The Subordination of Aesthetic Fundamentals in College Art Instruction

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“... we smile at a hasty philosopher who assures his disciples that art is about to be replaced with philosophy.”

Rudolf Arnheim

Opportunities for college students of art and design to study fundamentals of visual aesthetics, integrity of form, and principles of composition are limited today by a number of factors. With the well-documented prominence of postmodern critical theory in the world of contemporary art (and its questionable effects on higher education in art and design), the study of aesthetic fundamentals is largely subordinated to a multitude of conceptual, theoretical, and/or expressive priorities recycled from the art world. Contemporary idea-based priorities tend to obviate, in the minds of many artists who teach, the “need” for aesthetic fundamentals in college art curricula. But as Arnheim suggests, art is not easily replaced by ideas alone. For no matter how interested artists, instructors, or students may be in ideas, theory, or self-expression, today’s college art/design students need to gain a solid grounding in aesthetic fundamentals early in their college art educations in order to become adept and well-informed makers of art and/or design.

In this paper I argue for the value of aesthetic fundamentals in the education of artists and designers, and outline a series of factors that
contribute to the subordination of aesthetics in college art instruction. I examine introductory-level college art/design curricula, including a pair of courses that are intended to provide students with visual, compositional, and/or aesthetic fundamentals, and explore why instructors, even in these courses, too often bypass such fundamentals in their teaching. Specifically, the ways traditions of art education, mixed with artist/teachers’ own art training, lead to a virtual dismissal of aesthetic fundamentals are discussed. Certain assumptions that professional artists often bring to their teaching are questioned, and how these contribute to the problem are examined. I identify a historical phenomenon that plays a key role in the subordination of aesthetic fundamentals – the schism between “art” and “design.” I suggest an approach to embracing aesthetic fundamentals in college art instruction that preserves students’ individual and cultural differences, while at the same time enabling them to make aesthetic decisions in their work, and to discern aesthetic quality in each other’s work. Finally, I conclude that students can fully succeed in more advanced explorations of the complex and controversial realm of contemporary art issues, and certainly in the applied arts, only after receiving a solid, balanced, and inclusive grounding in the profound aesthetic power of clear organizing principles of visual information.

The Value of Aesthetic Fundamentals

Why are aesthetic fundamentals – that is, principles and elements of visual organization – actually important to the education of college art students? Among other reasons I will discuss, they are important because professional artists do somehow have to learn to make their work aesthetically convincing, even if they must manage other challenges as well, including “newness,” historical relevance, and significance of idea. The National Association of Schools of Art and Design shares this reasoning, as evidenced by their requirement that B.F.A. students acquire “essential competencies,” including becoming “visually literate,” developing an “understanding of basic design principles, concepts, media, and formats,” and “mastery of basic foundation techniques.” The problem we face in educating artists today is that the range of challenges inherent to a career in the art world often results in aesthetic considerations being assigned a low priority in visual arts curricula. Many contemporary artists teaching in college art programs see themselves as all but immune to the realm of visual aesthetics; they subscribe instead to the prevalent postmodern dictum that aesthetics are superfluous. As this way of thinking permeates college art
instructors’ thinking to an ever greater extent, students of art and design find themselves increasingly distanced from aesthetic training, and from the aesthetic experience. In this distancing, there is loss to students.

Students lose when aesthetic fundamentals are neglected because for all the effort they might make as contemporary artists to master the art world’s complex mix of theoretical and/or conceptual mandates, they will also have to strive \textit{visually} to activate the vast museum and gallery spaces where they hope to exhibit. As Arnheim recently wrote, “In the visual arts, regardless of whether an artist sculpts or paints in the traditional manner or whether he nails mattresses on plywood, the criterion remains the same. The works of architecture, literature, and music also obey the same basic axiom – they speak by means of the senses with which we are endowed: vision, hearing, and touch.”\textsuperscript{4} Regardless of contemporary art’s penchant for shock, intellectual severity, and/or theoretical posturing, artists continue to make \textit{aesthetic} products. The provocative and challenging works artists create are still intended to be perceived through the senses (including visually), whether the artists define themselves as “interested in” the realm of aesthetic experience or not. For art today relies as much as art ever has on the authority of its visual presence, its aesthetic quality. And just as artists have done for centuries, contemporary artists also seek to seduce viewers not only with ideas, but also with aesthetically compelling and provocative embodiments of their ideas.

