

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* by E. W. Eisner; *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum* by A. D. Efland

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## REVIEW

### *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*

E. W. Eisner (2002). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 258 pages, ISBN 0-300-09523-6.

### *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum*

A. D. Efland (2002). New York: Teachers College Press, 201 pages, ISBN 0-8077-4218-X.

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#### **The Role of the Visual Arts in the Growth of Mind**

Do the visual arts require thinking? What kinds of thinking? Are the arts something to be learned, as demanding and rewarding as thinking is in the sciences and other school subjects? And do they contribute in an important way to the general development of mind?

Most of us in art education would answer “yes” to these questions and would agree with Eisner that “many of the most complex and subtle forms of thinking take place when students have an opportunity to work meaningfully” in the arts (p. xii).<sup>1</sup> One could even say that this has become a central belief in art education today. Nevertheless, there is little agreement about how to describe these forms of thinking, or how to promote them. Is thinking in art unique in some way? Does it add an extra dimension to mind, or does it promote more general abilities? Is it intuitive or rule-guided, socially constructed or based on universal principles? And what is the role within art of creativity, of skill and technique, of knowledge of the world and society?

The appearance of these two books in the same year suggests the importance of these questions. Both aim to clarify the unsettled cognitive character of the visual arts. “Educators,” Efland says, “are unsure of how to use the arts to develop cognitive abilities in children or of the means for assessing such attainments” (p. 7) and he says his purpose is “to identify reasons for teaching the arts within a view of general education dedicated to expanding cognitive development” (p. 6). Both address these reasons and make plain their relevance to issues facing art education today. These include art teaching and assessment in general and two major current controversies in particular: basic curriculum structure (art as a separate discipline or in an integrated curriculum?) and the relevance of what is learned in art for other school subjects (teaching for transfer or

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<sup>1</sup>As Eisner notes, there is some alternation in his book (and hence in this review) between art, which means the visual arts, and the arts in general. The context should make this alternation intelligible.

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for what is unique in the visual arts?). But the two authors arrive at different answers and make quite different recommendations for practice.

There has, of course, been a history of attempts to describe the ways we think in the visual arts in the years since the “cognitive revolution” of the late 1950s, and Efland reviews it in the first half of his book. It includes Arnheim’s notions of visual thinking, which tied thinking closely to the visual sensory system, and of artmaking as problem-solving, which tied it to the character of particular media. It includes also Nelson Goodman’s idea that an art medium is a “symbol-system” and that artmaking is the expression of thought in a particular symbol-system. These ideas initiated a kind of separate but equal tendency with respect to the senses and/or art media that has proved hard subsequently to overcome. Goodman’s work led to the research of the early Project Zero and ultimately was an important source for Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. These approaches have all been important intellectually and politically but, especially in postmodern times, have obvious difficulties as a general account of what it is to think in the visual arts. In the first half of his book, Efland puts this history in the wider context of general theories of mind, including various contemporary structuralist and social constructivist accounts of learning. In the second half of the book, he offers suggestions for a contemporary approach and for the kind of curriculum that would be consistent with it.

By “politically important” I mean to refer to the politics of the school curriculum in North America. For in spite of having made progress in this respect, art is still often considered (by administrators, parents, politicians, even by teachers of other subjects) a soft subject where little thinking is required. Many continue to believe that art is dominantly a matter of feeling, intuition, talent, or creativity, all understood as not including what we normally call thinking; hence, art still has a weak place in the curriculum, is usually not assessed well, and is often not included in accountability measures. This remains a major problem for the field. These books suggest that until we have an agreed-on account of the cognitive activities involved in art, one that is readily intelligible to non-art educators, our chances for achieving more recognition in the curriculum are slim. That means that the arguments here are relevant to advocacy as well as to theory and practice.

It is also worth saying that these are not questions for psychologists only, although they are sometimes thought so. The issues are too big for psychology alone to handle. The cognitive revolution was already notable for combining philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology with psychology, and today one would have to add various other kinds of influence, especially semiotics and postmodern theory of various kinds. It is useful to add art and education to this list.

These two books have many points of agreement but, in the end, their differences dominate and they point the field in different directions.

Eisner reviews many of the issues of art teaching, assessment and curriculum that he has previously written on and one can see continuity with the arguments that supported DBAE, for which he has been a major spokesperson. In particular, he puts a major emphasis on the importance of teaching the visual arts for their “own distinctive contributions,” which largely have to do with expressive form and aesthetic experience. These, he insists, should be “the primary justification for the arts in our schools” (p. xii). In this respect, one could say that the book is a sophisticated statement of what are probably mainstream opinions in the field. But he also returns frequently to the influence of John Dewey and discusses various modes of thinking that overlap with other school subjects. This may be the most interesting part of the book, but I believe it produces internal inconsistencies—a question I will return to.

