Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education
ISSN: 2326-7070 (Print)
ISSN: 2326-7062 (Online)

Volume 5 | Issue 1 (1986) pps. 53-61

Teaching Art History to Children: A Philosophical Basis

Jennifer Pazienza

Copyright © 1986 Working Papers in Art Education.

Recommended Citation
Pazienza, Jennifer. "Teaching Art History to Children: A Philosophical Basis." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 5 (1986): 53-61.

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

TEACHING ART HISTORY TO CHILDREN A PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

Jennifer Pazienza

"The problems that give rise to philosophies emerge when the strife of ideas and experiences forces men back to basic assumptions in any field." (Randall, J.H. Jr., 1958)

> Our own field of art education - and indeed all of education - is now well beyond the threshold of a period of accelerated transition and significant change. Favored ideas and goals, which for some time have been assumed to be the proper bases for wise curriculum content and sound teaching practice, are now being held up to question (Barkan, 1962, p.12).

Manual Barkan recognized the value of curriculum development ideas expressed by Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner and strongly suggested art education's adoption of them. Applying Bruner's (1962) thesis to learning in art education, children would gain an understanding of the fundamental structure of the subject art and its modes of inquiry. Intellectual activity is understood, for instance, to be the same in "kind" for the art historian doing historical inquiry out in the world as for the elementary school child in the classroom, the difference is one of "degree".

As loud and compelling as it was, Barkan's call for change in art education either fell on deaf or reluctant ears and those who were listening were unable to successfully adapt theory to practice. Now, nearly twenty-five years later, the Getty Report is calling our attention to the problem again.

Translating theory into practice is a problem. It can be an even greater problem when a theory does not exist. Such is the case, I believe, with art history education. The continuous nonexistence of sound and successful art history education practice is due to the lack of a sound philosophical basis from which theories of art history education curriculum can be designed. The need for establishing an adequate philosophy of art history education would seem most desirable if the strife of ideas and experiences

http://ir.uiowa.edu/mzwp/vol5/iss1/14

is to be resolved.

Teaching and Inquiring

To know anything of the "way" art history should be taught requires an understanding of what it is, how it works, and of what value it has for children's education. Examining the parts ie., art, history, and education, establishing a philosophy for each, can serve to enlighten our understanding of them in relation to each other.

An art education concerned with the question of what art historians do is one that has as its central philosophical premise the study of the subject art, that is the construction of interpretations of meanings of works or groups of works of art. Through investigation of various inquiry processes employed by exemplars within the discipline of art history we might come to know something of the way in which historians construct interpretations of meanings. However, inquiry into method alone is insufficient. "Various determinants influence, either consciously or unconsciously, the historians' thinking and writing about works of art. Among the strongest of these is the scholar's conception of history itself. He must have historical awareness if he is to think, talk, and write intelligently about the visual arts. Art history, then, is molded by a philosophy of history." (Kleinbauer, W.E., 1971, p. 13)

Do Art Historians Need a Theory for Inquiring?

Recognizing the importance of examining the underlying principles of art historical inquiry is a current concern within the discipline itself. James Ackerman from Harvard University writes:

> Art history in this country has been a discipline without any avowed theoretical base; until recently few of us has cared to reflect on the assumptions by which we work. . . Art history has given a false impression of maturity because its material has prompted the development of sophisticated techniques for representing the historical sequence of works of art primarily through the paradigm of style evolution

> and the evolution of symbolic imagery through the discipline of iconology. These and other key features of our method came into being two generations ago, and since that time theoretical activity has stagnated (Ackerman, J., 1973).

Keith Moxey, from the University of Virginia, attributes the current renewed interest in the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky, evidenced by the publication of a new book, a symposium at the Centre Pomidou in Paris, and a session at the 1985 College Art Association annual meeting with the discipline's recent arousal of theoretical concerns. Reflecting upon these he writes:

> American art history has become increasingly self-conscious about the theoretical ssumptions underlying its scholarly productions. In the context of the radical and far-reaching theoretical transformations that swept anthropology, history, and literary studies in the 1960s and 70s art history seemed attached to eternal verities. There has been very little discussion of theoretical issues. . . . however, it was perhaps the adaptation of philosophical and linguistic theories by literary critics that ultimately proved most influential (Moxey, K., 1986, p. 265).

Art history has grown to be a discipline whose inquiry methods are grounded in practice. In other words, art historians most often learn to inquire from other art historians. While there may be those within the field of art history who see no real need to examine the grounds from which they conduct their inquiry Svetlana Alpers (1977) contends that histories are made, not discovered. "As scholars art historians all too often see themselves as being in pursuit of knowledge without recognizing how they themselves are the makers of that knowledge" (p. 6). For art history education to gain its place as an epistemologically respectable discipline, that is one with an adequate theory of knowledge, we ought to seek to discover and understand the underlying assumptions

http://ir.uiowa.edu/mzwp/vol5/iss1/14

of its aims, values, tasks, principles, and techniques which in turn define its practice.

