

Education as an Art

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THE VALUE OF ART FOR THE ADOLESCENT

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Before us on the screen is the figure of a Pharaoh. His body is uncomfortably still and rigid. He looks as if he were confined within an invisible strait jacket. His legs are stiff and parallel down to the toes, the feet flat on the ground. His weight rests on the back leg; we do not feel the urge to move arising within this man. His arms and hands are almost painfully harnessed to the body - no greater absence of freedom could be portrayed (even Michelangelo's Bound Slave is not so imprisoned). Lastly the head: the senses wide awake, full lips, large nose and nostrils, large eyes and ears; but there lies a secret: the eyes are not looking at you or me - they are gazing into space; their interest lies not in this world but beyond. They are not asleep, and not rapt in mystic reflection - the beyond is visible, a world of constant change, or filled with objects or beings that call forth respect and wonder. The head, whose importance is accentuated by the striking headdress, is slightly thrown back as though to emphasize the direction of the gaze into the beyond.

"Let not mine eyes stray from beholding thee, so that my deeds be but the expression of thy will."

We are spellbound by the tenseness and uprightness of the figure. And now we look at the same Pharaoh from behind. What a different picture! Most striking of all, it is a solid pillar from the very ground up to a point between the shoulder blades. There it changes to a thick, ropelike form composed of a series of rings; this in turn holds together, one might say controls, the whole headdress. Lines have their meaning Egyptian sculpture makes this very clear - and the vertical lines of the pillar, resolved into the outspread, sun like rays of the headdress, certainly give the impression of a personage who is held upright entirely by a force outside himself.

We have before us then someone quite different from ourselves, for except for the medium held in a state of trance - we should certainly object if we felt we owed our upright stature to anything but ourselves. Is there anything in Egyptian history that would help us to understand this phenomenon?

The Egyptian, when asked by the Greeks who was their first king, replied, "King Menes." (3400 B.C.) "Who was King before that?" "Before that, the Gods ruled over Egypt."

Or take the Old Testament story of the Pharaoh and his dreams, which only Joseph could interpret. How insistent is the Pharaoh that the dream shall be interpreted! How else is he to know how to rule over Egypt?

So we have here a confirmation in art of something we know and can learn from history. The Egyptians stood differently in their relation to freedom than do we. If therefore all historical documents were destroyed, and only art were left, we should still have quite a lot to say about that time. Thus we confront art as a bringer of truth and knowledge.

And now, in striking contrast, we will look at a Greek sculpture, the statue of an Olympic runner. It is a maiden, yet we are not made especially aware of her feminine sex. What strikes us is the light poise, freed from material grossness, of the body on one foot, the other ready to leap off; the hands slightly lifted, lifting the body as if on wings; a short garment with a series of delicate, fluidic, vertical folds, held together underneath the breast by a broad, quiet band; and the head with no particular expression, a familiar characteristic of Greek sculpture.

When the children see this, they are again and again seized and uplifted by the buoyancy of the figure, so light, so effortless, so rhythmical the very essence of life and latent movement.

The Greeks knew how to form the body so that it could bear the stamp of the spirit. The lines run harmoniously, the forms are not infinitely removed from the 'ideal' form of the human body, that ideal which in physical reality does not exist. And in beholding such harmony, we too begin to see more purely, to breathe more rhythmically, and to will more 'lightly'. The shadow that so easily clouds the brow of the adolescent is dispelled: where life is so abundant, death has no entry. Art is beauty the life-giver!

Lastly, an example from the realm of the painter. Most people know the head of Christ by Leonardo da Vinci from the Brera gallery in Milan. What does it express? We have before us a face with somewhat soft, feminine features. The eyelids seem to sink rather heavily; the nose is long, expressive of great feeling; the mouth so sensitive, there is almost a quiver on the lips. Lips that could pronounce words of such great contrast as those spoken to St. Peter, "Flesh and blood hath not revealed this unto thee but God," and "Get thee behind me, Satan," lips that could say, "Maiden, arise," and with those words command both life and death: such lips must needs be sensitive. But above all, the downward look, the seemingly heavy eyelids! What can divine goodness do other than lower the eyes before the weakness of humankind? These drooping eyelids are always waiting to be lifted that the gaze may fall direct on man, when man too shall be able to behold Him 'no longer through a glass darkly' but seeing 'face to face.'

