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Teaching Sculpture in High Schools

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Richard Henry Helzer for the
Master of Science in Teaching presented May 17, 1971.

Title: Teaching Sculpture in High Schools

APPROVED BY MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

Frederic Littman, Chairman

James L. Hansen

Frederick J. Kline

This thesis proposes to develop a one-year sculpture program for high school art students. The intention is to present a reference and guide for those teachers interested in establishing their own sculpture program.

Justifications for the course are discussed, including the importance of experiencing three-dimensional forms for any student interested in the visual experiences of life - be it nature or the man-made environment.

The general approach to teaching sculpturing is presented along with a sequence of projects designed to provide the student with a variety of experiences with sculpturing as an art form and means of personal expression. Also included is a description of desirable classroom characteristics, materials and tools.

The conclusion contains my personal views on the value of offering sculpturing at the high school level and the benefits to student, school and community. I also recommend a means of selecting students for the class and reasons for such selection. Here also, as a result of three year's of teaching at the high school level, I feel that it is necessary to make comment about the importance of the high school art teacher's commitment to their subject matter.

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of
Richard Henry Helzer presented May 17, 1971.

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May 17, 1971

TEACHING SCULPTURE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

by

RICHARD HENRY HELZER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

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in

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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I acknowledge my deepest appreciation to my wife, Sharon, for her continuous encouragement and support, without which this thesis would never have been possible.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a one-year program in sculpturing applicable to the secondary art curriculum. The ideas and methods presented here represent my approach to teaching and are not intended to be used as a final curriculum standard. It is hoped however, that this thesis may serve as a reference and guide for those persons interested in establishing their own sculpture program.

CHAPTER II

JUSTIFICATIONS FOR A SCULPTURE COURSE

Sculpturing is currently afforded only a small portion of time in the general art program of most schools. While at the same time these schools do offer a variety of specialized art courses; including - ceramics, jewelry, commercial art, lettering, fashion design, crafts, weaving and oil-acrylic painting. In comparison to these branches of the arts, sculpturing is very neglected. I must here stress the importance for the high school student (in art or not) to experience three-dimensional forms: the tactile quality, the spacial expanse of volume and form; the visual experience combined with the tactile; the effect of light (and of shade) on forms. All of these elements of three-dimensional objects should be an absolute must for any student interested in the visual experiences of life and their possible interpretation through the art form. My concern is that to a great number of students, "formal" exposure to art forms ends with their high school education. It must be realized, therefore, that without an exposure to sculpture, these students will be less prepared to appreciate nature: for nature presents herself to us particularly in three-dimensional form.

There is a need for the students to develop a visual consciousness of their physical environment - the buildings, furnishings, automobiles, appliances, etc. Sculpturing can provide the means for developing an awareness of three-dimensional harmonies. Today's

students will be required to make a multitude of decisions about the environmental quality of the world in which they will be living.

It is important, therefore, that they become alerted to the visual pollution created by man, in order to prevent its continued growth.

Through a knowledge of design quality and the relationship of form and its function, the sculpture student will be better prepared to meet the challenge of improving their environment.

CHAPTER III

GENERAL APPROACH TO THE COURSE AND REASONS THEREFORE

The intent of this course is to provide a foundation upon which the student, through projects, lectures, demonstrations and awareness of the historical development of sculpture, can develop an understanding of the whole of sculpture as an art form and as a means of expression. I am not primarily concerned with sculpture as an end product, but rather as a process of developing the creative potential of the high school student. This should not be simply a branch of manual training. The value of teaching sculpturing must lie in the development of the individual's interpretation of visual experiences not merely in the execution of technical processes.

Project 1.

Exploration of a Plastic Material

The student should be provided with clay to experiment with solid form. Through the tactile experience and exploration, the student will gain understanding of possibilities of its use and find meaning in his or her own effort. This approach will allow the student to develop dexterity and formulate thoughts and ideas about the medium.

Project 2.

Hollow-built Vertical Figure

After a period of personal investigation and only then, should

some explanation be made of the characteristics of clay, followed by demonstration of the material. It should be explained that clay does not need to remain in a solid mass. Hollow-built construction methods (slab, coil, pinch and clay slip), will be explained, along with firing procedures (drying, kiln use, temperatures). Reference to the etruscan hollow-built figures (through the use of slides) may serve as a suggestion of a subject for this project. However, this should remain just a suggestion for it is most important that the student develop his own use of the hollow-built method of construction. It is from this personal searching for answers that a more ordered experience develops, resulting in a more satisfactory expression. The teacher should help them understand the structural principles of the human body and suggest sketching of ideas before construction.

Project 3.

Relief Sculpture

Relief sculpturing is another direction for investigation by the student. This type of modeling comes closest to the two-dimensional work most students have been conditioned to do. It is important that they realize the three-dimensional qualities of the various types of reliefs (intaglio, cameo, mezzo). The suggestion for this project is the experimentation of three-dimensional affect using geometric shapes. Geometric is suggested for purposes of simplification to allow the student to investigate the technical aspects more thoroughly.

Project 4.

