SOCIAL RELEVANCE IN LOWENFELD'S
CREATIVE AND MENTAL GROWTH

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For the sake of this panel presentation, I am defining "social relevance" to mean that aspect of an art education textbook which fosters a growth relationship between the student and his or her social and physical environment. Ten minutes is not much time to deal with this, either in depth or detail. This entire panel could be spent discussing the varieties of social growth in Lowenfeld's, Creative and Mental Growth. I'm sure each of the panelists could say the same about the books they are covering.

With Creative and Mental Growth, a special problem exists; that is, which edition do you use? The Old Testament or The New Testament? The first three editions by Viktor Lowenfeld, or the four posthumous editions -- the gospel according to Sts. Brittain and Macmillan. I have chosen the third edition, (hereafter cited as C&MG-3), because it was the last edition completely written by Viktor Lowenfeld, and represents a culmination of his thinking as of 1957. I shall also make a few brief comparisons with the recently published seventh edition (cited as C&MG-7).

I find three basic varieties of social relevance in Creative and Mental Growth. They are interrelated, especially as they operate on the individual child, because synthesis and integration take place in the mind of the child rather than in the subject matter itself. Lowenfeld's three varieties of social relevance are:

1. the role of art in society - which for Lowenfeld was one of creative aesthetic sensitivity to art and design in the cultural or built environment.

2. art for social growth - that is, using the art activity as a means of learning to work, cooperate and share with others.

3. art for social consciousness (or social awareness) -- that is using the art activity for children to express their feelings and attitudes about events and phenomena in society and the environment.

The first type (the role of art in society) is expressed in his opening statements about the integration of art and society.

    If we want to understand a period and its characteristics, we
    should look at its cultural, social, and scientific achievements
    and its art expression. If we want to understand fully a work
    of art we should look at the time in which it was created, the

circumstances which determine its style and art expression as well as the individual forces which led the artist to his form of expression. This interchanging effect between period and culture, social, political and religious environment and art expression has always been of greatest significance for the understanding of both the period in which a culture was created as well as the culture itself. The total integration of all these aspects determines a culture.

If later generations would look at the interchanging effect between our contemporary culture and its bearers, they would get a most diverse impression. Gothic cathedrals are built between skyscrapers and most advanced fields in science are taught in buildings of styles or pseudo-styles long outmoded. It is quite obvious that in this way a discrepancy is created between teaching and action. This is true especially if educators are not conscious of this fact. "Learning by doing" also applies to teaching, for we cannot expect confidence from our youth if we accept different measures for our actions. By so doing teachers deprive themselves of the proper functioning of a most effective educational means -- environment. In a well-integrated culture such discrepencies do not exist. (C&MG-3,p.38)

The second variety of social relevance (art for social growth) is described in Lowenfeld's observations about social growth, of which a different aspect takes place at each stage of the child's artistic development. For instance, social growth is revealed in the pre-schematic stage (age 4-7 years) by the child's ability to identify with drawing himself or herself in the picture, and including others and some features of the physical environment, although their placement may be egocentric or subjective. (C&MG-3, pp. 126-127). During the schematic stage (7-9 years), social growth continues as the child establishes a mass consciousness, and an awareness of her or his social environment, revealed in their art by using a baseline and including specific features and objects in the physical environment, such as windows, doors, furniture, trees, plants, etc. in a sociocentric or objective placement. (C&MG-3, p. 174) During the stage of drawing realism or the gang age (9-11 years), social growth is the outstanding factor. The child discovers his or her social independence, that she or he has more power in a group than as an individual. The child's drawings may show an interaction between human figures that was missing in earlier art work, express an emotional feeling about the environment, such as happy or dreary, and include social differences in clothes. They show more cooperation when working together on a mural or other group project. (C&MG-3, pp. 209-210) During the pseudorealistic stage or stage of reasoning (11-14 years), children develop a consciousness about their social environment, and characterize their feelings and attitudes about it through art. They show a close and cooperative relationship between the human figures and specific features of the physical environment and its conditions, juxtaposing buildings, streets, signs, symbols and natural objects. (C&MG-3,pp.249-250) Lowenfeld identified those items and details in examples of children's art which indicated social growth with instructions on how to score them on evaluation charts he provided. For each stage of growth he also discussed methods

for identifying and evaluating features in child art which indicated intellectual, emotional, perceptual, physical, aesthetic, and creative growth; their related discussions have subsequently been eliminated to form the posthumous editions.

Lowenfeld described art lessons, activities and the types of motivation or stimulation that elicit social growth (and growth in other areas) in the child's art work. They were such activities as having the child draw, paint or model in plasticine himself or herself with a pet, parent or in an event with another person. Art activities during the stages that include the baseline and a socio-centric orientation to the environment were planned to encourage additional ways of depicting spatial relationships, such as through X-ray drawings, foldovers, and overlapping. He also recommended murals as a method for developing student interaction and cooperation through group art activities. The student learned not only to cooperate and share ideas, but to give up space and territory, to move his or her contribution from a prominent to a less prominent position for the overall success of the mural, and to use overlapping and size to show importance and relationships.

