

#9 Art

The learning objective for art studies is captured in this little experience of one of my storytelling friends:

“The first time I saw Raphael’s Disputa, which decorates one of the walls in one of the rooms of the Vatican in Rome, I had set out with my guidebook, intending to study all the paintings by Raphael that decorate these rooms. I entered the first room and, I suppose looked around the other walls, seeing three other paintings, but all I recall during this visit was the Disputa. I sat down before it and remained seated! I do not know how long, but the morning slipped away. What I thought about as I looked at the picture I cannot tell you. My impression is that I did not think at all; I only felt. My spirit was lifted up and purified and strengthened with happiness. Returning to my hotel, I read about the picture in my guidebook. It appeared that one of the figures represented Dante. I had not noticed it; and as I read on, I noticed other things that I had missed; that indeed, the whole subject as far as it could be put into words had escaped me. I had no knowledge what the painting was about; only I had felt its beauty.

“Since then I have studied more about the picture and discovered some of the means Raphael employed to arouse this depth of feeling, and the knowledge has helped me to find beauty in other things.”

My son described a similar experience on his last visit to the National Art Gallery in Washington DC. He said he walked into a room and there was a small painting on the wall that so moved him, that he stood there for probably half an hour. It was not a well known painting—it was a scene of a French café by an artist he had never heard of. He said he couldn’t tell me what thoughts were going through his mind. He just stood in silence—wrapped in all the feelings the painting stirred up.

Now compare these experiences with art with the learning objectives I pulled off the Virginia State Standards list. These standards begin in the first grade:

“Demonstrate understanding of the elements of art: Color, form, line, shape, space, texture, value, balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, proportion, rhythm unity, variety. Identify, analyze and apply criteria.

“Students will examine works of art and make informed judgments about them based on established visual art criteria.”

“Provide analytical skills to evaluate information that is conveyed through images and symbols.”

Where is the part about opening children’s eyes to see the beauty in all the world? Where is the lesson that teaches that true art communicates with the deeps of our souls?; that Man becomes the thing he gazes upon, as Hawthorne taught in *The Great Stone Face*; that images are long lasting so be careful what images you impress on the heart.

I copied these words from one of the heart educators: “The heart and soul of the masterpiece, the sheer beauty of it, are considered least of all, and students end up heartily hating something they might have enjoyed and loved....It is better to create a capacity to enjoy art than to have a

technical knowledge of its pieces.”

On the back of our book on paintings, I included the quote: “When we see ordinary things, we see only with our eyes, but, when we see works of art we see with our hearts.”

The heart feels; it doesn't analyze and, in the end, it's the heart that shapes who we are.

Learning the rules of art before we have felt it is like being shown the secrets behind the magic tricks before we've felt the magic.

Childhood is for feeling the magic of art. Children love looking at pictures and it's the second language we can use to communicate to the heart of a child before he understands words. And it's a powerful and lasting language. We say 'in one ear and out the other', but we don't say 'in one eye and out the other'. Dr. Rich Melheim, who is working wonders using art-based education among children living in poverty around the world, wrote that 'while the human ear can process 10,000 bits of information per second, the human eye can process up to 7 billion bits of information per second. Therefore, neurologically speaking, a picture is not worth a thousand words. It's worth 700,000 words.”

The visual impressions made on a child's tender heart last a lifetime.

Before I get into how to help children feel the magic, I have a really sad story to tell you. The Snow Queen has struck the art world. If you go to modern art exhibits and find yourself scratching your head, you're not alone.

What if I said this to you?

Lavishly zyzzx the fo rof perpendicular

Did you get anything out of that? Each of those words means something to me, but I wanted to express them to you in my own way, so I threw out all the rules of grammar. In fact, I thought a couple of the words sounded better backwards. This is what happened in the art world. A hundred years ago, they threw out all the rules that had taken hundreds of years to discover and apply.

