

# How John Dewey's Theories Underpin Art and Art Education

**Patricia Goldblatt**

## ***Abstract***

John Dewey believed every person is capable of being an artist, living an artful life of social interaction that benefits and thereby beautifies the world. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey reminds his readers that the second Council of Nicea censored the church's use of statutes and incense that distracted from prayer. Dewey, in an interesting turnabout, removes dogma from the church, but lauds the sensory details that enable higher understanding of human experience. Dewey evokes a paradox: the appreciation and need for the "experiential" artifact, but art as catalyst to realms beyond the physical.

For Dewey, art functions as experience. Processes of inquiry, looking and finding meaning are transformative, extending connections with what is good and right. Expanded perceptions open venues for understanding and action. Attention to detail excites potential for meaning, yielding important societal insights, previously taken for granted. Transformative experiences occur when people intuit new concepts, that occasion seeing in valued ways. Art communicates moral purpose and education. Dewey believes moral purpose is justifiable, art conveying messages that stimulate reflection on purposeful lives. Dewey is a pragmatist whose attraction to art postulates it as a means to an end because he envisions the end as just and fair: democracy.

## ***Art as the Exemplar***

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Art communicates moral purpose and education. Dewey believes moral purpose is justifiable, art conveying messages that stimulate reflection on purposeful lives. Changed perceptions, increased interest, and moral sensitivity engender thoughts and actions in regard to societal roles and responsibilities. Serving as a child's curriculum, art "provide[s] the material affording . . . a consciousness of the world in which he has to play a part" (1897/1964, 75–76). Art deepens understanding by vicarious entry in worlds symbolized beyond personal context. Art suggests touchstones in comprehending overarching values that unite societies, for "art is the most complex expression of longing and aspirations of a society" (1934). As a tool to erase bias, art expresses global experiences.

In educating for democratic citizenship, Dewey identifies self-direction, administration and responsibility for people "to take charge . . . adapt to change . . . participate in the shaping and directing of those changes" (1897/1972). Maxine Greene, also a proponent for arts in public spaces like schools, ties choice, authenticity and possibility in education to action, for people's intersubjectivity can invent projects: "transformation, for re-invention of some aspect of the world" (1986, 242). For Greene and Dewey, dialogues broaden awareness, so imagination and horizons expand, encouraging alternative choices. With hopefulness, people discover inspiration and reason in art to act for societal improvement. Dewey is a pragmatist whose attraction to art postulates it as a means to an end because he envisions the end as just and fair: democracy.

### ***Artistic Process: The Merging of Self and Environment***

Experience is always central for Dewey: the continuous process of interaction whereby a person acts upon the environment and is acted upon (1934, 104)—doing and undergoing. "Environment" is "the whole scheme of things . . . the imaginative and the emotional" (1934, 333), the combined legacy of civilizations, the collective past, as interpreted by artists, a *funded* intelligence that connects worldly events with personal or public histories. Art combines artists' outgoing response with the incoming energy of their environments, shaping and reshaping "until it [is] good" (Dewey, 1934, 49), satisfying and unifying:

What is called the magic of the artist resides in his ability to transfer these values from one field of experience to another, to attach them to the objects of our common life and by imaginative insight make these objects poignant and momentous. (1934, 118)

Through interactions with environment, Dewey maintains, humans store experiences, are receptive, never at rest, reflecting and reorganizing daily events and

impressions, and reinterpreting the chaotic confusion of sense information. Art-work itself is not the completed story. It has a past dependent on history and techniques. Artists “acknowledge something beyond the immediacy given” (Jackson 1998, 28) as the work “becomes” through viewers’ interaction of shaping it in their heads, words or actions. Therefore, art, enjoyable in its own right, also continues to change. An educative experience is part of a chain that increases capacity for more experience, or “knowledge of something else” (Dewey, 1938, 122).

A sudden transformative experience occurs when viewers experience a “rupture” from the mundane, are drawn to, or perceive meaning. Investigation expands inquiry and revitalizes meaning, now unencumbered and divorced from traditional associations. The experience stands alone, but is then returned to the former stream of daily life with new significance. This reintegration of art Dewey understands as a unified whole, reconciling discontinuities and disequilibriums, “reduc[ing] the chaotic conditions in society and culture” (Maxcy, 2001, 5). With esthetic experience as paradigm, Dewey’s “pragmatic eye” foresees richer lives.

Discussions with Charles Peirce (1934) shifted Dewey away from an “inductionist epistemology to one grounded in realism, referred to as abduction” (Pugh & Girod, 2002, 5). Quoting Peirce, who felt that “abduction merely suggests that something may be” (Peirce, 1934, 171), Pugh and Girod point out that “metaphor, through the ideational process plays a central role in new learning” (2002, 5). Metaphor, enriched by associations, contexts, and images drawn from imagination and societal icons, provokes fresh perceptions: art’s images as catalysts. Dewey emphasizes, “What is perceived are meanings that resonate personally rather than just events or circumstances” (Jackson, 1998, 5). Art integrates self and society.

