

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HENRY SCHAEFER-SIMMERN'S THEORY AND RESEARCH LEADING TOWARD AN INTEGRAL THEORY OF ART EDUCATION

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Henry Schaefer-Simmern was fully aware of the sociological implications of his work. His theory of visual, artistic conceiving stated that people possess an inherent ability to transform their perceptions into holistic (gestalt) formations expressed as works of art. They have this ability in varying degrees regardless of differences of sex, race, chronological age (above the motor scribble age), IQ (above 47), socio-economic status, creed, and geographic location. He believed that society should encourage the development and expression of this ability and that those of its members who are artistically active (whether children, adolescents, or adults) can uplift and transform society for the better. He saw the dehumanizing affects of industrialization. He deplored the visual pollution which appears in portions of cities and towns in the U.S.A. Yet he noted the efforts made to bring visual art into communities by such means as the WPA Art Project, and efforts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Extension Service. He guided students to be aware not only of the gestalt art forming ability within them, but also of the arts of societies past and present.

Schaefer-Simmern's art education includes the handicapped and non-handicapped in the schools, and also people throughout the community. He reconciled opposites in art education: creative self-expression and cognitive-systems (neo-academic) while going beyond them to point a way toward an integral art education for society and for each individual member of that society.

Henry Schaefer-Simmern, the noted late art educator and researcher, believed in the existence of an inherent artistic ability in which people's perceptions of their visible environment are transformed into gestalt formations and expressed as works of art, no matter how simple or complex those works may be. He hypothesized that most people possess this inherent ability regardless of race, sex, chronological age, IQ (above 47), creed, socio-economic status, geographic location, or time.

Schaefer-Simmern addressed people of all walks of life and his art education extended beyond the traditional classroom. As discussed in his book, The Unfolding of Artistic Activity (1948), he worked with the handicapped, the incarcerated, refugees, unemployed workers, and professional people. Also, he worked extensively with children and adoles-

cents (1966, pp. 47-68), and his Institute of Art Education in Berkeley, California, also provided classes for art teachers, artists, and layman adults. His ideas and accomplishments had appeal for people of varying personalities, psychological conditions, physiological systems, and sociological backgrounds and attitudes.

John Dewey (1948) wrote in his forward to Schaefer-Simmern's book (1948):

Escape from the one-sidedness which attends many philosophies of sense, of reason, of bodily or physical action, of emotion, and of doing and making, distinguishes the work reported upon the following pages. In their place there is constant observation of the wholeness of life and personality in which activity becomes artistic (p.x).

Gestalt Formation

Schaefer-Simmern's approach to art education was not an atomistic one concerned with isolated parts or meanings. He was aware of the potential role of art in society, and he referred in admiring terms to the WPA Art Project, art interests within the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, the art classes of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, a New York Physicians' Art Club, an American Physicians' Art Club in San Francisco, and various business people's art clubs. He also commended the art encouraged in rural America by the Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. He was interested in such efforts for he believed that they were essential to offset the dehumanization caused by industrialization. He wrote about industrialization of the 1800's and later, and of the unemployment of the 1920's and early 1930's: "Never did the need for defending human worth seem so imperative as in those days of indignity and degradation" (1948, p.4).

Schaefer-Simmern's approach was a gestalt approach to human nature, art, and society. Contrary to criticism (Wilson, 1985, pp. 90-91) classifying him as a romantic, a developmentalist, and a universalist, Schaefer-Simmern was beyond these classifications insofar as the last two imply an exclusive concern for inborn traits or predetermined natural laws. For he believed that social and cultural influences and values as well as inherent gestalt forming abilities influenced the quality of the artistic structure of works of art. However, the inherent gestalt forming ability in individuals was seen as of fundamental importance for the achievement of artworks of high quality. He was a developmentalist, a universalist, and a believer in social values and cultural influences. His ideas and

works cannot be subsumed within an extreme, polar position.

To Schaefer-Simmern, a "gestalt formation" (a concept taken from gestalt psychology), is a holistic structure in art, in which each part is interfunctionally related to every other part and to the whole. His research indicated that even young children, beyond the disorganized scribble stage, express simple gestalt formations (also called by him "artistic forms"), which develop in increasing complexity with age and continued artistic activity. The formations evolve according to definite stages of unfolding. Referring to the gestalt formations in young children's art, Schaefer-Simmern wrote in his book, The Unfolding of Artistic activity (1948, p.9), "This unified structure, simple though it is, may be recognized as the 'seed' of the artistic [gestalt] form."

