ARTS EDUCATION IN THAILAND: WHY IT MATTERS¹

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บทคัดย่อ

มนุษยศาสตร์โดยเฉพาะทัศนศิลป์มักถูกมองข้ามในมหาวิทยาลัยไทย ทั้งนี้เพราะคนไทยเห็นว่าวิชาเหล่านั้นให้ประโยชน์ที่เป็นรูปธรรมน้อยมาก บทความนี้มุ่งแสดงให้เห็นว่าการเรียนการสอนการถอดรหัสและพูดคุยเกี่ยวกับภาพวาดไม่เพียงต้องการทักษะระดับสูงด้านปริชาน การมอง และภาษา แต่ยังต้องการความรู้เชิงบริบทที่กว้างขวางอีกด้วย ซึ่งบุคคลใดจะมีทักษะเหล่านั้นได้ ก็ต่อเมื่อมีความรู้พื้นฐานทางมนุษยศาสตร์ ผู้เขียนวิเคราะห์ผลงานทางศิลปะหลายชิ้นพร้อมกับอภิปรายสุนทรียศาสตร์สมัยใหม่เพื่อโต้แย้งว่าศิลปะเป็นส่วนประกอบสำคัญของการประสบการณ์ของมนุษย์ ดังนั้นรายวิชาหมวดการศึกษาทั่วไปในระดับมหาวิทยาลัยจึงควรรวมศิลปะไว้ด้วย

Abstract

The humanities, especially the visual arts, are often neglected at Thai universities because they are perceived as rarely yielding tangible results. This paper aims to demonstrate that learning to decode

and talk about a painting not only require high level cognitive, visual, and language skills, but also extensive contextual knowledge, which only a background in the humanities can offer. The author analyzes several works of art as well as discusses modern aesthetics to argue that the arts are an integral part of the human experience, and therefore, should be included in general education courses at the tertiary level.

The soul never thinks without an image
- Aristotle -

More and more reputable state and private universities in Thailand have attempted to adopt an American model of a liberal arts education, and yet many of the very objectives of this classical curriculum—namely to create a well-rounded, enlightened, and cultured citizenry, have been lost in translation.

In recent years, Thai policy-makers and parents have lost sight of the original American model by becoming product driven consumers who view education as a brand name commodity and seek to hasten their children's education in order to have their offspring join the workforce or the family business—thereby becoming “productive” members of society. This mindset was brought home in 1999 by Prachuab Chaiyasarn, the Minister of University Affairs at that time, when he announced that universities should focus on becoming a “university for industry” or a “university with industry” (as cited in Mounier and Tangchuang 2010:104).

Universities that primarily cater to business and industry belie the very essence of a liberal arts education and put Thai students at a major disadvantage in an ever-changing world. Since the Thai

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Ministry of Education (MOE) certified on September 6, 2010 that the GED would be an acceptable alternative to high school, we, at Mahidol University International College, (MUIC), witnessed a marked increase in the number of very young applicants who were foregoing high school in favor of a GED. Indeed, our university went from a handful of GED applicants prior to 2009 to over 1300 once the MOE mandated this change (MUIC Office of Admissions 2009-14). Of particular concern to us was that parts of the GED, namely the language arts and social studies sections, were “western” centric, thereby depriving these students of their own cultural, social, and historical heritage, which they would have otherwise received in high school. In fact, the GED was never intended to replace high school, but rather it was created for World War II veterans who were unable to finish high school as they had been drafted to serve their country.

Another significant issue is the rise in popularity of vocational majors at the undergraduate level in Thailand. By examining the curriculum of the most prestigious American liberal arts programs at the undergraduate level such as Harvard or Yale, as well as other top colleges³, one would be hard pressed to find business or international hospitality and tourism management as potential concentrations. And yet, these types of majors have become quite common at Thai universities, including MUIC, Bangkok University, and Rangsit University. If we add globalization and ASEAN’s goals into the equation, we

have no choice but to recognize that Thai students today are being short-changed; they are being deprived of a shared body of knowledge, not only of their own rich cultural traditions and those of others, but of cultural universals as well.