In a comprehensive review of American M.F.A. programs, Howard Singerman recently observed, “Although I have a Master of Fine Arts degree in Sculpture, I do not have the traditional skills of the sculptor: I cannot carve or cast or weld … \textit{What constitutes training} as an artist now…?” (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{5} If such a question can be asked of the highest professional preparation available in the field – the M.F.A. degree – the questions of how younger art students are trained, and of what is genuinely fundamental to art education on all levels, are even more compelling. And with students literally flocking to college and university art/design programs,\textsuperscript{6} the more specific question of how visual, compositional, and/or aesthetic inquiry is addressed by arts fundamentals instructors becomes paramount, especially given that many young students see the B.F.A. degree as “professional” certification in itself.\textsuperscript{7}

Why has the college art teaching community come to devalue aesthetic fundamentals? One reason may be that some of the fundamentals
that introductory-level design courses ostensibly provide are derived from the more specialized histories and practices of painting and sculpture – the fine arts. As a result, instructors of introductory design courses may find it difficult to assess, and to value, the difference between what is *fundamental* to both art and design, and what should be reserved for study in later fine arts courses. But this difficulty neither wholly explains nor fully excuses the increasing subordination of aesthetic fundamentals in college art instruction. The de-valuing of aesthetics in early college art training is caused by a series of factors, in a chain reaction.

Legacies from traditions of art education, combined with instructors’ own art training, color how artist/teachers view their role in their students’ educational process. The resulting attitudes serve to reinforce in many instructors, certain assumptions about the “practicing artist” and the “artist/teacher.” These assumptions in turn fuel a temptation to “make artists” out of first-year students. When rampant confusion about distinctions and similarities between “art” and “design” is added to the mix, aesthetic fundamentals are all but abandoned. To understand these factors, their interactions, and their contributions to the larger problem, we must start by examining how college art curricula have been, and currently are, structured and defined.

**College Art Curricula**

College art programs have long organized their courses on the premise that a solid grounding in fundamentals of visual organization enables students to develop proficiency that is transferable to later explorations into art making. In most undergraduate settings, aesthetic fundamentals are supposedly addressed within foundation, or introductory-level, courses – generally “Two-Dimensional Design” and “Three-Dimensional Design.” But some college art programs have wholly abandoned such grounding. Opting instead to elevate what amount to students’ every expressive impulse to the level of educational mission, some institutions of higher learning have adopted contemporary art’s apparent disdain for aesthetic concerns. Such programs constitute only a small minority, but even the vast majority of undergraduate art programs, while still appearing to concern themselves with fundamentals, largely subordinate aesthetics as well (even if unwittingly).
A review of American college and university catalogues from institutions offering undergraduate art degrees indicates that Two-Dimensional Design and Three-Dimensional Design courses often comprise half of students’ first-year studio experience (along with Basic and/or Figure Drawing courses).\textsuperscript{10} Course descriptions for 2-D and 3-D Design offerings reveal that they are intended to provide various fundamentals of visual organization, composition, and related perceptual skills. This placement of aesthetic fundamentals within the sequencing of stated course requirements implies agreement across the profession that future artists and designers should learn early in their college art careers how things work visually. In other words, many in college art believe students need first to investigate ways of organizing and composing (design) before they delve into exploration of the array of conceptual, theoretical, and/or expressive possibilities afforded by various media (making art).\textsuperscript{11}

For all the good intentions evidenced by most programs, however, too many 2-D and 3-D Design courses today lack clarity of visual, compositional, and/or aesthetic focus. During two decades of teaching introductory art/design courses (along with Sculpture, Drawing, Painting, and Life Drawing) at a number of collegiate institutions, I have observed that many college art instructors essentially equate 2-D Design with Painting courses, and 3-D Design with Sculpture courses. Consequently, beginning students will often be steered past the actual fundamentals of aesthetic experience, and led directly to explorations of the more alluring conceptual, theoretical, and expressive issues of the fine arts disciplines. While these art issues are not problematic in and of themselves, they can easily be inappropriately placed within the undergraduate curricular sequence. Conceptual, theoretical, and expressive issues should not replace fundamental organizing principles, perceptual skill building, and integrity of form in visual composition at the introductory level. The trend toward allowing them to do so arises out of a temptation to align introductory design courses with the developments in contemporary art and/or postmodern critical theory that foster disdain for aesthetics, and by extension, for “design” fundamentals, in the minds of many artists who teach.

