

Truthful Illusions: Art's Usefulness

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I congratulate you, the seniors, on your impending acquisition of a Bachelor's Degree and the students winning awards, on your academic accomplishments. Mileposts like these contribute to stature in your community. What you have accomplished is no small feat. Because you have been in the company of your friends and peers for the past four years, it may seem that everybody can accomplish what you have. The fact is that you're part of a relatively small group of people who can evaluate the issues of a problem and seek responsible solutions. I've been thinking about your role in the community as I've been putting this talk together.

I want to encourage you to use art more actively in your life. We have a great deal to accomplish in the U.S. in terms of cultural attitudes. Our culture does not prepare us to live a life that includes the appreciation for the arts. We are a nation of practical people. In America, we have learned to value the measurable world. Even in elementary school we are required to study math and science and we are taught to respect the ideas and honor the accomplishments of such inventors as Thomas Edison, Eli Whitney, and Alexander Graham Bell but we do not encounter or contemplate in any depth, the accomplishments of artists like Sandro Botticelli, Paul Cézanne or Georgia O'Keeffe. This disparity is not true in other nations

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where the making of art is integrated into one's everyday experience.

When you reflect on your experience here at Juniata, on how your set of values has been strengthened by contemplating and solving problems in the Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, International Studies and Fine Arts, it would be hard to argue that your values have remained unchanged in the past four years. You are the potential leaders of tomorrow. Your education not only brings an opportunity to achieve your dreams but it also brings a responsibility to guide others who have not had your experience. It's up to you to bring your values and problem solving abilities to your community. People of sound judgment, with strongly established values, contributing to their communities, will help to preserve our nation's freedoms.

How do you plan to spend the values of your valuable life? It's good to be trained for a career. It's also good to get out and work toward accomplishing the necessary steps to realize your goals. It is important to provide for your material needs. However, you must provide for your emotional and intellectual needs as well. We, in America, entertain the adage that "Time is money." However, time is also life passing.

In the late 1960's, I made a series of drawings and paintings from a photograph taken in 1945. It showed my mother kneeling



in a garden with my brother Jack sitting on her knee. I was standing beside her. I was five years old, my brother was three and my mother was 29. In the late 60's, when I was making the paintings, I was 29 and my mother was in her early 50's. What fascinated me was the fact that those three people didn't exist anymore. Our appearances had changed completely, our minds contemplated totally different thoughts, our emotional makeup had evolved into totally new states and even the cells in our bodies had replaced themselves completely at least three times. There was nothing left of those three people who were captured in that photograph.



I mention this because there exists the risk of concentrating so much on the accomplishment of career goals and socially established goals that we might discover, later on, that we have lost sight of who we are today. Worse yet, we discover that the person seated here today has disappeared and there is no trace of who that person was. Henry David Thoreau observed that he felt sorry for the person whose only purpose for taking a journey was to arrive at his destination. Please take the time to reflect upon and enjoy the many experiences you will be having on the way to accomplishing your goals.

Because you will be influential in your communities, I urge you to develop and strengthen your aesthetic judgment by actively including the fine arts in your life's routine. Creative ideas, neces-

sary for solving problems creatively, do not happen in a vacuum. You must place yourself in situations that put you in touch with creative ideas. Make friends with artists. Get to know how they think. Go to places where you will encounter their challenging works. Visit their studios. Go to galleries and museums, to concerts, to plays, and to poetry readings.

Bringing the arts into your life increases the number of aesthetic experiences you will have, which in turn will bring aesthetic options to your choices when you have decisions to make. Developing a curiosity about the expressive forms you encounter in works of art and sensitivity to their qualities would be excellent preparation for making difficult decisions in all other aspects of your life. Making art challenges the maker to be original. The practice of teasing an idea into one that demonstrates originality of thought will come in handy in exchanging ideas with others in career activities, family issues and sorting out for yourself what is True in life.

At this point, I feel the need to address the question of what it is about art that makes it so necessary to the quality of life. To answer, I would like to present my understanding of how art functions in a society and what the role of the artist is. Envisioning this could lead to an understanding of how art can be used in one's life.

Art depends on our ability to think abstractly. We have a memory and the ability to connect one experience with another in a new way that has not been thought of before. The element that triggers this new connection is a symbol. Symbols are things that, when encountered, refer to something else beyond themselves. Signals do the same. But signals are too specific to act symbolically. A stop sign, which is an example of a signal, has only one interpretation. An interpretation that one does not spend a long time meditating about, or searching for its meaning. One might argue that some artworks are only meant to be decorative. I don't want to diminish the contribution that such works make to the creation of a pleasant environment but the art I'm talking about uses symbols that operate at multiple levels. It is the contemplation of these deeper levels that breeds the stimulation of creative ideas within us.