Without a solid foundation in the humanities, our students may become business savvy, but they will also remain culturally illiterate and have virtually little understanding or knowledge of the world they live in or the complexities and richness of the human experience. By not providing a balanced curriculum that includes both professional training and knowledge of mankind’s incredible legacy, creativity, and potential, educators will leave Thai students ill-prepared to face the challenges of the modern world or to have a meaningful impact on society, the country, or humanity as a whole. Broudy goes so far as to say that “without such studies [the humanities or liberal arts] the resources for the intelligent comprehension of the tasks of life in a free society are virtually impossible. Only the study of the arts and sciences provides the concepts and images with which life is construed by the educated mind” (1985:213). The humanities offer us the essential tools to decipher who we are, or once were, as a people and civilization. Because they focus on understanding the human experience, the humanities invariably encompass a variety of disciplines from philosophy, religion, and literature to language and the arts, as well as many other fields of study, including some of the social sciences. Each of the disciplines that make up the humanities provides us with greater insight into understanding the human experience—both past and present.

³ See the following websites for comparison:
<http://catalog.yale.edu/ycps/majors-in-yale-college/>
<https://college.harvard.edu/academics/fields-study/concentrations>

Much of what we know of our past comes to us through the arts—be it in the form of pottery, sculpture, painting, music, architecture, or literature, among others. Thus, the various disciplines in the humanities, and more specifically the arts, have an indelible symbiotic relationship insofar as one cannot exist without the other. In short, the arts feed the imagination, encourage creativity, teach, and move us, as well as develop our cognitive and problem solving skills, but most importantly, they improve our quality of life (Broudy 1979:348, Dewey 2005:39, Eisner 1998:8, Richmond, 2009:102).

The Thai National Curriculum of 2008, *Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551*, does indeed include arts education from grade 1 to grade 12 and acknowledges its benefits insofar as the “learning of the visual arts develop creativity, artistic imagination, beauty appreciation, aesthetics, and worthiness, which affect the quality of human lives”. Primary and high school students learn to understand “the relationship between the visual arts, history and culture” and learn to appreciate the “values of artworks representing the cultural heritage, local wisdom, Thai and universal wisdom; art appreciation and application in daily life” (2008:209). And yet, once Thai students enter university, arts education is virtually nonexistent. An artificial divide has been created whereby students who demonstrate a predilection for the arts study studio or the performing arts at specialized universities such as Silpakorn University, among others, whilst the majority of Thai university students receive little or no formal instruction in art history, art appreciation, or aesthetics.

According to Mounier and Tangchuan (2010:107), the Thai Ministry of Education, like those in other countries, has come to regard the mission of higher education as needing to meet the demands of the labour market, rather than fostering an academic environment that transmits a shared body of knowledge upon which cultural and scientific scholarship is built. It is this very paradigm shift in higher education that has made many Thais, including some administrators, educators, and parents believe that the arts are superfluous ornamentation that has no intrinsic or academic value; consequently, they do not merit the curricular attention that other disciplines such as math and science deserve.

This paper aims to dispel these beliefs by demonstrating that the study of the humanities, especially the visual arts, not only promote the development of a national identity, and an insight into as well as an understanding of other cultures and world-views, but more importantly, the study of the arts foster cognitive, linguistic, as well as other essential high level skills. Finally, we will propose suggestions on how the visual arts can be integrated across the curriculum and encourage Thai universities to include art appreciation as well as art history courses in the general education curricula.

The arts teach us who we are

Without a doubt, some of the greatest benefits of arts education are establishing a strong cultural identity, interpreting, and understanding the world in which we live. In studying the arts, Tom Anderson maintains, “students should attain a sense of their being in a cultural continuum, of having roots, of owing their cognitive and cultural foundations to those who came

before ...” (1990:138). The study and appreciation of the arts allow us to comprehend that cultures do not develop in isolation and that each culture absorbs elements from other cultures. However, it is how we shape these influences, and what we do with them that make a people culturally unique. Art and culture are irrevocably entwined; they are, indeed, the human experience.

Traditionally, most Thai art is religious in subject matter mainly because Buddhism plays such a vital role in the people's daily life. Thai Buddhist art can be divided into three major periods, namely the Mon or Dvaravati period from the 7th to the 10th century, the Lanna, which emerged near Chiang Mai around the late 11th century, and the Sukhothai period, which arose around the 13th century. Although most westerners are familiar with Buddhism, they are oblivious to the fact that many Buddhist images found in Thailand have Indian and Sinhalese influence, or that the Sukhothai style Buddha⁴ is the most uniquely Thai religious icon. Fisher (1993:178) and Rawson (1967:145-150) concur that images of a standing Buddha have always existed, but it was the Sukhothai masters who were able to capture movement in such an elegant and graceful manner.

