

Aesthetic Development Theory and Strategies for Teaching Contemporary Art to Adults

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When public controversy erupted in March of 1990 following the acquisition of Barnett Newman's (1967) painting *Voice of Fire*, the National Gallery of Canada's curatorial and education staff were suddenly under intense pressure to react quickly and effectively to the growing contention surrounding the acquisition. At the time, it seemed that no one at the Gallery could have forecast the extent of the public's dissatisfaction with the purchase which was in large part related to the abstract character of the painting and to its price tag of \$1.8 million. As public interest in *Voice of Fire* grew because of the intensive national coverage of the events surrounding the acquisition provided by both print and electronic media, so did requests from the public for information and interpretation relating to Newman's work. Since such a reaction and demand had not been anticipated, educators and other staff had to design and set up a program to respond immediately, in the full fray of national debate, to this sudden need for educational services.

More recently, in January 1991, having learned from the *Voice of Fire* experience the value of anticipating the public's response and of preparing for it, the National Gallery announced another potentially controversial acquisition, but only once a full complement of educational activities was put in place in support of the unveiling of the painting. It was felt that Attila Richard Lukacs' *Where the Finest Young Men...* (1987) might become controversial for a number of reasons. First, the painting depicts a group of young male nudes—skinheads—involved in an initiation ritual which intimates the idea of a religious ceremony such as a baptism yet, at the same time, evokes suggestions of sexual domination and submission. Second, in the wake of the recent obscenity charges laid in the United States against the retrospective exhibition of photographs by New York homosexual photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, it was felt that the obvious homoerotic content of Lukacs' painting had the potential of offending

some viewers. Surprisingly enough, the anticipated controversy over Lukacs' work never did materialize. In spite of the fact that the acquisition was initially widely reported by the media, gallery visitors who viewed the painting did not seem offended or overly disturbed by it. This response surprised some gallery professionals. It seemed that there was no guaranteed way of evaluating ahead of time the need for planning a course of action in the eventuality that a work of art might receive less than an enthusiastic response from the public.

These recent events at the National Gallery of Canada raise interesting questions about whether or not it is possible to predict, with any level of accuracy, what kind of public response is to be expected in regards to certain acquisitions or exhibitions. Furthermore, they bring us to question whether or not educational programming can effectively make a difference in the kind of reception given by the viewing public to such works of art. Finally, as museum professionals, we must ask ourselves about the curatorial and educational strategies that can best be adopted to deal effectively with situations such as the ones described above.

Part of the answer to these questions resides I believe in a recent body of research focusing on art gallery visitors' understanding of works of art. This research had led to the formulation of aesthetic development theories that have the potential of providing museum professionals with a much better understanding of viewers' responses to works of art. Familiarity with these theories may prove to be a basis upon which to make reasonably accurate assessments of the potential for controversy of certain works of art. Finally, these theories suggest that certain strategies for teaching the appreciation of contemporary art to adults may well prove to be more effective than others, and they delineate the parameters within which educators can reasonably be expected to exert a positive influence on visitors' viewing behavior.

Aesthetic Development Theories

The aesthetic development theories about to be presented here are theoretical accounts that describe the sequence of stages of cognitive development that each of us must "grow" through in order to acquire and further the necessary abilities to respond aesthetically to works of art. Although the rate of progression through the various steps of learning identified by each stage may vary considerably from person to person, the sequential order of aesthetic development is said to be the same for all individuals. Michael J. Parsons, a leading figure in

aesthetic development research, defines the idea of stages of aesthetic development in the following way.

What do I mean by "stages"? Basically, I think stages are clusters of ideas, and not properties of persons. A cluster is a pattern, or structure, of internally related assumptions that tend to go together in people's minds just because they are internally, or logically, related. To describe a stage is not to describe a person but a set of ideas. People use these ideas to make sense of paintings. If they were consistent in thinking about paintings, they would use a consistent set of ideas to interpret them. They could then be said to be "at" a particular stage of cognitive development. But this situation is rare. It requires us to think more carefully about art, and perhaps about our ideas about art, than most of us do. (Parsons, 1987, p. 11)

In total a half dozen researchers have formulated descriptive models of aesthetic development. Most of these were first proposed some time ago; these include Coffey (1966), Murphy (1973), Clayton (1974) and Brunner (1975). As the many features of these models tend to overlap, I have chosen, therefore, to present the two most recent: Housen (1983) and Parsons (1987).

