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From the Aesthetic Movement to the Arts and Crafts Movement

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The Aesthetic Movement in England and the United States promoted industrial production of "objects of virtue" that drew on the artistic styles of cultures removed in time and space from the nineteenth-century urban industrial environment. Aestheticism was not viewed simply as a means to the material improvement of society; spiritual benefits were to be accrued by those who learned how to respond to aesthetic beauty. The visual styles of art education textbooks and journals changed as the Arts and Crafts Movement succeeded the Aesthetic Movement. This change in style reflected a shift from an industrial art education to an antimodern desire to return to preindustrial modes of production. In this paper it is argued that conflicts between opposing categories in art education were the result of tensions found in the ideologies reflected by the Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

When art education entered American public schools in the 1870s, at least some of its promoters expected the teaching of drawing to provide economic benefits for the newly industrializing society (Nichols, 1877). Until recently, this economic rationale for an industrial art education has been taken for granted by historians of art education and, at the same time, dismissed as representing an unwarrantably narrow view of the value of art in schooling (Dobbs, 1971). Bolin (1986) has argued that other rationales coexisted with the industrial, economic rationale. Bolin concluded that "diversity in drawing education purpose and practice was reflected in and promoted through" (p. 236) the 1870 Massachusetts drawing act. Nevertheless, the very pervasiveness of the industrial interpretation for the origins of American art education (Soucy, 1990) suggests a need to take seriously the economic rationale and the connection of art education with industrialization.

On the other hand, although a number of art education historians (e.g., Efland, 1990; Macdonald, 1970; Wygant, 1983) place the work of Walter Smith as promoting industrial drawing in the context of the British South Kensington system of art education, they do not address the larger context of the artistic styles found in both. My goal is to attend to aesthetic as well as economic factors of influence on art education. I will argue that late nineteenth-century artistic styles, those of the Aesthetic Movement and those of the Arts and Crafts Movement, shaped as well as transmitted values and that conflicts between values espoused by proponents of each style have contributed to ambiguity and inherent contradictions within art education.

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My analysis is informed by readings in sociology of art (Wolff, 1984), social criticism (Aronowitz, 1973), material culture (Bronner, 1989), and recent social and cultural history (Boris, 1986; Lears, 1981; Levine, 1988). Although the exact nature of the dialogue between artistic styles and societies needs to be explicated (Shapiro, 1961), that task is outside the scope of this paper.[1] The present paper should not be taken to argue that artistic style, economic factors, and means of production and distribution were the sole (or necessarily the major) influences on American art education, ca. 1870-1910. A variety of factors must be analyzed and interpreted according to several different frames of reference to enrich our understanding of past and present conditions in the field. Rather than a global analysis, I will concentrate on a narrow time period and a few influences in an attempt to tease out some lesser known aspects of our history.

The Economic Rationale

Sparke (1987) traces the history of design from the eighteenth century expansion of the market for consumer goods, describing what she calls "design's inevitable link with the growth of capitalist economy" (p. 9). The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century businessperson used novelty and fashion to stimulate the market for goods as the growing English middle class sought to emulate the consumption patterns of the upper classes. At about the same time, technological changes contributed to the transition from home-based craft production of goods to mass manufacture in urban factories. As more goods could be produced, greater desire for those goods had to be stimulated. By the early twentieth century, consumers were being taught not to buy just a table, but to buy the right table, the new, fashionable, stylish table—similar to the table that might be found in the homes of the "better" classes (Allen, 1983; Ewen, 1976).

In England, where there was no shortage of labor, industrialization began earlier but took longer than in the United States, where agriculture and western expansion reduced available labor. Due to this labor scarcity and other factors, the United States became a world leader in developing industrial production based on interchangeable, standardized components. Much of what was produced, however, was strictly utilitarian. The gun and rifle, sewing machine, and clock-making industries were among the earliest examples of the success of the American system of manufacturing (Hounshell, 1985).