Just as had happened in music, by the mid 1800's, artists had discovered the greatest secrets and rules of art that made it possible to communicate profound messages to human hearts instantly. You can take a work of art like this and show it to anyone anywhere in the world, no matter what the culture, no matter when they lived in history, and their hearts will instantly understand what this painting is saying. It's entitled 'enlisted'. I felt the meaning of this painting before learning the red ribbon in the man's cap was the sign of an enlisted soldier. Any wife, mother, sister, lover, daughter, friend who has sent a soldier off to war knows the meaning of this painting. When it was first displayed, one of the foremost art critics of the day who was used to looking through works of art through an analytical eye, broke down and wept.

The intellectuals of the early 1900's, under the Snow Queen's reign, looked down on this kind of art as sentimental and unsophisticated. They despised storytelling in art. As a result, this whole body of art from 1848 to 1920 was completely erased from all the university textbooks and from all the courses of art history in our schools. Museums put many of the paintings in storage.

Then a few years ago, a Fred Ross who holds a Master's of Art Education from Columbia University, stumbled upon a work of art by Bouguereau that moved him like no other work of art ever had. This is not the painting he saw, but is painted by the same artist. He wrote: "Frozen in place, gawking with my mouth agape, cold chills careening up and down my spine, I was virtually gripped as if by a spell that had been cast. Years of undergraduate courses and another 60 credits post-graduate in art, and I had never heard Bouguereau's name. Who was he? Was he important? Anyone who could have done this must surely be deserving of the highest accolades to the world."

The experience led him on a search where he discovered these things I'm telling you. He has been working hard to restore what has been lost. If you go to artrenewal.org, you'll find the Art Renewal Center which is a treasure trove of fine art. There are over 80,000 high resolution images, primarily made up of this forgotten art. Look up his article on Why Classical Realism matters and read it. It's eye opening and may just change the way you think about art. And a lot of things about what's happening in the art world will make a lot more sense.

Without this art, I don't think we could work the magic with our children that I'm trying to describe. I went through all 80,000 images and guess who I kept bumping into? Mother! Although sometimes she was barefoot, she wasn't repressed, miserable or trapped; she was content, joyful; she was beautiful. And I found Father. In the last 50 years, we've gone from Father Knows Best to Father Knows Nothing to Who Needs a Father. But here he was! He was working hard to provide for his family. He was strong and protective. He was adored by his children. I found brothers and sisters with their arms around each other. I found families happily engaged in work and play. All over the world! And I found dear, beautiful Mother Nature everywhere.

I found fine art that brought scenes of history I had been studying, to life! I held on to over 2,000 of these fine art images and organized them on pinterest pages so you can see them, too. If you are wondering where the fine art images went that used to be on a page dedicated to fine art on the old site, they are now sorted by nations and you can find them on the Enrichment page, sorted by Family and Historical. While Art Renewal says you cannot print the art work from the site, I contacted Kara Ross and she said permission is given to families to print these works of art out for personal use in your homes. Just be aware—that for any other purposes, you need to contact their licensing department. I encourage you to support their work by becoming a member of Art Renewal—it's only about \$20.00 a year.

If you want your children to grow up to value motherhood and fatherhood and family, let these be the images they see on the walls of your home. Let them be the last images they see before they go to bed and the first ones they see when they wake up in the morning. Hang a bulletin board by their beds and change the images frequently. Show them images of these mothers smiling and

playing with their children. Let them see the look of love on her face. Hang images representing the innocent and pure love between a man and a woman to counter the sex saturated images bombarding them everywhere else. Who is creating art like this anymore?

We don't think twice about spending \$500 or \$1000 for a flat screen TV, but we balk at spending \$300 on a piece of fine art that can influence the heart of a child for eternity? Do we worry more about matching the color of our couches than inspiring the heart of a child?

I didn't think much about the influence of what's hanging on my walls until one day, one of my daughters came home from a friend's house and was so excited about their new basement. She said it was unbelievably cool. They had posters from old movies and movie stars all over the wall and she said, "How come we can't have a cool house like that?" I need to interject here that I happen to love religious art and many of the rooms in our home have a scene from Jesus' life in it. She went on to say, "How can my friends talk about and do the things we like to do if Jesus is looking at.... us." Oh. She didn't have to say anything else and neither did I. The paintings stayed.