Artists’ responses to life foster insights; however, time is required for gestation, for the self to “recover the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living” (Dewey, 1934, 333). Stories of others, archetypal images or “apprenticeship models of instruction” (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) in art can induce emotional response, sensitivity and reaction: art communicates. Dewey believes motivation towards moral conduct is “the business of the educator” (1959, 11). “Quality,” the simple, elemental starting point for all inquiry (Maxcy, 2001, 2), culminates in stimulating moral feelings considered beneficial to the community.

Dewey upholds Albert Barnes’s method of artistic inquiry as a systematic investigation into learning and perhaps a “re-thinking of how schools should educate” (Maxcy, 2001, 5). “Driven by his interest in education as art criticism” (Maxcy, 2001, 3), Dewey promotes applying an “objective criterion of value” (Maxcy, 2001, 4) to evaluate and analyze esthetic experiences. In schools, revitalized and expanded viewpoints encourage students’ envisioning possibilities of “landscapes” (Wilson, 2003, 5) that are different from their own. Social consciousness and a sense of responsibility move one to contemplate means to affect change.

Csikszentmihaly alludes to epiphanies that occur in art as moments out of time, when artists become one with their artwork, or viewers are transported, as “the flow” experience unites inner self and outer worlds of experience (Csikszentmihalyi,

1990). Insights facilitated through art connect previously unrelated elements, catalyzing new knowing as a shock of recognition: “a self not consciously known.” Dewey states, “[Art] quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in varied qualities and forms” (1934, 109–110). Greene suggests this *lurch* of comprehension provides awareness for initiatives and actions.

If school serves as a protective shield for children’s understanding “multiple vicissitudes they can expect in a stressful world” (Haggerty et al., 1997, 427), then art teaches gleaning of power in decision-making to enhance *experiences* of others: “This awareness lead[s] to an openness . . . of how the world could be ordered differently” (Wilson, 2003, 7).

Artists present the model as they actively internalize, then externalize in their art, landscapes, events, relationships and ideas. Since artists have already separated slices of life, viewers are posed to look. Art reveals how democracy looks when rights are deprived or upheld, demanding distinctions between right and wrong. Artists direct attention while guiding towards intensification and reawakening of memories, experiences and sentiments that expand meaning as art is recontextualized into the personal venues of ordinary people. Artists’ selection or rejection of content holds a “moral aspect” (Dewey, 1938/1972, 82) that belongs to the creative process to affect response, each piece in accord with the artist’s story. Pondering choice of topic, viewers note what is lacking or “deficient [in] reality” (see Sartre in Wilson, 2003, 7). Subtly, moral criteria piqued in the perceiver surround subject matter and technique: signals to explore deeper. Growth is fostered through active engagement. Reorienting new ideas into existing value systems provokes critical inquiry based on visual depictions.

The outcome of the process should be “indirect and vital moral education” (Dewey, 1959, 4), feelings altered by conditions that prompt response. The melding of viewer, artist and artwork forges a relationship which teaches that events depicted in art can motivate change, to herald an improved future: “To perceive is to acknowledge unattained possibilities . . . and thereby to behave in deference to the connections of events” (Dewey, 1958, 143–44). Negative emotions aroused by disturbing scenes grate, propelling redress of inequalities. “Th[is] vibrant immediacy [of art] has . . . a utilitarian presence that transforms it into an object about which statements can be made and ideas thought” (Jackson, 1998, 9)—limitless potential. Schools, in providing opportunities for insights, encourage students’ considerations of the moral basis upon which decisions are made, challenged and acted upon.

### **Deweyan Models**

Barbara Hepworth’s responses to experience are presented in her sculpture, personal yet universal: the world integral to the self who acts and is acted upon (Dewey, 1934, 104). Hepworth transforms her lived life, interactions with places, use of materials, artworks of others, and friendships into art. Art represents the completeness, uniqueness and unifying emotion embodied in Dewey’s “experience” that exhorts every person to see the secret life of things artists sense, then re-create in art.

Hepworth connects persons and places. Noting, transmitting and recording move her experiences from nature into art. She queries, "Could I, at one and the same time, be the outside as well as the form within?" (Hepworth, 1970, 81). Concepts of "holistic" and "unified" define her works as she reflects how ordinary things coalesce with self and are made memorable. Her attentive approach to relationships results in enhanced perspectives that spark meaning.

Gauguin, in transforming and re-creating responses to society, also broadens viewers' longing for experience, while entreating moral judgments. His decision to abandon his life in France for the South Pacific was an affront to society. His break from traditional conventions in paint and life startled and challenged values. Critics' disgust in the nineteenth century initiated an inquiry of "why" these images, "why" this technique? Similarly, students exposed to art from diverse cultures are posed to look deeply, deconstruct images and entertain larger societal stories. Artists, some inadvertently, become educators as they employ new materials or depictions that are unpopular or foreign to the mainstream.