Although ornament might be applied to these manufactured objects, novel style played a small part in American consumer decision making until the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the years following the Civil War, purchasers who sought to ape their betters (Waller, 1989) turned to British or European goods (just as many consumers do today). There seemed to be a split between the cultivated and the vernacular, the practical and the aesthetic, the factory and the art manufacture (Kouwenhoven, 1948; Levine, 1988). If art could be united with industry, so the rhetoric went, then artistic culture could be the opportunity of the many rather than the privilege of the few (Nichols, 1877). It was argued that in a democratic society everyone should be able to emulate the conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) formerly limited to the wealthy.

George Ward Nichols included a table of exports and imports as an appendix

[1]Those interested in the dialogue between artistic styles and societies are referred to Janet Wolff's *Social Production of Art* (1984), especially Chapter 3, "Art as Ideology," in which she sketches some complexities of possible relationships among class, gender, ethnicity, ideology, and material production.

to his 1877 book on *Art Education Applied to Industry*. American exports tended to be practical goods, such as sewing machines, clocks, and railroad cars; American imports included "earthen, stone, and china ware"; "fancy articles"; jewelry; household goods; "paintings, chromo-lithographs, photographs, and statuary"; and "paper-hangings, papier-mache, etc." (Nichols, 1877, p. 202). As Nichols wrote: "Every consideration of culture, refinement, and all of that moral power which comes from education, require us to instruct our people so that these things shall be manufactured within the United States" (p. 201).

Isaac Edwards Clarke (1885), the Republican bureaucrat commissioned to produce the late nineteenth-century government analysis of American art education (Efland & Soucy, 1989), compared past and present circumstances in the United States to a frontier log cabin and the Fifth Avenue mansion of the merchant prince. These metaphors are telling; they contrast rural with urban, the frontier ideal of independence with the interdependence of capitalism, the individually hand-crafted object with the product of anonymous artisans, and suggest the importance of upward emulation. Clarke (1885) goes on to state: "Now comes the era of display" (p. CXLVII). It is not enough to possess power, "the fact of its possession must be demonstrated by its use . . . the newly rich man seeks to show his wealth . . . *by the articles that culture demands* [italics added]" (p. CXLVII).

By extension, art education in a democracy, as both Nichols (1877) and Clarke (1885) envisioned it, should prepare workers to work in art industries as well as in larger mass manufacturing with its interchangeability and standardization. At the same time, art education should educate middle- and lower-class consumers to want newly produced goods, to desire to emulate upper classes in purchasing goods with the correct look and style. In this model, apparent differences dissolve among evening drawing classes for male workers, art and craft instruction for amateurs and artisans, and women's club models of artistic self-culture. All these manifestations of late nineteenth-century art education can be considered means toward implementing the ideology of the Aesthetic Movement (Stein, 1987).

The Aesthetic Movement

One necessary feature of the description sketched above is variety in available goods. Changes in style became necessary so that the wealthy would want to purchase new items before the old wore out or broke, and the lower-classes would feel the desire to emulate upper-class purchasing habits. Style and design became important as material goods proliferated. Manufacturers plundered styles of past times and distant places in what Michael Collins (1987) has called the Victorian style wars. For some Victorians, historical unity became the criterion of appropriate usage as the householder sought to furnish a townhouse in Louis XIV. For others, copying "the forms peculiar to any bygone age, without attempting to ascertain, generally completely ignoring, the peculiar circumstances which rendered an ornament beautiful, because it was appropriate" was an "unfortunate tendency" (Jones 1856/1986, p. 1). Instead of appropriating historical styles in their entirety, nineteenth-century consumers in search of good taste were encouraged "to discover the universal conditions inherent in the nature" of decorative objects (Falke, 1879, p. 162). First in England and then in the United States, "a closely-knit [sic] group of self-appointed *cognoscenti* with carefully cultivated sensibilities" developed ways to pass on to others the aesthetic standards discovered in past ornament and in

nature (Aslin, 1969, p. 14). These groups constituted the core of the Aesthetic Movement, ca. 1870-1895.

