SOME THOUGHTS ON YOUNG TALENT IN THE ARTS

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In the decades after the end of World War II, America saw an amazing increase in the production, use, and enjoyment of the various arts. The world came to recognize a number of genius-creators in art, music, dance, theatre, architecture, and design. The appreciation and consumption of high artistic effort increased many-fold among the population-at-large.

During the frenzied years surrounding the Vietnam War, an increasingly large number of our young people of high school and college age wanted nothing to do with the corporate-structured world of their elders and pursued a future life in the arts as a way of expressing their rejection of a world full of war and horror. Then, during the mid-70s, that attitude reversed itself and the next generation of students was much more concerned with developing skills necessary for their first work experience after the end of their schooling. Despite these changed attitudes and the economic difficulties in the country following the oil price shocks, popular interest in the arts and the pace of growth among museums, symphonies, theatres, dance troupes, and community arts activities, in general, have not slowed very much. Our country is much more involved in the arts than ever before. The talent necessary to man the symphonic chairs, to create the works of art, and to serve the various artistic needs of the community is in place as a result of the arts education of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

As the emphasis on job skills and the demand for economy in public services continue, the arts in various levels and kinds of education are threatened. Many still consider them as "frills" in the schools and call for a return to "the basics." Others still explain that the country needs engineers or business majors. As a nation, we do not yet fully realize the importance of both consumer and producer education in the arts, nor have we paid particular attention to the ways in which we might find and nourish latent and exceptional talent in art, music, dance, theatre, creative writing, or the other arts. One might well argue that artists should be permitted to grow freely, somewhat like wild mushrooms; to rise wherever they happen, to flourish wherever they may.

That is what American society had done in the past. The 19th-century romantic notion of the Bohemian life holds that artists need to suffer to produce art. It is a marvelous romantic novel or opera which tells us of the happy life of the carefree, young artist who—while subsisting on a loaf of stale bread and freezing in a garret—enjoys a life of freedom with boisterous companions and loves. While this sort of story may make a great evening's entertainment, it is unlike-ly that the devotion and discipline required to produce artistic works were, even in the 19th century, enhanced by physical discomfort and starvation. While it is still true today that many young professionals in the arts are poor, they are not producing better work because of their poverty but are in that condition, rather, because of their devotion and commitment to the discipline of their training. Some agencies now recognize the need to assist young artists with improved living and working spaces as well as subsidies to provide other basic necessities.

Just as our attitudes toward art and artists have evolved, so—to a limited degree—has the attitude towards arts education in the schools. Forty years after educators and psychologists first explained the disastrous effects of look-alike, colored pumpkins in the third grade, elementary schools are still encouraging children to color-in the spaces and many an elementary teacher proudly displays her heads of Lincoln at the appropriate season of the year. Few elementary teachers realize that such excesses are stifling to the creative impulses basic to artistic development.

Twenty years after we first heard about the Russian use of group-produced murals as a way of indoctrinating the individual child's subservience to the group, American teachers still do not recognize the power of a unique product and praise for individual success as a way of promoting self-development in a democracy. On the other hand, our professional teachers organizations in the arts and numerous foundation-sponsored projects of national scope have come to the fore and sought to make statements to influence public opinion about the importance of creative activity; of nurturing artistic ideas and discipline; of including a healthy and legitimate segment of general artistic education in the curriculum of the schools.

As for those students with potentially special aptitude and talent in the arts, we have offered only benign neglect and romantic laissez-faire. There is no way of knowing how much artistic talent was left to shrivel by the lack of opportunity, the lack of special schooling, or, even worse, by the negative attitude on the part of teachers, peers, or parents.