Sacred Pali scriptures, which described the Buddha as having 32 stylistic characteristics, or Lakshanas, found in nature, were the principal sources of inspiration for Sukhothai artists. According to Fisher, “the Sukhothai

Buddha is the most abstract of the images of the Buddha, a tribute to the Thai ability to blend religious meaning and literary descriptions with a sophisticated artistic sensibility to produce a remarkable and original creation of transcendent spirituality in a human form” (1993:179). Why is the 14th century *Walking Buddha* such an important turning point in Buddhist iconography?

Firstly, it is sculpted in the round, and the Buddha is depicted as walking, with the heel of his right foot slightly raised, typical of Sukhothai statuary. The graceful and sinuous lines of the body, delicate features and gestures coupled with his flowing diaphanous robe are undeniably and exclusively Thai. And secondly, according to Leidy (2008:271), it also echoes the humanity of the Buddha and his final reincarnation, which are of great importance to Thais, while serving as a paradigm of awareness to both monks and laity.

Unfortunately, most Thai mural paintings prior to the 18th century, have been lost. However, the tradition can still be found in Thai illuminated manuscripts, or folding books. The illustrations are typically Thai in style and are recognized for their delicate lines, bright colors, magical figures, as well as their mythological and religious narratives, such as the Ramakien or Buddhist cosmology, among others. They are considered throughout the world as one of Thailand's greatest artistic contributions, and yet they remain sorely neglected not only in secondary and tertiary education, but also in Bangkok's National Museum, where these artifacts are poorly maintained and displayed.

The visual arts not only offer us the opportunity to learn about our own

⁴ See
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/asia/b/bronze_figure_of_the_walking_b.aspx
http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/12/2006/hm12_4_1.html

cultural heritage, but they also allow us to understand people whose cultures are very different from our own. As the number of international schools and colleges grow exponentially in Thailand, insight into the cultures of the languages students learn becomes increasingly more important.

The arts teach us about other cultures

Our students at Mahidol University International (MUIC) are all multilingual. Although the language of instruction is English, most study a third and some even a fourth foreign language as well. In the last few years, Spanish has become the most popular European language at our university, and like so many other languages, it is spoken in a number of countries, each with its own distinctive traditions, artistic, and cultural heritage. In addition, the majority of our students study abroad for anywhere from one trimester to an entire academic year. Thus, students are not only given the opportunity to use their language skills outside the classroom, but more importantly, they are able to experience a foreign culture and all the complexities and uniqueness of another worldview. When students study abroad, they not only have to learn to navigate the unknown, but also create a new identity while still maintaining their own cultural roots. The challenge of balancing two very different, and often, conflicting cultures is powerfully conveyed by the Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo in her *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932)⁵, which she painted while living in the United States.

Kahlo could never be confused with a Spanish artist, for everything about her was uniquely Mexican. Her vibrant color palette, iconographic references to her beloved Mesoamerican indigenous culture, as well as her role in the “Mexicanidad” movement, whose principal objectives were to remove the remaining shackles of Spanish imperialism, and later the United States’ political and economic influences, place her as one of the most important and influential Mexican artists of the 20th century. Janice Helland (1991:1) explains that Kahlo’s form of “Mexicanidad” preferred Aztec imagery in her art rather than Mayan or Toltec because it represented her desire for a “unified, nationalistic, and independent Mexico.” Kahlo equated herself with the Aztecs, in part, as a reaction to Spain’s brutal and bloody conquest of Mexico (1519 to 1521). Indeed, the destruction of the Aztec Empire forever altered the course of Mexican history, but more importantly, the core of its culture. According to Helland, Kahlo’s anti-Spanish imperialism sentiments coupled with her antipathy of the United States’ interference in Mexico’s internal affairs drew the artist to idealize the Aztecs as “the last independent rulers of an indigenous political unit” (1991:1).

In her *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, Frida Kahlo stands as a vertical axis, on the border between two very different worlds, the United States, or “Gringolandia,” the moniker she often used in reference to the US, on the right and Mexico on the left. The industrialized United States is depicted as machine-driven, cold, desolate, and lifeless. Muddy grays and brownish tones are used for the skyscrapers and factory smokestacks, which billow filthy fumes into the sky, engulfing the American flag. In the right

⁵ See <http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org/263801/Self-Portrait-On-The-Borderline-Between-Mexico-And-The-United-States-1932-large.jpg>

middle and foreground, we find metallic pipes and machines, including an electric flood lamp, a sound amplifier, as well as a fan whose cables are deeply rooted into the earth. One cable, especially, deserves our attention, for it is plugged into the pedestal on which the artist stands while the other end is attached to the roots of the colorful vegetation on the Mexican side. Clearly, Kahlo is expressing her antipathy to the modern industrial influences invading her homeland. The America Kahlo paints is a strange, barren, mechanical, and inhospitable place that not only lacks humanity but culture, as well.