Efland, by contrast, uses his historical review to argue that we presently have no satisfactory cognitive account of art. He recognizes a role for the aesthetic in the arts, but does not see it as the most important consideration. He argues that artworks are complex and variously connected organizations of thought that share many features with other domains. He also develops the idea of imagination as the capacity to see the world in new ways, a capacity that has value in all domains and walks of life. He ends by laying out various criteria for a more satisfactory theory and argues for an integrated curriculum in which the visual arts play a central role.

### **The Role of Media in Thinking**

Eisner and Efland agree fundamentally that artworks are about ideas. As Eisner says:

Work in art is typically directed by an idea that is realized in the material and through the form that the artist creates. These ideas can be large or small, important or trivial; they can reveal what has gone unseen, or they can put the familiar in a context in which it can be re-seen in a new and vital way. The artist can comment on or celebrate a slice of the world... (p.51)

They agree also that this does not diminish the role of media in art. Thought is about ideas, but ideas must always be mediated. They must be embodied in some material that has ties to the senses, which is to say they must be formulated in a medium. Otherwise they cannot be communicated or perhaps conceived. This is true even in the sciences, although there the media are usually more conventional and the meanings more abstract. In the visual arts, meaning is usually grasped first through the senses and only subsequently becomes conceptual; even then it remains closely tied to the medium in which it has taken form.

The agreements between Eisner and Efland show how they have learned from the history that Efland reviews. Neither is interested, for example, in metaphors of the mind as a computer, in thought as “information processing,” nor in the separation of intelligences. They reject the notion that thinking in art is best when it is conducted in the terms of

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<sup>2</sup>The reference is to the views of Rudolph Arnheim, first advanced with great persuasive power in 1954 in *Art and Visual Thinking*.

<sup>3</sup>Skoglund produced this installation in 1994 in the art museum of Columbus, Ohio. It included multiple references to the wedding of Mary, Queen of Scots.

one art medium only and is free of the influence of language.<sup>2</sup> They make it clear that thinking in the visual arts can include aspects of the kinesthetic, the tactile, the auditory, or the verbal. This is because they both situate thinking in the body as a whole, rather than in the brain, the neural system, or a specific sensory system, as their predecessors tended to do. Hence, they have no trouble with the ad hoc combinations of materials that artists sometimes use to express their thought. For example, Efland discusses Jasper Johns's assemblages of objects and painted targets of the 1960s, which embodied the near-paranoid Cold War and homophobic fears of the time. Eisner tends to refer to the standard art media in his discussions (watercolor is a favorite), but he would have no difficulty with, say, Sandy Skoglund's use of marmalade and strawberry jam as a medium, with which she coated the floor and the walls of a gallery in her installation, *The Wedding*.<sup>3</sup>

For the same reason, they also reject Goodman's (1976) notions that an artform is a "symbol system" and that learners are learning to use the particular system of an artform. Instead, they frequently contrast the arts with the sciences and with natural languages. The sciences are, as Efland puts it, "well-structured domains," characterized by systems of generalizations of wide scope and accepted rules for applying them to cases. Natural languages are less so, but they do have significant elements of system—the rules of grammar and conventions of vocabulary are the most obvious. In comparison, rules and generalizations have very little place in the visual arts. Elements of system may be found within individual works, but do not usually carry over to other works. The color red does not always mean blood, nor do concentric circles always constitute targets. Their significance must be determined in each case, always in the context of a particular work and a specific culture. In short, whatever system is found in an artwork is always a special case. Hence, thinking in art is not, in general, dependent on the mastery of rules and conventions and the analogy with language is misleading.

Eisner cites the same contrast made by Dewey in slightly different terms. Dewey (1934) states:

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 genuine work of art probably demands more intelligence than does much of the thinking that goes on among those who pride themselves on being 'intellectuals.'  
(quoted in Eisner, p. 15)

One of the pleasures of these books is their clarity about the relationship of thinking to the medium, and hence to skill and technique. Control of the medium is thoughtful when it is used to express a particular idea well. By themselves, neither skill nor technique are particularly thoughtful, and therefore, by themselves, neither is an educational goal;

they become goals only when the learner has an idea that needs expression. Eisner is particularly clear about this, a topic that often seems confusing in the practice of teaching. He consistently distinguishes his position from those who see skill as a major goal of art education and those who decry it as trivial and non-cognitive.

