Art Appreciation and Creativity Development in the Jewish Day School

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"Imagination is more important than knowledge."

—Albert Einstein

"Pyramids, cathedrals, and rockets exist not because of geometric theories of structures or thermodynamics, but because they were first a picture—literally a vision in the minds of those who built them."

—Historian Eugene Ferguson

Introduction

Art education is rarely prioritized in Jewish Day School curricula. A double curriculum of secular and religious studies often leaves little time for subjects whose importance is "still questioned." Even in the best of secular schools, art education often survives, but only on a year-to-year basis with the constant threat of being slashed. If not for the monitoring by the education watchdogs and the relentless hard work of art advocates, there would be many artless schools in

America and even more artless Jewish Day Schools.

The fact that art is offered in some schools and not others is nothing new. Many administrators or school boards have considered an art program “glorified busywork” and do not really understand the nature of art and its value to society. While no one group can be blamed for this misunderstanding, arguably most everyone who is against art programs rarely cares enough to give the matter of art education serious thought. As a result, the average Jewish Day School graduate, like most secular school graduates, is probably a victim of a passive attitude toward art education that often translates into no art classes being offered. There is a sad irony in this situation because the arts have always played a major role in Judaism. In this essay, therefore, I will argue that it is essential to have an art program in a Jewish Day School, and present ideas for what I think a rich art curriculum should consist of, taking into account limits on time that result from a “double curriculum.”

Before I talk about art education in a Jewish Day School setting, it is important to define what art is. It is commonly held that the definition of art has changed many times since the cave paintings were first created 40,000 years ago. It started with “art is magic,” then moved to “art is beauty and emotion,” then to “art is the artist’s view of the world,” and on and on and on. Each culture has defined art in its own way, depending on the time, the place, and the people who made it. But what is art today, in the twenty-first century, postmodern era? The present accepted definition is, “art is when a person takes any material or substance and uses it to make a statement.” Today, one can take paint, stone, clay, food, newspaper, scraps of metal, wire, cloth, vinyl, egg crates, rubber, or film and use them to make a statement. Anyone who has visited a museum of modern art anywhere in the Western world can attest to the variety of materials being used in unique ways. Like the paintings of the past, postmodern art of the twenty-first century challenges the viewer to think about and analyze what the artist is trying to say. But it may be more demanding than paintings of the past because the viewer may not readily understand the language of an artist who, for instance, uses a few tree branches to make a point.

What distinguishes art from science is that art and creativity are timeless. Science is like a ladder—each year humanity builds upon what it knows and what it has achieved to move forward and upward. When humanity makes progress in science, it usually replaces old techniques and old insights with new ones. Art is only somewhat similar, in that while artists employ techniques that build upon those of their predecessors, viewers do not cease appreciating and finding beauty in what came before. Cave paintings are just as fantastic to behold as a

Michelangelo statue, or a Picasso painting, or an Andy Warhol silkscreen of a soup can, or a Frank Gehry piece of architecture. Someone might prefer one style over another, but each is still relevant today and can be appreciated. So with this in mind, why is it important to teach art in school?

Why Is an Art Education Important for Every Child?

Many people do not accept art as an important element in their lives or in the general education of their children. Therefore, there are numerous schools that lack art education, even in the richest and most progressive states. I am fortunate to teach at a school whose headmaster and administrators value art education, but within many Jewish Day Schools across the country art education is often missing from their curricula. This is always an unfortunate state of affairs, and with budget cutbacks and financial restraints, the problem will only get worse. Therefore it is important to outline a few reasons why every child should have the opportunity of an art education throughout his or her years in school.

I use the term art education to mean a curriculum that combines the teaching of art appreciation and theory with the instruction of hands-on projects—seeing and doing. There are several reasons children benefit from this type of art education. Most broadly, art education can help nurture creativity and critical thinking, which are necessary to excel in a range of disciplines. If people stopped creating or thinking critically, progress in many fields—medicine, engineering, science, or literature would cease. At the same time, art education can encourage healthy risk-taking so that children become comfortable with stepping out of their “comfort zone,” and gain confidence in trying new projects. This ability to come to terms with risk-taking, and sometimes experiencing and recovering from failure, is an important skill-set to learn. Parents who therefore dream of their children becoming doctors or engineers or lawyers should consider that the skills taught in art education can be useful, and critical to, a variety of professional careers.