In contrast to the American landscape is her beloved Mexico, which Kahlo identifies with the Aztecs, the last independent rulers prior to the Spanish conquest. In the left foreground, we see the colorful flora in various stages of bloom and cacti indigenous to her native land. Unlike the American side, life in all its magnificent colors emerges from the earth. Behind the flowers, in the middle ground, we find pre-Columbian figurines, specifically Aztec fertility statues, and ruins. Lying nearby is a human skull, a direct reference to the Mexican festival *El día de los muertos*, the day of the dead, whose origin is, in fact, Aztec. As Helland points out skulls were often embedded into the walls of Aztec temples as “a life sprouting from death metaphor” (1991:2). This dualism can also be seen in the upper left, where Kahlo has placed an Aztec sacrificial temple. Above the temple, we find a blood spewing sun and a crescent moon linked together with a bolt of lightning, another reference to the Aztec practice of ritual human sacrifice. Thus, we see, on the Mexican side, a world rich in history and culture where life and death are interconnected, and as Helland (1991:2) asserts intimately tied to the earth

and cosmos and to Kahlo’s identification with her Aztec heritage.

Most intriguing, however, is the depiction of Frida Kahlo herself, who stands on a pedestal, on which the following words are inscribed in Spanish: “Carmen Rivera painted her portrait in the year 1932,” using her middle and married name rather than the one for which she is known internationally. Did she do so because she felt overshadowed by her famous husband, Diego Rivera, a renowned painter himself, or is she mocking the United States’ system of social stratification at the time—whereby women gained social recognition through marriage? Another interesting point worth examining is her western attire. Unlike most of her other self-portraits in which she wears traditional Tehuana attire, she is clothed in a subdued pink evening gown, accentuated with delicately laced white gloves. The bold vivid colors of her folkloric Tehuana costumes and stunning headdresses are gone; instead, we see a diminutive and muted Frida. In her *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, Kahlo poignantly captures the feelings of alienation and isolation, her attempts to adapt to a new culture, as well as longing for her homeland. Anyone who has lived or studied abroad can certainly identify with the emotions evoked in this painting. Indeed, the arts give us a common ground, a means of communication across cultures and languages, of “a life lived – a life felt”. Stuart Richmond sums it up quite well, when he says “art simply brings us into intimate connection with what it means to be alive using the tools and materials currently at its disposal. As such, art is most conducive to the answering of questions concerning how we ought to live, for art above all explores the very

pith of human existence” (2009:102). McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras and Brooks agree insofar as the aesthetic experience provides the viewer with new references that allow one “to become more receptive to unfamiliar people, attitudes, and cultures” (2004:48).

The arts teach us to see

All cultures express what they value most in some form of the visual arts. When we look at the great gothic cathedrals of Reims and Notre Dame, we don’t need to be medievalists to grasp the importance of the Christian church in Europe or the role religion played in the lives of the people who built or sought spiritual solace in these majestic edifices. As we glance at Hokusai’s prints, we easily sense the power and sanctity of nature; by the same token, we do not need to have a background in Hindu art to appreciate the highly unique and stylized interpretation of feminine beauty of Nihal Chand’s *Bani Thani*, considered by many to be the Indian “Mona Lisa”. With just a quick look and without any formal training in the arts, the average viewer is able to arrive at such basic conclusions. However, he has only gotten a glimpse—a chimera of what these masterpieces have to say.

Novice viewers will often misread or overlook the very elements or context that render a particular work of art iconic because they lack the historical, religious, social, political, and/or philosophical background to decode its message. This is where the other disciplines of the humanities play such a vital role in helping us to see and understand. They provide us with a framework to begin exploring the layers of meaning not only simply in a given work of art, but also all around us.

If we take, for example, Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1873)⁶, we can readily infer from the title that the man in the painting is Marat, and he has just died. However, unless we have some inkling of the French Revolution or who Jean-Paul Marat was, much of the significance of this masterpiece is lost on the untrained eye. To decode this painting, the viewer must know that Marat was a journalist and the editor of *L’ami du peuple*, *Friend of the People*, an extreme pro-revolutionary French newspaper and that he suffered from a painful skin disease, which required him to work from his bathtub. It was there that Charlotte Corday, a young royalist, assassinated Marat by stabbing him in the chest on July 13, 1793.