Since the ability to transform perceptions into gestalt formations is inherent, Schaefer-Simmern believed that the role of the art teacher is not to impose rules and methods of achieving gestalt formations upon student, but rather to lead them to discover their own gestalt formations. Through teacher guided self-evaluations of their art products, the students gradually are able to express and elaborate formerly suppressed gestalt formations. Young children, however, do not have a problem of uncovering suppressed formations as these formations have not as yet been blocked by teachers and parents who do not understand the artistic process in general, let alone the process of visual, gestalt form consciousness as defined by Schaefer-Simmern.

Schaefer-Simmern's Sociological Concerns

The psychologist, Howard Gardner, in his book, Artful Scribbles: the Significance of Children's Drawings, (1980) made some wrong

assumptions that Schaefer-Simmern had ignored cultural influences upon historical art. In regard to Schaefer-Simmern's hypothesis that artistic, gestalt forms exist in historic and prehistoric art, Gardner wrote that Schaefer-Simmern did not state that all art of the past contains gestalt, artistic forms. Because he chose only selected examples as verification does not belie his point. Nor did Schaefer-Simmern deny social and cultural influences on gestalt forms. He stated in unmistakable terms,

The unfolding of artistic activity cannot be separated from the nature of Man; it must grow out of him as a unified process. The essence of his being should determine its course. Only then will it become a force in the upbuilding of a world that is adequate to his nature" (1948, p.7).

The "nature of man" meant to Schaefer-Simmern an artistically endowed human being whose nature includes his fellow beings in a society and culture. However, as the above quotation indicates, the essence of a human being, that is, his or her innermost aspect of personality, can and should exert itself through creative, artistic activity to change society (the world) for the better. Therefore, more than the matter of a balance of the artist's personal side and social influences upon that side is involved. It is rather a matter of the individual and groups of individuals transforming the society in which they live.

Tom Anderson, (1985) in his article, "Toward a Socially Defined Studio Curriculum," nicely presented the two extreme philosophical positions in his explication of a socially-defined curriculum (pp. 16-18). The individual creative position in art education is represented in Anderson's article by the creative self-expression of the Progressive Education Movement. He referred to

the other extreme position of social influences upon artistic education and production as the "philosophy of Walter Smith," with its stress upon accuracy of representation and copy work. The creative self-expression view of the Progressive Education Movement fits the Rouseauian, developmental, and universalist philosophic position attacked by Wilson (1985). However, Anderson, unlike Wilson, sought to reconcile these two extreme positions. Still, in advocating a third position called a socially defined approach, Anderson thought that accuracy of representation and copy work (stressed by Smith) is acceptable because these activities help students to learn of their heritage (inheritance) and help them gain skills to be used in creative self-expression.

It is an interesting attempt at reconciliation and Anderson should be given credit for it. However, from Schaefer-Simmern's standpoint, there is a flaw in such justification of concern for accurate realism and the practice of copying the art of others.

Schaefer-Simmern pointed out not only in his book (1948), but in his teachings and lectures that reproductive memory work and copying are conceptual thinking exercises that do not develop the inherently endowed gestalt forming art ability which he believed is so important to develop. One achieves a gestalt art forming ability not by reading books on how to compose pictures; not by being taught rules, formulas, or methods in schools; and not by copying art or reproducing live models, still lifes, or other objects from single limited viewpoints. Instead, one needs to be attuned (or reattuned) to one's own inborn sense for holistic (gestalt) relationships within visual, artistic form of the basic art elements and subject contents (1948, pp. 197-199). Surely, the student learns of other people's art ideas and styles, their materials and processes, by copying

their art. We human beings learn from each other and imitation is part of the general learning process. However, if such copying from society is done to the detriment of the individual's own ideas and style, his or her own sense for gestalt, unified art form relationships, and his or her expression of personal artistic understanding, then such a teaching practice becomes highly questionable.

Young children are attuned to their inherent gestalt art forming abilities on a simple level, but often lose touch with these abilities because either no art education is given in the schools, or the approaches to teaching art do not take such artistic forming abilities into account. Yet, consciousness for artistic form can be regained if teachers know how to guide their students back to a sense of attunement with themselves.<1> From Schaefer-Simmern's position, it is not enough to accept Walter Smith's viewpoint as presented by Anderson (1985) and to try to wed it with creative self-expression.