Aside from benefiting their future professional lives, art education both deepens and broadens children’s understanding of the world around them. Students who take art classes are not only able to appreciate art in museums, they are able comprehend and value the different cultures they come in contact with on a daily basis. Students equipped with this skill are more able to navigate through an increasingly multicultural world and interact intelligently with people of different backgrounds and faiths.

Finally, art education can help improve children's academic performance. Making art is a uniquely human activity and the making and appreciating art marks an important stage in human intellectual development. In addition, research shows a correlation between studying art and academic achievement. For instance, art education correlated with higher SAT scores, and some studies show that students perform 30 percent better in business when they have taken art classes. [1]

Why Is an Art Education Especially Important in the Jewish Day School Setting?

To make connections.

We marvel at modern-day communication tools; the iPhone, the Internet, Skype, wi-fi, and the digital camera have all facilitated communication and the sharing of ideas. We can be in touch with people living anywhere in the world in a matter of a few seconds. But of course we cannot call or email people who lived years ago. Art is different, as it can put us in touch with civilizations and people that lived thousands of years ago. Art is the voice of what occurred.

Jewish Day School students are especially vested in history, so they can use art to better appreciate their Jewish cultural heritage and see how their forefathers and foremothers lived, as well as get a sense of the other civilizations of the ancient world. The art tells the story. Whether it is an ancient menorah, a ceramic jar, an Assyrian animal carving, an Egyptian tomb painting, a Babylonian ziggurat, or a Greek mosaic, art puts the viewer in direct contact with the past.

To nourish the soul.

How might a student feel when at the Kotel for the first time, or when he or she learns about the horrors of the Holocaust? The history and stories of the Jewish people can certainly open profound as well as unsettling emotions and feelings. In an art class, students can express their feelings and emotions and make a statement through the visual arts. It is a place where they can incubate their thoughts without the pressure of a test. They can get lost in thought as they make a clay bowl; as they feel the wet clay slip through their fingers, they can find themselves. But it is where they can also explore their values and create a visual image that is reflective of their beliefs and concerns. For example, they can design a poster to express the injustice of the kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit.
 Nourishing the soul of a Jewish child has to include the arts as a way of

integrating the life cycles, the emotions, the battlefields of Jewish history, and the spiritual meaning of our traditions. It is especially important and is a way of staying connected to Israel as well as the outside world.

To learn respect.

The world is filled with human rights violations, prejudice, discrimination, gender inequality, anti-Semitism, ethnic hatred, and war. Art curricula can enlighten students both about their own culture, as well as the cultures of the world around them. The advantages of a Jewish education are enormous. But there is a downside to it. Day School students often grow up in an environment that is just like theirs, and they often miss the opportunity to mingle freely with kids from other backgrounds and lifestyles. An art program is a great way to learn about other cultures. This is increasingly important because Jewish people play on the world stage, and so it is essential that they be comfortable with other cultures for business, in politics, and for pleasure. For example, doing a Chinese landscape painting and along the way understanding the origin of this style of painting can help a Jewish Day School student learn about the symbolic meaning of the style and the culture within which it developed. Instead of laughing, which kids normally do when they see something that is bizarre or strange to them, if they have knowledge of what they are looking at, they can begin to respect different cultures. In the end, they will respect themselves as well for being culturally literate. Museum visits with observations and explanations are therefore very important. Worksheets, writing and sketching in the museum are wonderful ways to get children to ask about what they see.

To develop an interest in the aesthetic dimension of life.

Somehow a sense of aesthetics sometimes gets lost in the observant Jewish family tradition. Why? Does a sukkah have to be pre-fab and made of plastic? Does everyone’s wedding invitation have to look similar? Can a menorah be made from copper plumbing parts or fire bricks? Judaica that is creative not only brings a smile to everyone’s face, but also can make them think more about the mitzvah. Holidays and *semahot* become more exciting and inspire more reflection when the Judaica is unique. Why does creativity tend to get lost in the tradition? This issue is something that I never quite understood, but is certainly a valid argument for a substantial art program in the Day School setting. There are endless possibilities for new and different ideas while keeping with tradition.

To take risks.

To become a creative person, one has to take risks, come up with new ideas, and have the tenacity to follow through with the creative process. In Jewish Day Schools, taking risks, or trying something different, is often avoided. More broadly, thinking and problem solving is becoming easier to avoid in the age of computer technology. It's just easier to Google your way from start to finish. What is getting lost, therefore, is the teaching of problem solving and imparting the confidence in students to take risks. It is an especially important skill to have the courage to create something, change it, revise it, critique it and work with it. It doesn't happen instantly. You have to work it through. That is the nature of the creative process. And you might get a great idea that just doesn't pan out and that is okay too! It is just as important to learn from mistakes.

