

National Art Education Association

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Author(s): Maud Ellsworth

Source: *Art Education*, Vol. 22, No. 8 (Nov., 1969), pp. 29-30

Published by: [National Art Education Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3191364>

Accessed: 30/05/2013 11:44

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How Students React To High School Art Experience

BY MAUD ELLSWORTH. The American high school is the place of promise for American children. In the midst of amazing growth and a constant struggle to keep abreast of fast moving changes, it manages to fulfill its mission on many sides. However, the enrichment of the spirit through widespread and meaningful experience in the arts is one part of education that the high school yet must develop.

Our high schools try to provide whatever appears to be the greatest need of the young persons enrolled in them. Quick emphasis on mathematics and science came when the lack of such emphasis was seen to be dangerous in a space age. The necessity for feeding the spirit is never so obvious. If it were, a better balance of the students' time in school would be struck between the arts and other subject matter.

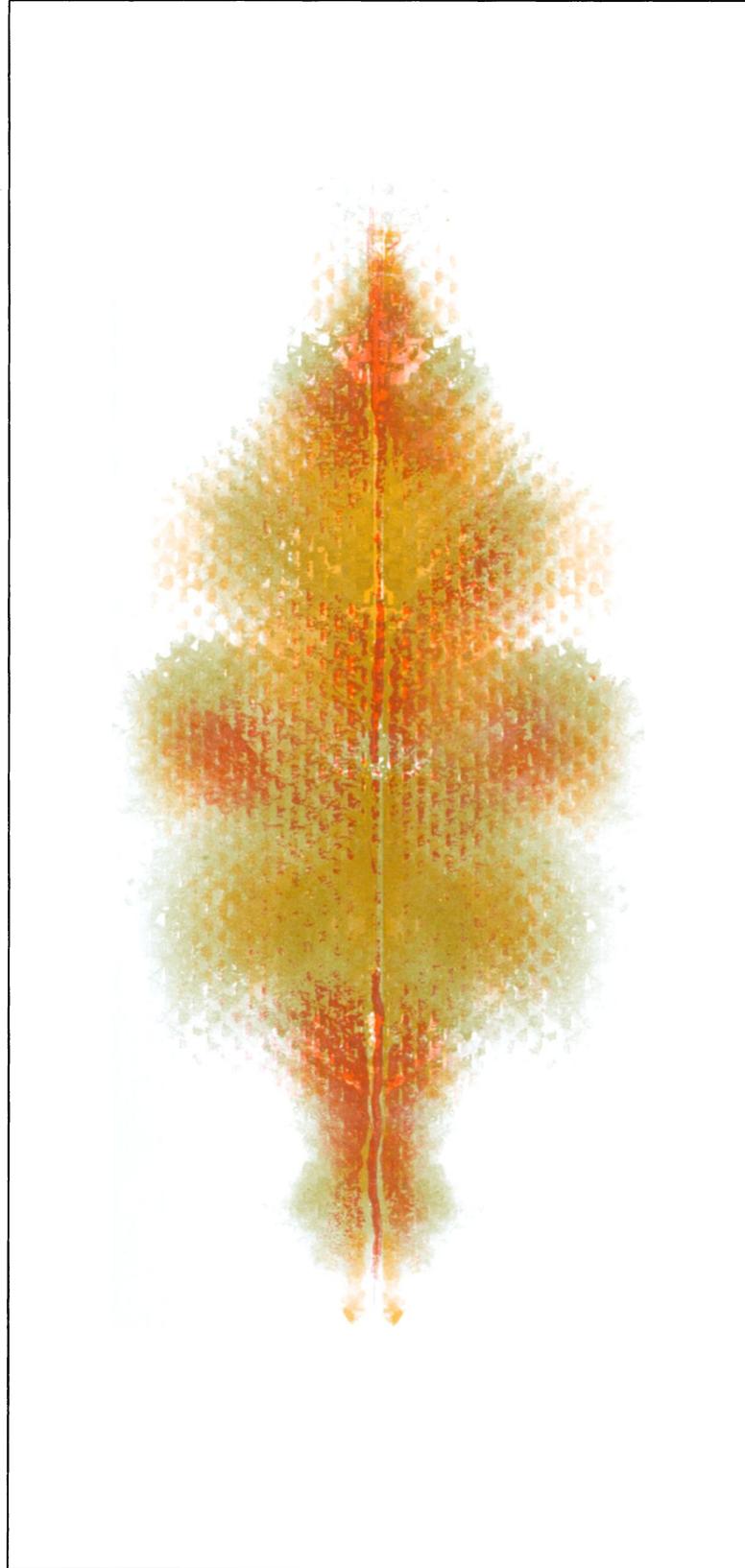
Of the two sides of visual art, the expressive side is more often emphasized in the high school than the receptive. No one will question the educational advantage of involving as many students as possible in their own creative problems. But all students should be surrounded by examples of great art and helped to understand and enjoy them. Receptive experiences not only feed the creative life but furnish spiritual inspiration, contact with great personalities, and a basis for the development of taste. The art history course has appeared in a limited number of high schools.