To be sure, fundamentals curricula can be highly problematic in their own ways, and must be developed with awareness, flexibility, and breadth of understanding. Many developmentally oriented sequences, for example, can easily become rigid progressions from “basic” to “higher-
order” thinking. This produces a multitude of elemental exercises, often disguised by complex-sounding project assignments, that are actually little more than rote drills in gradation of tone, cutting of shapes, or assembly of parts, leaving deeper issues of aesthetic quality, inventiveness, spirit of investigation, and personal vision for “later,” when the basics will supposedly be in place.

While focusing introductory design courses on “skills” alone – mere technical training – is clearly insufficient, subordinating the necessary focus on aesthetic fundamentals in 2-D and 3-D design courses to the more elite concerns of contemporary art thwarts students’ primary opportunity to investigate compositional aesthetics, both pictorially and in the round. The underlying factors contributing to this problem include legacies from art education traditions that mix with instructors’ own art training to affect the ways college art educators view their role in their students’ training.

The Impact of Art Education Traditions on College Art Instructors

Educational research shows that college teachers usually replicate the methods by which they were taught, and are reluctant to change methodologies. Additionally, how college instructors themselves were taught – and how they, in turn, teach – extends from how art has traditionally been (and still is) addressed at the pre-college levels. Several enduring traditions of art education influence the way art is taught in colleges, and feed into the decline of aesthetic fundamentals in most college art programs. These traditions can be identified by an educational aim whose objectives – Study Skills, Jobs, Spirit, and Understanding Ourselves and Others – were intended to exceed the addressing of art’s inherent value in early education.

The “Study-Skills” tradition, which geared the study of art in schools toward its perceived value for the learning of other subjects, influences today’s college art instructors to steer their introductory design courses toward the widest conceivable “purpose” – the speculative fine arts of painting and sculpture – as though such purposes beyond the teaching of aesthetic fundamentals are the appropriate aims of the courses. The “Jobs” tradition taught art for job skill acquisition; its legacy has been pressure on introductory design instruction to justify itself as a direct path to art careers. This pressure influences instructors – usually professional painters and sculptors – to assume painting or sculpture will be the career focus of all
beginning students. The “Spirit” tradition motivated educators because of how art could elevate the imaginative lives of students; a flawed legacy of this tradition is the belief that accessing students’ inner, emotive levels requires the avoidance of design fundamentals which are commonly viewed as secondary, if not irrelevant, to seemingly loftier and more expressive aims. The “Understanding Ourselves and Others” tradition grew out of a modern focus on the individual, and more recently, on the concern for cultural diversity in education. Its legacy has led to various approaches to fostering the expression of self, and is closely allied with the meaning-construction imperatives of postmodern critical theory. The problem this legacy causes is that expression comes to supersede aesthetics, often to their utter exclusion.

Another factor undermining aesthetic fundamentals in introductory design is the longstanding intellectual bias in education that elevates mental over manual activities in the learning process. As Diana Korzenik explains, “the ranking of prestige and priority of certain school subjects [renders] art ... contaminated by [a traditional] disdain for work with the hands.” This bias is, arguably, present even within art circles today, and is most pronounced when it comes to the introductory design courses, because the aesthetic fundamentals such courses (should) stress are regarded by many contemporary artists as intellectually inferior. Accordingly, few experienced professors teaching in art programs welcome the prospect of instructing fundamentals courses. Most view this teaching “load” as a burden, preferring the more cultivated senior or graduate level students (not to mention the presumed status associated with mentoring at these more advanced stages).

The legacies from art education, and the biases described above, have not only contributed to the subordination of aesthetic fundamentals in college art instruction, but they have also spawned another problem: assumptions shared by many college art instructors about the relationship between the practicing artist and the artist/teacher.

**The Practicing Artist as Teaching Artist**

Not surprisingly, the majority of instructors teaching 2-D and 3-D Design courses today are themselves trained fine artists who are professionally active in the contemporary art field. Ironically, this very fact often contributes to a tendency to dress up introductory design activity
in contemporary art’s more elite clothing when it comes to college art instruction. After all, artists today are surrounded by controversy: painting and sculpture have undergone monumental definitional shifts and complex evolution of aesthetic values in recent decades. The permanent concerns of painters – light, illusion, transparency/opacity, mark making – quietly persist against a backdrop of such theoretical constructs as semiotics, post-structuralism, and varying critiques of formalism. Sculpture has evolved even more dramatically, embracing explorations into such non-material oriented genres as Installation, Video, and Performance Art. While art theory often fascinates artists for its apparent usefulness in opening channels of investigation, it can often function to the detriment of that goal when taught in studio contexts, by artists themselves, rather than in art history, art criticism, and/or other liberal studies courses. Additionally, cultural theorists such as Thomas McEvilley have illuminated the tainted history of western art and its institutions, leading many to question the merits of teaching anything from these aesthetic traditions at all, for fear of furthering Eurocentrism.