A contemporary English observer traced the roots of the name *Aesthetic Movement* to eighteenth-century German philosophy and the controversy between objective and subjective conceptions of beauty. "The *Aesthetes*," he wrote, "are they who pride themselves upon having found out what is really beautiful in nature and art, their faculties and tastes being educated up to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities" (Hamilton, 1882, p. vii). Those whose sensibilities were not as well cultivated were referred to as *Philistines*. Although Aesthetes recognized the subjectivity and relativity of beauty, they sought to establish general principles, the dissemination of which "endeavoured to elevate taste into a scientific system" (Hamilton, 1882, p. vii). Walter Hamilton, and later art historians, traced the roots of the Aesthetic Movement to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) of the late 1840s and early 1850s, to the critic and supporter of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, John Ruskin, and to poets as well as artists and designers (C. Spencer, 1973; R. Spencer, 1972). Members of the Aesthetic Movement shared a vision of unity among the arts; painters often worked as designers or craftsmen or wrote poetry. The artist and his home or studio served as the model to be emulated.[2]

According to proponents of the Aesthetic Movement, appreciation of beauty should be valued above wealth and all virtues (Hamilton, 1882). Nonetheless, possession of the right objects was taken to be a sign of moral and spiritual superiority. As Hamilton wrote in 1882: "Chippendale furniture, dados, old-fashioned brass and wrought iron work, medieval lamps, stained glass in small squares, and old china are all held to be the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace and intensity" (p. 34). The Aesthetes thus contributed to the rise of art as religion (Barzun, 1974).

The emotional intensity of the Aesthete was parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan in their operetta *Patience* which premiered on April 23, 1881. In the operetta, 20 love-sick maidens pine over the Aesthetic poet Bunthorne, ignoring the dragoons to whom they were earlier engaged. The maidens suggest that the dragoons need to improve their uniforms—to make them more artistic—if the soldiers want to get the girls:

> Red and Yellow! Primary colors! Oh, South Kensington! . . . there is a cobwebby grey velvet, with a tender bloom like cold gravy, which, made Florentine fourteenth century, trimmed with Venetian Leather and Spanish altar lace, and surmounted with something Japanese—it matters not what—would at least be Early English. (Gilbert, n.d., p. 62)

Although Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood inspired the Aesthetic movement, Henry Cole and South Kensington were principal disseminators of the Aesthetic gospel. Cole, son of a captain in the First Dragoon Guards, friend of the Utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, artist, designer, and bureaucrat, assumed control of the British national system of schools of design in 1852 after successfully managing the Crystal Palace exhibition (Alexander, 1983). Working with theorists such as Richard Redgrave, Owen Jones, and the

[2]I have deliberately chosen to use the male pronoun here to emphasize that, despite increased opportunities for women in the arts engendered by the Aesthetic Movement (Stein, 1987), the male artist was the dominant role model.

German, Gottfried Semper, Cole sought to improve the design of machine-made goods through art education. His system of art education had three major parts: (a) books which prescribed rules for good design and showed exemplars from various times and cultures; (b) the national system of art education; and (c) the South Kensington Museum, today the Victoria and Albert Museum. By the time of Cole's retirement in 1873, South Kensington "had assumed its place as the greatest decorative art museum in the world" (Alexander, 1983, p. 162). Many Aesthetic designers taught or studied at these schools of design, including Christopher Dresser (Frayling, 1987). Other artists studied the museum's collections for inspiration, including Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, and Walter Crane, who participated in both the Aesthetic and the Arts and Crafts Movements.

Walter Smith brought the South Kensington style to the United States and eastern Canada, serving as a state- and self-appointed arbiter of aesthetic values. Although Smith left Massachusetts in 1881, Normal Art School students used Redgrave's *Manual of Design* (first published in 1876), Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (1856/1986), and other volumes mirroring the South Kensington philosophy through the 1880s. Roger Stein (1987) suggests that conflict between Smith's views and those of "more Ruskinian advocates of ideal aesthetic education" (p. 30) contributed to Smith's dismissal. In any case, both American Ruskinians (Ferber & Gerdts, 1985) and South Kensington principles of good design contributed to the Aesthetic Movement in North America (Burke, Freedman, Frelinghuysen, Hanks, Johnson, Kornwolf, Lynn, Stein, Toher, & Voorsanger, 1987) and to its attempt to both popularize and enshrine art.