Abigail Housen (1983) proposes, in her doctoral dissertation, a model of aesthetic development which considers both the affective and cognitive dimensions of aesthetic experience. This model is comprised of five stages of aesthetic "understanding": 1) "Accountive Stage"; 2) "Constructive Stage"; 3) "Classifying Stage"; 4) "Interpretive Stage"; and 5) "Creative Reconstructive Stage." In the first stage, the *Accountive Stage*, aesthetic response consists mostly of relating the work of art to one's own subjective past experience. Housen says of this initial stage that "Preferences, beliefs, past history are not distinguished from judgments, but form the basis for making judgments" (p. 7). In stage 2, the *Constructive Stage*, a work of art is assessed according to its perceived function or utility, which can range "from the very moral and didactic to the very mundane and worldly. A painting may reflect the good and joyous life or it may be worth a huge amount of money" (p. 8). During the third stage known as the *Classifying Stage*, the perceiver sets aside his or her own subjective impressions and instead attempts to appreciate art objects by objectively classifying the work in question according to an historical period, an artistic movement, or a particular style (p. 9). In the *Interpretive Stage* (Stage 4), the viewer begins to respond to the work in a new and very individualized fashion. He or she, for the first time, exploits feelings and intuition, as well as other information, in formulating a symbolic interpretation of

the art work (p. 9). Finally, in the last stage called the *Creative Reconstructive Stage*, the work "is looked at in many different ways, from many different perspectives, with each new encounter colored by past insights. In relating the painting in such [a] way, the viewer acknowledges that both he and the art work bring to the encounter particular histories and properties" (p. 10). All information is now considered relevant, no matter whether its source is within the onlooker's own subjective experience or within the art work's factual existence.

Parsons' (1987) model of aesthetic development also is comprised of five stages. Unlike Housen's model however, which presents the aesthetic development of adolescents and adults, Parsons' theoretical representation of development covers the entire range of aesthetic understanding beginning with early childhood and continuing from there to all stages of adolescence and adulthood. Each stage in Parsons' model presents an advance over the previous one in two ways. First, each progressive stage allows for a more complete understanding of the aesthetic object. Second, each successive stage represents an increasing ability, on the part of the individual, to take and to understand the perspective of other viewers as well as his or her own. Parsons labels these two criteria for identifying advancement from one stage to another as increasing "aesthetic adequacy" and increasing "psychological adequacy" respectively (p. 20).

Stage one in this second model is called *Favoritism* and it identifies the responses of children up to about the grade of kindergarten. The response here is best described as "an intuitive delight in most paintings, a strong attraction to color and a freewheeling associative response to subject matter" (p. 22). *Beauty and Realism* is the title given by Parsons to stage two. At this level of development, the subject of a painting is all important and the stage itself is structured around the notion of the painting as a skilled, realistic representation of a necessarily attractive subject. The main focus of the third stage is the expressive qualities of a painting, and appropriately, the stage has been named *Expressiveness*. Realistic representation is no longer seen as the purpose of a painting. Rather, paintings serve the purpose of expressing someone's experience. The viewer now looks for and judges a painting in accordance with its interest and intensity of expression. In stage four, named *Style and Form*, the viewer now understands that a painting gains its true significance and communicative potential, not on the basis of personal opinion, but as a result of a social consensus.

The meaning of the work of art is constituted within a social framework which includes ideas of tradition, style and history (p. 24). Finally, stage five is characterized by *Autonomy*. It is now understood that, in the end, the responsibility for evaluating the worth of a work of art rests with the individual. Yet, "individuals must judge the concepts and values with which the tradition constructs the meanings of works of art. These values change with history and must be continually readjusted to fit contemporary circumstances" (p. 25).

Prevalence of the Various Stages

Both Parsons and Housen agree that the stages described in their respective paradigms of aesthetic development are not closely correlated with age. Instead, both researchers have identified art viewing *experience* as the most important factor in determining individual levels of aesthetic development. Nonetheless, Parsons relates that only "in a most general way... does stage follow age, and only at the younger ages. In practice, virtually all pre-school children use [Parsons'] stage one ideas. Most elementary school children use [Parsons'] stage two ideas. Many, but fewer, adolescents use (at times) ideas from [Parsons'] stage three. After that, circumstances become more important than age" (Parsons, 1987, p. 12).

