

Aesthetics, Art and Education: Consequences For Curriculum¹

by Duncan Roper

Against the background of the aesthetic functioning of creation, the faculty of the imagination, and the experiencing of art, I turn to the specifically educational task in the school. I have already emphasised that in education I consider the development of aesthetic insight and imaginative ability more important than artistic activity, especially at the more elementary stages of schooling. In making this statement I do not wish to give the impression that I do not think it right that young children should engage in painting, music making, reading literature, writing stories and the like. Quite the contrary. My point would be that the object of engaging in such activity is that they gain *concrete experience* of the aesthetic side of creation and have their imaginations extended and developed. Moreover, I would suggest that these educational objectives may be assisted if the development of aesthetic insight and imaginative ability is supplemented by non-artistic means. Any detailed and disciplined attempt to study art in relation to man's life should only be undertaken at the more advanced stages of schooling, with children thirteen and over.

The Aesthetic Functioning of Creation

How does one teach aesthetics? I don't know any easy or quick answer to this question. However, to grapple with it, I again emphasise that we should not see it as a task of ramming home a certain body of theory as the necessary ground for any aesthetic action; nor should we try to encourage children in a [174] self-expression of their likes and dislikes. We should be concerned with the task of alerting and deepening their awareness of and their insight into the aesthetic side of creation. This means that teachers should always appeal to the child's actual experience of creation, encouraging reflection upon and opening up of that experience in the child so that he or she may grow in their ability to sensitively weigh and appreciate the aesthetic side

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of God's creation as it functions in coherence with other aspects. To this end I make the following more concrete suggestions:

- (a) Why do we go for walks in the mountains, in the forest or near the sea? Why is it that we smell and look at flowers? These are just a few elementary examples of the ways in which we appreciatively experience the aesthetic side of creation. Both through a direct encouraging of such experience and an analytical reflection upon it, the Christian school should awaken children to the wonder and awe, the delicacy and the strength evidenced in the aesthetic features of God's natural creation. Moreover, through a reading of such passages as Psalms 147,148 and Job 37 - 41, children may also be awakened to the confessional side of these experiences. Just how these things should be incorporated into lessons is something I don't feel qualified to be able to answer. However that attempts should be made to try is something I am sure about.

- (b) Why should we try to keep the house tidy, the garden weeded and the playground tidy? Such activities have a definite aesthetic side to them by virtue of a stylistic coherence, that is destroyed when a mess is created. To care for, maintain and develop this coherence in the home, the garden and in the school grounds is an integral part of man's stewardship of this earthly creation. Beginning with such examples drawn from the child's own experience, the aesthetic aspects of keeping and tilling gardens, cities and industries can be opened up. So too can the aesthetic aspects of the problem of waste. What happens in a home when one room is reserved for storing all the junk, with no attempt being made to keep it tidy? What happens if all the weeds from the garden are thrown next door? An integral part of our stewardship is bound up with the question of dealing aesthetically with waste, so that piles of such material do not become heaped in one spot to become cesspools. To deal responsibly with these complex issues obviously requires taking into account far more than the aesthetic functioning of creation. It requires proper consideration of all aspects of creation as it functions in coherence. However, I raise them in this context because it seems to me that these problems have assumed such importance because of the cultural dominance of a vision of life that has paid insufficient attention to the aesthetic dimensions of man's cultivating activity and far too much attention to the possibilities of sheer technical earth-moving

power. If we are to redress this situation Christianly then our children must be opened up to the aesthetic side of creation in the tasks of keeping the whole house clean and the whole garden free of weeds without dumping them on our neighbour.

The aesthetic functioning of the creation must be brought into focus directly from the child's experience. It is important that children have a rich experience of reading stories, acting, painting, playing, making music, and so on, in order that they may build a store of experience to appreciate something of the problems and joys involved in the aesthetic realities of style, coherence and allusiveness.

The Development of the Faculty of Imagination

Most children already have quite an active imagination by the time they come to school. All too frequently, however, schools tend to stifle rather than develop the imagination. The school's task should be one of seeking to further develop this faculty in ways of obedience to the creation ordinances of God.