David and Marat were friends and ideological comrades, and thus, the painter approaches his subject with great reverence. In fact, he has transfigured the radical revolutionary political leader in death into a martyred hero of the people. Through David’s use of composition, color, and light, he has created a neo-classical Christ like figure, which bears a remarkable resemblance to the great Renaissance sculpture, the *Pieta* by Michelangelo (1498-1499) or to Caravaggio’s painting *The Entombment of Christ* (1602-1603).

Casual viewers often fail to realize that painters, like authors, have points of views and opinions that can be explicitly or implicitly expressed. And, David’s public expression of his own political position, namely as a fervent supporter of the revolution, will often go unnoticed. By

⁶ See

http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/resourcesb/dav_marat.jpg

carefully examining the bottom foreground of the painting, David has placed three revealing objects at a 90 degree angle, namely the bloodied weapon, or dagger, Marat's limp right hand holding his writing quill upright, and a simple wooden box, which functions as both a table and tombstone, with the inscription "A Marat – David". The artist sends a powerful, yet subtle, message that is—through Marat's writings and David's *memento mori*, remembrance of mortality, not only will the slain revolutionary live on but so will his ideals. Both the man and the revolution have been immortalized in David's *The Death of Marat*.

Visual images, in particular, speak to viewers in a universal language, and our principal responsibility is to "see", to internalize, and reflect on what is being expressed. Unfortunately, the act of "seeing" isn't as simple as it seems. It requires time and practice to develop as well as background knowledge, which is where the humanities come in. We need to train the eye to see all the subtleties, to penetrate the opaque, to understand artistic connections and decisions, to decipher symbols, create meaning, and to reflect how this meaning is conveyed. But most of all, we must allow ourselves to feel—to be moved by what is before us and to pay attention to what the artist is saying. In short, we need to learn how to see in order to have a true aesthetic experience.

The first step in learning how to experience art is to give ourselves the time to explore fully a work of art and understand our reaction to it. Most untrained viewers approach a painting globally—that is—they stand at a distance looking at the "big picture"; they rarely see beyond the content or subject matter. They don't get up close and personal and

examine the different parts—or take stock of the seemingly "unimportant" things, such as line, brushstroke, texture, etc. In fact, they often even fail to see the role color and light play in conveying mood or tone. As David Perkins points out much of art is "hidden" or "invisible". He tells us that "most works ... are largely invisible at first[;] they gradually reveal themselves to the patient eye and mind" (1994:36). Thus, we must train students to invest the time and pay attention to details, relationships, and capture the nuances in that in art, "small differences can have large effects. They traffic in subtleties," which, according to Eisner (1998:5), is not something we are used to doing in daily life. By really seeing, we discover, we marvel—we have an aesthetic experience.

The arts teach us to think

As we begin to learn how to see through the artist's eyes, to appreciate how he has mastered his medium, worked through problems or limitations, made aesthetic and technical decisions to communicate his intention or message, we are obliged to question, for seeing art necessitates thinking about what we see. We must begin a dialogue with the artist by asking questions and looking for answers in the art. Why did van Gogh choose to paint sunflowers so often? What did he see in them to want to spend weeks, months, and even years painting them over and over again? Why are some of the flowers in full bloom painted in rich golden shades while others are brownish and withering? Could there be some hidden meaning here? Could he be depicting the cycle of life or how ephemeral all living things are? If so, does this theme come up in his other paintings, or only in his *Sunflowers* series? It is undeniable that artistic creation and appreciation require not only highly

developed intellectual skills similar to those used by scientists and mathematicians, but also knowledge to make the appropriate connections between the parts and the whole, form and content, as well as the “relationship between the arts and culture over time” (Eisner 2002: 74). Assimilation of a work of art requires that we make full use of what we know of the world. It brings together all that we have learned in the humanities coupled with our own personal experiences.

This process of seeing, questioning, interpreting, finding confirmation, seeing again, reflecting on what has been discovered, and constantly reevaluating, requires complex and highly developed forms of thinking, which all educators, regardless of their discipline, seek to foster in their students. Like reading a text, seeing a work of art is not simply the passive reception of visual images or symbols, the act of seeing actually involves sophisticated forms of thought in the construction of meaning. Perkins argues that the arts provide a sensory point of reference—an object that is “physically present as you think and talk, providing an anchor for attention over a prolonged period of exploration” (1994:98).