Housen, on the other hand, reports that adolescents of about 16 years of age demonstrate an average level of aesthetic development "of about stage I/II," which is in fact a transitional stage in Housen's model between stages one and two. At about age 20, "mean aesthetic [Housen's] Stage III is attained only in the college group when aesthetic exposure is high" (Housen, 1983, p. 187).

At this point in time, it is impossible to ascertain what the average aesthetic stage of visitors to the National Gallery of Canada might be. Abigail Housen undertook, in the spring of 1984, a pilot study of 36 visitors at the Institute of Contemporary Art (I.C.A.) in Boston, which determined that the majority (65.6 percent) of the subjects interviewed had not yet attained her Stage III of aesthetic development (Housen, 1987). However, a high proportion of this part of the sample were, in fact, in transition from Housen's Stage II to Stage III.

If an aesthetic stage profile of visitors to the National Gallery of Canada were available, it is unlikely that it would correspond closely to that of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. The National Gallery of Canada is not a gallery solely devoted to contemporary art,

as is the I.C.A. The National Gallery does indeed have an impressive collection of Canadian and international contemporary art but, for a large segment of the public, its main attraction is the permanent collection which includes a large number of historical European works of art, as well as the world's largest collection of historical Canadian art. The National Gallery of Canada, therefore, would be far more likely to attract a larger clientele of novice-viewers than would the I.C.A. And, it is probably a fair assumption to conclude that the mean aesthetic stage of visitors at the National Gallery would be certainly no higher and, in all likelihood, that it would be lower than that of visitors at I.C.A.

Reconsidering the Public Reaction to the Newman and Lukacs Acquisitions

Considered from the point of view of aesthetic development theory, the different public reactions to the Barnett Newman and Attila Richard Lukacs acquisitions become more understandable and take on new meaning. A painting like that of Attila Richard Lukacs is received with more tolerance, if not enthusiasm, because it meets a number of the expectations of a viewing public whose average stage in terms of aesthetic development can be assumed to be a Housen's Stage II (Constructive Stage) or, again, a Parsons' Stage II (Beauty and Realism). Once again, the main features of Housen's Stage II are a concern for realism coupled with the conviction that a painting must necessarily serve a function such as documenting an event, teaching a moral lesson, or preserving a likeness (Housen, 1987). The principal elements of Parsons' Stage II are the viewer's interest in realism and his or her belief that the purpose of art is to represent persons, nature and objects. The basis for judging the worth of paintings are deemed to be "beauty, realism and skill" (Parsons, 1987, p. 22). It is clear that Lukacs' painting *Where the Finest Young Men...* (1987) meets all of these Stage II criteria in both Housen's and Parson's models. And, it is likely that, in spite of the difficulties presented by the subject matter of the painting, the Stage II viewer is inclined to take such an artist and his work seriously because the common ground provided by the representational style of the work establishes, from the very outset of the viewer's experience with the painting, a kind of partnership between the artist and the viewer.

On the other hand, even the most basic understanding of an abstract work like that of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967) requires viewing skills that are beyond a Stage II level of aesthetic

development. Appreciating such works begins to be possible as the viewer enters Stage III (The Classifying Stage) in Housen's model and Stage IV (Style and Form) in Parsons' model. According to Housen, during Stage III "the formal elements of line, color, and composition, form the criteria by which [the viewer] perceives, decodes, and judges a work of art. For the first time the viewer confronts the work of art directly and objectively. . . . His detective work results in the correct placement of a work of art in terms of a period, school, style, or particular place within the artist's oeuvre" (1987, p. 43). According to Parsons, the "new insight here [in Stage IV] is that the significance of a painting is a social rather than an individual achievement. It exists within a tradition. . . . There are relationships between different works—styles—and a history to their interpretation. All of these aspects of a work are public and may have a bearing on its meaning. . . . [The viewer's insight] places the emphasis on the way the medium itself is handled, on texture, color, form, space, because these are what are publicly there to see; and on style and stylistic relations, because these are how a work relates to the tradition" (1987, p. 25). From these excerpts, it becomes clear that a Housen Stage II and a Parsons Stage IV provide viewers with some elements of the necessary framework to come to an understanding of Newman's *Voice of Fire*. It also becomes evident that a Stage II viewer is ill equipped, from a cognitive developmental perspective, to deal successfully with an abstract work of art. If we add to this realization, the fact that Stage II viewers (Housen, 1983 and 1987) tend to judge works of art according to its worth in either functional or monetary terms, we now understand how such viewers are offended by million dollar price tags in relation to abstract works of art, as was the case for *Voice of Fire*. For a Stage II viewer, an abstract work of art is not a work of art, as it fails to meet his or her most basic criterion for aesthetic judgment: realism. Seen from their point of view, they naturally ask: "How could such a 'failed' work of art be worth millions?"