The paintings on our walls have a quiet influence in our homes. Find creative ways to use these pictures and make them part of your children's everyday life. I've picked up some beautiful volumes of art at the library book sales. When I pay 50 cents for them, I don't feel badly at all having the art cut out of them to be pasted in notebooks and such. You might want to keep a lookout for them.

I know that art is a touchy subject. I'm no expert. Some of you will defend modern art to me. But I just can't see how a giant white canvas like the one that recently sold for a million dollars will tell much about us in a thousand years from now. Haha! As I am writing this, it unfortunately tells a lot about a lot of us, doesn't it? Big empty hearts and big empty heads.

But I know what touches my heart and as I have shared the art from this era with the moms in our Well-Educated Heart group, it has opened a layer of appreciation that wasn't there before. I have found this fine art lifts and ennobles and inspires me. So I pronounce it good.

Our ability to appreciate art depends much upon what is in our own hearts. As I talked about in the talk about Imagination, a hard heart cannot appreciate art in the way being described here. An intellectual understanding will never open the door. As our tastes become more refined and cultured, our taste in art changes as well. As John Van Dyke said, "It will take years before you come to a full appreciation of art, but when at last you have it, you will be possessed of one of the purest, loftiest, and most ennobling pleasures that the civilized world can offer you."

I can tell you how you can kill a love of fine art in your children. First, turn it into lessons. You do all the choosing. Schedule out a study of artists and stick to it. Be sure to require your children write about the art they are looking at and have them write up reports about the artists. Second, start from the very beginning to draw attention to the elements instead of allowing them to take in the whole. Third, find fine art that has no connection to anything familiar in their lives. Fourth, schedule a visit to a museum. Be sure you have printed worksheets with learning objectives in hand and insist they complete them before they go out to play.

If these things will kill a love of fine art, doing the opposite will cultivate a love. Let art be spontaneous in your home. Leave art books around the house to be enjoyed without compulsion. Find ways, as we've talked about, to display fine art on your walls—even your refrigerator. Share art you love with your children. Remember- the deeps of the heart are silent. The feelings art stirs within us are not easily-nor should they – be translated into words. Let whatever words are used come naturally, without compulsion. And most frequently, they will come out in oral rather than written expression.

In childhood, look for fine art with something familiar in them. Kittens, families, children, home. I give you a lot of possibilities in the enrichment sections of the nations and nature. We have become a people who look but cannot see which is why we want to cultivate a habit of attention in childhood. One way to do this with art is to do picture talks. You don't want or need to do it with every painting. It's just a way to help open a child's eyes. Here's an example to go along with von Bremen's The Pet Bird.

Look how much fun these children are having. I wonder what's going on?
Look! A tiny little bird. It must be a pet. It looks like they all love it.

See the oldest boy hold up his finger for the little bird to stand upon? Can you almost see the bird peck at the piece of bread the little boy is holding in his left hand?

The girl behind him is leaning her head on the older boy's shoulder. These children must love each other. They're a happy little family, aren't they?

The littlest brother has climbed up on the cushioned chair just so he can be closer. He's holding out his finger very steadily and quietly, and maybe he's saying, "Let the bird come and sit on my finger." The little bird isn't afraid; he knows these children won't hurt him.

The other little girl has stopped reading so she can watch the bird, too.

The man who painted this picture loved children. He lived in Germany. When he was a little boy, he was always drawing tiny little pictures. His real name was Johann Georg Meyer von Bremen but they called him Kinder-Meyer because he loved children. One time he played Blind Man's Bluff with them and then painted a picture of it. He had a motto that hung on the wall of his room: "Make the best of your time; it never returns." A lot of his paintings are here in America. Shall we see if we can find them in a museum sometime?

The story can be that simple.

In our Stories of Paintings in the Story Hour Series, I gathered some of these simple stories together to give you ideas for some picture talks of your own. I'll also be adding some to the Enrichment pages. Maybe you can do a picture talk in your poetry tea time and then hang the picture on the fridge at child eye level and just leave it there until the next one.

