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Essential considerations In designing a new system of art education for South African schools and universities

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Essential considerations in designing a new system of Art Education for South African Schools and Universities.

Willem de Sanderes Hendrikz

ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN DESIGNING A NEW SYSTEM OF ART EDUCATION . FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES .

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UNIVERSITY OF THE
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C O N T E N T S

1	THE PROBLEM STATED	1
2	THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS	13
3	PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS	37
4	TEMPERAMENT, AESTHETIC EXPRESSION AND TASTE	59
5	THE CREATIVE ACTIVITY	81
6	ART AND CIVILISATION	102
7	ART IN SOUTH AFRICA	119
8	APPROACH TO ART EDUCATION	131
9	BIBLIOGRAPHY	149

1 THE PROBLEM STATED

In 1937, when I was appointed to the staff of the University of the Witwatersrand as Lecturer in Fine Arts, I accepted the responsibility of giving lectures and studio classes according to the prescribed syllabus in each of the following subjects :

1. The History of Fine Arts
2. Painting
3. Sculpture
4. Drawing
5. Any one of three Crafts selected by students
6. Anatomy
7. The Philosophy of Art
8. Art Appreciation
9. Theory of Colour
   (The last three subjects were not so classified in the calendar, but were implied in the advanced classes for students majoring and taking honours in the Fine Arts.)

These nine subjects had to be developed over three and four year courses, and involved - in addition to lecturing - administration, supervision of practical work, correction of essays and studio criticism, directing of research of advanced students and conducting class tests and examinations.

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No experienced lecturer in his right senses would have undertaken such a commitment. But I was inexperienced, desperately aware of straitened financial circumstances, and so fired with enthusiasm for the work, that I could teach for eight hours a day after sitting up each night to do the necessary reading and preparation. I had no time for creative research, no time to practise the art of sculpture, and no time to examine the system to which I was conforming or to evaluate the results of my teaching.

The intervention of the war and enlistment brought me to my senses. A military staff position gave me spare time to read and think constructively about my civil occupation and for three years I worked, during this spare time, on a thesis relating to an academic approach to the teaching of the Fine Arts at a University. This work was a sincere attempt to effect a compromise between traditional methods of art training and the revolutionary principles postulated in modern painting and sculpture. But all my efforts, while leading me into hitherto unknown fields of learning and considerably broadening the limited view of the manifestations of art which I had previously held, failed to provide a solution of the problem which I had set myself.

The more obvious reasons for this failure I discovered in the facts that

(a) The knowledge of modern art is still, in South Africa, an esoteric privilege. The initiation of students (fresh from our Matriculation system of education) into its complex secrets is not only almost impossible, but culturally dangerous, since it is inclined,

at this stage of adolescence, to lead to constricting prejudices - either for or against, according to the cultural background of the student - that sterilise the development of a balanced appreciation of the Fine Arts.

(b) Any traditional methods of art training in South Africa defeat their own ends since - except in the fields of Bushman and Bantu art - we have no major collections of original historic work to serve as a basis for direct reference. (The history of European art in South Africa gives us much that is significant in Cape Dutch architecture and furniture, some interesting "primitives", a few fine period illustrations, and next to nothing in sculpture. Even the most enthusiastic nationalist will admit the inadequacy of this local traditional heritage. The contemporary and near-contemporary artists in this country were either trained in Europe or have been so much influenced by European art that there is as yet no evidence of any definite flavour of what one could describe as South African in spirit.)

In short, I had been seeking for a relation between two systems that were fundamentally in conflict, and neither of which could, under the circumstances, be applied with any hope of success in this country.

But these factors, I found, did not form the main reason for the failure of my original intention. I was forced to the realisation, with some bitterness, that my work had been to no purpose, because it was based on the assumption that art had a significant part in the

society of which I was a member, whereas in reality it is little more than the side interest of a few socially and economically privileged individuals, and the despair of a handful of artists who, in every instance, have to supplement their incomes by teaching art or by some other means that has nothing to do with art.

The problem had changed from the material one of evolving a practical organisation for the art department of a University, to the sociological one of justifying the inclusion of art classes in the education of a nation that is still primarily concerned with materialistic pursuits.

Once such a justification is established, the complex manifestations of historical as well as contemporary art make it imperative that any system of art education - if it is to be effective - must be designed in terms of present-day scientific progress and our knowledge of the psychological and physiological factors which govern the creative activity and its appreciation.