The same successful artists who are involved in the exclusive and theoretically charged contemporary art world have inherited much of the responsibility for teaching introductory design courses in our college and university art programs. And the art-world values that such professionals often bring to their teaching inevitably affect their level of interest in aesthetic fundamentals. Indeed, art-world values can easily be over-applied in teaching, leading to dilution, if not dismissal, of the learning objectives that 2-D and 3-D Design courses are intended to achieve. Korzenik perceptively addresses the problem of the artist-teacher link when she suggests that “the role of the [art] teacher, the one responsible for bringing art-making into young people’s education, needs to be differentiated from the role of the artist, the one whose mind is full of ideas centering primarily on personal work” (emphasis mine). Many college art instructors may simply assume the practicing artist and the teacher of art are one-and-the-same. This conception is somewhat misguided, and makes it difficult for instructors to distinguish their proper role in their students’ education.

In 2-D and 3-D Design instruction, the focus should not be on professional, field-specific, or socio-historically oriented training slanted toward any area of specialization. Lower-division curricula should not follow the lead of the art world. Rather, art pedagogy at this level should hold the influences of the art world in check, and focus on fundamentals of
compositional aesthetics. Solid grounding in aesthetic fundamentals prepares first-year students to declare, pursue, and even change majors in their college years, and to transfer skills, knowledge, and understanding from one professional art/design activity to another later in life. A balanced foundation in compositional aesthetics can also be broad and inclusive. Well-contextualized aesthetic fundamentals should not be viewed as sinister, for they are not the same as “design fields,” nor are they simply to be equated with Eurocentric imperialism and ignored for that reason. As artists, then, instructors need to convert their involvement in the rapidly changing world of contemporary art, theory, and visual culture into a useful tool in preparing art and design students for a range of art/design study, instead of what amounts to an obstructive bias against aesthetic experience in the education of young students. This conversion would allow the formulation of clear, context-based, accessible learning prompts for the introductory-level design courses. In this way, the practicing artist would become the effective teacher.

The misconceptions about practicing artists’ and artist/teachers’ roles in higher education lead many college art instructors into a strong temptation that only exacerbates the larger problem: that of seeking to “make artists” out of their introductory-level students. Arnheim addresses this pitfall when he warns that artist/teachers can often “feel tempted to communicate their knowledge in order to satisfy [their] own aspirations along with those of the student.” Acting on this temptation is unfortunate, however, because of what is lost in that leap. The appropriate question is: what should students actually learn in introductory-level design courses?

One way to answer this question is to look at it another way – if 2-D and 3-D Design courses were eliminated from art programs, what learning would be lost? The course descriptions referred to earlier, reviewed in the survey of college catalogues, clearly imply that the intended learning goals of these courses are understanding and mastery of fundamentals of visual organization. These fundamentals include aesthetic questions of interaction, such as how visual elements such as line, shape, volume, value, or color can be organized into visually unified pictorial compositions, or into forms in space. By contrast, course descriptions for Beginning Painting and Sculpture courses reflect conceptual, and/or expressive learning goals that generally embrace issues of contemporary art and aspects of critical theory.
A review of Painting and Sculpture courses’ student learning outcomes displayed in college art exhibitions, catalogues, and on college web sites reveals a striking correlation between the work students produce and the course goals identified above. However, all too often this student work reveals little understanding and mastery of the fundamentals of visual organization, as if no 2-D and 3-D Design courses (which are usually prerequisites) existed.

A similar examination of learning outcomes from 2-D and 3-D Design courses reveals that work produced in these courses often demonstrates upper-division Painting and Sculpture course goals more than those of 2-D and 3-D Design. In fact, the work usually reflects an emphasis on conceptual, expressive, or contemporary-art specific values very similar to those perhaps germane to Painting and Sculpture courses. Indeed, much of the student work produced in 2-D and 3-D Design courses today could easily be mistaken for that produced in specialized fine arts courses – so clear are the influences of conceptual, anti-aesthetic, and theory-centric values. This similarity of student learning outcomes is symptomatic of how aesthetic fundamentals are subordinated to more specialized, and less visually oriented, aspirations.