In the previous chapter ['Aesthetics, art and education: a Christian look at art'] I distinguished between structural features of the imagination - picturing and inventive reconstruction, and directional features. The latter have to do with the religious roots of what is envisaged by the imagination, with particular, reference to the character of the life wisdom to which it bears witness. My specific proposal with regard to the nurturing of the imagination involves considering the following four [175] basic aspects of what is involved, and suggests that lesson situations be varied in a way which focusses upon only one of them at a time:

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| 1) <i>picturing</i> | } | structure |
| 2) <i>exaggeration</i> | | |
| 3) <i>inventive reconstruction</i> | | |
| 4) <i>life wisdom</i> | | direction |

Although many of the activities I suggest have the elements of 'art-like' activity, I want to stress that the prime focus is not upon the improvement "or development of

aesthetic excellence through a concern for technical matters. That is appropriate for a focus upon artistic activity, but what I have in mind here is rather an 'imagination class' in which the prime focus is upon the nurture of the faculty of the imagination.

1) Picturing

Let me illustrate what I have in mind by way of example:

- (a) If children are listening attentively to a story, then they will be active picturing the places, people, events that are being read to them. They may be asked to draw a picture of some character or event in the story. They may be asked to complete the story for themselves after the teacher stops reading at a suitable point. A variation on this last theme can come about by giving the barest element of a story - so that certain characters and situations are conjured up in their imaginations, with the task of developing a story. This exercise may be attempted either upon an individual or a class basis.
- (b) When the class is out on a picnic they may like to give names to various parts of their immediate environment, thereby seeking to discover some of its allusive features.
- (c) The class could listen to a piece of music together. The children could be asked to imagine themselves as actors in a film for which the music is the sound track, and be asked to report upon the film.

The major purpose of such exercises is simply to encourage the development of the actual 'picturing experience' of the imagination [177]. The purpose of reporting is simply to provide some indication as to how actively and effectively the children apply themselves.

2) Exaggeration

Most people are aware of the game of charades, in which the lack of freedom to use verbal means of communication forces people to exaggerate certain movements in an effort to symbolise what they have in mind. What I suggest is basically a variation on the theme of charades. The focus here is upon the exaggeration of certain features of ordinary experience for the purpose of suggestive symbolisation. To achieve this the imagination faculty has to seize upon certain features at the expense of others - so that the imagined thing is seen in a certain way, one that highlights those aspects of the real situation which most suggestively symbolise its meaning. This exercise of the

imagination works most effectively in situations in which children are required to symbolise in ways that have certain restrictions placed upon them. When faced with the challenge to communicate in this way they will respond by appropriately exaggerating those features of the mode of expression which has been allowed. Consider, for example, the following possibilities:

- a) voices without words
- b) facial movement
- c) bodily movement
- d) drawing in schematic outline - in the manner of cartoons
- e) metaphorical and onomatopoeic usage of words

3) Inventive Reconstruction

Once some progress has been made in the aforementioned activities, some attempts may be made to put together something a little more extended. In this the focus should be upon the attempt to put together a coherent imaginatively conceived object. Although this would require no less emphasis upon the activity of the imagination in the manners already discussed, it will inevitably involve a greater measure of analytical reflection if it is to be carried through effectively. I offer the following examples of what might be done: [178]

- a) Voices with words used onomatopoeically: there are many ways in which this medium: may be explored. One would be the chant-like repetition of suitably related words that is apparent in many children's songs. (e.g. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich man, Poor man., Beggar-man, Thief).
- b) Voices without words: this could be explored in more complicated ways as a development of what is involved with exaggeration e.g. a more sustained and developed symbolisation of a storm or a busy street.
- c) Bodily movement without voice: an extended mime-dance treatment of a story, or something more abstract would provide much scope here.

- d) Bodily movement with voice: the possibility of a short sequence is an obvious possibility. However, it should not focus exclusively on dialogue, and should make maximum use of movement and tonal use of sounds.
- e) Written expression: this is a possibility that could develop from exercises involved with 'picturing'.