There are many forms of self-expression: laughing and crying come to mind. But the kind of expression that I'm promoting includes the consideration of how a work of art's form contributes

to its impact. Art is that element in our lives that gives expression to the non-physical, incalculable, un-testable, uncontrollable half of our world-view. Working with a perception that is as yet unformed, the artist has to make his or her creation believable. It must ring true in the current day and age. The artist's role is that of the "symbol giver." He or she invents forms that express the tenor of the times, the current world-view. People use the artist's gift to verify that what they are feeling about the state of their world is consistent with the world-view of others. They use tangible symbols to verify that which is intangible within them.

By the time we graduate from high school we are too intimidated to try our hand at making art. However, we have more ability at non-verbal expression than we give ourselves credit for. It would be good to choose some form of art that offers you a means of self-expression. I am a painter and one may think that I am talking specifically about visual art. I will continue to make reference to visual art in this talk, but what I say pertains to all the creative arts including such art forms as creative writing, musical performance, theatrical performance, dance, painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics, photography, and digital art. Feelings and thoughts that cannot be measured or quantified can be effectively communicated by aesthetic means if one opens one's self to the making of art.

How do we use art in our Lives? It becomes an additional means by which to communicate our ideas and feelings; not only to others but to ourselves as well. Both the making of art and the appreciation of art strengthen our ability to communicate. We are able to use art to communicate because we are capable of thinking abstractly. To think abstractly means that we are able to read the meaning of symbols. Symbols, as I've said, refer to something beyond themselves. Numbers are symbols. Spoken and printed words are symbols and all images are symbols. All images are abstractions; even photographs. There is a wonderful anecdote about Picasso that exemplifies this last point. This story may not have really happened, but I know that it presents the Truth.

As the story goes, Picasso was at a dinner party with a number of guests and one woman was chiding him about his painting style. She was saying things like, "Someone should explain to Monsieur Picasso that a person does not have two eyes on one side of his head." Later in the evening she was passing around a photograph

of her fiancé. When it was handed to Picasso, he looked at it and then asked, “Is he really this tall?”

All art is artificial. It presents an illusion that points at the Truth. We may believe that the plot of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” didn’t really happen; however we do know that the experience being portrayed is True. We believe in illusions. Works of art attempt to establish the recognition of Truth through the creation of an illusion. An illusion into which we enter knowing that it may not be “real” but it may, still, lead us to an understanding of what is True.

Integrity in art requires that one remain true to one’s own perceptions. Resisting the temptation to borrow from others, the artist relies on his or her own experiences, reflects on their meaning, and shapes symbols that reflect those personal perceptions. Truth in art means being honest about one’s feelings. John Keats, in his poem “On a Grecian Urn,” states:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty
That’s all ye know on earth and that’s all ye need to know.¹

Having been born into the scientific age, we tend to equate truth with reality, with that which can be verified by dispassionate observation. However, there is another kind of truth. It’s the kind that Plato presents in his philosophical writings; something we know to be true but that is not measured by physical means. Keats was writing about the decorations on a vessel created about 400 B.C. The figures on it remain in an eternal state of youth and the trees in an eternal season of spring. It is an expression of joy. It presents an idea that we all can share. It is an ideal truth.

The scientific process has brought us to understandings of our natural surroundings that were unimaginable before the Age of Enlightenment. However, science isn’t all we need in order to function in this universe. If we rely entirely on our calculations and measurements, we will have an incomplete balance in our worldview. We need to take into account our inner universe as well. I refer to the world of emotions and feelings. These are very real to us and are capable of moving us to take actions that are beyond measurement or calculation. Huston Smith, in his book “Forgotten Truth,” states:

Our mistake was expecting science to provide us with a world-view when we now see that it shows us only half of the world – its physical, calculable, testable, significantly controllable half, and even that half is unpicturable; it can't be visualized.²

Works of art propose a visualization of the world that embodies both the intellectual and the emotional in its perception. We believe in the artwork's illusion when it fits with our perception of reality. Through the ages the perception of what is real has shifted and the symbols representing those shifts have changed. The art styles of the various epochs give us a good idea of how people perceived their location in the universe. When we look at the work, we look at the forms for clues to this world-view. The form is different from the subject. The subject is what the work is about. The form is the manner in which the subject is presented.

To understand the distinction, a helpful example is demonstrated in a couplet written by Robert Frost:

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.³

Frost creates the image of an old dog, perhaps lying by the fire. On hearing an unusual sound, he barks but he is too tired and stiff to bother getting up so he raises his head and barks over his shoulder. This is the subject matter. However, the rhythm and pattern of the words, in and of themselves, have an awkward clumsy structure. The rhythm and pattern of sound is the form. "The old dog barks backward without getting up." The form of the second statement provides a fluid sprightly rhythm that emulates the energy of a puppy. "I can remember when he was a pup." Without considering the meaning of the words, the poem still expresses the basic comparison through its form.

