But we all take it for granted that enjoyment of a thing is not necessarily dependent on your own mastery of it, or even in your participation. Take professional sports as an example. Does your own lack of athletic ability stop you from enjoying a Vikings game? Of course not! (The Vikings stop you from enjoying a Vikings game!) The same reasons we give for making gangly, uncoordinated kids play organized sports (e.g., “It's good for them! It teaches persistence! It builds character!” etc.) apply in spades to the arts. In addition to that, the creative mind is a muscle that needs to be stimulated and exercised the same way that

our bodies do. That it doesn't produce anything worthwhile on the first try might only be evidence that it hasn't ever been asked to!

One of my coworkers at the stained glass studio was an art teacher at the K-9 public schools in New Jersey. What amazed me is that beginning in Kindergarten all of her students would do portrait drawing, still lifes, master studies, and other real, academic, art projects that recurred every year. The result of this consistent method of teaching is that she could keep a long-term portfolio on file for each student, so that you could see tangible development over time. No matter the skill level of the student, there was always growth; there was always embarrassment at how they drew "back then," and pride in how they were drawing now—especially when they never thought they could. And I've seen similar results in my own students, too, even over the course of a single semester. So please don't feel inhibited by an initial lack of interest or skill in art.

3. The third reason for being hesitant to begin an art curriculum is, I suspect, the most common one. In a subject that seems somewhat specialized, **you may feel underqualified**. You haven't had any training or experience in the subject, and therefore it would be presumptuous to try teaching it. Even if your child did demonstrate some artistic talent, what could you do beyond encouraging them? When it comes to offering guidance or instruction, you wouldn't even know where to begin.

My mother was in that boat, as well, and while she always encouraged and supported me, she often said that she felt helpless to provide any real instruction. So I totally understand that. I wouldn't attempt to teach something like psychology, even to a third grader. (And the third grader would just use it against you, anyway.) The irony, I think, is that art can be one of the most accessible subjects. It needn't even be a structured class, to begin with. Take your children to an art museum as frequently as you can, and take your time there. Even if you can't teach drawing, sculpture, or painting, what your children really need is so much simpler. Let them experience *beauty*.

2. Seeking Beauty

For clarification, I do not use the terms "art" and "beauty" interchangeably. Not all art is beautiful, and not all beauty is art. Beauty should be a part of any art instruction. But if you had to pick only one, I think perhaps that experiencing art in a structured classroom format is less important than nurturing a familiarity with—and a hunger for—beauty.

So what is beauty? If you're looking for a checklist or a set of measurements, you won't find one that stands the test of time. Definitions tend to be suspiciously vague: "A

combination of qualities... that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially sight." What definitions have in common is that those qualities, whatever they may be, give pleasure to the viewer. I don't disagree with that, but oh, how the Postmodernists have run with that detail. They love to focus on the "pleasure" aspect, reducing beauty to a series of chemical reactions in the brain. Thus beauty, again, is assumed to be in the eye of the beholder, and nowhere else.

A definition that I like, even if incomplete, is that beauty is God's signature on his creation. When "God created the heavens and the earth," he "saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." Beauty is the opposite of chaos. Beauty is orderly and purposeful—chaos is formless, unordered, and meaningless. Like a signature, beauty cannot exist without an author—an artist—someone to direct matter into a meaningful pattern. It is utterly irrational to believe that a universe born by accident could produce something as wonderful and beautiful and purposeful as the human body—just as an example. When God completed his work of creation, it was perfect in purpose and in form. In other words, it was good and beautiful—even without a single person to see it:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).*

The marvelous thing is that even though beauty exists without our recognizing it, our gracious God has given us the ability to recognize it. What would be the purpose of the heavens continually pouring forth God's glory, if no one was there to hear or see it? It boggles the mind, but the beauty of creation exists for our benefit—for our delight—and that we should in turn give glory to the Creator. Beauty fills an actual need within us, that would only be acutely felt in the total absence of beauty. Imagine, if you can, living your entire life in a drab cube, never seeing a sunrise, or hearing a bird song, or tasting a steak. The whole universe of aesthetic experience sustains us in ways we barely perceive. Familiarity with these pleasures has instilled a kind of numbness towards our need for them.

The root cause is of course sin. In our fallen state, the world is doubly corrupted—the beauty of creation is marred by sin, and our sinful flesh does not always perceive it. This brings us back to the question of subjectivity. Beauty exists as an objective reality—with or without our gaze. But try though we might, we can neither perfectly perceive it nor achieve it through our own efforts. We argue about whether this or that work of art is beautiful. The artists who actually strive for beauty in their work will always fall short of perfection.

The conundrum facing all of mankind then is that a gift of God made for our enjoyment cannot be fully enjoyed unless we look for it, learn to recognize it, and glorify him in response. When what is objectively good and beautiful is out of sync with what we happen to like, the solution is to experience more. It's a process called "developing good taste." Or as Dr. Gene Edward Veith, Jr. defines it, "learning to like what is good."

The first time you tried coffee, you wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between a can of Foldger's that had been in the freezer for a few months and a fancy Jamaican blend that had been hand-ground the same morning. Your palette hadn't been developed enough to detect all the subtle flavors and aromas, and decide which of those are desirable. You probably had to drink a lot of cheap coffee before you could even taste a difference, didn't you? Or would a first time beer drinker be able to tell the difference between a Coors Light and a micro-brewed Belgian ale? It's the same with beauty in the visual arts.