That said, some would argue that 2-D Design outcomes should look like the products of a Painting course, and that 3-D Design outcomes should look like works of Sculpture. After all, the argument goes, visual “composition” is involved in all art/design activities. While it is true that work produced with the conceptual and/or expressive aims of fine arts courses will be “composed” in the broadest sense of the term, this does not mean that visual composition has been taught (or even addressed) in any meaningful way. To interpret similarities in student learning outcomes as an invitation to blur the pedagogical roles of courses that are so different is a critical mistake. The fact that one often sees intriguing beginning painting and/or sculpture created in response to 2-D and/or 3-D Design instruction indicates that the instruction may have emphasized conceptual and/or expressive concerns too early. It does not mean that instructors should stray into the beckoning realm of contemporary art issues when teaching fundamentals courses such as 2-D and 3-D Design.

With legacies from art education, ingrained biases, misconceptions about practicing artists’ and artist/teachers’ roles, and the temptation to make artists out of beginning students all working against aesthetic
fundamentals, still one more important factor contributes to the problem: artists’ apparent long-standing need to maintain rigid value distinctions between art and design.

**The Art/Design Schism**

Many contemporary artists view “design” in a pejorative light, labeling it conservative, non-expressive, or commercial. Similarly, many design professionals view contemporary “art” as obscure, undisciplined, or indulgent. By extension, a central conundrum of fundamentals instruction in art and design is the pronounced schism between the two “professions.” Those who primarily teach introductory-level courses—professional contemporary artists—tend to equate aesthetic fundamentals with the design fields, which is part of why these are treated by so many as irritants in the metaphorical eye of art.

The qualitative distinction between the fine arts as theoretical disciplines of ideological expression, and the practical design fields as linked to the realm of craft, extends from early hierarchical divisions that were formalized in the Italian Renaissance. Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise elevated painting as an art above craft, and gave it primacy among all arts by virtue of its theoretical grounding in mathematics. Leonardo carried the primacy of painting further, classifying it as a theoretical art of high mental activity and inventive scope, while assigning sculpture to the lower stratum of mechanical trades involving sweaty manual labor and messy raw materials. Art divided once again in the nineteenth century, this time separating the realm of “industrial arts,” as early industrialization demanded high manual skills from workers, including mechanical drafting and other demanding skills. At that time, the “fine arts” of painting and sculpture perhaps had good reason to view themselves as distinct, since the industrial arts were grounded not in theoretical terms such as those Alberti and Leonardo had posited, but in the supposedly intellectually “inferior” realm of manual crafts, or hand-work.

By the time Modernism came to define the avant-garde, important art had formed even closer ties with theory and philosophy. As cultural historian Daniel Herwitz explains, “It is well known that … the art of the avant-garde, [was] obsessed with its own theoretical self-formulation. The avant-garde [was] dedicated to the idea of pre-figuring its artworks by a philosophical theory.” For example, Marcel Duchamp explained about his
own work, “Everything [in my art] was becoming conceptual, that is, it depended on things other than the retina.” Visual (retinal) values were no longer adequate for new, thought-provoking art, which depended on philosophical theory for meaning, integrity, and purpose. Indeed, whole modern art movements evolved largely out of theoretical discourse. The De Stijl movement, for one, produced its own journal and formed specific rhetoric for the purpose of philosophizing its paintings, sculpture, and architecture.

More recently, Modernism has yielded some of its infatuation with the avant-garde and formal newness _per se_ to postmodern theory – semiotics, post-structuralism, feminist and Marxist critiques of formalism – which dominate the world of contemporary art, and art in higher education today. It seems that, as Herwitz further suggests, “We are the inheritors of the avant-garde’s theoretical norms.”

In colleges and universities particularly, theoretical thrusts served another need – survival of artists within the higher education system. Artists’ collective need to “elevate” their field in the context of education harkens back to the bias referred to earlier (defined by Korzenik). Having first joined the ranks of university scholars in this country at Yale’s School of Fine Arts (1864), and at Syracuse University’s College of Fine Arts (1873), artists needed to align art practice and art history with the other academic humanities: literature, poetry, music. Theoretical models borrowed from the fields of philosophy, linguistics, and the social sciences were used to elevate fine arts, not only in relation to other humanities but also “above” the applied arts, or what is now called “design.” By the latter part of the 20th century, “research” institutions such as California Institute for the Arts prioritized the idea that all art was ideological, even political, based on Hal Foster’s maxim “historical specificity, cultural positioning is all.”