Today, again, the arts in school are among the first things cut when the budget is tight. The trend is "back to basics" for various reasons, perceived or real. The drive in elementary, secondary, and collegiate education is to emphasize basic and technological skills. There can be little argument that all individuals in our society should, to the limits
of their capability, be able to read, write, calculate, or understand the use of electronic machinery as we approach the 21st century. To use education in these areas as an excuse to cut the arts, however, is to condemn civilization to a homogenous dullness worse than that predicted by Orwell. We need, also, to remember that not all individuals have the same capacity for controlling timing; but, how can a music test establish the validity of a song or the quality of a piano recital. In the visual arts during the 1950s and early 1960s, Victor Lowenfeld, in his book *Creative and Mental Growth*, attempted to deal with the notion of ability in art by establishing typical age-group behaviors. But others, under the influence of Victor D’Amico, approached stimulating the child’s growth by enriching his experience with colorful materials and challenging problems. They rejected the notion of measurability.

Isolated efforts by foundations, special schools, and corporations have, from time to time, been launched to emphasize young talent. The Scholastic Art Press for many decades has highlighted young, visual artistic talent co-sponsored by local and national businesses. Its list of alumni artists is an impressive group. The John D. Rockefeller III Foundation’s program to build and support outstanding arts education programs in elementary schools was widely hailed for its innovative steps. The Ford Foundation has had a number of programs in the arts, a challenge grant to outstanding collegiate visual arts programs, and others to support young musicians and artists. Arts, Education, Americans, a panel of distinguished citizens headed by David Rockefeller, Jr., held public seminars in many American cities, and published a report stressing the need for the arts in public education with a particular emphasis at the elementary level.

Currently, more than 80 cities have established magnet high school programs in the arts. Joining earlier and established arts high schools in New York, Chicago, Detroit and Newark are schools in Cincinnati, Houston, Seattle, and Dade County, Florida. A number of states have followed North Carolina’s Governor’s School for the Arts, combining high school and collegiate study emphasizing the arts.

In the mid-1970s, the Educational Testing Service, a non-profit corporation in Princeton, New Jersey, took up the challenge of developing ways of finding talent among young or potential artists. The original intent was to develop a scoreable test which could be applied to high school youngsters in art, music, theatre, dance, and creative writing. With the advice of panels of arts educators from the field, however, this direction was soon abandoned as impossible. Instead, ETS developed a program now known by the acronym ARTS—Arts Recognition Talent Search. The program, now funded and directed by the National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts (in Miami), seeks to downplay the testing and competitive aspect of its activity while highlighting the talented youngsters’ potential, and giving support and public recognition to all participants. Applicants from around the nation, some several thousand strong, are asked to submit slide portfolios, visual or audio tapes, and supporting documentation to a preliminary screening group in each discipline. The screeners pass on their recommendations to a final panel of experts in each of the art forms. They, in turn, invite some 150 seventeen-year-olds to Miami each January. During the week of their residence there, they are given a series of graded studio ex-
Experiences and master classes. Evaluations by the judges are based in part on personal interviews, observation of performance, and expert opinion on the quality of the work performed. Awards are in the form of cash and scholarships for higher education.

The second half of the 20th century has seen America come of age in the arts. Our citizenry has produced some important creators of art work; we have seen a great increase of involvement in the arts. Our educational programs have taught art, music, and theatre to many, resulting in a phenomenal growth in museums, art clubs, music halls, and theatre groups. There can be little doubt that this artistic involvement by our people is, in part, the result of our public schools and our universities. There is now, however, an urgent need to focus on developing specially trained young people, at a time when education in the arts is on the decrease. School programs are being cut back as economic moves; college students are urged to take only job-skills courses. At such times, the opportunities to become acquainted with dance, or to explore an interest in ceramics, are severely reduced.

The opportunity to experience an art form is the first step to developing a skill or interest, or to uncover latent, strong artistic abilities. We now know that there are no tests in the various arts that can predict success or talent. We also know that artistic talents are not merely God-given, but can be stimulated, educated, and nurtured. We are also aware that successes among talented artists are few, and that there must be plenty of space for failures, which are many. We know that young artists need technical skills, in addition to talent, great self-discipline, and the will to persevere.

The contributions made by various government groups, foundations and private task forces and research by educators and psychologists have shown us the way. Our society needs young artists to produce music, art, theatre, and poetry that keep our lives from being homogenized and uninteresting. We must increase our efforts to find, stimulate, and teach young artists.

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