

## Introduction

Art teachers play many roles. Their professional practices include instructing students, planning lessons and curriculum units, diagnosing learning or behavioral problems, organizing and distributing materials for art making and evaluating student learning. In addition to the tasks directly related to classroom instruction, art teachers often act as art therapists who help individual students use their art to grow emotionally, as college and vocational counselors, exhibition preparers, public relations advocates for the visual arts and for art in the community, art critics in regard to student and community art, art historians and teachers of art history, philosophers of art, cultural anthropologists, graphic designers, and artists in their own right. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, art teachers have been playing all these roles for a century or more. Just as these roles overlap in the course of any teacher's day, so the chapters of this book provide overlapping perspectives on a past era in art education. Although most of us think of history as a linear chronology, this book is a thematic history that puts art instruction during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into educational, artistic, and social contexts.

The stage on which many art teachers perform is the public school classroom. Art education developed its professional practices in tandem with the development of publicly funded school systems in North America, the ascendancy and domination of modernism and formalism in the world of fine art, and the recovery from a devastating Civil War and subsequent efforts to build United States presence as an international economic and political power. All of these social and cultural changes had an impact on the development of public and private schools and

definitions of art. Art educators today face challenges not unlike those faced by Walter Smith when he was establishing industrial drawing in Massachusetts schools from 1871 to 1883: determining what should be taught and planning the art curriculum, helping teachers prepare to teach art, gathering the necessary visual resources and art materials, then evaluating the success of the program through examining student work. While the challenges of the present day and Walter Smith's era are remarkably similar, the contexts affecting the professional decision-making of both periods are markedly different.

This book focuses on the turn of the twentieth century, a period during which art educators, like other Americans, often felt overwhelmed by the scale and speed of change. That era, like the present, was characterized by educational reform, criticism of schools, and pressure from special interest groups who expected public education to attend to their needs and support their beliefs. The range of constituencies public schools had to answer to and the existence of multiple rationales to explain the value of art in education led to an eclecticism that has parallels with present conditions. Late nineteenth-century educators tried to ignore this eclecticism because it contradicted their prevailing faith in the existence of a single best answer. On the other hand, the belief in singular vision and centralized administrative structure that governed educational reform a century ago, today has given way to multiple visions, site-based management, and shared decision making, among other reforms. Today's educational reformers acknowledge the inevitability of change and the impossibility of finding one best method. Chapters in this book will explore some of

the changing ideas about art that led to conflicts among art educators and between art teachers and general educators, the impact on art production and instruction of technologies for image reproduction, and ways that modern social values affected art education.

One way to deal with change is to compare the new with the known. A poem by John G. Saxe, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” gives us a metaphor for the alternative views of art education that structure this book.<sup>1</sup> Six men approach an elephant. They have never before met such a creature. Each man encounters a different part of the great beast. Comparing their experiences later, they quarrel over whether the elephant is more like a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree trunk, a fan, or a rope. Each chapter of this book introduces different features of the elephant that was art education about a century ago. No one feature alone describes the elephant, but, taken together, all the features illuminate aspects of art educational practice.

Art educators of the past, along with art educators today, tend to favor certain metaphors. The slogan *Arts Literacy*, which was used to explain the importance of the results of the 1997 National Assessment of Educational Progress in the arts, echoes metaphors popular at the turn of the century that were used to justify drawing in ante-bellum schools. The classical notion of liberal arts—those studies appropriate to free citizens in a republic—was adapted from the 1890s into the 1920s to fit Progressive educational reforms in which freedom from restraint or discipline was viewed as prerequisite to democratic development. Experience in the visual arts would free the child from unhealthy socialization, release creative spirit, and change the world one person at a time.

On one hand, art entered schools to prepare students for work by providing them with training in skills that could lead to profitable employment. On the other hand, school art historically has also served as recreation and escape. The visual arts have been compared to other school subjects: to the rigor of mathematics, the precision of the sciences, and the formal abstraction, rhythm, harmony, and pure design of music. The visual arts have been incorporated into the humanities, defined as polite learning that shows reverence for the past and distinctively human ideals. These metaphors continue to have relevance today.

A few years ago I was team-teaching a graduate history of art education course through distance education, when students raised the question, “When is history?” For most of them, history was what happened before they were born. Events of the 1960s and 1970s that had been part of my life experience were fabulous historical events to them. Although I can appreciate their need to learn about recent history, I also understand that greater historical distance helps us see art education from a different perspective. In this book, I attempt to make familiar ideas about art education seem fresh by examining them in the context of art teaching practice a century ago. At the same time, I want to make the strange world of the past more familiar by indicating similarities between present and past. Biographies of past art educators are included to help readers understand that our professional ancestors were real people who shared many of our struggles but responded from knowledge, beliefs, and values that may seem alien to us.

When I was teaching art in elementary schools and art methods to future teachers, I sometimes wondered why certain activities seemed to be

repeated in almost every art program. I could usually figure out an educational justification, but remained curious as to why some particular activities were so popular and pervasive. Why didn't art teachers more often select different means to reach their goals? As a teacher I have used instructional strategies that I had participated in as a student or learned from the cooperating teacher when I student taught. Again, I discovered that some activities are found in almost every art teacher's repertoire while others, possibly equally valid for student learning, are rarely seen. One of my reasons for writing this book is to explore *why* this is the case and to encourage other art educators to reflect on how we have come to do the things we do.

In a way, this book is a kind of virtual teachers' room where art educators of the past share their ideas and experiences. We can compare and contrast our own stories of art teaching with theirs, vicariously extend our individual experience by imagining ourselves in unfamiliar situations, and recognize puzzles that may lead us to see our professional lives in unexpected ways. My goal is not to suggest that art teachers in the twenty-first century adopt nineteenth-century practices or goals, but to encourage critical reflection on current beliefs and habits, raising questions about what we do as art educators and why.

## Notes

- 1 J. G. Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," in *The Home Book of Verse*, 9th ed., selected and arranged by B. E. Stevenson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1951), 1877–1879.