A Proposed Art Curriculum in the Jewish Day School

Ideally, if Day School art educators work together, a seamless art curriculum could be developed that would run from grades K–12 and that follows state standard guidelines.

Knowledge and skills would be built on prior experience, but would be revisited allowing for mastery. This is called a spiraling approach. Kids need to be re-exposed to the information and the experience for education and confidence building to work best. The following are proposed standards, which are based, in part, on some baseline standards set by New York State:

Standard 1: Students should participate in the arts and make works of art that explore different kinds of subject matter, topics, themes, and metaphors. Students will understand and use sensory elements, organizational design principles, and expressive images to communicate their own ideas in works of art.

Standard 2: Students should know and use a variety of visual art materials, techniques, and processes and become aware of the many options and careers in the arts.

Standard 3: Students should respond critically to works of art connecting the individual work to aspects of human thought. They will learn to reflect on, interpret, and evaluate works of art using the language of art criticism.

Standard 4: Students should develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communications and how the arts shape the diverse cultures of past and present society. They will explore art and artifacts

from world cultures and discover the roles that art plays in the lives of a given time and place. They will use art to understand the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of human society.

With these standards as a guide and with the limited amount of time for art classes, I would propose the following:

K–2nd grade: An introduction to the different art materials and techniques, such as painting, sculpting, and printmaking. The emphasis should be on experimentation and exploration. Children should begin to feel confident with the materials. There should be a focus on Jewish themes, such as the holidays. Examples: a clay hannukiyah or a tzedaka box.

3rd–5th grade: An introduction to the elements of art, which are line, shape, form, color, value, texture, and space. Basic observational drawing skills and modeling skills should be introduced, as well as an introduction to the work of various artists. Jewish themes should be used whenever possible. Examples: scenes of Israel painted in acrylic paint on canvas, three-dimensional soft sculpture.

6th–8th grade: Design principles should be introduced, such as balance, movement, rhythm, contrast, emphasis, pattern, unity, proportion, and variety. This is the language and grammar of art. Students in middle school should be given the opportunity to delve deeper into the art and culture of other lands as well as learn about the art of the Western world. An overview of the art movements as well as a close study of one of the artists should be explored. Examples: Chinese hand scrolls, hard-edge paintings, Picasso cubist portraits, pop-art paintings, the mosaic and South American rain sticks.

9th–12th grade: One unit of art is needed for a high school diploma and the choice is one of the four arts, which include dance, music, drama, or the visual arts. Students who choose fine arts should create a collection of artworks in a variety of media, based on assignments that encourage them to explore various ideas and viewpoints. Teachers should use rubrics for evaluation. College portfolios should be prepared for those students seeking admission to university art schools. Examples of projects: graphic design, lithography, computer graphics, poster design, and experimental sculpture.

Conclusion: To the Source

The center of our Jewish spirituality was the Holy Temple and from the beautiful biblical descriptions we know that there was an emphasis on aesthetics. As it’s

mentioned in the Torah, “Let them make a Holy Shrine that I may dwell amidst them” (Exodus 25:8). The descriptions in this part of the text tell us that the Israelites procured such materials as gold and silver along with fine artisanship, such as weaving, dyeing, and the setting of jewels. The Torah prescribes in detail all the fine materials to be used to build the Temple including the specific measurements and amounts. One could only imagine how beautiful it all was—a true work of art.

In the time of the Temple, Judaism’s expression of faith was fundamentally connected to the arts. And so it should be today as well. There is a concept in Judaism of “hidddur mitzvah”—beautifying the mitzvah. It is praiseworthy to not just fulfill the commandment, but to embellish the mitzvah with additional beauty, so as to express our love and respect for it. It is our responsibility as a community to continue that aesthetic journey with our children so that they may express their faith and so that they can appreciate and participate in the arts throughout their lives. After all, out of the Jewish Day School might come a great architect, industrial designer, fine artist, art teacher, graphic designer, interior designer, curator, art conservationist, art historian, commercial artist, fashion designer, frequent museum visitor, or art collector. Hopefully all of our children armed with a good art education in their Day School years will become lifelong participants in the creative process as well as the future caretakers of all of humanity’s artistic treasures.

[1] The College Board Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takes from 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993; “Why Business Should Support the Arts: Facts, Figures and Philosophy,” Business Committee for the Arts.