PRESENT VIEWS ON THE PAST: BASES FOR THE FUTURE OF ART EDUCATION HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Written histories, like art, need not seek justification outside of themselves. They do not become better history because they serve a particular purpose. That does not mean however, that histories should not meet specific needs. Any one history can have a number of practical functions, determined as much by the reader as they are by the historian. A history of art education, for example, could be read simply for enjoyment. But it could also be utilized as a depository of ideas, a lab report on tested practices, or a tool for tracing the origins of presently held beliefs. Each of these functions could meet the needs of a particular individual or group. However, written histories can also have a second type of function; one which serves the needs of historiography—the discipline of history writing.

Histories, like any set of ideas, arise and develop in an historical context. Any contemporary history is related to histories written before it. Reciprocally, past histories are affected by histories written today. Different histories then, can be used to append, contradict, support, or otherwise clarify each other. It is this second type of function of histories which will here be examined in relation to art education.

In general, the major works of art education history have been broad surveys, providing quick glances of a wide time frame. It is true that Macdonald’s *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (1970) does give extensive details about personalities and politics in art education’s past but, as Michael (1971) pointed out,

only one chapter of twenty is devoted to child art. In this chapter, although Macdonald mentions several Europeans and two Americans (Dow and Lowenfeld) as contributing to our knowledge of child art, he tends to emphasize the work of Cizhek and selected Englishmen: James Sully, R.R. Tomlinson, Marion Richardson, and later Cyril Burt. Only one American source (*Dow’s Composition*) is given in the chapter notes on child art. (p. 40)

Wygant’s *Art in American Schools in the Nineteenth Century* (1983) is also broad in scope. In reviewing the book, Korzenik (1984) correctly pointed out that Wygant’s wide panorama “is probably wise at this point since so few of us are familiar with people’s names and their ideological positions” (p. 194). The wide focus of Wygant and Macdonald, along with the work of their predecessor Frederick Logan (1955), has provided us with a much needed skeletal framework for art education’s history. Flesching out that framework can now be
a function of more localized art education histories.

Prominence and Influence

Because of their wide scope, these historical overviews have tended to focus on highly visible ideas and personalities. Wygant (1983), for instance, states that “programs in schools that gained notice are most worth the historian’s attention” (p. 3). It would be a mistake, however, to equate conspicuousness with influence or pervasiveness (Gottschalk, 1950, pp. 235-236). Even if an idea about art education was prominent amongst theorists of its day, that in itself is no measure of that idea’s impact upon actual classroom practice or upon future developments in art education thought.

Logan recognized this. Like Wygant’s history, Logan’s Growth of Art in American Schools (1955) focused primarily on books and discourses on art education. But twenty years after writing his history, Logan discussed the limitations of concentrating solely on prominent theories:

What is going on in art education is that which teachers are doing in the elementary schools, the secondary schools, and the colleges. And there is a marked difference between the research that’s going on in the colleges among professional people who are dealing with art education, and that which is going on in the schools where people are teaching children. That will always be true. (Succa, 1979, p. 7)

Just as contemporary prominence does not guarantee an impact upon events, posthumous fame is not a measure of actual influence (Gottschalk, 1950, pp. 234-235). Such fame is, in fact, often self-perpetuating. For example, Walter Smith and his alma mater, the National Art Training School at South Kensington in London, play a prominent role in the histories written by Logan (1955), Macdonald (1970), and Wygant (1983). Smith is also shown as the key late nineteenth century art education figure in many of the short historical surveys found in art education texts and journal articles (Chapman 1978, pp. 6 & 7; Efland 1983; Eisner 1972, pp. 37-40; Eisner and Ecker 1970, pp. 14-16; Gaitiskill, Hurwitz, and Day 1982, pp. 33-34; Hamblen, 1985; Jones. 1974; Kaufman, 1966, pp. 56-57; Pasto, 1967).

Although it is not clear how many of these shorter surveys used primary sources to determine the actual pervasiveness of Smith’s influence, it is clear that anyone relying on secondary sources will probably perpetuate the notion of Smith as the quintessential late 19th century art educator. Moreover, many future interpretations of primary sources will be predicated on the assumption of Smith’s predominant role. Thus, Smith’s present visibility will likely breed Smith’s increasing future visibility, and other lesser known art educators are likely to remain lesser known, regardless of their actual influence.

The Extent of Influence

While we obviously have enough evidence to conclude that Smith and other well known early art education theorists did influence life in a number of classrooms, numerous related conclusions still need to be historically explored. There remain unanswered questions regarding the origin of many art education theories, or the degree to which any theory was adapted or adopted, or the
actual times in which particular ideas held sway. A potential function of less broadly focused histories is to illuminate these questions. Chalmers’ (1985) research, for example, points out how David Blair played a large role in spreading the South Kensington drawing system to many parts of the English speaking world. Smith, in other words, had no exclusive franchise for disseminating the system so often associated with his name.