A far better melding would result if the socially imposed art lessons to be joined to the creative self-expressions of a student were designed according to his or her stage of art development and level of visual understanding. A still better joining or synthesis would take place if the socialized art teachings were designed and introduced according to each student's own stage of gestalt artistic form conceptions, artistic cognitions, and perceptual awareness. These should not be confused with abstract, conceptual cognition.

Neither the conceptual, academic approach nor the creative self-expression approach include, according to my knowledge, recognition of an inherent artistic gestalt forming ability in human beings. What good is it to follow an old academic approach and cause students to become confused by styles and forms foreign to their conceptions of the world and

imposed on them by their teachers? What is the value of accepting such a limited philosophy of art and society which stresses dependence on external order instead of on one's own meaningful sense for visual unity of artistic form? Are there other social values that far outweigh either Wilson's, Gardner's, or Smith's values? I would say that a meaningful socially defined curriculum involving studio experiences would reconcile and transcend the opposite approaches of individual creative self-expression and social conditioning by achieving an innovative rather than an eclectic third way. That is, thesis and antithesis would be reconciled and transcended to achieve a synthesis or integral philosophy and approach.

Certainly there is a transaction that takes place between the individual and his or her culture. The artistic person creates according to a consciousness for artistic form and may, at the same time, respond to a prevailing artistic style within the culture. Yet, the gestalt form instinct or ability is paramount in each artistically active person, no matter how highly controlled or uniform the societal style. S/he may absorb that style and "fuse" or integrate it with his/her own style and stage of artistic conceiving.

Individuals are influenced in a variety of ways, and in relation to artistic activities, the varying degrees range from complete interference with creative art formations to complete encouragement of same. Schaefer-Simmern tried to offset those social influences that blocked the expression of students' artistic, gestalt conceptions. He influenced his students through an indirect questioning strategy. In this way, he helped them to become attuned to their own inherent endowed artistic forming abilities. Schaefer-Simmern provided an example for bringing about the delicate balance between individual artistic form conscious-

ness and social or cultural conditioning. He did not advocate letting students do as they please with creative self-expressions. Rather he subscribed to the notion of meaningful social influences being used and transformed by people who are artistically active. The concepts developed by art students will then be fused with their consciousness for artistic form. It should be evident that in no way is there any benign neglect for society advocated here.

A Kinship Approach to Our Art Heritage

As students in Schaefer-Simmern's art classes attained new levels of artistic form realization, he would show them reproductions of art works from the history of art which were similar to their own in the organization of lines, shapes, spaces, and so on. Thus, new discoveries of form were reinforced. Students could relate to the art works shown to them individually and they gained deeper understanding and appreciation of those works. Thus, they gained in two ways: (1) reinforcement in their own forming processes, and (2) understanding of the larger artistic heritage. I relate to this experience personally. While studying at Schaefer-Simmern's Institute of Art Education in Berkeley, California, I began to paint large outlined human figures filled in with flat colors. When I was shown reproductions of Romanesque paintings of human figures, I was stunned. The forms were quite similar. I gained confidence in my new art and an appreciation and respect for Romanesque art.

Later, I saw a nine year old boy in Schaefer-Simmern's children's class draw a fine bird. Schaefer-Simmern showed him a slide reproduction of an ancient Egyptian tomb fresco from 2500 BC with birds in an acacia tree. The boy liked it very much, but then he criticized part of it by saying, "That bird looks like

it has a branch growing out of its head!" Sure enough, there was an area where the ancient artist had not solved the overlapping of a bird over the end of a branch. Therefore, the end of the branch was isolated from the rest of the branch and it created an illusion of coming out of the top of the bird's head! Here was a nine year old boy in Berkeley, California, criticizing, with justification, one portion of a tomb painting from ancient Egypt. How many children are so guided to develop their gestalt art forming abilities enough to see such things in the art of the past? Not many, I fear. Until art teachers are prepared to look at art works carefully and to make gestalt judgments, we cannot expect their students to be guided to do so.

Through the teaching procedure just described, Schaefer-Simmern instilled in his students a deep visual comprehension of certain art works from societies of the past and also from modern societies. He showed art works from many periods and places. Readers are referred to the case of Miss E. in Schaefer-Simmern's book, The Unfolding of Artistic Activity, (1948). She discovered form solutions similar to her own in certain paintings from the Italian Renaissance. As was the case with students in all of Schaefer-Simmern's classes, such historical works of art were seen after form discoveries were made in students' art and not seen before hand and imitated.