3. Teaching Beauty

So how do you teach something so complex, nuanced, intimidating, and transcendent as beauty? I can't say much about it from a philosophical viewpoint; but as an artist, I would suggest both an analytical and an experiential aspect. Each is appropriate at different times and for different age groups.

First, let's look at an analytical approach. I like to think of the aesthetic realm as a pyramid composed of three parts: history, theory, and practice. If you go to art school, they'll tend to compartmentalize those and keep them distinct. When I teach my art classes, I consciously structure them to include at least two, if not all three. Students will study the history by putting it into practice. For instance, we study Byzantine art while making a mosaic. But by putting it into practice, they are implementing the theory (principles of color, design, etc.) perhaps without even realizing it.

Beauty is encountered in different ways in each of those three parts. Art history details thousands of years of the best of the best—mankind's most enduring efforts to

achieve aesthetic beauty. Art theory describes the methods that artists use to achieve balance, order, and beauty in their work. And practice implies taking up the tools and materials and wrestling with beauty one piece of paper, one canvas, or one lump of clay at a time. All art making is imitating in a small way God's first act of creation.

As I said before though, you needn't implement a rigorous academic approach in order for your children to see some benefit. An experiential aspect is important for all ages—but especially younger children. Take your kids to an art museum. You'll find that most art is marvelously universal and approachable. You don't need to translate an Italian painting or a Greek vase into English. The historical context of each piece needn't be related, nor the technical process described, in order to appreciate the beauty of it. All of that can come later.

Nor is beauty found only in museums. We know that the earth is full of beautiful things that God has spread at our feet for our enjoyment. Are we too busy to enjoy God's gifts? Make time for them. I know it sounds cliché, but stop what you are doing and watch a sunrise once in a while. Appreciate that fleeting moment of gold, pink, and purple, because God put it there for you. Go to the Grand Canyon some day. See the Rockies. Point out the constellations on a clear summer night.

If you can't experience all those things in person, books are a fine alternative. My main exposure to beauty as a child came in the form of illustrated books—especially Bible story books. Of course, seeing art in person is always better, but books offer a way to take your mind and experiences beyond the practical limits of a field trip.

And here's something you can do right now. Since beauty is not exclusive to the discipline of art, start seeing how beauty bleeds into the subjects you are already teaching. For example, our kids aren't old enough to take a survey of art history, but they are already getting a taste of it through their world history. My oldest son has the worst case of King Tut fever I have ever seen. At seven years old, he is absolutely obsessed with ancient Egypt, and it's largely because of the art. Tutankhamen's death mask is an object of rare beauty and craftsmanship, and it's fun to see our son drawing it over and over, and making his own masks out of paper. We didn't tell him to do that. He decided on his own that this art was worth imitating.

Beauty bleeds into other subjects as well: earth science, biology, natural history, astronomy, literature, and music. Make those connections explicit for them. Take a holistic approach. Help them to see beauty wherever you encounter it, on any day of the week. In doing so, you'll find your own perception being heightened and honed as well.

Last spring, we had recently moved to our current home in Winona, and we had yet to settle on a new church home. After having lived in Nebraska for the past six years (and having grown up there myself), it was a completely new experience for us to be able to throw a stone in any direction and hit a Lutheran church. So we were able to be a bit choosier than we otherwise would be. When we had visited the half dozen or so nearest WELS churches, we asked our children which church they liked best, and why. To our surprise, it wasn't the church with the friendliest pastor, or the youngest pastor, or the best Sunday school. They picked out the one that had the beautifully carved and ornately painted altar, font, and pulpit, and stained glass windows. They were not used to any of those things, so seeing something so beautifully crafted made an impact on them. (Let that sink in: they were not used to seeing beauty in God's house.) The beauty they saw there was of a kind that made it feel distinct and set apart from everyday life.

Lest I get off on a tangent about the importance of beauty in worship, the point I'm trying to make is that beauty can be noticed and appreciated even by children. Something that was completely outside their experience was recognizably beautiful to them. That speaks to the universal nature of beauty. The fact that it was outside their experience also means that I can't take credit for telling them what is and isn't beautiful in every instance. I want that to serve as a note of encouragement—that you and I, and even our children, still have some level of God-given ability to recognize beauty. Give yourself at least that much credit (or, rather, give God at least that much credit). You may not have the most well developed sense of artistic taste, but developing anything takes practice. The more you give your and your children's attention over to beauty, the more discernment you will gain. You'll begin to see beauty not just in the obvious places (e.g., the Grand Canyon or a sunset), but also in unexpected places, like a dilapidated, but once-beautiful house. Or a country church, lovingly crafted by farmers and craftsmen 100 years ago. Or perhaps in the cross, where the Son of God hangs bloody and lifeless—for you.

As you learn to like what is good, the mystery and "subjectivity" of art will start to melt away. You'll be better able to tell good art from bad art, and what is ugly from what is objectively beautiful. If you decide to include an academic study of art, then you'll be better able to provide guidance to your children. Most importantly, you'll be enjoying God's gift of beauty as he meant you to. You'll be a more complete human being, and in my experience, that is certainly worth the effort.