For Gauguin's aghast viewers, art criticism was based on societal mores. For artists to charge these reactions, the public must respond, even being tutored in the process of contemplating life through the artist's eyes. The artist's special intelligence gives shape, form and expression to *felt* things, documenting the growth and demise of civilizations or individuals. A recorder of past histories or prophet of the future, the artist lives at the boundaries of what was and what may be, rendering through the lens of emotion, longings, aspirations and anticipations.

Thus, emotion in Gauguin's work—both his and the critics' reactions—becomes a readable language that transmits sensations gathered and expressed in art. Making visible tragedies or suggesting the possibilities of fresh beginnings, artists can banish nightmares, making real dreams of freedom through calls to action.

Democracy is inherent in artists' production of art because every person possesses rich stores of experiences to be re-imagined, replicated and enhanced. As Proust said, it is not new places, but new eyes that are required, and opportunities to see without prejudice.

### ***The Importance of Art in Context***

For Dewey, art is located in context, for viewers to comprehend cultures from which the work is formed. However, for many years, art has been taught through formal principles. Rarely were artists' or viewers' milieus part of pictorial analysis. Two years ago, Griselda Pollock's theories on Van Gogh, which establish context for his art, provided the official guide at the Art Gallery of Ontario: a serious study that artists' dialogue with their world at particular times and in particular places impacts the genesis of expression. Dewey's understanding of artists, viewers and their environments is now commonplace for constructing meaningful dialectics with art, research and theory construction.

Art criticism extends a framework for viewer entry into paintings: "Daily analytic experiences with our environment are part of our enculturation" (Mathews,

2004, 1). Elliot Eisner proposes becoming a “connoisseur” (Eisner, 1991), through close examination of detail, inculcating sensitivity and discernment for understanding meaning behind imagery and paint techniques. It is interplay between the context within the artwork and that of the viewers who make sense in terms of their own environment. Both Peirce and Eisner create systematic processes of discrimination that, through problem-solving and evaluation, culminate in judgment-making: judgments determined by considering various contexts.

Similarly, Edmund Feldman’s sequential art criticism process propels viewers from concrete details to abstractions through discussions of description, analysis, interpretation and judgment. Dewey believes inquiry should be structured, step by step. Looking critically concludes in universal comprehension of experiences. Careful classification and observation encourage investigation of context, reasons beyond the capture of specific moments in art.

The process of selecting criteria and evaluation clarifies reasoning and develops an individual’s ability to consider data from multiple perspectives, examining and contemplating information and context. Theoretical sorting of issues, responses and consequences is preparation for confronting similar life situations: “cognitive knots” (Wagner, 1984) entreat deeper probing because they rankle at some level. Dewey believes educators should note students’ instincts and impulses, and through creative expression guide them into constructive activities leading to the development of judgment. Thus, students are initiated into critical and constructive action, learning to exercise judgment. Dewey writes, “The kind of character . . . [educators] hope to build . . . insists upon carrying [actions] out” (1959, 49–50). He might have been referring to character education touted in schools to develop morally conscious citizens, engaged in cooperative, productive environments.

Artists express aspirations. If the school’s role is to improve and advance the welfare of society or “the development of a larger life” through subject selection (Dewey, 1897/1972, 57), methods of learning and doing, the ideal of inquiry through an art curriculum that represents varied societal experiences extends a way to foster moral and intellectual training. Learning to see and think in school can shape the future. If art reflects liberty of expression, then those who pursue it through art are involved in a sociopolitical action (Freedman, 2000, 42) to reconstruct a world of enhanced and improved social relations. And to critique art is to participate in democratic practice! Ethical decision-making teaches processes of systematic questioning, or dialectics, identifying why and where human rights have been denied.

If students are soldiers (Dewey, 1897/1964) of tomorrow’s democracy, training that consists of working towards moral development—in supportive, nonthreatening spaces where cultures are juxtaposed in public spaces—acknowledges acceptance of difference openly, which is essential in comprehending freedom. Frank discussions that focus on humanistic values perform as powerful redress to those eternally silenced. What is perceived in art, then, is contextualized meanings rather than just events or existences (Dewey, 1958, 248).

The “common objects of life” portrayed in art, such as nature, birth, death,

sorrows, joy and transitions, are likely to generate predictable responses that supersede cultural divisions, enabling expanded perspectives. By examining diverse art, individuals are prompted to discover “the meaning and value of what [they do]” (Dewey, 1897/1972, 56), identifying common needs of global society. Objects, persons and events are never seen in isolation, but contextualized, connected in space and time. They are carriers of meaning.

Nel Noddings (2002) addresses the great existential questions of birth, death, cruelty, pain, misfortune as *immortal conversations* whose subject matter dwells on questions arising in all daily conversations. Whether rights have been destroyed, or people greet one another on sidewalks, Carol Gilligan maintains, there will be an ethic of care that attaches to human needs. Kohlberg, too, notes morally autonomous people make decisions based on principles of justice and human rights. Similarly, in response to industrialization, which disrupted families and forced them to cities, Dewey proposed re-establishing community life. Always the pragmatist, Dewey focuses on applying principles, particularly *felt* moral principles that can be “brought down to the ground through their statement in social and psychological terms” (Dewey & Tufts, 1908/1978, 83)—possibly in artworks that transform abstractions into realities for the purposes of education.