Implications of Aesthetic Development Theory for Adult Education in the Museum

Aesthetic development theory provides a sound basis for arguing for some fundamental shifts in the way that art galleries, museums, and even some schools think about the relationship between adult learners and the teaching of the appreciation of contemporary art. Four such arguments will be presented here, but these are by no means

intended as a definitive examination of all the implications of aesthetic development theory in regards to adult education. No doubt, additional insights will surface as more and more educators begin to take notice of these theories of aesthetic development and attempt to apply them when planning and delivering educational programming.

First, unlike other aspects of cognitive development such as, for example, the genetic epistemology developed and proposed by Jean Piaget (1947), it must be understood and acknowledged that aesthetic development is a non-universal domain of cognitive development. This is an important distinction which implies that aesthetic development is not an automatic process, as it is not linked principally or solely to physical or psychological maturation. Rather, aesthetic development occurs only to the extent that individuals are involved in art viewing experiences. This, in turn, underscores the importance of the art gallery and museum as an educational institution, and emphasizes the importance of museum educational programs as, in effect, curriculums for aesthetic learning.

Second, just as Elliot Eisner (1972) pointed out to art teachers in addressing the theory of stages in children's art making development, it is also the responsibility of gallery and museum educators, when using stage theories of aesthetic development, "not simply to observe development but to foster it" (p. 117). Museum officials should not use their knowledge of aesthetic development theory to simply label and classify, according to stage theory, the aesthetic behavior they witness when working with the public. Instead, educators need to use such theory to broaden and deepen their true understanding of the public's viewing behavior. Based on this foundation of new knowledge, they can then establish, evaluate and refine educational programs that will nurture aesthetic development and eventually result in increasing individuals' capacities for autonomous art viewing and appreciation. Housen reports that progression from the Constructive Stage (Stage II) to the Classifying Stage (Stage III) requires the attainment "of a simple framework which he [the viewer] uses to clarify aspects of the art object. This framework can grow out of a variety of possible distinctions, some historical, and some pertaining to the so-called formal properties of the work." She goes on to explain that these frameworks are not the same for all viewers, but share a common characteristic in providing the viewer with "a basis for decoding the structure of patterns within the work" (1983, p. 185). These findings seem to naturally lead us to a definition of the pivotal task of museum and

gallery education, that of helping viewers to acquire frameworks for successful aesthetic experiencing.

Third, the findings of aesthetic development research lead us to conclude that the only really functional position that museums and art galleries can adopt and truly defend in regards to a definition of aesthetic experience is one that is necessarily pluralistic. Thomas Munro, a pioneer in the philosophy and psychology of museum education, recognized long ago that both the expert and the novice viewer have equal claims to validity in their respective aesthetic judgments. Each responds differently to the same work of art. The expert's judgment of a work has validity in relation to our cultural and historical heritage, while the novice's judgment has validity in relation to his or her own present experience. "Each, the connoisseur and the layman, has some right on his side. They are judging art from two different standpoints; the one in terms of its historical importance, the other in terms of its ability to please or serve the modern observer" (1956, p. 136). It is clear that the traditional curatorial and scholarly hegemony, in defining what is or is not "acceptable" behavior in responding aesthetically to works of art, is being increasingly challenged and may soon come to an end. From within and without public museums and galleries, a growing movement is emphasizing the need to be concerned about the museum visitor as well as the museum artifact or art object. This trend has resulted in an erosion of the power and influence that traditional arguments of authority and scholarship once had. Instead, there is a growing public expectation that museum officials should demonstrate the validity of works of art by involving the public in a shared aesthetic experiencing of these works of art.