With artists in colleges and universities today still wrapping their work in intellectually elevating theory, _art_ and its “retinal,” _manual_, and commercial sibling, _design_, are left divided, to the detriment of both. The “artist” and the “designer” have each achieved the status of _professional_, won through the struggles of academics who have secured a public image of “expert” with the support of universities and, by extension, museums. But each field has also become what sociologist Randall Collins defines as “socially idealized occupations organized as _closed_ associational”
communities” (emphasis mine). For professional contemporary artists and designers, then, separation and distinction from one another, as well as from other professions, is paramount under the inherited model of specialization and elitism. Hence the confusion of each field about what might actually be common to both, such as – in the educational context – fundamental principles, practices, traditions, and certain theoretical modes.

The art/design schism involves a mutual intolerance among members of a professional “art community” and members of a professional “design community.” Recent encounters with college art educators and department administrators highlight this phenomenon. One college fine arts administrator matter-of-factly claimed, “Art and design should look different, feel different, smell different, and taste different.” On another occasion, within a college fine arts community, I witnessed gaping mouths and raised eyebrows from both “sides” of the art/design divide in the course of discussion with each. A cautionary hush ensued when the “D-word” was used in reference to a Foundation design project. Likewise, with instructors from a design program, conversation was halted again by an apparent abuse of the “A-word,” when “arts fundamentals” were mentioned in connection with a Foundation learning goal. For even in the context of foundational learning, each community views attributes of the “other” with marked skepticism.

Since design professionals often equate arts fundamentals with the “art world,” and art professionals often equate aesthetic fundamentals with the “design world,” foundation programs are often misperceived as “design programs” by fine arts faculty, and as “fine arts programs” by those teaching in design areas. Foundation instructors, on the other hand, enjoy a unique privilege – researching, demonstrating, and prioritizing critical methods, historic traditions, and transferable skills common to both the art and the design realms. For in the foundation context, art and design are essentially the same educationally, because a vast array of fundamental knowledge can be drawn from each professional area that pertains equally well to the other. Yet many instructors in professionally oriented art/design programs, and in many foundation programs, fail to embrace this common ground, instead privileging the differences between each other’s products, histories, ideas, and values.

For purposes of fully enabling students, however, the commonality of certain fundamentals should be precisely our point. In fact, it may be
that in these times of over-specialization (indeed, of professional isolation) and debate about art/design education, genuine progress in the college art endeavor will hinge more on conciliations between these two seemingly exclusive discipline bases than on further distancing and continued competition for enrollments and other resources. For it may simply be, as Royal Bailey Farnum suggested sixty years ago, that “The artist is a designer, whose scope of activity is quite unlimited….” With such conciliation in mind, inclusive and balanced programs of focused aesthetic fundamentals can provide sorely needed aesthetic sensitivity, understanding, and adeptness that is transferable to the larger challenge of integrating both professional communities.

Whether transferable to further study of the fine arts, or to areas of design, first year art/design students must be afforded guided opportunities to develop aesthetic sensitivity, to examine their creative work in the context of visual history, and to assess their aesthetic decisions about – the aesthetic quality of – their products. To this end, we need approaches to embracing aesthetic fundamentals that can preserve both individual and cultural differences, while enabling students to discern, and enhance, aesthetic quality in their own, and each other’s work.

**A Contemporary Approach to Aesthetic Fundamentals**

Defining issues of visual quality, or aesthetic value, provides a framework for embracing aesthetic fundamentals. An understanding of visual quality is perhaps the most important fundamental learning goal for first-year college art/design students. If students can define and apply issues of visual quality in composition, they can make aesthetic decisions accordingly. With that advantage, students can also assess their work using those qualitative issues. This dual process of making and assessing also develops vital critical thinking skills, since engaging in assessment involves both intuitive and rational analysis.

Of course, the word “quality” is loaded with culturally-constructed meaning ranging from the benign to the downright oppressive. For some instructors, the very idea of making qualitative “judgments” is objectionable, given the ways in which Western traditions have been shown systematically to exclude non-white and women artists. And this reluctance to impose value judgments on students may constitute yet another reason for the subordination of aesthetic fundamentals – it is much easier to foster
students’ expressive inclinations, or to bolster their self-validating attempts to mold theoretical constructs around aesthetically unconsidered work. Judgment, after all, requires great social responsibility, since “awareness of alternatives and counter-judgments” must be incorporated. Arriving at judgments is, therefore, not made less valid by the respecting of multiple views; it is simply made that much harder. Compositional aesthetics can very well be taught through the Western art and design traditions, as long as they are contextualized in relation to other aesthetic constructs, and if instructors are vigilant in resisting the assumption that these traditions are superior to other culturally defined aesthetics.