Inquiry that grapples with good and evil yields reasons for judgments and justification. Dewey reflects that study should bring a child to realize the social scene of action, providing criteria for the selection of material and the judgment of its value (1897/1972, 67). Viewing art, according to Baumgarten, relies on direct, intuitive, but *active* knowing based on perception, thought, analysis and interpretation (Cromer, 1990, 3), necessary dispositions for moving out into the world, and becoming responsive to what may touch “our manner of being” (Jackson, 1998, 164).

Art as a teaching tool is a touchstone. As viewers relate personally to emotional or imaginative states, myriad associations emerge, an idea supported by Jerome Bruner on the power of affective experience. Arousing reaction through expressive images, art portrays scenarios that can seed doubt in viewers who encounter difficulties (Jackson, 1998, 50) in them, for “good thinking habits are cultivated through following, rather than avoiding, doubt in seeking a resolution to a problem” (Dewey, 1933, 14). Indeed, many artworks translate consequences of abrogating democracy, and stimulate dialectics for constructing rather than demolishing society. Viewers encouraged to solve moral dilemmas through observing civilization’s caprices acquire habits of “social imagination and conception” (Dewey, 1938/1963, 72), preparing for “dramatic rehearsal[s]” (Dewey, 1908/1978, 293), thinking or daydreaming about future events. Through indirect channels (Jackson, 1998, 64) or related activities, art presents a standard against which morality is judged.

Art in education nurtures thoughtful reflection, which is essential for transformation. Like a dance of many steps, comprehending art occurs as viewers are emotionally ensnared, reflect, and realize relationships within the artwork and their lives; back and forth between painting and self teaches visual observation as key in

resurrecting emotional associations and societal intentions, prompting questions like, “What are humanistic needs in a free society?”

Dewey’s “common objects” and Maxine Greene’s “public spaces” establish the locus for conversations on issues that provoke choices in moral decision-making. An education that exposes societal abuses in the arts challenges the status quo of destructive behavior. Viewing art and reasoning theoretically invite responsible dialogues. The practiced habit of examining ethical issues, albeit with no simple answers, produces multilayered deliberation of potential actions and consequences.

### **Deweyan Models**

Awareness of history and context reveals reasons for artistic response, satire and voice. In spite of Dewey’s fear that “concepts” preclude “ideas” as established “products” (1934/1958) and fail to expand perception and vitalize experience, Picasso’s art remains inspirational. Restoring an understanding of origins instigates fresh insights.

It is impossible to dismiss the era in which Picasso lived (ca. 1885–1930), a time of turbulence, industrialization, and constant change. *Guernica* stands as reaction to the bombing of the Basque town. Commenting through imagery, Picasso creates a common language that targets and expresses outrage at governments’ destruction of human rights. Attacks through art provide paradigms of nonviolence, lessons to be learned. In terms of provoking moral judgments, Dewey understands Picasso’s art as a source of education to arouse pity and provoke action. Dewey extols artists as guides who employ their medium to protest injustice.

The educative purpose of exposing oppression and suffering engages viewers’ empathy as they reflect. Artists create “a story . . . [that] induce[s] pity, indignation and humility” (Dewey, 1938/1972, 138). Works of visual art, “saturated with story” (1934, 344), are not distinct from lives of people, nor to be hoisted on pedestals; they contain the recognizable sagas and rhythms of daily life. Like the *illiterati* of the Middle Ages who read murals for religious instruction, contemporary viewers also participate in visual transference of meaning from imagery to personal lives. Examining Picasso’s minotaurs and weeping mothers, perception is heightened, and consequences conveyed in human terms. Picasso’s art extends forums of education for peaceful solutions. In contrast to dehumanizing events, art communicates non-violently. The transformation of public events into public documents incites outrage, pain or pity as moral agency into the meaning of democracy.

Hoffman refers to empathy as a “vicarious affective response to another person” (2000, 29) where viewers face “an induction” to help, to share, to at least respond in some positive fashion. *Guernica* stimulates discourse, providing reasons to preserve and protect dignity and safety. Interaction between perceivers and art uncovers meanings embedded in art to be released into the dimension of the public—not objective or subjective—a place where viewer transformation and transcendence are possible. These are desirable and consistent, aligned with Dewey’s outcomes of reflection: responsibility, openmindedness and wholeheartedness.

Noddings wondered how good citizens can ignore misery. To reflect on situations in art calls for engagement in moral judgments, where democracy denied is depicted, problematizing issues that every population faces. Ensuring analytical experiences of decision-making to develop moral character is “the business of the educator” (1959, 2), situating critical thinking in a school’s curriculum to examine inequities.

Clearly, Dewey promotes artists as responsive to societal events. Dewey heralds societies’ documentation of their forbears’ experiences. Life experiences function as sites for contemplation in quest of better lives. Dewey’s concept of “material” is transformed into “media,” the content from which artistic interaction between self and environment is shaped, as *Guernica*’s paint enhances a plea for justice.

