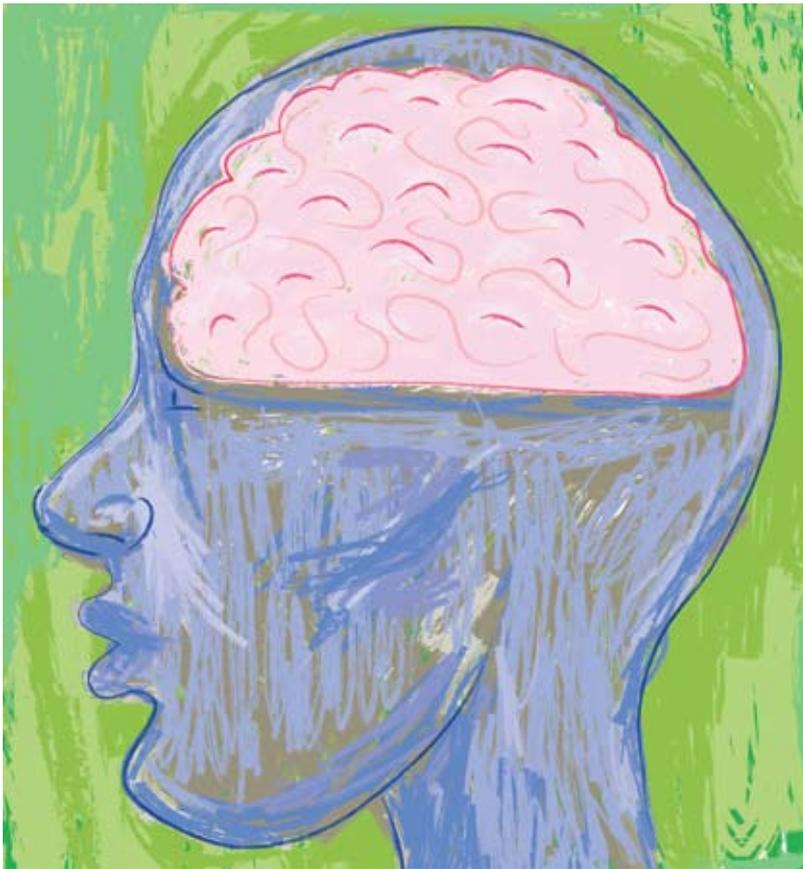


Can Art Give Us Knowledge?



James Magrini

There is a reason, they tell us, that art and music are the first subjects relegated to the educational scrap heap when funds are scarce. We know that science gives us empirical knowledge and math, axiomatic truth, but what of the fine arts and music? What of literature and poetry? Do the arts deal in the stock-and-trade of knowledge, or are they merely about play, or worse, deft technical manipulation? The question I consider runs thusly: What type of knowledge, if any, is associated with the fine arts? Responding to this query, I hope to reveal the value of the arts in education.

The Clarifying Lens of Art

The ancient Greeks believed that art provides a special type of knowledge called *aisthesis* (from it, we derive

“aesthetics”), which is unlike any other form of knowledge. Today’s cognitive theorists associate this form of intuitive-perceptual knowledge with emotions. However, it must be noted that emotions are never blind or devoid of a legitimate cognitive content; they are neither the equivalent of blind passions nor base drives. Rather, they inspire us to feel, imagine, and ultimately, understand our world and lives in new ways. Through the clarifying lens of art, by

means of the aesthetic experience, we understand things differently.

The cognitive content of art is not akin to the cognitive content of the sciences. Science tells us what life is by demonstrating its truth-claims, providing truth that is actual in nature. Contrarily, art illuminates, reveals, and intimates truth perceptually, and

within moments of insight, shows us what life is, and invites us to imagine what life might become. Art does not hand us ready-made certitudes. Rather it provides experiences wherein knowledge is illuminated, and as opposed to the explicit truth of science, art’s knowledge is implicit—instances of truth that hold potential for future development.

Art Speaks

I have witnessed students experiencing and contemplating the deep, emotional horrors of war when participating in Picasso’s *Guernica*, more so than if they had read a historical treatise on the events during the Spanish Civil War. The painting speaks, and the voice of protest resounding from the canvas is far more visceral and immediate than the spoken word. Students, as participants, enter that world and are transformed, and for the first time, begin ruminating on the meaning and implications of this war as portrayed, and further, warfare in general.

Indeed, the subjects of math and science are absolute necessities for all students, and removing these viable forms of knowledge from the curriculum is unthinkable — but so too should the removal of art and its unique form of knowledge be unthinkable. If educators seek to nurture a flourishing, participatory member of the democracy, they must take seriously the notion that the arts are not merely for enjoyment and beautification, and their inclusion in the curriculum is as necessary as any of the sciences.

Educators must work to ensure that future generations will demonstrate an acute understanding of and appreciation for art’s transformative powers. The knowledge that art provides, along with the potential to become more humane, is as much a part of solid democratic citizenry as is the ability to think clearly, objectively, and critically. ☞

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