Another way to help them develop that habit of attention that may be more appealing to older

children is to play a game where they all study the painting, and then turn it over and see how many details they can remember. Let them do a rough sketch of the painting from memory. Or have them list things they saw in the painting. Play it like Scattergories and have everyone read from their list and the one with the most unique items wins the round.

Don't wear these tools out. The objective is just to have them become aware. When you go to an art museum, you will frequently see people sketching what they are seeing and that is part of this process of developing the habit of attention.

I've started doing something that I had never thought of doing before. When I find a painting that speaks to my heart, I memorize it much like I memorize a poem, to hang on the art gallery wall in my heart so that anytime I want to, I can close my eyes and see the painting. It takes time to notice all the details and be sure to place them on the painting in my imagination.

I posted this painting in the facebook group and it resonated in a lot of hearts. What do you see? I'm sure you see the look of joy on the mother's face. But how many clues are you picking up? Did you notice the window pane that is out? The little pictures of soldiers at eye level for her little children to see? What else do you see?

Another thing you can do to help your children fall in love with fine art is to share stories of the great artists. Find stories with a familiar connection to your children—little children will want to hear about the artist when he was a little boy or a little girl. I share as many stories from the heart about artists that I can find in the library. One place I put them is in the Great Lives Artists section.

Never let these activities feel like a chore. These are occasional activities. Most of the time, just let them look at the pictures.

As they start to learn about the great artists, they're going to be introduced to the great era of religious art. Hundreds of years ago, before the common man had books and while sermons were preached in Latin, it was the art that taught the spirit of religion to the people. The paintings were full of symbolism. If you don't understand the symbolism, there are books in the Art Appreciation section that will teach you and you can begin to unfold the symbolism to your children and it will become like fun detective work to begin to make sense of these paintings.

I truly believe that much of our faith crisis is coming because we are trying to connect our children to God through His laws, and not through the Arts. Our hearts must see and feel Him. Sharing paintings of Jesus Christ that passed through the heart of an artist who knows Him will do infinitely more to plant faith in a child's heart than a million doctrinal discussions.

Continue to learn about art yourself. And in its proper time and place, you can begin to unfold the rules that created the magic they already feel. The second half of the Stories of Paintings book I mentioned earlier with stories for little children has a wonderful introductory book to help you explain media, color, perspective, technique, etc. And there are many books on the Art Appreciation page found in the Other Category that teach to the heart and will begin to layer in a

deeper appreciation and understanding. Take it slow. If you're children aren't interested yet, come back later. But I'm betting you'll enjoy it and it will give you more ways of talking about paintings with your children. As your older children start understanding these principles, it will be enjoyable for them to go back to paintings they already love and see how the artist applied the secrets they're learning about.

As your children come to appreciate how art makes them feel, they'll have a greater appreciation for a study of architecture. I found some great books I put on the Art Appreciation page.

Isn't it simply miraculous that we have access to so much fine art with which to feed our hearts? Your children are looking upon fine art images that were reserved for royalty, for the aristocracy, the few. Almost all of the art mentioned in the old books which are usually reproduced in black and white can easily be pulled up in a Google search, but sometimes I can't find a color version. It wasn't until I saw the movie *Monuments Men* that I realized some of these paintings may have been among those that were destroyed by Hitler and Nazi Germany, which makes a knowledge of them even more valuable. By the way, if you haven't seen that movie yet, I highly recommend it. The movie itself isn't perfect, but its message about art is powerful.

Of course the images do not have the same impact as the actual art itself. Do visit museums and since you will have made friends with so many works of art and artists, your children will feel like they are at home with friends. Every time I visit a museum, the first painting in a room I am drawn to is the familiar one. And to see it close up often takes my breath away. I've seen the image of Washington crossing the Delaware hundreds of times—but nothing compares with seeing the larger than life original full wall version.

It has been said: "There is only one way to improve the taste of a nation. It cannot be done in a hurry and it cannot be done by force. It can only be accomplished by exposing the people patiently to that which is truly 'good'; to that which is truly 'noble'.

This you will do in your fine art studies.

With that, I'll leave you with my final thought for this talk, courtesy of Charles Kingsley:

"Never lose an opportunity to see anything beautiful. Beauty is God's handwriting."