Thus, seeing is unequivocally thinking. Rudolf Arnheim rejects the traditional dissection between the senses and cognition and argues that perception and thinking are irrevocably interconnected. Arnheim tells us that true “productive thinking in whatever area of cognition takes place in the realm of imagery” (1969:5). To illustrate this point, he describes how we all use images, non-mimetic drawings, diagrams, or sketches to think through a concept or work out solutions to problems. As people’s thinking becomes more focused, the

drawings or images grow in complexity. A physician, for example, will visualize each step of a complex surgery in his mind’s eye prior to walking into the operating room, in the same way as an electrician might draw a series of diagrams as he plans the wiring layout of a new building. Artists do the same. They frequently make sketches or drawings, in which they think through ideas, understand structures and shapes, work on colour or composition, solve problems, and make modifications. The works of art we see hanging on a museum wall are merely the translation of “finished thoughts into visible models” (1969:129); they are the end product of an arduous process or journey. For Rudolf Arnheim, “artwork is a form of visual thinking, and beyond that, all areas of human activity require the capacity of dealing with visual imagery. And the training field for this is the visual arts” (Pariser 1984:182).

We have seen that looking at a work of art is not merely a passive or “undergoing” experience; quite the contrary, it is a complex and dynamic binary between artist and viewer. The renowned philosopher and educator, John Dewey, in his seminal work *Art as Experience* (2005:48-56), suggests that an object only becomes a “work of art” when the viewer is engaged in the creative process. Thus, the artist and viewer participate together in the aesthetic experience. In essence, they both contribute to the creative process; the artist puts himself in the viewer’s position as he works and guides the potential perceiver’s eye. Similarly, the observer must deconstruct this process, aided by the skills of the artist, of course, to truly appreciate or achieve the aesthetic experience. For Dewey, the artist needs a discerning viewer to complete the creative experience. Dewey tells us, “the esthetic

[sic] experience—in its limited sense—is thus seen to be inherently connected with the experience of making” (2005:50).

In short, experiencing the arts provide numerous cognitive benefits. First, they foster imaginative and creative thinking—they incite us to think outside the box. They encourage us to reflect, to comprehend the importance of detail and see the effects of relationships, to find innovative or unconventional ways of solving problems, as well as to look beyond the superficial to find meaning. The arts provide a multitude of opportunities to analyze, form judgments, and accept that, very often, as in life, there are many ways to see and more than one way to solve a problem, or interpret a work of art. They, as Eisner contends, allow us to accept ambiguity, to explore the significance of the particular, and “liberate us from the literal” (2002:14).

Anyone who has taught in Thailand is well aware that students in the public education system are given few opportunities to explore, think critically, much less think abstractly, or discover meaning for themselves. Thai classrooms are very much teacher centered and rote learning is the preferred methodology. In pretty much every public school classroom in the country, there is only one possible answer to any question posed, namely the teacher’s⁷. Re-evaluating the position of arts in higher education may very well necessitate a paradigm shift that Thai pedagogues and policy makers must inevitably face.

⁷ For an in depth analysis of the problems facing the Thai educational system, see Tangkitvanich, Somkiat and Sasiwuttiwat, Supanutt. (June, 2012) Revamping the Thai Education System: Equality for all in *TDRI Quarterly Review*.

Finally, more and more scholars have come to the realization that the arts are not only critical in understanding the world around us, but they should take their rightful place among the pantheon of the major disciplines, specifically along side the sciences. Nelson Goodman, the influential American philosopher and founding director of Project Zero at Harvard University, insists “the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology” (1978:102). Goodman’s contributions to the field of aesthetics are of particular interest to us. His theory on systems of symbols or references, such as the ones used in language, music, kinetic and visual arts are essential in constructing and understanding the different worlds in which we live. To decode these symbols often necessitates the use of one’s cultural background or other less obvious references, which we must find and use. Goodman maintains that the eye isn’t innocent for it “selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, and constructs” (1976:7-8). Thus, reception and interpretation are inseparable.

Arnheim concurs in that “both art and science are bent on the understanding of the forces that shape existence, and both call for an unselfish dedication to what is. Neither of them can tolerate capricious subjectivity because both are subject to their criteria of truth. Both require precision, order, and discipline because no comprehensible statement can be made without these” (1969: 300). Similarly, Dewey was so convinced of the role of intelligence in producing a work of art that he vehemently maintains:

Any idea that ignores the necessary role of intelligence in production of works of art is based upon the identification of thinking with use of one special kind of material, verbal signs and words. To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical. Indeed, since words are easily manipulated in mechanical ways, the production of a work of genuine art probably demands more intelligence than does most of the so-called thinking that goes on among those who pride themselves on being 'intellectuals'. (2005:47)