Fourth, although the planning and carrying out of educational activities within the art gallery or museum remains the jurisdiction of the education department, the final responsibility for educating the viewing public must extend to all departments within the museum. For example, the composition and design of exhibitions can have considerable impact on the educational usability of any installation. All departments within these institutions must share equally in a genuine interest and in a concern for the audience they serve and, therefore, work cooperatively to ensure the success in tandem of both exhibition and education programs. Exhibitions are, after all, the "subject matter" of educational interventions within the museum. Successful strategies to promote aesthetic development will require that educators have access to a wide variety of works of art, so that the astute art educator can expose his students to a measured progression in terms of the

difficulties presented by specific works of contemporary art. The present practice of thematic installations for presenting contemporary art that is employed by so many art galleries and museums often does not provide educators with access to the wide range of contemporary art they need in order to make convincing educational interventions. There is but one apparent solution to this dilemma: curators and educators must learn to work together. And, just as the curator will sympathize with the education related problems facing the educator, yet learn to respect, without undue questioning, the professional integrity and competence of the educator within his or her own field, so too will the educator sympathize with the particular exhibition related problems facing the curator and respect, again without undue questioning, the professional integrity and competence of the curator within his or her own field. Based on this mutual respect, the coming together of their different yet complementary perspectives—one being the representation of the point of view of the eventual visitor to the exhibition, and the other being the representation of the scholarly cohesiveness of the exhibition—will yield, I am convinced, better not weaker exhibitions. After all, in the end, art galleries and museums cannot avoid asking themselves the crucial question, "For whom and for what purpose are these exhibitions being prepared?"

Elements of a Strategy for Teaching Contemporary Art to Adults

Over the years and decades, art galleries and museums have invested in their collections, and more recently they have invested, in many instances, in impressive new facilities. Few, however, have made a concerted effort to invest in any systematic way in their audiences, either by researching or promoting their members' art viewing skills.

There are serious limitations to what can be taught in a one-hour one-shot educational intervention in the manner of the guided tour or the in-gallery talk. As we begin to consider promoting aesthetic development, it becomes apparent that we cannot think of educational programming in the same terms as those traditional museum activities that are able to accommodate large numbers of visitors and produce instant gratification. Yet, we are neither seeking to replace or even phase out the guided tour or the gallery talk as an educational service. Rather, we look ahead to the not so distant future, when a new type of adult visitor, the product of perhaps a weekly year-long course in art viewing strategies, will be seen to wander through the contemporary galleries of our museums, autonomous and confident in his or her own newly acquired art viewing skills.

It was noted elsewhere in this article that progression from a Stage II to a Stage III level of aesthetic development, according to Abigail Housen's model, required the acquisition of a fairly simple theoretical or schematic framework by which the viewer can examine and classify works of art (Housen, 1983). A strategy, designed to help adults understand works of contemporary art, would first have both to accept and to reject this notion. It would accept Housen's observation on the basis that it provides important information on the kind of developmental task that is required of a Stage II viewer before he or she can progress to Stage III. It would reject the assumption that a single framework, although sufficient to allow the transition to Stage III, would be all that is required in order to gain the ability to appreciate a range of contemporary works. Rather, it is more likely that a broad appreciation of contemporary art would require some familiarity with a number of art viewing frameworks or strategies, the choice of which would be dictated by the features of the work of art itself.

Second, the essential starting point of any educational interventions is deemed to be what the workshop participants may already know (or believe they know) about, in this case, contemporary art. Instructors will have to acknowledge the feelings and the opinions, both positive and negative, that participants may have about contemporary art, and to admit that these are valid just as long as participants are being honest and open. By providing anthropological and ethnographic examples of how the meaning of an art object may change depending on who is doing the viewing¹, instructors will help participants to understand that their points of view are socially and culturally bound, and that their beliefs, although honestly held, may help or hinder their understanding of any kind of art, including contemporary art.