In addition, as I see it now, the method of art teaching, if it is to have any cultural value, must be evolved strictly in accordance with the needs of the nation and the conditions under which it is to be practised. So any approach to the formulation of such a method must have its basis in a sound appreciation of both the social and psychological aspects of the problem. (The physiological and psychopathological aspects are outside my province, but their significance will not be overlooked.)

"South Africa has passed through dark and difficult passages in her history; more than once she has stood face to face with stark disaster. For generations she has been tried and tested as perhaps no other young country of our day has been tested....."1

Under such conditions one cannot expect an indigenous art to flourish; neither can one criticise a nation for regarding Art as a luxury when materialistic needs are the fundamental concern of its survival. But although those days are passing, and great schemes are afoot for the post-war development of this country, there is still a reluctance to recognise the significant part that purely cultural pursuits will play in the movement toward a better world.

If South Africa is to enjoy a cultural development that will be commensurate with her material development - and in a later chapter I hope to prove that no nation can attain any real degree of civilisation without a full recognition and use of the vital social value of art - then something must be done about the present indifference to this factor.

It can be readily understood that conditions are by no means perfect for such a realisation. "Imagine yourself living under conditions that millions endure, impoverished so that you lack adequate nourishment, crowded half a dozen of you sometimes into a single room; how much would you be interested then in these simple and most abiding and most accessible experiences? How much margin of spiritual resiliency

1 Jan Christiaan Smuts: Toward a Better World (New York 1944) p.118

and energy would you possess to seek and care for the creative things of life, and what chance would your children possess of growing up to be the kind of people who would seek them?
There is no need to labour the point. To speak of creative living as a possibility for the mass of our countrymen is a farce. If we deplore low tastes, we had better open the avenues that lead to higher. Abundantly creative living is denied to the masses."2

There are three avenues towards this end that can be opened: the introduction of proper art education in all Government Schools; the improvement of the present standards of art in South Africa by means of Art appreciation classes in Universities and Colleges; and adult education in similar classes at Art Centres and through cultural organisations.

For the achievement of these objects the first steps are to convince the public and the authorities of the social need for art in the development of their country and to train teachers to put the scheme into operation.

Stated thus, the matter seems fairly simple, whereas in actuality it is beset with difficulties that are by no means confined to South Africa. In the United States of America, where more progress has been made in this direction than in any other country in the world, similar obstacles are being encountered, particularly in the prejudice against art as a frill or luxury which has no measurable material value for children on leaving school.

2 Hewlett Johnson: The Socialist Sixth of the World (p.81

"The value of the three R's as school subjects is obvious to the layman. He understands the importance of this type of learning to his child as a future citizen. But hours spent in art work may cause him to feel that there is a serious waste of the child's time and an unwise expenditure of public money. Since the practical value of art is not strikingly evident, it is sometimes difficult to phrase convincing arguments to the doubting taxpayer."[3]

In addition to overcoming this prejudice, there are other difficulties involved in the introduction of art training in primary, secondary and high schools. The present rigid matriculation system allows for no resiliency in its general pattern, designed originally to meet the materialistic needs of the communities which it serves: the low scale of teachers' salaries places them in the anomolous position of being the cultural leaders of their communities while receiving the salaries of ordinary labourers, and discourages them from spending the time and expense on amplifying their initially limited training - in addition, it fails to attract the more highly trained and talented men and women who might otherwise have chosen teaching as a career. (A survey of similar conditions in the U.S.A. was recently completed by the Committee on State aid of the Educational Conference Board[4] and proves beyond any doubt the unfortunate affects these factors have had on the educational progress of that country.)

3 Florence Williams Nicholas, Nellie Claire Mawhood and Mabel B.Trilling: Art Activities in the Modern School (New York 1937) p.1

4 The Educational Conference Board is made up of the following organisations:
The New York State School Board Association,
New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers,
New York State Teachers Association,
New York State Association of District Superintendents,
New York State Council of School Superintendents, and
New York State Association of Secondary School Principals.

Moreover, the influence of the protestant churches on our system of education is very considerable, and their attitude to art in its many forms is by no means sympathetic. There is still much of puritanical doubt as to the moral validity of the pleasure in the arts of painting, sculpture and drama, a most definite antagonism towards the art of dancing and an unbalanced tendency to regard poetry and literature as the only arts that can officially be recognised with impunity. To this latter tendency may be ascribed the rapid progress of Afrikaans literature and poetry which, although of very great cultural value, is out of all proportion to the arrested development of the other arts for which the South African is fundamentally as richly talented.