### ***How Art Extends Traditional Ways of Knowing***

**Removing Fear.** Dewey states, “When this perception dawns, it will be commonplace that art . . . is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession . . . the complete culmination of nature” (1958, 269). Paintings provide for the unusual to be assimilated and integrated into viewers’ frameworks of experience. Artists’ expression of diverse cultures by “entering sympathetically . . . in the experience of remote and foreign civilizations” broadens and deepens perspectives, rendering those cultures “less local and provincial” (Dewey, 1934, 332). Attending to difference in art removes fear of the stranger. Through exploration, viewers travel vicariously, immersed in heritages, attitudes and social mores. Comparing contexts stimulates discourses wherein meanings are negotiated, realigned with former knowledge and settled in viewers’/students’ minds.

**Empowerment.** With art as core education (Dewey, 1925) and studio, students themselves interpret, express, perform, and create, their experiences *lived* and scaffolded on the artwork of others. Dewey suggests students possess four proclivities: social instinct (the wish to communicate with others); constructive impulse (to make things); instinct for investigation (to find out); and the expressive impulse (to create). In school, these aspects are reconciled in social processes of learning, by interaction with peers, making, examining, and reflecting on art while also creating new ideas or art products.

Students learn they possess the ability to change things. As active participants, they are capable of taking action to express pleasure or displeasure. Dewey believes in hands, eyes and the body as teachers, as sources of empirical education (1915, 256), as opposed to rote learning and the superficial accumulation of information in school.

**Critical Analysis.** At the Barnes Foundation, where Dewey was director, decorative pieces such as candlesticks are arranged with pictures, reiterating design features, fusing art and real objects. Students identify commonalities by engaging in dialectics with paintings rather than ranking art by artist, title or chronology. This process requires observing resonances among paintings and objects. Making connec-

tions based on multiple factors engenders ways of categorizing, arranging, comparing and contrasting information, thus making meaning. Processes for finding patterns and continuity appealed to Dewey. He touted systematic scientific inquiry that causes viewers to undergo formal periods of reflection. Johann Gottfried von Herder (eighteenth century) also believed critical viewing of art induces philosophical and cultural knowledge. Connections between looking at art and art criticism “bec[omes] an intellectual and linguistic system of inquiry based upon perception, thought, analysis, interpretation and symbols” (Cromer, 1990, 3).

**Principles of Democracy.** Art is a catalyst to democracy; it encourages myriad expressions and interpretations: systematic—as in Barnes’s pedagogies—and source for personal reflection and transformation. In all, viewers’ experiences are the entrance into understanding of a larger experience that “realize[s] values within” (Dewey, 1938/1972, 57).

“For Dewey, art and aesthetics lend themselves to a social reintegration via pedagogy” (Maxcy, 2000, 5); “. . . art [then] could teach us how to restore order over chaos” (Maxcy, 2000, 4): integrating students with unique interests or special needs into school communities and understanding order that brings disparate elements together to form a cohesive whole. Meaning-making in the arts has been proven to be effective for at-risk students. Talking about or using art to reveal understanding, besides the expressive opportunities it provides, demonstrates its versatility for multiple intelligences learning.

Dewey hopes to extend education beyond known and accepted boundaries, to discover practical ways of looking, perceiving, understanding and extending that knowing into “genuine community life” (1938/1972, 75). He lauds schools where students cooperate and collaborate. Through art criticism and reflection, students acknowledge competing viewpoints and understand canons must be expanded to provide equal opportunities for expression of multiple races and genders. For Greene, imagination “has always [broken] through the crust of conventionalised and routine consciousness” (Greene, 1973, 47).

**Responsibility.** Artists raise the issue of responsibility, pondering and uncovering scenes of oppression with which society would prefer not deal. Questions regarding economic, social and political systems arise, prompting viewers/students to consider the legacy of civilizations that cause poverty, neglect and death of citizens. Seeing in diverse ways sensitizes viewers to abrogations of rights, provoking imaginations to envision alternate responses. Discussion of art teaches how emotional reactions can be used by politicians or in media to direct public consciousness.

Art in these instances is a catalyst for penetrating worlds of difference, and offering them for public scrutiny, gradually expanding traditional modes of understanding. The artist, almost apostle-like, responds with responsibility to experiences that deny human rights. Viewers, schooled through art, perceive and emulate artists’ heightened sensitivity, thereby “open[ing] new fields of experience and disclos[ing] new aspects and qualities in familiar scenes” (Dewey, 1934, 144). Edu-

cating for societal awareness prepares populations to live more consciously, attendant to viewers' appreciation of abstractions, symbols and images found in art. Learning to see for moral good shapes ways of knowing towards others and decision-making for positive action.

