

On Art and Art Education



Illustration by Rama Hughes.

Rama Hughes

Saying that art is about creativity and self-expression is like saying that English is about creativity and self-expression. It is true, but not entirely.

Language is a life skill. An English teacher doesn't expect all of her students to become Shakespeare. She does expect them to become literate though. She teaches them to read and write, to comprehend language, and to communicate effectively. How different the world would be if English teachers had to contend with the preconception that a lack of talent means there is no value in the subject.

Art's Life Skill

Art is about making an idea into a reality. There isn't a single crafted or manufactured object that didn't pass through an artist's hands. That is art's life skill. It applies to everything from the telling of a story, to the functioning of a home, to the building of a business.

Consider the fact that every big business employs a fleet of artists to design logos, build websites, visualize and advertise products, communicate their messages, earn investors, and

create a brand. It is no accident that companies like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Disney are recognized around the world.

Art as Language


Art is a universal language. Human history is recorded in pottery, hieroglyphs, painting, and architecture. Our future is planned with diagrams, schematics, floor plans, and animations. Art delivers us safely to our destinations every day. We all know what to do in the event of a water landing. We know where the nearest exits are in theaters and hotels. Roads are designed to tell us when and where to turn and where it is safe to cross the street. We all know that the octagon at the end of the street means stop. But did you ever wonder why that sign is red? We live and die by these ideas—ideas that are communicated very effectively by artists.

Almost everyone understands art, but very few people have learned to speak it. A careful look at the world makes an artist's value clear. The books, magazines, and websites that we read were all designed by artists.

Every school, every building, was created by an architect's pencil. Clothing, cars, furniture, bridges, and even the space shuttle began their existence as drawings on pieces of paper.

Art as an Essential Life Skill

Not so long ago, art was taught as a fundamental life skill; as a practical tool for future engineers; as an observational skill vital for scientists. The nature and the quality of art education may have changed over the decades, but it is important to recognize that visual art shares something with every other language: It can be a fun, expressive medium, but it also has a grammar and a vital set of skills that can be taught to any student.

If art education is ever going to earn its permanent place in our schools, the full scope of the subject must be recognized. A complete art education teaches students to see clearly, to think creatively, and to give form to the future. And, yes, it is creative, self-expressive, and fun. 

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