The arts teach us to communicate

Language is not the only way humans communicate; we also communicate with visual images and have done so since our earliest beginnings. We need not look any further than the caves of Lascaux and Chauvet or the *Venus of Willendorf* and of *Hohle Fels*, to understand that long before the written word existed, humans communicated through imagery—be it through painted images on cave walls or sculptures. In fact, the written word developed much later, around 3200 BCE. And, as writing established its own art form in prose and verse, it also became a visual art with calligraphy—the marriage of the written word and visual form, prized by so many Asian and Arab cultures even to this very day. Writers, like painters, work with images, but unlike painters, they use the medium of language to create imagery while the reader uses the words on the page to reconstruct images in his mind's eye. Both the reader and the viewer

must deconstruct these images in order to discover meaning. Artists, whether their medium is language, paint, or marble help us to see and understand the world around us. This awareness, as Eisner (2002: 46) postulates, is epistemic.

A work of art allows inquisitive viewers to go back in time, or remain in the present, to stand in the shoes of another, and see the world from an entirely different perspective from their own. Because art speaks both to the mind and emotions, across time and cultures, it is, without a doubt, the most all-encompassing universal language humankind has developed. Thus, the idea that verbal language is the principal means of thought or communication is erroneous, at best. Dewey vehemently maintains, "if all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings than can be expressed only by immediately visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinctive existence"(2005:70). The arts provide us with a window into the past and present, as well as insight to future generations about who we once were as a people. The artist tells us stories—universal narratives to which we can all relate. He can commemorate a specific historical or religious event, fascinate us with the mundane, be didactic and emotive as well as playful or ironic; he can express strong political and social opinions, or even have an agenda; he can allow us an intimate glimpse of people going about their daily lives—the list of possibilities is endless.

Talking and writing about art is especially challenging, for they demand a linguistic precision that very few other disciplines

require in order to communicate a specific experience, in our case, an aesthetic one. In a sense, to talk about art forces us to use literary tropes that we don't normally use, such as metaphor, synecdoche, or simile, which generally belong to the realm of the poet or writer. How do we describe a specific shade of blue that distinguishes it from all other blues? How do we communicate to another how a particular mood is set by the interaction of light and shadow? How do we translate into verbal language how or why a work of art deeply moves us? We must learn a new vocabulary because the discourse we use on a daily basis is inadequate as it is unable to capture or do justice to the aesthetic experience.

As we saw in our discussion of David's *The Death of Marat*, talking or writing about the visual arts, which requires knowledge of the historical and political context in which the work was created, of religious iconography, of visual symbols, and a myriad of other things too, is challenging enough, to say the least. However, appreciating non-mimetic, or abstract art, is even more taxing for the viewer who has had little contact with the historical context or progression of art movements. Up until the mid 19th century art was pretty much representational and even mimetic— that is to say the artist's primary objective was to capture the illusion of reality.

In the early 20th century, painters began to move away from realism and visual references to focus on visual language, the essence of subjects, and the medium itself. Thus, the use of form, color, shape, line, texture, space, etc. became the subjects of expression while pictorial representation took a backseat. The unconscious mind, fragmented images, and the spontaneous

became the foci. If we take, for example, Willem de Kooning's abstract expressionist painting, *Woman I*⁸, viewers have no choice but to redefine their concept of feminine beauty as they study the seated female subject. How would one describe the ambivalence of this female figure, who is at once voluptuous and highly sexualized, but who is also formidably menacing and terrifying? She is reminiscent of the highly sensual and erotic Paleolithic fertility figurines, specifically the *Venus of Willendorf* we mentioned earlier. However, her hideous skeletal face, grotesque grimace, and threatening glare belie the very notion of feminine sensuality. All the cultural female archetypes are found in this single female figure, for *Woman I* typifies the dissonance of the feminine; she is at once alluring and repulsive—beautiful and monstrous. De Kooning's *Woman I* captivates us because the emotions it evokes are so very raw and brutal. And finally, how does one interpret and verbalize De Kooning's aggressive and violent brushstrokes, his use of line and color that are equally disturbing?

Most inexperienced viewers have trouble with abstract art, which is often echoed when they ask the teacher "what is it?" or "what is it about?" and often dismiss it as meaningless scribble. The lack of mimesis can be disorienting at first. Thus, the unseasoned viewer must return to the artwork and continue his dialogue with the artist. Through the act of "thoughtful" seeing, as Perkins would say, using one's background knowledge, and questioning, the layers of meaning will finally reveal themselves. When this occurs, students

⁸ See http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79810

will be able to express, and thus share, their visual and aesthetic experience. As Dewey so aptly puts it, "...works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience" (2005:109).