Smith was not the only bridge between British Aesthetes and Americans who sought to emulate them. Oscar Wilde "brought the aesthetic gospel in flamboyantly theatrical form to the United States in his famous and well-reported lecture tour of 1882-83" (Stein, 1987, p. 25). Wilde represented an extreme strain of aestheticism to Americans schooled in Ruskin's morality of art. Even strong proponents of an "esthetic education," who might be parodied with a lily à la Wilde, opposed the amorality of his "art for art's sake" doctrine which claimed that art "never expresses anything but itself," that bad art comes from life and nature, that life imitates art rather than the reverse, and that lying "is the proper aim of art" (Warner & Hough, 1983, pp. 153-154; also Ellmann, 1988). Wilde's aestheticism may have anticipated doctrines of avant-garde modernism, but many American apostles of the Aesthetic Movement wanted to go forward to the past rather than back to the future.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

Although Aestheticism had roots in the desire to reform manufactured goods, some Aesthetes, following the lead of Ruskin, questioned whether anything made by a machine could truly be artistic. These designers, craftspeople, and artists formed the core of the emerging Arts and Crafts Movement, ca. 1880-1920 (Boris, 1986). Instead of placing artistic values above ethical ones, members of the Arts and Crafts Movement often merged ethics and aesthetics following Ruskin's dictum that good art could only come from a good person in a good society. At least a few, such as William Morris, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, and, in the United States, Ellen Gates Starr, tried to use art as a vehicle to reform society, a total reverse of the growing separation of the aesthetic from other values engendered in part by the Aesthetes. Members of the Arts and Crafts Movement also recommended a return to pre-industrial methods of

production, establishing guilds on the medieval model and small craft workshops, often in rural communities, where hand-workers could labor in communion with nature.

Although the Aesthetic Movement used natural motifs for surface ornament, the Arts and Crafts Movement created organic forms true to the characteristics of the material. Truth was no longer a virtue attributed to the artist, as it had been for Ruskin and his disciples, nor was it a virtue which accrued to the owner of an object, as was the case for the Aesthetes. In the arts and crafts context, as in modernist art and architecture, objects and their materials personified desired human virtues. Clay, wood, and metal were sincere; a chair had integrity. As Linda Nochlin (1971) puts it, the aesthetic or formal was assimilated to the moral imperative.

Unpacking the paradoxical relationship of the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements to modernism is very difficult. For example, products of the Aesthetic Movement tended to be historicist in form—borrowing ornament from all periods and places—but Aesthetes tended to be modern in their willingness to participate in the growth of industrial capitalism. Aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde anticipated the total divorce of aesthetics from ethics which has been under fire in recent controversies over the renewal of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Cincinnati exhibition of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe (Hughes, 1989; Kramer, 1989). On the other hand, products of the Arts and Crafts Movement are regarded as modern in form—clean, spare, and pure. The artists and craftsworkers who created these modern forms were, however, historicist in their desire to return modes of production to pre-industrial models. Their rhetoric argued for "the art that is life" (Kaplan, 1987, p. 52), but their arts were increasingly separated from the life of the masses.

Ellen Gates Starr, working as an arts and crafts bookbinder in her private studio at Hull House, was only able to teach her craft to one or two apprentices at any time. Because of its emphasis on hand-work and the uniqueness of each artist's touch, the Arts and Crafts Movement offered limited career prospects; it could not accommodate masses of workers. Even when its products were predeterminately rough in finish and quality of work, so that they could be reproduced by the semi-skilled amateur in her leisure time, the prices charged set them beyond reach of the average consumer. Starr herself recognized the irony of creating, in a settlement house, books that only the wealthy could purchase (Stankiewicz, 1989).