### **Deweyan Models**

The European community in the early twentieth century rejected so-called African “*primitive art*,” preferring representational styles. Picasso’s and Hepworth’s use of African art broadened Western sensibilities. Habitual viewing of African artefacts served to demystify them. Whether European or Ethiopian, emotions carved into masks communicated like messages, thus establishing common ground: humans respond similarly. Art expressed the same, recognizable story.

The unveiling of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* caused a furor for its subject matter of a brothel, but also for the appropriation and elevation of African masks. In spite of overt warnings this new art did not belong, Picasso created space for societal taboos, investing art with new associations and meanings. When actually integrated into society, art establishes a place where diverse cultures co-exist or become fodder to fund art’s future development. Hepworth as “an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization” (Dewey, 1897/1972, 77–80) provides a model. Her art demonstrates the emotional intensity of *primitive art* to reach past the surface into deeper recesses to extract global and spiritual significance, developing “habits of social imagination and conception, intrinsic to the development of moral education” (1897/1972).

Anticipating that “limiting prejudices would disappear,” Dewey explains the effect of observing different kinds of art in this manner: we begin as artists ourselves as we undertake this integration, and by bringing it to pass, our experience is reoriented (Dewey, 1934, 334), absorbing societal difference into our knowledge. Dewey believes people should be exposed to the best architecture, music, sculpture and paintings (1938/1972, 82). He contemplates an international language of art, widening contexts for the examination of experience.

### **Finding Vehicles for Artistic Expression**

Dewey’s *artist* meets challenges of incorporating prior and burgeoning experiences in innovative ways, responding to frictions of past and present; the artist uses traditional materials and means and transforms them into an expressive language: “one strand in total experience . . . because of the entire pattern to which it contributes and which it is absorbed” (Dewey, 1934, 290). In art movements, in dialogue with societal changes, new materials and themes of experience emerge, initiating artists’ quests to visualize ideas through new forms and techniques (Dewey, 1934, 143) that express and communicate internal landscapes. Students, too, can emulate artists, conceiving, creating, and reacting to their environments.

Not only visible changes, but psychological states require fresh expression. Artists create materials that speak to experience with originality. Choices of media

and subject matter raise questions and demand analysis, first challenging, then deepening viewers' experiences:

. . . the ultimate desire was to break down the separation of fine art from other things, and show what it could contribute to ordinary lives . . . so ordinary person could be trained to see pictures . . . that would also enrich the life of the individual. (Greenfeld, 1988, 152)

With the notion of imbuing an idea, an insight or a dilemma, artists catalyze individuals' capacities to choose, act, or imagine alternative realities: features that define democracy. Dewey proposes children be educated in the "power[s] of analysis and inference with respect to what makes up a social situation and the agencies through which it is modified" (1938/1972, 73), concepts available to students in art class.

### ***Deweyan Models***

Picasso and Braque, in creating collages, employed real materials, newspaper, bits of wood and wallpaper. Conscious of the creative possibilities of new media, they integrated content and form—materials to express the fragmented quality of their lives' disruption, invasions, and war. In developing cubism, they reflected dissonance and infused new vocabulary into the language of art, converting "dumb [materials] in ordinary experience into eloquent media" (Dewey, 1934, 233).

Jasper Johns's assemblages of two-dimensional and three-dimensional constructions, simultaneously construed as paintings and/or sculptures, also confused objects of life and art, questioning boundaries.

### ***Artistic Commentaries on Life***

Historically, artists document while providing commentary. Artists present their observations for purposes of reporting, exhorting and even attacking evils perpetrated on society. Visual criticisms are not tolerated in tyrannical societies, so artists must be subversive in exposing inequalities and damage.

The temporality of art, depicting an event that has occurred in time past or present, is an unfolding or storying of experience, artists' or societal responses to it. Art can foster moral and intellectual growth, encouraging the absorption and reconstruction of life-denying events, transforming them into data that can be pragmatically applied for a better world; a person "must have the power to stand up and count for something in the actual conflicts of life" (Dewey, 1938/1972, 79). This is an important role for artists: to address societal responsibility, revealing visual manifestoes for purposes of imbuing life with greater significance, transforming it into art. Dewey believed esthetic experience functions as manifestation, record and celebration of the life of civilizations.

Perkins (1994) exhorts people to stop and really look, not merely pass their eyes over surfaces. This is Dewey's hope for ordinary people: to emulate artists and look deeply into common situations and materials. Dewey reaffirms art is everywhere—in the street, in the landscape, in one's own imaginative past and present.

This approach does not separate classes of people: every person is equal, participating and leading a fulfilled life. Art as representative of these principles taught early in school is inculcated; it is as basic as literacy.

### **Deweyan Models**

In 100 B.C., a Greek artist was commissioned to celebrate Alexander the Great's victory over Darius. The artist balances triumph and despair. Like eyewitnesses, viewers are compelled "to look at the scene of the slaughter not only through the eyes of the victors but also through those of the man in flight" (Gombrich, 1960, 136). The artist reveals a range of joy and suffering. Providing a human construct, a frame to the events, the artist critiques reactions of exultation at the goriness of war along with a measured look at winners and losers. The artist's implicit morality is seen in his depiction of Alexander's victory. This reasonable, empathetic artist conjures the past reshaped in his present, with an eye to the future, to change how men might battle.