The third variety of social relevance (art for social consciousness) is an extension of social growth appearing to some degree in the stage of dawning realism (gang age), but more fully during the pseudo-realistic stage, stage of reasoning and adolescence. Since this latter stage is also the one when the student's visual and haptic orientations tend to settle somewhere on that continuum, Lowenfeld recommended socially-conscious topics and stimulation which developed both orientations in its production.

Brittain also raises issues of responsibility which relates social consciousness with social conscience, as in the following passage:

> Somebody has to worry about the future of our country. With poorly designed "builder" houses, glaring neon signs, big billboards proclaiming the virtues of particular kinds of beer, and local streams being used as garbage dumps, the prospects for the future beauty of the earth look very dim... Examining our surroundings in detail, seeing beauty not only in the spectacular but also in the smallest growing things, is not limited to any one field. But art experiences can bring new realizations to this environment, evaluations based on reasons other than economic. The conservation of our resources depends in part on the sympathetic preservation of that which is beautiful, that which has intrinsic value, and that which is reusable in other forms. (C&MG-7)

Where Lowenfeld uses the imagery of cathedrals among skyscrapers to illustrate his point, Brittain uses "builder" houses, billboards, and garbage dumps. Although each reflects a different personal point of view, they also reflect the difference of twenty-five years and social change.

In addition to these three varieties of social relevance, Lowenfeld held a very specific aesthetic philosophy about murals in the social and physical environment. He felt that murals reflected the nature or character of the society and culture in which they were painted. The purpose of murals, for Lowenfeld, is to enhance the architecture of the building, to remain sensitive to the building's architectural features and the texture of its wall surfaces without losing the building's integrity. Murals, such as those in Byzantium or the early Renaissance, reflected morally sound cultures. In contrast, murals of the late Renaissance and Baroque -- with painted-in architectural features that did not exist, beginning with Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Ceiling, and reaching a climax in the skies, clouds, ascending angels, and people leaning over balcony railings in Rococo ceiling frescoes -- reflected a decadent and immoral society or culture.

I sometimes think of this when I see murals on the outside of big city buildings. Some are flat and decorative, depicting the history of an ethnic group or some aspect of their lives. Others deny the existence of the building by depicting streets of little shops, landscapes and beach scenes, the extension of parking lots or the street itself into a vanishing point, or the architectural features of another era. Murals we now call "street art"; they are reflections of a society trying to open-up the environment of the city through illusion.

Without making a detailed comparison between the third edition of Creative and Mental Growth, and the recently published seventh edition, one observation should be made. With the fourth edition the sections on growth areas (social, physical, intellectual, emotional, perceptual, aesthetic and creative) were dropped from the discussions on each stage of development, and collapsed into a single chapter on "The Meaning of Art in the Classroom." In the seventh edition, the sections on social growth, which Lowenfeld treated separately at each stage of development, are collapsed into four paragraphs in a chapter on "Understanding Growth and Development." In the chapters dealing with special stages of de-velopment, Brittain refers to aspects of social growth related to each stage, but in broad terms. They reflect Lowenfeld's ideas but the text has been changed.

The revision of a textbook might be compared to the remaking of a movie. Each remake takes on the styles, emphasis, design, and social milieu of the time in which it occurs. The revision, or updating, of a textbook often incorporates new research, reflects recent trends, and responds to social and cultural change. One problem arising from this is how to make the necessary revisions without losing the unique features, qualities and other aspects which gave the original its significance, importance and popularity. Consequently, Brittain may deal with similar issues but in more contemporary terms and references. For instance, the following passage under the heading, "The Meaning of Art for Society" in the seventh edition has relatively the same location and purpose as the introductory passage by Lowenfeld, quoted above from the third edition:

Art is often considered the highest form of human expression. It is certainly true that art is something that is cherished, sometimes valuable for the collector, and can even be stolen for ransom. Art is also a reflection of the society that

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creates it. The art of ancient Greece or Egypt tells us a great deal about the society in which it was produced. It is a little difficult to evaluate the present forms of art within our own society; although art critics enjoy tackling this task, the artists themselves seem to be less interested in the meaning of the art they produce...It could be interesting to look at our society from the point of view of an archeologist a few thousand years from now and guess at the kind of society he might piece together from the variety of art forms found in the drug store, automobile showroom, or airport novelty shop...

Art can play a meaningful role in the development of children. Focus of teaching is the developing, changing, dynamic child who becomes increasingly aware of himself and his environment. Art education can provide the opportunity for increasing the capacity for action, experience, redefinition, and stability needed in a society filled with changes, tensions, and uncertainties. (C&MG-7,pp. 22-23)

To summarize, there is a strong element of social relevance pervading Lowenfeld's Creative and Mental Growth in both the original editions and the revisions by W. Lambert Brittain. As noted, there are three varieties of social relevance in Creative and Mental Growth: the role of art in society, art for social growth, and art for social consciousness. Lowenfeld demonstrated how to stimulate students to include aspects of social growth in their art and how to evaluate student drawings in order to identify manifestations of social growth in the relationships between human figures, the child's social and physical environment, and spatial representations. The Brittain revisions treat these aspects more generally.

References

Lowenfeld, V. Creative and mental growth, 3rd Edition. New York: The MacMillan Co., 1957

Lowenfeld, V. & Brittain, W. L. Creative and mental growth, 7th Edition. New York: The MacMillan Co., 1982.