4) *Life Wisdom*

The development of the structural features of the imaginative faculty should proceed hand in hand with the development of its directional features. There is sometimes a tendency for Christians to think that they should always give priority to this aspect of the life of the imagination. I think it educationally unwise to always concentrate upon the directional focus. Giving it undue attention will stifle the development of the child. Rather the directional focus should regularly form the focus of a particular lesson whilst permitting the remainder to have other points of focus. The object of the lessons as a whole should be to develop a fully rounded imaginative life in the children, with the structural and directional aspects in-dissolubly linked. No particular lesson can achieve everything.

In developing the specifically directional features, I think that the lessons should concentrate on the Scriptures, with particular [179] reference being paid to those portions in which the imagination plays a significant part. In this respect the parables, both in the New Testament and in the Old Testament, are a rich source of imaginately wrought wisdom. Possessing a profound simplicity they readily lend themselves to the development of the directional focus for imaginative faculty. Another rich source is the book of Proverbs.

With this in mind I would suggest the following as a concrete example of how the directional aspects of the imaginative faculty may be developed in a Christian school:

Read, discuss and reflect upon the life wisdom taught in a particular parable or proverb.

Invite the children to visualize the sort of situation dealt with by the parable - perhaps as unmentioned 'onlookers' or 'participants'.

Encourage them to employ various exaggeration techniques to highlight the important features of the life wisdom embodied in the parable or proverb. Encourage the children to cast the same life wisdom into a parable situation of their own making.

Invite them to inventively reconstruct this in several of the media suggested in *inventive reconstruction* this time taking special care with regard to the life wisdom that such 'reconstructions' embody.

Artistic Activity.

We have now given some attention to the two areas which I consider to be most important with regard to the education of art and aesthetics in a Christian school, at least in the early stages. Again I would like to emphasise that without an adequate grounding in them, attempts both at performing, even good, art works and trying to appreciate and criticise them, tend to lack the necessary depth and intuitive grasp necessary to appreciate what it is all about. However, I don't want to convey the impression that I think that the school has no task with regard to the nurture of artistic skills. I do. The extent and way in which it should, do so is a very complicated matter. On the one hand, many of the skills for these arts can and should be nurtured by the school. The ability to "move in time, to paint, to follow music, and to [180] have some appreciation of being able to make music as part of a group - singing and playing percussions instruments - seems 'to me to be quite appropriate for the school, and a necessary part of a general education. Where those with more special skills, developed outside the school, may participate and contribute, then I think this is all to the good.

Finally, the activities of singing and dancing for relaxation and enjoyment, without too close attention being given to technical expertise or developing the imagination needs to be a part of the healthy life of a school, Similar comments could be made with regard to the nurture of music and possibly 'the other arts,' in the worship activity of the school.

The Study of Art in Relation to Man's Life

The more disciplined activity of studying and analysing works of art and their meaning is one that should not be undertaken until the latter stages of the educational

development of the child. After thirteen would be my estimate of the appropriate time to begin an exercise of this nature. As such it is a very big subject in its own right, and one that I cannot hope to do justice to here. Attention should be given to obtaining some grasp of the history of the different arts in ways that bring to light the dominant cultural ideals, and that this general survey should be accompanied by a more detailed attention to some particular works. Where possible these works should be experienced live, if they are performing arts. Perhaps it should be said that just because it may not be appropriate to study and analyse art works until a later stage, that does not mean to say that children should not be encouraged to experience them, in the appropriate way, well before that. The analysis of works of art is far more effective if it is based upon active imaginative experience of them. Indeed without this and some appreciation of the cultural significance (in the sense of embodying cultural ideals that have their roots in religious driving motives) then the study and analysis of art in relation to man's life can be somewhat empty.²

Summary

By focussing upon these four features - the aesthetic side of creation, imaginative development, artistic activity, and art in relation to man's life, I believe that the necessary scope and range of a Christian curriculum in art and aesthetics may be appreciated. Alongside the many other activities that need to receive attention in the school, I well appreciate that the task is a daunting one. However, that should not prevent us from moving on towards the goal, in the grace of God.

² For a further discussion of some of these issues, I would recommend the reader to look at the chapters on aesthetics in *Shaping School Curriculum*, edited by G.J.Steensma and H.W. Van Brummelen, op. cit., and works such as Hans R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970.