In 1467, Master E.S. conveys the world of the peasant in *The Letter Q*. Pestilence, hunger, drudgery, all the facets of feudal life are encapsulated in one solitary letter. A serf is shown beneath the feet of his lord and the hooves of a horse. Van Gogh also concentrates his observations on ordinary people. He paints prostitutes and peasants, struggling for survival, provoking emotional response. *The Potato Eaters* (1885) creates a visual essay of people who do not complain or moan. They accept their fate. Van Gogh bestows dignity and solemnity while extending their crowded room into the viewers' space so viewers might *know* their hunger. Viewers would rather turn away from this scene, but cannot. This is the power of art that communicates *real* daily life, introducing and deepening the significance of the human condition.

Similarly, Georges Seurat does not sentimentalize or trivialize workers. People are not objects to be displayed solely for the sake of artists' ideas; they are individuals identified by human qualities. Seurat's scenes represent the life of the worker, bathing in waters polluted by industry or at work. In *Les Poseuses*, ordinary and recognizable possessions—an umbrella, shoes, thick stockings—are scattered about. With stomachs slack, demeanor introspective, these "poseuses" are equal to any worker. Linda Nochlin says they are "slyly subversive, calling into question both the epistemological and social status of the subject" (Nochlin, 1994, 71). Using the identically sized dots of pointillism, Seurat's technique embeds principles of equality into the scene. Deprivation of human rights takes many forms: slow gnawing poverty or bullets to the head.

Seurat, like John Dewey, believes the purpose of art is to serve humanity, expressing rights people deserve and which he transformed into paint. Seurat expresses compassion, envisaging a world where paintings are calls to action, to be read and acted upon; this is public education that addresses personal morality.

### **How Art Promotes Democracy**

Underpinning Dewey's thoughts on art is a strong belief in humanity as moral prerogative that identifies art as a champion of what is good and right. Therefore,

Dewey would herald the dadaists' desire to repair and remake society, ridding it of violence. However, his belief in humanity did not prepare him for the futurists' lauding militarism, business and war in their art. Dewey believes dictatorial means cannot educate for democracy. Nor does his idealism conceive of art's role in championing evil, destruction or the chauvinist nature of robust housewives and nostalgic scenes that promoted Hitler's fascism.

Käthe Kollwitz, disparaged and banned by Hitler, represents the essence of democracy, showcasing struggles against tyranny and oppression. Her subjects are war, slaughtered children and their parents. Her intent is an outcry to prevent more deaths. Kollwitz's prints contribute to protest art and anticipate feminist art. As the mother of a youth sacrificed in war, she calls on personal experience to transform warnings into art. Kollwitz's technique is the woodcut, an appropriate medium because of its primal, rough, clawed-out finish that conveys the elemental fight to keep children out of harm's way.

The print is a viable medium to attack repression. In an attempt to inform citizens and resonate with as many as possible, the cheap and accessible woodcut can be reproduced multiple times and reach large numbers. Artistic techniques do not exist without people, and people do not exist apart from their contexts, apart from reality they wish to transform (Freire, 1973, 121). Prints and paintings are invocations to duty, the moral duty that cannot be ignored. Picasso elaborates,

I made paintings that bite. Violence, clanging cymbals . . . explosions.  
A good painting—any painting! ought to bristle with razor blades.  
(Huffington, 1989, 290)

### ***Towards Social Justice***

Art invites participation in matters of social justice. There are many artists who use their art to decry social states. Van Gogh, Kollwitz, and Seurat speak from the conscience of the concerned. They transform lived experiences into art so that others might know sad, terrible situations and tragic events. However, many artists live vicariously, with an innate sense of what is right and just, employing their talents through visual imagery. Artists, compelled to speak, share their protest against the denial of democratic rights.

Whether employing exaggerated nightmare scenes or ennobling the poor, artists entreat people to care and respond, to participate and to act. Gombrich concurs that there are never “innocent eyes,” since everyone is conditioned by what he or she observes in life from earliest days, carrying the “burden of civilization,” for moral matters pervade society. Artistic expression also constitutes the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization! Ironically, the triumphs of art that ennoble the human spirit are rendered mute when democratic processes are denied.

The artist's work then initiates a dialogue that calls for inquiry, recalling the past, or dwelling on present experiences, suggesting repercussions of actions or inaction. By triggering imaginations to think and behave differently in the present or future, art forms a bridge. As midway points between artists and viewers, art is a

vehicle of understanding or reflection and translates experience into media: "Human beings constantly create and re-create knowledge" (Freire, 1973, 119). Through visual art, artists impact viewers' emotions and/or cognition.

The artist is the weaver, moving in and out of the picture, combining insights and observations into a tapestry: "Through art, meanings of objects that are otherwise dumb, inchoate, restricted and resisted are clarified and concentrated" (Dewey, 1934, 132–33)—by the creation of new experiences, which emerges as art.