Similarly, South Kensington was by no means the exclusive purveyor of late nineteenth century school drawing theories. For example, in 1871, the year of Smith’s arrival in Massachusetts, Charles Barry published his small treatise, *How to Draw. Six Letters to a Little Girl on the Elementary Principles of Drawing*. Barry, a drawing instructor in the Boston public schools, claimed that the letters “were received with favor by teachers of drawing throughout the country” (p. iv).

Barry did not intend his book to be an exhaustive “how-to” manual, although he did briefly outline what such a manual should contain. Nevertheless, many ideas usually linked to Smith are encapsulated in Barry’s short text. For both Smith and Barry, the aim of the drawing teacher is to train the eye for accurate perception, the hand for speedy and accurate execution, and the memory for accurate recollection of form.

Smith and Barry also shared similar ideas regarding pedagogical method. Both had their students begin with straight lines. The task was then to move step-by-rigid-step through curved lines, combination of lines, geometrical forms, ornamental motifs, vases, and perspective exercises.

Certainly the few general principles found in Barry’s book do not constitute as exhaustive an account as the vast synthesis of information found in Smith’s drawing books. Moreover, the fact that Barry published his ideas in Boston a couple of years before Smith published similar ideas in the same city does not allow us to conclude that Smith was influenced by, or even cognizant of, Barry’s work. However, that fact does highlight the need to look beyond Smith for the sources of late nineteenth century art education ideas.

Wygant has created or restored historical prominence for a number of these early sources. William Bartholomew, for instance, is rarely mentioned in either Logan (1955) or Macdonald (1970). Yet Wygant (1983) calls Bartholomew “probably the most prolific author of drawing texts” (p. 47). Many of Bartholomew’s texts not only predated Smith’s books, but also provided the latter with substantial competition.

In an accurate assessment of Smith’s influence, there would have to be detailed analysis of the extent to which his ideas on teaching drawing differed from the ideas of Bartholomew. Also, further research would have to follow Macdonald’s and Wygant’s lead in determining the influence on Smith of Henry Cole, or the French system of mechanical drawing which Smith studied in 1863 and 1867, or the drawing systems of other European countries with which Smith was familiar. Unless there are significant differences between these drawing systems and Smith’s drawing system, history may conclude that Smith’s influence in North America was more as an organizer and promoter of ideas rather than as an originator of them.
Historical Facts and Historical Reconstructions

While Smith undoubtedly did play a role in his profession's history, there are other cases where posthumous fame may be less warranted. In the first edition of his book *Children and Their Art*, Gaitskell (1958) credited John Ruskin with probably beginning the interest in children's art (p. 126). This curious contention has survived the book's three revisions (Gaitskell, Hurwitz, and Day, 1982, p. 144). The source cited by Gaitskell for this information about Ruskin was *Education Through Art*, by Gaitskell's friend Herbert Read (1945). Read, in turn, based his interpretation on Ruskin's 1857 text, *Elements of Drawing*.

In fact, Ruskin devotes only two paragraphs of *Elements of Drawing* to children and art, and when Read quoted the first of these paragraphs (p. 116), he left out Ruskin's introductory sentence. Ruskin (1971, p. 9) began, "In the first place, the book is not calculated for the use of children under the age of twelve or fourteen". This is hardly the auspicious opening line we would expect to find when searching for the origins of interest in child art.

There are, of course, numerous examples of interest in children's drawing which predate Ruskin's 1857 paragraphs. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, for example, Marie Morris, who would later gain fame as a botanical painter, probably began to teach drawing to the children in her mother's school in 1830 (Nutt, 1932, p. 73). Three years later, Morris opened her own school and included drawing in the curriculum (Morris, 1833).

It would be argued, however, that Read's point was not that Ruskin was the first to teach drawing to children, but rather that "Ruskin first drew attention to what might be called the educational possibilities of drawing" (p. 115). Read may also have been interested in Ruskin's idea that methods used to teach drawing to adults are not necessarily appropriate for use with children. But even though these particular ideas of Ruskin's were not reflected in 19th century school curricula, they do appear prior to Ruskin's 1857 text. Herbert Spencer published an influential essay on children's art in the May 1854 issue of the *North British Review*, and later included it in his book, *Education* (Macdonald, 1970, p. 321). In this essay Spencer outlined how teachers would be "guided by Nature's hints, not only in making drawing a part of education but in choosing modes of teaching it" (Spencer, 1929, p. 82). James Sully, the 19th century English psychologist who, according to Read (p. 116), first attempted to give a coherent theoretical explanation of the psychological significance of children's drawings, advised students to consult Spencer's essay for "the educational principles underlying drawing" (Sully, 1897, p. 202).

Well before *Elements of Drawing* was written, in fact, when Ruskin was only five or six years old, Bronson Alcott had recognized the value of drawing for children. When Alcott first began teaching in Connecticut in the 1820's, approximately a decade before he started his famous Temple School, "he thought children should have little slates of their own upon which they might draw and scribble for their own pleasure." (Shepard, 1937, p. 77).