Third, art educators such as Eisner (1972) and Feldman (1987) have proposed a variety of frameworks for viewing art, which can serve as an initial basis for teaching viewing strategies and as a departure point for developing others. Eisner proposes that art objects be examined according to their formal, symbolic, thematic, material, experiential and contextual dimensions (1972, p. 107). Feldman, in addition to formulating a model for art criticism (1970) which has been widely used in art galleries throughout North America, has also proposed that works of art can be examined in relation to their personal, social or physical functions, as well as in relation to stylistic traits, or again, in relation to their formal characteristics (1987). This list is, of course, incomplete. It ignores, first of all, the standard

structure used for understanding art objects that are to be found in museums: the art historical framework. As well, it excludes some of the more recent contemporary points of view adopted by artists, such as the feminist, ethnographic, and political frameworks. It is proposed that a selection of these various structures be presented in carefully constructed ways so that workshop participants will come to understand them and the subtleties that differentiate each one. It is further proposed that actual viewing practice be the basis for illustrating and validating the soundness and applicability of each different approach to understanding art. Such practice will also underscore the need for considering contemporary art from a number of points of view, and it will emphasize the point that the characteristics of the art object are what dictate which approach will be most fruitful. In some cases, a particular approach, the formalistic framework for example, may lend itself particularly well to a hands-on studio approach used in combination with an art viewing approach.

Fourth, the social dimension of art viewing must be emphasized throughout the duration of any program that aims to teach contemporary art to adults. When adults are encouraged to discuss works of art in a group situation, they learn from experience that an installation, for example, which, at first glance, may mean nothing to them, may have considerable meaning for others. In listening to others speak of the meaning that the work has for them, they learn how others, and ultimately how they themselves, construct meaning out of a work of art. Furthermore, and most importantly, they learn not to summarily dismiss works of art that seem mysterious and difficult to penetrate.

Fifth, if viewers are ever to become autonomous in their art viewing activities, they must gain insight into their own aesthetic experiencing process. As workshop participants begin to gain confidence and skill in their viewing ability, workshop instructors can prepare and propose exercises that will help participants gain awareness of their own viewing and responding process in different art viewing situations. Once viewers acquire the ability to objectively examine their own preferential art viewing framework, they gain the ability to make adjustments to that approach or to change approaches when necessary.

Finally, it is appropriate, I believe, to conclude this article by relating to you the comments made to me by Carla Whiteside², artist, educator and an esteemed colleague, as we discussed the outcome of a four-part workshop, focusing on contemporary art, that she led for a group of adult visitors at the National Gallery of Canada. According to

Whiteside, the difficulty in teaching contemporary art to groups of adults as opposed to teaching the same to groups of children, lies in the fact that unlike children who, because of their similar ages and rates of maturation, are experiencing the same thing for the first time together, adults have widely varying levels of art viewing experience. In any one group of adults, the extent of previous art viewing can range from that of the utter novice to that of the well-travelled museum enthusiast, and therefore, adult members of the same group tend to all be at very different stages in their aesthetic development. The challenge that faces the art educator in such a situation resides in finding different means of addressing the same work of art, and in formulating and presenting the same opportunity for active participation in different ways so that all members of the group get excited and involved in the workshop at a level from which they can profit: their own level of aesthetic understanding.

This, then, is the challenge that awaits museum educators genuinely interested in assisting adult viewers get the most out of what our collections of contemporary art have to offer. A sound understanding of aesthetic development theory will provide educators with a framework of their own: one which will help them to understand the behavior of museum visitors; one that will help them to define the tasks involved in promoting aesthetic development; and one that will suggest pathways for achieving such ends. Knowledge of these theories and their application in practice, however, is but part of the solution to the problems that museums face in regards to the public reaction afforded to many examples of contemporary art. Museum and art gallery education departments must become more involved in audience research. So little is in fact known about the audience we are all working so hard to serve.

Notes

1. As one example of what I mean here, let us consider how a Tibetan stone carving will have a totally different meaning to the artist who made it and to the Canadian of European descent, who happens per chance to view it in the National Gallery of Canada's collection of Asiatic Art.
2. This conversation took place on March 8, 1991 and was in reference to a workshop entitled "Meaningful Play: The Expression of Ideas in Abstract and Contemporary Art" which took place at the National Gallery of Canada on Thursday evenings from February 7 to 28, 1991.

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