One might ask what high school students think of what they are getting in the visual arts. They are scarcely experienced enough to set up their own programs of study or to control their cultural surroundings. However, it can be of use to us who give them their daily fare to take note, occasionally, of the fact that they see through us quite clearly, that more often than not they appreciate challenge, and that under a many faceted exterior they often resent being denied opportunities for which they hope.

A long standing concern of this writer for abundance in the high school art program led to a study of the opinions of high school students in regard to their high school art experiences.

During the summers of 1961, 1962, and 1963, individual interviews were held with 420 high school students from 35 different states who were attending the Midwestern Music and Art Camp (Art Section) on the campus of the University of Kansas. The group interviewed consisted of 285 girls and 135 boys. Of these, 25 had just completed Grade 8; 104, Grade 9; 95, Grade 10; 142, Grade 11; and 54, Grade 12.

A total of 270 schools in 210 districts were repre-



sented—8 private and 262 public schools. Fifty-two per cent of the participants came from schools of 1,000 to 3,500 population, 45 per cent from schools of 200 to 1,000 population, and the remaining 3 per cent from schools having less than 200 students.

The interviews were designed primarily to determine whether these students had been introduced in their schools to great art, artists, and art history and how they felt about their school art experiences. In addition to these questions, the participants contributed opinions concerning general art course content, methods of teaching, and qualities shown by art teachers in their schools.

Courses in art history were reported to be given in 21 of the senior high schools represented, all but two of which were located in the Midwest. Half of these high schools were said to have special courses in art appreciation as well. Forty-two per cent of all senior high school students interviewed said that they would like to take an art history course in high school. Seven and five-tenths per cent were opposed to such a course, and the remainder were uncertain of its value. A half dozen of those who wanted the course expressed the opinion that, although not all high school students would want or be able to profit from art history courses, the need for such courses is as great as for upper level mathematics and science courses. In addition, numerous students mentioned the desirability of greater interest and wider preparation in art history on the part of high school teachers.

Sixty per cent of all students interviewed had come in contact with historical material and/or the work of artists at some time during their enrollment in studio courses. This material had been introduced in different ways, in different amounts of time, and according to these students, with a wide variety of effectiveness. Comments ranged from, "I did not like this part of the class. She just sprung it on us sometimes," to "In our class, our own work and the study of artists blend."

Home, school, and public libraries formed a source of information about artists and art history for the participants. Over 27 per cent of them reported many good art books in the school. The rest said that there were "some," "few," or "none at all." Half of all participants had, one or more times, checked out art books or magazines from public libraries, and a fourth of them had art books or magazines at home. No significant amount of influence was evident from travel, out of school classes, or the inclusion of art subject matter in high school courses such as world history or Latin.

It may be worth noting that almost all of the participants recognized with clarity the importance to them of a good art teacher. On the whole, they appeared to be fair but severe judges of the teaching ability of their instructors, and they elevated the superior teacher, with dispatch, to a place of high respect.

The students considered "teacher aliveness" of highest significance in determining the worth to them of all school experiences. They rated as qualities most wanted

by them in an art teacher: *helpfulness* (the ability as well as willingness to promote student development), *understanding of students*, *much knowledge of art*, *patience*, and *challenge*. It is not surprising, then, that this group placed *dullness in teaching* as the greatest block to personal progress that they had encountered in high school art classes.

Students were proud when they felt that they had helped to make a good art department. They were proud of the teacher who had a reputation as a fine instructor, who was without question their friend, and who commanded the respect of the community for his own creative work. They appreciated the dynamic teacher who "invited us to learn," who created a climate "where everyone accomplished," who "challenged us to think and to explore," who was "flexible," and who "adjusted problems to our needs." They were grateful for the teacher who "emphasized originality," "was a master counselor," "helped us to meet failure," "gave a feeling of significance to our work," "increased the quality of our work constantly," and "was always willing to help us out of school hours."

Voluntary statements by participants revealed that the reasons for teacher inability to challenge high school students were lack of any real interest in teaching, inadequate preparation in subject matter and lack of interest in continuing study, failure to understand the needs of youth, and personal characteristics of dominance and egotism. Students repeatedly mentioned serious frustration they had endured due, in their opinions, to shallow course content, grades given for nothing, habitual teacher absence from class, "appalling disorganization," uncertainty caused by insecurity, and "just plain old boredom."

Most of the students interviewed had their greatest interest in art aroused before they reached junior high school. About six per cent of the senior high school students said that they first became interested in art through their high school experience.

The opinions of the participants in this study were offered in a spirit of helpfulness and in a setting that made frank appraisal of their school situations possible. It was not expected that exact findings could be obtained through the interviews. The result is a reflection of the feelings and opinions of students in different kinds, sizes, and locations of American high schools about their past art experiences and the kinds of experience they want.

The high school art program needs constant study. Always in question are kinds of courses, breadth of art influence, and teacher preparation. These are not all. And there is little doubt that along with teacher evaluation and planning of visual art activities in the high school, much is lost if the students are not made actively a part of both evaluation and planning.

Maud Ellsworth is a professor of art education, emeritus, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.