Casting Techniques for Relief Sculpture

Useful in the development of the student's understanding of casting techniques, would be an explanation of the reasons for casting a clay object. This would include a statement about reproducing a clay object in a permanent material; a material which would be more visually pleasing. Another reason for the casting procedure would be to produce several copies of the original object. Therefore, a demonstration of casting a negative mold of clay relief is useful at this stage of the student's development. It would not only provide information about casting (mixing of plaster, size and thickness of molds, reinforcing and repairing molds), but also the procedures for casting the original clay relief into other materials (plaster, cement, aluminium and bronze). This would include an explanation of the use of wax, venting and gating; as well as investment, burning out of molds and pouring of metals.

Project 5.

Free-Form Clay Sculpture

The final project of the year should reflect the individual student's interpretation of the meaning of three-dimensional form. It is the responsibility of the teacher to acquaint the students, throughout the year, with an understanding of the meaning of such terms as; form, volume, proportion, texture, contrast, rhythm, and movement, etc. Through individual projects, the student has been allowed to develop personal concepts about sculpture. The individual's personal experiences, combined with those shared experiences of other student's work, has provided a resource of information. The approach for selecting the final project will be through an individual

expression of the meaning of three-dimensional form.

Another aspect of sculpturing that can be introduced at this point would be ways in which sculpture can be mounted and patinaed. This explanation would include: surface treatment (paints, wax, oil, varnish); mounting of three-dimensional forms on bases (wood, stone, cement); mounting of reliefs (interior walls, exterior walls, permanent or movable).

CHAPTER IV

DESIRABLE CLASSROOM CHARACTERISTICS, MATERIALS AND TOOLS

1. Characteristics

The success of any art course stems from the classroom attitude. Therefore, an atmosphere where individual constructive learning can occur must be established and maintained. Another characteristic to consider is the physical arrangement of the room. The classroom must allow for separate work and storage areas in order to minimize confusion and conflict. There should be three definite work areas. One for students working on individual projects, another for specific work activities, (such as wedging of clay and mixing of plaster), a third for storage of projects (in process and finished), as well as the storage of materials (clay and plaster). The general high school art room is equipped with work tables, a sink, storage cabinets and work counters; all of these items can be utilized for a sculpture class.

2. Materials

I would like to suggest easy access to plastic materials available locally. This is of definite advantage to those schools that do not have large storage space for materials.

3. Tools

The basic clay modeling tools are the students' hands. With no more than their hands they can redesign a shapeless mass of clay

into an unlimited variety of form. Other tools that could aid in the students' experiences with clay are household utensils (primarily a knife). More elaborate commercially made tools are available, but do not necessarily result in more elaborate sculpture. Another source of tools are those fashioned from wood by individual students. The making of functional tools can be a worthwhile learning experience. This experience can help to develop pride in craftsmanship which can carry over into their personal sculpturing efforts.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Of what value is the course to the individual students, to the school, in general and the community as a whole? What has sculpturing ever done for me and why do we need it in the high school when we already offer so many other art courses? These are but some of the possible questions that may confront the person trying to establish a sculpture program. The answer to these questions must be direct. Sculpturing provides a means of interpreting one's environment; expressing ideas; and developing an awareness of visual experiences. The thinking out of one's ideas helps to establish order to experience and results in a more aesthetic minded person. These are of value not only to the individual but the school and community as well.

The course should be established as an elective for those students who have shown an interest and ability in art, through the general art program, and who, according to their teachers, would best profit from the experience. If high standards are not set, the course may serve as a dumping-grounds for any student having problems in academic courses. The success of the course depends on the establishment of a selective attitude for admission. Discipline problems must be minimized if an atmosphere for creative thinking is to succeed.

I am convinced that the teacher of such a course as sculpturing must also be an artist. By this I mean, he or she must be actively involved in the creative search of meanings and expression through

personal work. Too often, the art teacher is a person who echoes concepts and follows outlined procedures without any personal convictions. They compromise the greatest danger to the success of any art course. Their students, for the most part, will rise above this situation if they have the desire to continue their investigation of self-expression. But to those who may be lost along the way I have concern.

I have asked myself, why hasn't sculpturing been offered in greater depth before? Could it be the cost of such a program, materials, equipment, facilities? - or possibly the fear of uncontrollable discipline problems inherent in such a class? I personally feel that neither of these answers suffice. The answer may, however, be found by questioning high school art teachers in general. For the most part, the high school art teacher has been trained to teach in a "general art" situation. That is to say, to know a little about most branches of the arts and primarily the two-dimensional areas. Should the primary concern be to teach any art available, or follow a personal conviction of the importance of the individual's chosen field? I would answer by saying, sculpturing is my chosen field; the constant search for expression through sculpture, an incentive, and the teaching of sculpture to others is my personal commitment. Each art teacher must make a similar commitment to the subject area they teach. Without conviction to the worth of the subject, the teacher will fail in conveying its meaning to the students. It is important, therefore, that the teacher have a command of the subject - in other words be an artist.

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Hansen, James L., Assistant Professor of Art, Portland State University.

NOTE:

More than from any book - let it be the best - an art student learns from his teacher who in turn gains his professional knowledge from his master; through generation after generation of work and thought passed on by live voice.