### **Deweyan Models**

"How do you turn catastrophe into art?"

On June 17, 1816, a frigate set out for Senegal from Saint Croix. The boat struck a reef at high tide and was abandoned. Gericault, like Picasso in *Guernica*, selected and manipulated moments of terror in *The Raft of Medusa* for the historical event to affect generations, foment attacks on governments, and raise a cry to the global community to never forget. Nel Noddings reflects on questions that dwell on the origins and meaning of life, death, suffering and goodness: those perennial posings by the sentient human who is driven to ask, "What if this happened to me or my family?"

Artists who bring these scenes to societal attention prod scrutiny of actions within the artwork, demanding response. Processes of inquiry are explored as the question hangs in the air: How do we deal with others in and out of terror-filled and possibly life-threatening situations? What is the moral responsibility here? If viewers imagine themselves as victims and empathize, their compassion is realized to consider the brutality that depletes society of creative, contributing lives.

Wondering if they could also assume the role of victimizer forces upon viewers serious consideration of moral values through critical re-evaluation. The artist's imagination renders experiences "poignant and momentous" (Dewey, 1934, 118), connecting personally through art. Art provides a continuing chain that expands perceptions, acknowledging truths inherent in the human condition like compassion and caring, perhaps as initial shared responses to moral conundrums. Art poses the question, but viewers, once engaged, own the responsibility of addressing the issues.

Sadly, the voices of the artists are often cries in the dark, but nonetheless, they break silence and stand as visual documents to societal horrors. Art provides, then, a moral conscience. The possibility of human experience to endure through art, recording societal stories, substantiates it as a document that can educate in myriad ways. As well, art assumes a life of its own once artists administer their final strokes, and it moves into viewers' consciousness.

### **Reshaping the World through Education**

Perhaps Albert Barnes envisioned a postmodernist approach towards education. He brought together diverse art from Asian, African and European milieus, as well as various materials—paint, wood, and metal—combining multiple perspectives

from disparate traditions and cultures. Enrolled at Columbia University in New York in 1917–1918, Barnes attended Dewey’s seminars that laid foundations for progressive education. Barnes successfully implemented Dewey’s ideas in his factory and accepted Dewey’s belief in “shared education as growth toward more and better experience” (Greenfeld, 1988, 56). They worked together to create “a systematic program of art education.” Dewey was named director of education.

Likely, the relationship grew because Barnes provided a practical testing ground for Dewey’s theories in practice (McWhinnie, 1994, 22). Dewey was informed of Barnes’s growing collection, Barnes consulted Dewey for advice regarding educational programming. Dewey’s theories and Barnes’s art combined in a concrete, real form. The purpose to educate was manifest in doctrines, discussions and decisions concerning the art of education and programs for education of art. Dewey’s acceptance of all art, rather than ranking or excluding some, and his belief that art was integral to life, predisposed his acceptance of Barnes’s eclectic arrangements and philosophy.

Because Dewey was attracted by the *science* that art could be analyzed pragmatically, he supported Barnes’s “very clear and logical . . . comments, and observations about the creative process, the artistic style and the critical esthetic . . . no matter the age, country, style” (McWhinnie, 1994, 23). Based on direct and empirical contact, rejecting slides or photographs of artworks, Barnes situated learners at the center of the program so they learned through seeing. For Dewey, this method not only yielded a structure of discovery, but brought art and science closer together.

Dewey and Barnes influenced one another, with racial democracy an important basis of their friendship. Consistent with better lives for all and real-life connections, Dewey extolled Barnes’s foundation: through paintings, ordinary people would better comprehend cultures and multiple perspectives, living enhanced lives. Barnes refused entry to those, like T. S. Eliot, who he felt lived off the works of artists. He wanted “the plain people, . . . who gain their livelihood by daily toil in shops, factories and similar places [to] have free access to the art gallery” (Higonnet, 1994, 66).

Dewey left his imprint and direction on the collection by recommending Bertrand Russell be hired to the foundation’s faculty.

## Conclusion

Elliot Eisner (2004), in his long and prestigious career in art, has reiterated the importance of how we should educate our children. He stresses that schools should educate for *judgment, critical thinking, meaningful literacy, collaboration* and *public service*. His vision is reminiscent of John Dewey’s concern for quality education, a way to live one’s life—always learning and contributing to society for the greater good.

In his focus on a moral life, Dewey looks to art as a way to combine and exemplify democracy: the artist makes art available to everyone, modeling transformative processes based on personal and public experiences that society must

embrace to foster the growth of its citizenry. It is a moral conscience through art that calls upon the imagination to conceive of and follow paths that ameliorate lives, shaping rich experiences that add value and dignity to how we lead our lives. If we believe in the survival of our species, one that we must protect, preserve, and celebrate, we should look to art as a document, a catalyst, a transformative process that causes us to act morally and with care and kindness.

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Patricia Goldblatt is a program officer, Standards of Practice, at the Ontario College of Teachers. Email: [pgoldblatt@oct.ca](mailto:pgoldblatt@oct.ca).