The Function of History

Historians are the makers of knowledge whenever historical investigation and interpretation into works of art become written accounts of possible meanings. But what exactly is an historical account? That would depend upon the individual interpreter's view of what history is and what theory of knowledge it should be attributed with. There are those who regard the past as a record of chronologically ordered facts. When the evidence can be empircally verified the account is complete. Since events in the past are just that, in the past, all that can be known is that which can be immediately perceived, any manner of speculation as to what might have occurred simply is not subject for consideration. However, there are those for whom history is not a mere record of events in the past, but events understood as outward actions of ideas. To know the idea behind an action or actions constituting an event is to know, as reasonably as possible, the mind of another. In so doing, the individual knows something more of his own. For these historians, history is for human self knowledge.

> Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the man you are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; . . . the only clue to what man can do is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is (Collingwood, 1946, p. 10).

Two Classical Modes of Inquiry

What effect has each of these positions, positivist and idealist, had upon art historical inquiry? Roughly said, the first, a positivist approach, most evident in the work of art historian Heinrich Wolfflin, (1932) would yield an account derived from the work itself. Consideration of the works' formal

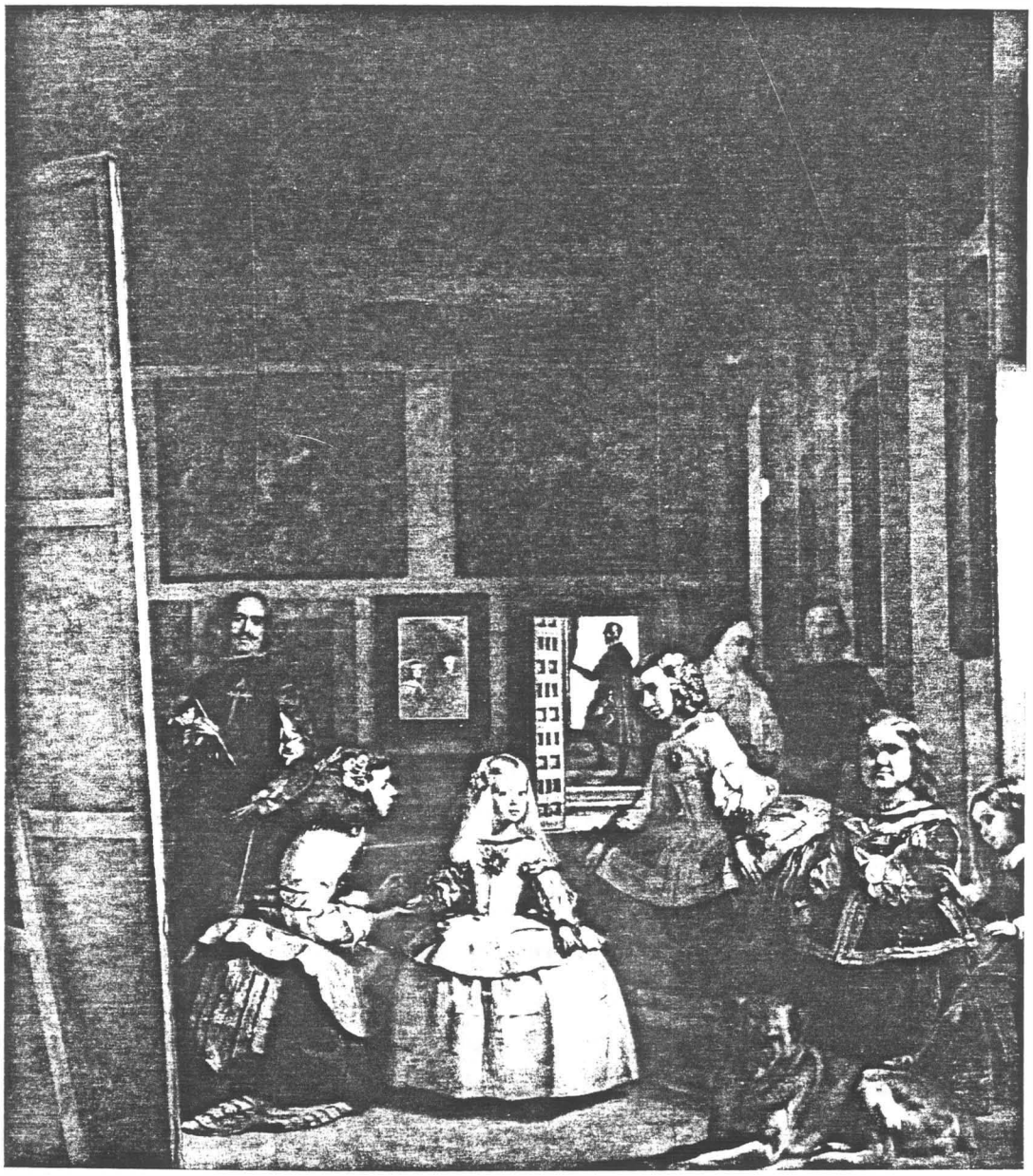
structural qualities, that which can be immediately perceived and known would be of paramount importance. Ultimately, an account of the evolution of the style of the work would prevail. The second, an idealist position, strongly influencing the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky, (1939) interprets the works' meaning, in terms of its cultural context, leading to consideration and examination of the conditions and influences surrounding the works' birth, ideas present in the culture, either consciously or unconsciously known to the artist, yet discerned in the work.