Members of the Arts and Crafts Movement shared with their Aesthetic predecessors the desire to educate the Philistines to their more refined tastes. As Linda Nochlin (1971) reminds us:

> The demand for a certain kind of decorative style in the middle of the nineteenth century . . . made the simpler, subtler, more refined, less technically skilful [sic] or obviously virtuistic objects unavailable to people without any education, training or leisure to appreciate them. (p. 232)

Paradoxically, objects that looked primitive and roughly made were more costly and less widely appreciated than those manufactured goods which today exemplify late Victorian kitsch.

Art educators influenced by Aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts Movement were caught in a further paradox. If everyone were educated to have good taste, the object of their taste would be less valuable because it had become popularized. Success in their educational campaign would result in their annihilation as

an elite and a loss of status which could not be redeemed by either popularity or profit.

Lawrence Levine (1988), in his recent study of the emergence of cultural hierarchy in nineteenth-century America, emphasizes the ambivalent nature of the educational mission of aesthetic reformers. He explains that the response of cultural elites to the apparent chaos generated by immigration, industrialization, and other social changes took three forms:

> to retreat into their own private spaces whenever possible; to transform public spaces by rules, systems of taste, and canons of behavior of their own choosing; and, finally, to convert the strangers so that their modes of behavior and cultural predelictions emulated those of the elites – an urge . . . [that] always remained shrouded in ambivalence. (p. 177)

Conclusion

Examining late nineteenth and early twentieth century art education textbooks, such as those published by Prang, reveals that elements of both Aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts Movement coexisted in school art after they had ceased to function at the cutting edge of the larger art world. We are all aware that change in schools takes a long time; one estimate suggests that it takes at least 30 years to bring about meaningful change in the classroom (Irwin, 1989). Those involved in trying to change educational practices are also aware of the fact that once practices have been accepted into the culture of the school, these practices tend to persist.

If these visual styles are as permeated by values as I have argued, it seems reasonable to expect those values to play a role in education, even after they have been forgotten elsewhere. The paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguities which are at the heart of the movements examined here have left their mark on art education in such issues as fine versus popular arts and elitism versus democracy (McFee, 1991). Many of these apparently rock-ribbed categories have roots in the controversies of Aesthetes and Craftsworkers. Levine (1988) argues that: "Scholars have not merely described and tried to understand the cultural classifications created around the turn of the century as products of that specific era which help to illuminate it, we have accepted them as truths and perpetuated them" (p. 241). As educators, as well as scholars, we in art education often teach simplified category systems as if they were not human-made, fragile, and porous. History of art education is sometimes written as if the only important events of the 1870s were occurring in Boston public schools, and as if the influence of Japanese art on art education were unconnected with other artistic, social, political, and economic events. The Industrial Drawing Movement is treated as if it had no connection to artistic styles of the day, to economic and political developments, nor to the teaching of art history and the development of art theory. More formalist approaches to art education, such as found in the work of Arthur Wesley Dow and Denman Waldo Ross, are treated as if they had no bearing on changing notions of the relationship between art and society.

Levine (1988) reminds us that categories are useful only so long as "they sharpen our vision and free us to rethink and redefine them" (p. 242). The aesthetic categories and cultural classifications left us by our ancestors at the birth of modernism must be re-examined in a post-modern context. Art educators need to question their taken-for-granted assumptions about art education and its history. We cannot assume that either/or categories provide the most

effective explanatory frameworks for researchers or practitioners. For example, viewing art education as either for the children of workers or for young ladies of the leisured wealthier classes is too simplistic. Quests for simple cause-and-effect explanations of the history of art education need to be replaced by more complex interpretations of past events. These events must be examined through lenses supplied by various theories drawn from several fields of study. It is not sufficient to think of history of art education as part of the history of schooling, nor as a branch of the history of the art world. Instead, historians of art education need to put past events into diverse contexts and to interpret them in relation to social values, cultural reproduction, economic production, and political issues, among other contexts.

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