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have seen how an arts enriched curriculum can provide students with insight into the complexities and universality of the human condition and of the wealth of mankind's cultural heritage—not to mention potential. The arts would allow them to bridge the divide between diverse cultural and social groups, appreciate the unfamiliar, and become personally engaged. Art reinforces the notion that viewers are both sentient and rational beings while offering opportunities to not only reflect upon their own humanity but also to communicate their personal aesthetic experience to others, for art is indeed the most international of languages. As our research has demonstrated, the arts foster the development of critical thinking skills, linguistic precision and complexity, an understanding of the importance of detail and relationships, as well as new ways of seeing the world. Indeed, as viewers learn to "see" and "peel" off the layers of meaning in a work of art, to use Perkins words (1994), they are forced to draw on all their prior knowledge and experience of the world around them. Likewise, viewers must also allow themselves to be moved by, or feel, the artwork that is before them, for only when the two converge can we say that they have had a true aesthetic experience.

Thus, as educators, we must ask ourselves why we place so little importance on the arts, especially when they have so much to offer not only to our students but also to society as a whole? And, how can we meaningfully bring the arts back into the classroom where they belong? We spend years teaching our students how to read, and yet, we spend virtually no time teaching them how to see. Broudy sums up this dilemma quite well when he says, "aesthetic literacy is as basic as linguistic literacy" (1985:349).

Although the Thai government does indeed recognize the significance and benefits of the arts in its national 1-12 curriculum, most universities in Thailand do not. This unfortunate situation could easily be remedied in a number of ways. First, the universities would have to acknowledge that the arts are as important as other disciplines in the development of a well-rounded and educated citizenry. They could begin by integrating the arts with other subjects, such as foreign languages, history, literature, philosophy, political science, etc., which would provide the students with an historical, political, cultural, and social framework to study a work of art. For example, in an elementary French class, the teacher, instead of using flash cards, could use a still life by Cezanne or Monet to teach colors, prepositions of location, vocabulary for the various objects in the painting as well as countless other things. Another example could easily be applied to students whose language proficiency has reached a level whereby they could be introduced to historical, political, social, literary, philosophic, and artistic movements. The instructor might begin with a discussion of World War I and its aftermath in order to introduce Surrealism. The class would read excerpts from Andre

Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, study a few selected works of surrealist poets and playwrights such as Guillaume Apollinaire and Antonin Artaud, respectively, examine the artwork of Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali, Joan Miró, as well as Max Ernst to understand how this movement expanded throughout Europe as well as the rest of the world, and into other art forms such as film and music as well.

By the same token, history and political science classes have the potential of becoming far more meaningful when works of art are introduced into the classroom. Whether we are teaching Napoleon's invasion of Spain or the two world wars, human suffering and the horrors of war are much more vividly driven home when seen through Goya's etchings, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, the Disasters of War, or Otto Dix' WW I prints, *Der Krieg*, the War. In fact, Catterall (2005:3) provides an excellent example of how Picasso's masterpiece, *Guernica* (1937), can be used in a classroom of children, which could readily be adapted to young adults. Students learn to see that the arts are not only very powerful political and social instruments of change, but also capture the human cost of war. In addition, art can even be brought into a mathematics class with the study of fractals—those mathematical functions, intuited by great artists that create self-replicating geometrical figures found throughout nature, such as snowflakes. Indeed, painters and sculptors have long been interested in representing the quantum world itself⁹. Thus, the possibilities of the arts across the curriculum are endless.

⁹ See Gavin Parkinson's fascinating discussion (2008) on the influence of modern physics on the Surrealist movement.

This solution, however, should only be viewed as a temporary one for the curricular shortcomings when it comes to arts education at the tertiary level. The arts should not solely be treated as a vehicle to teach other subjects, but rather, they should be viewed as academic disciplines in their own right. Introductory art appreciation and art history courses should not only be included but required in general education courses at all liberal arts colleges in Thailand. Universities that offer language and culture, as well as humanities majors must be persuaded to place the arts in a prominent position in their core curriculum, for culture and the arts are interdependent—the one cannot exist without the other. Thailand can no longer afford to ignore the benefits of arts related disciplines at the tertiary level. It is, therefore, absolutely essential that policymakers and curriculum developers reconsider what it means to be an educated individual. After all, is higher education only valued for its usefulness in securing jobs? Shouldn't universities strive to produce individuals who are not only employable but also enlightened and cultivated? As Rudolf Arnheim so eloquently reminds us, "without the flourishing of visual expression, no culture can function productively" (1957:5).

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