The term quality, then, as it might apply to the broad realm of pictorial organization (2-D) or to form in the round (3-D), should simply be taken to mean those regional properties that contribute to integrity of form. This is entirely distinct from the modern (and political) movement of Formalism in art, which held that art in itself should simply be defined as form. Since almost all cultures make judgments about such attributes of aesthetic product, the process of arriving at qualitative judgments need not imply a ranking or prioritizing of varying cultures. Whatever aesthetic traditions form the basis for the teaching of art and design fundamentals, the attendant culturally-defined aesthetic values can be made apparent to students in an inclusive way that enables them to make informed aesthetic decisions.

Defining issues of visual quality is difficult, but by isolating such issues for identification, investigation, and manipulation, we can successfully guide students to a heightened level of visual sensitivity. In fostering this sensitivity we prepare students for the study of many types of art making and help them to arrive at compellingly inventive learning outcomes. Students can emerge from introductory design courses with fundamental perceptual, technical, and compositional skills to complement critical thinking skills, with the ability to organize visual information in complex, inventive, and meaningful ways. To accomplish this, what kinds of visual quality issues should be addressed?

Some distinct issues of visual quality that can be readily identified, observed, demonstrated, and understood by 2-D and 3-D Design students include: Proportion (relative scale), Material Quality (craftsmanship, choice of material), Surface (texture), Visual Weight (appearance of mass), Placement (relative position), Balance (static and dynamic), Gesture (stance
or attitude), *Presentation* (enhancement), *Transition* (how elements connect), and *Neither-Nor* (arbitrariness or ambiguity).

It is not necessary to get caught up in semantics – individual instructors will naturally vary their definitions of visual quality to suit individual styles. It is the *consistent* consideration of such definitions, however, that provides the advantage in teaching with an aesthetic fundamentals focus. As mentioned earlier, when issues of visual quality such as those above are clear in students’ minds as they compose, they can question each, and thereby make *clear and specific* decisions about them. If they cannot isolate these kinds of issues and consider them in composition, their work will still possess compositional properties, but these will not be ones that were selected, formed, and controlled by the student; they will likely be *arbitrary* or *ambiguous*. Making and recognizing clear, specific aesthetic decisions as compared to arbitrary, ambiguous ones is vital for our students because compositional decisions represent opportunities for them to clarify aesthetic interactions as well as questions of meaning. For example, if the *proportions* used in a student’s work are clear and specific, visual quality will likely be enhanced. The relative clarity and specificity of the *transitions*, too, will either strengthen or weaken the overall visual quality of the work. It is well known that many such issues operate simultaneously in this way in *any* aesthetic product, and yet can be observed as *distinct* for purposes of decision and manipulation.

Each of the issues mentioned above can, of course, be examined from various culturally defined perspectives. Since all qualitative distinctions by definition occur in the context of cultural values, instructors must be vigilant in contextualizing judgments, and should include a parallel examination of the assumptions and motivations that underlie our own aesthetic traditions. But this requirement should not make art teachers afraid of qualitative analysis. The proportional interactions within an African mask, for example, will likely be quite different from those found in a Bernini portrait. In fact, proportion may not have been “used” at all in the making of the mask, whereas Bernini was likely obsessed with it. In any case, proportion can be observed as either clear and specific, or as arbitrary and ambiguous, in just about any object or image. Of course, there is no “good” proportion *per se*. When students identify clarity and/or ambiguity in composition, they perceive how the two manifest, perhaps differently for each individual, as visual strengths or weaknesses. In that way, issues of visual quality serve as guides for conceiving, composing,
constructing, re-working, and assessing compositions in response to all kinds of learning prompts, constraints, goals, and objectives.

Learning to isolate issues of visual quality within their working process also predisposes students to the very productive and gratifying process of self-assessment, since the aesthetic decisions they make while they work are the same as those they will observe in others’ work in organized critiques. This critical method is empowering to students because clear understanding of such aesthetic fundamentals brings visual clarity and specificity to their work.

**Conclusion**

As a result of the ways in which aesthetic fundamentals are subordinated to conceptual, theoretical, and/or expressive priorities handed down from the art world, a serious predicament exists for those of us teaching young art/design students. We are too often putting our students in the position of having what the late Ian Burn described as great “difficulty in sustaining such attitudes [as those promulgated by their art educations] outside of the school” and of discovering that “they have not been taught skills to allow them to work in any other way.”