With all this, there is no sentimentality in this picture, no weakness, only patience, only the essence of goodness, only Christ as a child may imagine him.

Here art speaks the language of goodness.

And now let us turn to the curriculum of a Rudolf Steiner school and look up what it says about the adolescent. Here are Rudolf Steiner's words: "In the very age when the child has to learn to understand that nature is ordered according to abstract laws which must be comprehended through the intellect, when in physics he has to learn how cause and effect are connected in each particular case, in this same age we should create a counterbalance through an understanding of art. We should introduce the child to an understanding of how the different arts have developed in the various epochs of human history."

And further we find the following paragraph: "Many of the difficulties and moral inhibitions at this age of the child's life which is so rich in riddles, wonders and surprises, and in which consciousness is striving to master the overwhelming life of feeling, can be surmounted by artistic and craft work, but also by lessons which are permeated by fantasy, enthusiasm and artistic feeling on the part of the teacher."

This last applies to the scientific subjects as well as to the humanities but nowhere so much as in the realm of art, where the human activity that has led to artistic creation is itself born of just these qualities of fantasy, enthusiasm and artistic feeling.

Artistic expression is something that lies deeply embedded in the human soul; it may take on many different forms of expression, but it is fundamentally a force to be considered and to be used. By allowing this force to remain dormant, by not giving it the right opportunities to come to expression, by not rightly releasing the pent-up enthusiasm, the hidden power of fantasy, the creative urge of artistic feeling, we stifle a vital part of the human being, and that which would otherwise add to life is obliged to find an outlet in forbidden ways. Destructiveness, nervous tendencies, pleasure-seeking, sexual difficulties, and many other errands of the adolescent can be found to originate in the lack or denial of this all-important factor in the totality of life.

It is a mistake to think that art is a luxury. Doctors emphasize the need for a correctly balanced diet for the body, and how the lack of this or that ingredient in our daily food leads to a corresponding weakness or even illness. Has a true psychology not yet discovered that the soul, too, needs its essential nourishment for its well-being?

Observe how children at the age of puberty develop physically more towards the earth, how the limbs grow longer, heavier, and more ungainly. How the boys tend to slouch and the girls to stoop, how different this is from the freedom of movement and buoyancy of children of nine to eleven. And mentally, too, there is a change. Thoughts are developing by which understanding can be gained; but thoughts can also have a life of their own, they can be used for criticism, for peering into the shady recesses of human weaknesses, one's own as well as those of others or of the world in general. And now recall the picture of the Olympic runner with its purity and rhythm. See how the forces of gravity, the down-pulling forces, are overcome and so they can be overcome in the observer, too. Having taught art to adolescents over a period of sixteen years, I can say from experience that with each class in turn there has been a changed attitude towards life on the part of the children: the walk becomes different, the head is held higher. I can instance cases of children who have caused grave anxiety, who were sullen, stubborn, who would brook no guidance of any kind, and who, during the period on art, have become quiet, attentive, have gone out of their way to be generally helpful, and have devoted the utmost care and time to their notebooks. For such it would not be too much to say that the period on art was a turning point in their lives.

And let it not be thought for a moment that the study of art is essential only for the abnormal, the difficult or the intellectually weaker child. The effect for them may be more obvious, but I could equally well instance cases of highly intelligent children, who through their very force of intelligence were lifted away from their will-life and were in danger of remaining brilliant but ineffectual intellectuals. The interest in art, supported by the practical activities offered by the Waldorf curriculum at this time, awakened in them the desire - I would even say the faculty - for creative work and so proved to be for them the most healing thing that the school could give them.

It would be fatal to imagine that humanity divides into the artistic and the non-artistic. Life is a totality, and the life of the individual is a seeking to achieve this totality in himself, and art, its perception, understanding and, if possible, its practice, is an integral member of this totality.