While the above represent the two major classical modes of inquiry in art history it should also be noted that there are many others, each contributing to and making new the knowledge we have about works of art. What is important to understand is that different inquiry modes may yield different knowledge about a single work of art. In other words, each inquiry method has the potential for bringing about some new understanding to add to a work's meaning and in turn its meaning to us.

Consider for a moment an abbreviated version of a brilliantly written essay on Velazquez's "Las Meninas" by Joel Snyder. Beginning with the question of how we come to comprehend the meaning of "Las Meninas" Snyder looks first to the established literature which grounds the work's meaning in an aspect of its formal structure, its perspective. Examining the painting's perspective, he finds a discrepancy and through diagrammatic explanation Snyder convincingly locates the point of convergence to be other than what it had traditionally been. In so doing, interpretations which relied on the previous understanding of the painting's perspective are negated. How important is this to Snyder's ultimate account? It is central. The traditional explanation of the painting's perspective led past interpreters to believe the reflected image on the back wall to be that of a corporeal king and queen situated outside the picture plane leading to a completely different explanation of their contribution to the meaning of the painting.

Snyder's theory of the painting's perspective places the source of the reflected image to be the double portrait being painted on the depicted canvas.

http://ir.uiowa.edu/mzwp/vol5/iss1/14



Diego Velazquez, Las Meninas, 1656.

But why the king and queen, he asks? And why a mirror image? Velazquez could have painted anything on that wall. Turning to the Spanish literature of the time, a number of books regarding the proper education of princes is revealed. This was known as Spanish mirror literature. Here the word mirror was used metaphorically. These works were intended to mirror or reflect proper conduct, the conduct and standards learned from the father and mother, the king and queen. The role of art was understood as that which had as its task the perfection of nature. Through further investigation Snyder discovers that Velazquez was more than aware of this literature and suggests his adopting it for use as a visual trope in "Las Meninas" (Snyder, 1985).

Joel Snyder provides us with a possible interpretation of "Las Meninas" which includes inquiry into the painting's structural significance and its historical cultural meaning. In so doing, the worlds concerning the conduct and standards of the Court of King Phillip and Queen Maria Anna, the Infanta Margarita, the court artist, and art are illuminated. An understanding of the history of the work and the work in history is revealed.

How does this further our understanding of the relationship between art history, art, and the goals of art history education?

The Goals of Art History Education

Art history education ought to provide individuals with increased knowledge of the subject art in accordance with the intellectual skills necessary to acquire that knowledge as well as the ability for individuals to utilize artistic knowledge for increased understanding of self and world. How could art history education achieve such aims? To answer that question understanding the "work" of art is essential.

The "work" of art resides in its ability to reveal knowledge regarding visual versions of others' worlds while revealing knowledge of ourselves to ourselves. But a work of art can not work until it is called upon to do so. The art historian as interpreter works the work of art by inquiring into its history as well as the work in history seeking to reveal the worlds within it.

What meaning does this have for teaching and learning in art history?

The Value of Art History Education

The educational value of teaching children to model the various modes of inquiry employed by art historians resides not only in the construction of interpretations of meanings of works of art but in the construction of personal worlds as well. Through reflective and comparative questioning and the formulation of written or crafted accounts children can begin to understand how meanings of works of art can contribute to their lives. As each inquiry mode determines the questions asked of a work of art, so, too, do they determine the questions asked of various aspects of children's worlds. The answers received become the knowledge necessary to the construction and reconstruction of worlds made. As children come to know the worlds revealed in a work of art, through investigation into the conditions leading to its birth, or the work's past, its cultural context, or the work's present, its future, or the work's continuous presenting through time, children can begin to construct possible versions of their worlds' past, present, and future.

REFERENCES

Ackerman, J. (1973). Toward a new social theory of art. **New Literary History, 4**, 315-330.

Alpers, S. (1977). Is art history? **Daedalus, 106**, 1-13.

Barkan, M. (1962). Transition in art education: changing conceptions of curriculum content and teaching. **Art Education: Journal of the National Art Education Association, vol. XV, 7**, 12-18, 26.

Bruner, J. (1960). **The process of education.** Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Collingwood, R. G. (1956). **The idea of history.** (p. 10). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kleinbauer, W.E. (1971). **Modern perspectives in western art history,** (p. 13). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Moxey, K. (1986). Panofsky's concept of "iconology" and the problem of interpretation in the history of art. **New Literary History, 2**, 265-274.

Panofsky, E. (1939). **Studies in iconology.** New York: Harper and Row.

Randall, J. H. (1958). **Nature and historical experience.** New York: Columbia University Press.

Snyder, J. (1985). Las Meninas and the mirror of the prince. **Critical Inquiry, 4**, 539-572.

Wolfflin, H. (1932). **Principles of art history.** New York: Dover Publications.