The form of a work of art is what I encourage you to regard when you encounter a work of art. It is the form that is the basis of expression. Over the centuries, artists have attempted to speak truthfully about the same unchanging themes. The element that changes is the form in their creations. Each epoch is distinguished by the way that it sees itself in the universe.

When we look at the animals superimposed one on top of

another in cave paintings, it implies an unselfconscious disregard for the order of space. Even though the sensitivity to the forms of the animals is quite accurate, the seemingly casual way in which one drawing intrudes on the space of another suggests a very unselfconsciously limited and insecure world-view.

The ideal spatial order found in Greek art expresses the respect that they held for the human mind. Compared to the Stone Age, these people felt at home in the world. Despite the many wars that took place during this epoch, it was a confident age. The feeling that one can exert a significant amount of control in one's world through the use of the intellect is expressed in ideal proportions and realistic imagery.

During the Medieval period, an age of insecurity, the work returns to abstraction. The style, using elongated figures flattened against an airless golden environment, is very effective in calling one's awareness to the significance and power of one's inner/spiritual world.

The dominant attitude of the Renaissance was that "man is the measure of all things." Once again, a confident age gives rise to realistic images characterized by the use of perspective to create an ideally proportioned space.

In the Age of Science, the major approach to reflecting the world was a style referred to as "Realism." Gustav Courbet, in reaction to the schools of painting that went before him, declared, "Show me an angel and I'll paint one." Impressionism offers us a most telling symbol of the 19th century's world-view. Using the scientific method, the artists wanted to remain objective before nature, reporting only the colors that they saw and recording their visual experience in the form of broken patches of paint to represent light particles.

The presence of science and the use of the scientific method gave people confidence that they had developed a means of controlling their environment. Thus, the symbols of the time are quite naturalistic. However, by the time of the First World War, this confidence had rapidly given way to insecurity and the abstractions of the 20th century. It became clear that science could only solve certain problems and that the unpredictable nature of life's experiences stem from more than just the elements that can be measured and quantified.

To regard the works of the 20th century is to contemplate the symbols of an insecure age. The movement to total abstraction, in other words, images with no recognizable subject matter, became the symbol for a world that is out of control with no seeming purpose, no central vision with which to anchor our sense of direction. We can no longer believe in the angels of Raphael. We live in the post-modern age, an age of insecurity and confusion.

For all of our ability to evaluate, analyze, measure, plan, and control our environment one must admit that our world is somewhat of a mess. The direction in which events are taking us seem to defy analysis and resist control. The abundance of information that constantly deluges us becomes indigestible and cancels out any attempt at finding an overarching principle to give us a direction for our world-view. In many ways, this condition creates an overwhelming state of confusion. If you're not sure of the definition of post-modernism, Huston Smith observes, "ask yourself if you know what is going on. If your answer is no, you're post-modern."⁴ Simone Weil stated it quite pointedly. She said, "Anyone who isn't confused today simply isn't thinking straight."⁵

The contemporary art that you encounter in the galleries and museums may not be what you would want to take home and hang on your wall, but it represents the truth about our age. If it upsets us or makes us feel uncomfortable perhaps it is because it is hitting too close to home. In general, works of art offer a guide by which we can take measure of our sense of what is really true. Meditating on the meaning of these works gets to the point that I have been trying to make.

Art is a Language that uses something other than words to generate ideas. Images are symbols just as words are symbols. A person benefits from learning the symbolic activity of the visual language. When a person adds visual symbols to his or her vocabulary of symbolic languages, he or she increases the potential for the richness of ideas. One cannot think a thought if the symbol for that thought does not exist in the mind.

For me, the highest accomplishments in any field of endeavor incorporate the qualities of nobility of thought, elegance of form and grace of execution. These traits lend themselves to one's engagement in many activities of life. One aspect of our culture in which these standards are consistently represented is the arts.

Please set aside time and some of your budget to make works of art and to get out and experience the work of others on a regular basis. Attend concerts of music that you are not already familiar with. Visit museums and galleries that exhibit work that is challenging to your understanding. Pay attention to how the words of a poem are fitted together or how a film is sequenced and edited. Each art form has its means of speaking symbolically. If you heed this plea, you will exercise your mind in ways that popular culture doesn't ask of you. Then, the journey on the way to achieving your goals will be much more enjoyable and your appreciation of your life's experiences will be that much richer.



NOTES

¹ *The Viking Book of Poetry of the English Speaking World*; Volume II (New York: The Viking Press, 1958): 772.

² Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992): vi.

³ Robert Frost. *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1963): 407.

⁴ Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, vii.

⁵ Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, vii.