While it is important for instruction to acknowledge the larger world of contemporary art and critical theory, it is also vital that instructors emphasize aesthetic fundamentals as a means of conciliation for the art/design, theory/practice schism. For as art educator Stuart Richmond warns, without this emphasis, “students in visual arts classes in universities … are just as likely to be asked to deconstruct and rework existing art in order to show its inadequacies, or to politicize chosen issues … as develop their own creative work.” With the intention of B.F.A. programs clearly centering on students’ developing a body of cohesive work, including (in the case of Painting emphasis) a consistent personal direction and style, it is regrettable that the problem Richmond describes is indeed common in undergraduate studio programs.

The goal of trying to balance the aesthetic and the theoretical within fundamentals courses is not counter to the commonly shared goal of teaching introductory-level art/design students to entertain possibilities, to think expansively, and to embrace the larger framework of culture and history in the process of learning. Indeed, the conciliation of art/design
fundamentals in introductory undergraduate curricula can, and should, gratify instructors and students alike by its capacity to exploit both the necessary aesthetic lessons and a genuine element of the more expressive and intellectually rich opportunities associated with art making.

While my suggestions regarding aesthetic fundamentals instruction may be provocative to some in college art today (those who might prefer to eliminate such instruction altogether), questioning the current state of fundamentals teaching is not a lament for times gone by. Rather, my suggestions grow out of recognition that instructors must recontextualize the teaching of introductory-level design so as to blend recently forged values from contemporary art, cultural history, and theoretical inquiry with values derived from aesthetic traditions.

If art and design are two distinct branches of a tree, aesthetic fundamentals should be conceived as analogous to that tree’s roots and trunk. And in that analogy lies the particular quandary of our time in college art teaching – how to unite, in new and inclusive ways, two seemingly disparate criteria: idea for its own sake, and the aesthetic manifestation of idea by adept, well informed makers. The path to more substantial and rewarding contemporary college art and design education lies not in the subordination of aesthetic fundamentals, but in the recognition of how their educational value has been marginalized, and of how our times invite fresh approaches to providing meaningful, and inspiring, undergraduate art/design instruction.
NOTES


3 National Association of Schools of Art and Design, *Handbook: 2001-2002* (Reston, Va.: National Association of Schools of Art and Design, 2000), 72, 87. This accreditation handbook also indicates that the development of solutions to aesthetic and/or design problems should continue throughout the degree program.

4 Arnheim, *To the Rescue of Art: Twenty-Six Essays*, ix.


6 According to the College Art Association’s *Directory of M.F.A. Programs in the Visual Arts* (1996) there were at least 7,100 students enrolled full-time for the M.F.A. that year; more than 10,000 degrees were awarded between 1990 and 1995. Entrance to M.F.A. programs generally requires the B.A. or B.F.A. degree, which coupled with the baby-boom bounce demographic trend currently beginning its predicted 10-year cycle, strongly suggests future enrollment growth for undergraduate art/design degree programs.


8 One example is San Francisco Art Institute, which has since come to foster very provocative undergraduate student works, such as one recent performance involving acts of a violent and explicit sexual nature in a public space.

9 Of fifty college and university catalogues reviewed, including those of well-known independent colleges of art/design and colleges and/or universities with highly reputed art programs, 4% represented institutions having apparently abandoned all attempts to teach aesthetic fundamentals.

10 2-D Design was listed as prerequisite to more specialized studio art offerings in 96% of the programs represented in the survey of catalogues, and 3-D Design was listed as prerequisite in 84% of them.

11 While the two cannot truly be separated, it is appropriate to sequence emphasis on each for the sake of better enabling students.

Described by Brown, Maurice and Diana Korzenik in *Art Making and Education* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 129-172.


This assumption is often erroneous: within my home institution, for example, enrollments have shifted away from the fine arts areas of study in recent years toward a number of design majors that students often perceive as providing more tangible career opportunities.


This would logically be the case, since the highly competitive college art teaching market primarily distinguishes between artists applying for faculty positions by comparing exhibition records, catalogue reproductions, articles, and reviews. The thirteen-member Foundation Design team at my own institution, for example, consists of twelve fine arts trained M.F.A.’s, including myself. The thirteenth member is also an active contemporary artist, although not the holder of an M.F.A.


Unfortunately, many college art instructors view this similarity of learning outcomes as a virtue, concluding that instruction has “succeeded” because it has brought students to the “level” of artmaking.


29 Farnum, Royal Bailey, (1941), cited in Howard Singerman’s *Art Subjects*, 70.


31 The term “regional properties” (borrowed from Monroe Beardsley) refers to the qualities of objects we can directly observe, and is included in an excellent definition of “value” in art offered by Curtler, Hugh Mercer, “In Defense of Values in the Fine Arts,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 34, No.1, (Spring 2000), 9.