It also appears that a more rigid geometric drawing slate was used by Froebel well before Ruskin's 1857 statement, but here again opinion differs. Michael
and Morris (1985) claim that “Froebel did not have children draw in school” (p. 104). However, Snider (1900) an early biographer of Froebel, writes that the founder of Kindergartens taught drawing in the Gruner school as early as 1805 (p. 96).

Other evidence that Froebel’s curriculum included drawing comes from a comprehensive 19th century American manual for self instruction in Freidrich Froebel’s principles of education, by Frances Post Van Norstrand and the Superintendent of the Chicago Froebel Association, Alice Putman (1896). Van Norstrand and Putman describe the tenth Kindergarten gift as a ruled slate which they say Froebel designed to help children draw (p. 56). However, Wygant (1983) hints that these geometric drawing slates may have descended into the Kindergartens by way of William Bentley Fowle’s ideas and the Milton Bradley Company’s marketing skills (p. 85). Snider (1900) on the other hand, supports the notion that Froebel’s occupations included “drawing in net-work” (p. 151).

The cases of Froebel, Ruskin, and Smith show how the distinction needs to be made between importance resulting from historical reconstruction and importance resulting from actual influence. It goes beyond simply weighing the veracity of facts, as with Froebel’s use of drawing or Ruskin’s apocryphal role in initiating interest in children’s art. It also entails interpretations of the facts. There are many verified facts about Walter Smith. But it was the historian’s reconstruction of those facts which transformed Smith from a “forgotten man” (Green, 1966) to a prominent figure from art education’s past. Historical reconstruction will also be responsible for making or breaking the posthumous reputations of other early art educators, such as Bartholomew, or the newest “forgotten man” of 19th century art education, Herman Krusi (Stark, 1985).

The Role of Local Histories

In art education historiography’s present conjuncture, more narrowly focused histories can play a vital role in distinguishing actual influence from mere visibility. In addition to unearthing the origins of various ideas, a function of localized histories could be to gauge the temporal and geographic extent of any person or theory’s pervasiveness. As just one example, the history of art education in Nova Scotia will be used to support Wygant (1983), Macdonald (1970), and Logan’s (1955) implied contention of the pervasive influence of Massachussetts’ artists and educators.

In 1829, W.H. Jones, an artist from Boston and Philadelphia, began teaching art classes at Dalhousie College in Halifax. Amongst his students was Maria Morris. In 1830, Jones organized Halifax’s first art exhibition (Piers, 1914, pp. 123-124). Earlier, in 1808, Robert Field, who was to become Nova Scotia’s most celebrated portrait painter of his day, also arrived in Halifax by way of Philadelphia and Boston (Piers, p. 112). Field had studied at the Royal Academy School in London and was a friend of Benjamin West (Harper, 1977, p. 82). Thus, the influential connection which Logan and Macdonald cite between West and North America might be extended to include Halifax.

Ideas from Massachusetts also appeared regularly in early Nova Scotian educational literature. Almost a century ago, Dr. J.B. Hall of the Nova Scotia
Normal School viewed the world history of education as one which developed "from Socrates to Horace Mann" (Hall, 1892, p. iii). According to Hall, Socrates had "exerted the greatest influence on educational systems to the present day" (p. 103), while Mann was one of the present day's "greatest common school men" (p. 193).

In 1951 Nova Scotia's first issue of its Journal of Education contained numerous references to the Massachusetts Normal Schools (Dawson, pp. 2, 8, & 12). A short while later, the Journal's fourth issue contained an article entitled "Practical Lessons on Schools from Boston". The article ended with the following observation.

There are also two other features of the Boston schools worthy of note and imitation—namely the prominence given to vocal music and linear drawing; both taught to an extent truly creditable and really surprising, and that without the least interference with other studies—thus familiarizing the eye and the hand with the handiwork of nature and art, and attuning the heart and voice to the praise of nature's God. (Dawson, 1852, pp. 47-48)

After its first few issues, Nova Scotia's Journal of Education disappeared for more than a decade. When it was revitalized in September, 1866, the first new issue indicated that connections to Boston were still extant. Textbooks prescribed in the Journal included Bartholomew's School Series of Progressive Drawing Lessons. In addition, teachers could purchase packages of 12 model cards for $.07 each (Rand, p. 14).

Thus it appears that the full extent of Bartholomew's influence has yet to be measured. But then, art education historiography is still in its infancy. Although we now have available a few important works on the profession's history, the quality of our conclusions will remain limited until we establish a more complete account. Different facts and interpretations will have to be verified, while the actual significance of other facts will only be determined in the future, when we are able to relate them to information which is presently unknown. More narrowly focused or localized histories, while valuable in their own right, can serve to provide us with some of that needed information.

Local art education histories will certainly benefit from the insights found in the more broadly scaled treatments of the subject. Indeed, many of the hypotheses and interpretations involved in local historical research would not be possible if these earlier overviews had not laid down their broad foundations. Testing the load bearing capacity of these foundations, however, will continue to be a function of localized histories.

References


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