These social and administrative problems will have to be solved by the Department of Education. The solution will no doubt demand something in the nature of a revolution in that department and will require an Act of Parliament as a motivation for constructive action. Although it is significant of our cultural development that in not one single major project for the improvement of our people and country has this vital social force been given any coherent thought, it is encouraging to know that the greatest statesman this country has ever produced has given form and content to a philosophical concept on which such future action may be based.

"We have left behind us a great era in the history of the world. We do not see it yet, and we are in the transition period between the two. It is one of the most interesting

and also one of the most difficult periods for any generation to pass through.

"What we want is some larger synthesis, some concepts that will bring together the vast details with which we have to deal. There has been an immense movement forward in thought, science, philosophy and all forms of human development. We are now running the risk of getting lost, becoming submerged in the details, and it is all-important for us to get some larger view of all this vast mass. We want what Professor Hoernle would call after Plato, the 'synoptic vision' over all these details.

"Holism is an attempt at synthesis, an attempt at bringing together many currents of thought and development such as we have seen in our day. It is not a system of philosophy. I do not believe very much in systems. They are sometimes helpful, but it is most difficult, in matters so complex as life and thought, to take any one concept that might embrace and embrace adequately the whole.Holism - the theory of the whole - tries to emphasise one aspect of thought that has been hitherto a neglected factor. I am trying to hammer out this neglected factor, which is, to my mind, all important in getting the 'synoptic vision'."

Science had shattered the idea (that the world was something ready-made and finished and moving forward as a constant, fixed rigid entity; and had impressed on us that this was not a fixed universe. It was instead a growing world, a creative universe, a learning world. The world was in a constant state of flux; there was a constant increase in all directions.

"Once you grasped that idea you had to depart from the view of things as entities; you realised that the world at bottom was not substance but flexible changing patterns.

"If you take patterns as the ultimate structure of the world, if it is arrangements and not stuff that make up the world, the new concept leads you to the concept of the wholes. Wholes have no stuff; they are arrangements, science has come round to the view that the world consists of patterns, and I construe that to be that the world consists of wholes.

"The effect of this change of view is very far-reaching. In philosophy it is difficult to estimate values; the beauty, the truth, the goodness of things. They seem to be additional to the substance of things. On the other hand, if you adopt the idea of patterns, you get away from substances and get patterns in which truth, goodness, beauty and value become bound up in the nature of things. To be a whole is to be real. To be valuable, to be good - these centre in the idea of being a whole.

"The world consists of a rising series of wholes. You start with matter, which is the simplest of wholes. You then rise to plants and animals, to mind, to human beings, to personality and the spiritual world. This progression of wholes, rising tier upon tier, makes up the structure of the universe.

"Every whole has its field, and all these fields interpenetrate each other. Thus we have a great community of wholes, each with its own field interpenetrating into the fields of other wholes. I think it is in the intermingling of the fields that the creative element of the universe enters." 5

5 Jan Christiaan Smuts: Toward a Better World (New York 1944) Extracts from pp.124, 125, 128, 129, 130, 131.

This concept implies that only by the fulfilment of the individual can the fulfilment of the whole structure of human society be achieved, and, conversely, in the enrichment of the community lies the enrichment of the individual - and ultimately the making of a better world.

If we are to accept it, are we not then obliged to design a system of education that ensures the conception of life as a whole, complete, covering the full range of human thought, emotion, sensation, intuition, perception, imagination and expression and including also the factors that enter into the field of aesthetics?

It is not enough to acknowledge this obligation. Something must be done towards its fulfilment. My own contribution, for the time being, lies in

(a) this stating of the problem; a preliminary survey of existing conditions in the Union; the editing of the formulae, theories and definitions in the general field of aesthetics that are relevant to this work; an evaluation of the psychological aspects governing individual temperament, taste and creative expression; the presentation of evidence of the social significance of art in civilisation; the appraisal of our system of education and the importance of art in an integrated curriculum; and

(b) a comparative study of modern methods of art education in the United States of America, and the presentation of a programme that may serve as the basis of an educational experiment which, by empirical means, may lead to a satisfactory solution of the particular problems of art education in South Africa.

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