SOCIETY AND AN INTEGRAL ART EDUCATION

Henry Schaefer-Simmern appreciated the efforts within the United States to foster interest in creative visual art. The Nazis in his homeland encouraged a kind of German romantic realism that glorified the so-called "Aryan Race." Thus, he could see clearly and appreciate efforts toward a freer artistic expression here. Nevertheless, he

was disturbed by the disharmony or lack of unified form of the typical Main Street, USA, with buildings of vastly different sizes and styles set side by side, advertising signs of many colors plastered here and there along the business streets, weeds and trash in public places, and slum housing and junk piles in poorer sections of towns and cities. He abhorred such visual pollution, but he was appreciative of well designed shopping centers, parks, apartment complexes, and civic centers. When he saw a well designed area, he would exclaim, "That makes sense!"

Society is a highly complex organization in the United States, with many layers and facets to it. As visits to schools and communities across the nation reveal, the art that is displayed shows everything from the tracing of adult prescribed images and copies of comic strip characters to creative self-expressions. We can see detailed realistic works with or without organization. We can see works made with obvious skill. However, I have seen few art works of junior high and senior high students that show artistic gestalt formations. Young children's art works do show simple levels of gestalt form, and some older children's art contains it.

Expressing oneself without some centering gestalt is emission and not expression in the best sense of the term. I recall a painting instructor at a midwest university who told Schaefer-Simmern and others at a faculty party, "We live in a chaotic age, and therefore, we must paint chaotically." To that, Schaefer-Simmern replied, "That is as absurd as saying, 'My house is on fire! Quickly, let us put more fire on it!'" Creative self-expression may be organized or it may be chaotic or degrees in between. Dewey wrote in his book, Art as Experience, (1958), "What is sometimes called an act of self-expression might better be termed one of self-exposure; it

discloses character - or lack of character - to others. In itself, it is only a spewing forth." (p.62). However, there are certain kinds of self-expressions that would fit Dewey's definition of experience as a unity or gestalt formation, (1958, p.37). Yet, we need not be so impressed by all statements that are called creative self-expressions for they can be very shallow and a mere "spewing forth" as is stated in the quotation above.

The opposites of creative self-expression, on the one hand, and academic art instruction with its prescribed formulas and concepts, on the other hand, do not offer students much because both philosophies and teaching approaches fail to include awareness of the inherent gestalt art forming ability identified by Gustaf Britsch, (4th ed., 1966), Egon Kornmann (1962), and Henry Schaefer-Simmern (1948) and its stages of unfolding and development in people.

Reconciliation and Going Beyond Opposites

Art does not merely reflect society. It has the potential to transform and uplift society. The dichotomy between creative self-expression in art and socially defined and imposed teaching about arts cognitive as well as studio modes can be resolved and transcended. An integral art education with a philosophy that contains these seemingly opposite views and yet goes beyond their limitations can be achieved.<2> Anderson (1985) caught a glimpse of such an art education. Henry Schaefer-Simmern gave us the ground work for it. An integral art education would take creative self-expression higher to a level of creative self-disciplined expression governed by one's own inherent gestalt art forming ability which the research of Britsch, Kornmann, and Schaefer-Simmern made known. Art instruction in society would go beyond the revival of old academic, conceptual

practices of single viewpoint seeing, reproducing images, and copying old and new masters' works and styles to concept development based on each student's own visual conceptions and stage of gestalt form development.

At the end of his book, The Unfolding of Artistic Activity, Schaefer-Simmern wrote:

Art education that recognizes artistic activity as a general attribute of human nature and that aims at the unfolding and development of man's latent creative abilities will then contribute its share to the great

task which faces all of us, the resurrection of a humanized world (1948, p.201).

An integral art education cannot ignore either the individual student's creative, gestalt forming ability, or the society in which s/he lives. The student needs to be met on his or her level, but should be challenged to go beyond that level in artistic cognition and in conceptual, abstract cognition. Society initially should be accepted for what it is, yet seen as a complex organization in need of betterment. One instrument for this betterment may be art.

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Footnotes

- 1 "Consciousness for artistic form": awareness and understanding of organized artistic, created structures of basic art elements and subject contents in art works.
- 2 "Integral": a synthesis containing opposite viewpoints and yet transcending their limitations, while at the same time having a unique and dynamic standpoint.

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