### The Aesthetic and the Ill-structured

In spite of this and other agreements, the two disagree significantly. Especially, they have different attitudes toward the aesthetic. For Eisner, this is the most important notion in defining art. Aesthetic qualities occur frequently in our daily life, but it is only in the arts that they are cultivated and consciously valued. Attention to them is required for both the creation of and the response to expressive forms. This is what distinguishes art from other subjects, and it is the central organizing idea that allows one to call art a discipline. The *aesthetic* constitutes the major goal of art education.

This view is well known and there seems little need to explain it here. It has been the most powerful argument for DBAE<sup>4</sup> and is still probably the mainstream view inside the field. Nor should there be any need to point out that the grasp of aesthetic qualities is cognitive, though it is not necessarily the final moment in a train of thought.<sup>5</sup> The argument is what drives Eisner to insist on keeping art as a separate subject in the curriculum: he has consistently argued that attention to the aesthetic tends to be short-changed in an integrated curriculum.

Efland, on the other hand, regards the aesthetic as only one of many features of the visual arts. The experience of aesthetic qualities is valuable in itself, but should not provide the goal of art education. To focus on aesthetic experience, he says, is misleading because it focuses on the experience itself and not on what is being learned and thought about. The aesthetic qualities of artworks make them attractive, but do not make them educationally important. They motivate and attract students, a major educational advantage of the arts, but what is educationally important is how the students think in consequence and what they learn. This latter has more to do with their interpretation of social and cultural reality. Efland says the function of the arts is the construction of reality (p. 171), and their cognitive value lies in the way they promote this construction. Presumably he would say the same of other subjects.

Efland is not much interested in what is unique about the arts. Instead he discusses the ways in which they overlap with other domains and display complex patterns of reference and thought, each work being a particular case where themes interact in ways that cannot be predicted. Artworks are about ideas that derive from social, cultural, and personal worlds and their complex overlapping with material from other subjects is their educational strength. One of Efland's examples is the palace at Versailles, which can be seen as an exemplar of the French Baroque style

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<sup>4</sup>Eisner elaborated this argument in his 1986 essay, "The Role of Discipline-Based Art Education in America's Schools," one of the foundational documents of DBAE, and has restated it many times since.

<sup>5</sup>I discuss the role of the grasp of aesthetic qualities in the process of thinking in "Aesthetic Experience and the Construction of Meanings" (Parsons, 2002).

and also as a symbol of the centralized authority of the French monarchy. Such works can be approached from diverse perspectives and lead the learner in several directions. "The understanding of a work of art," he says, "requires it to be grasped in relation to the social and cultural realms where it took form, and reciprocally ... helps the learner comprehend the social and cultural worlds it mirrors" (p. 166). Because of this, artworks can serve as attractive connecting points between school subjects.

An important learning here is dealing with the complexity of interpretation in general. Art is not unique in this respect, for other subjects, such as history and politics, are similarly interpretive and complex. But art has several educational advantages: it can be approached at an earlier age, is motivational, is concrete, and has sophisticated traditions of discussion and debate. These arguments lead to a version of an integrated curriculum in which selected works serve as central cognitive "landmarks."

The more general argument is that art is an "ill-structured domain," a notion that Efland takes from the work of Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich, & Anderson (1988). An "ill-structured domain"<sup>6</sup> is one where rules and generalizations are not very useful for understanding. In addition to the arts, there are, of course, others. Spiro, Feltovich, et al. were interested in the teaching of medicine at the university level, and business, law, history, also come to mind. It is better in such domains to teach for understanding through the study in depth of selected cases, because rules and generalizations will be misleading. Such cases should be chosen for their complexity and students should approach them several times, each time from a different direction.

It will be seen that, in terms of both curriculum and advocacy, Efland's strategy is the opposite of Eisner's. Instead of insisting that art is a discipline with its own central and distinctive idea, he dwells on what artworks share with other subjects and their varied interrelationships.

### What the Arts Teach

I have already said that Eisner and Efland agree on the role of media in art, but Eisner focuses on it more than Efland. One interesting discussion is about how artists interact with their medium. Artists, Eisner says, do not characteristically plan an artwork in detail before actually making it, as engineers might do. Instead, they remain alert to the way the medium itself affects the work as it evolves. There may be unexpected effects, better, worse, or just different from what was envisioned—what Eisner calls 'surprises'—and artists make adjustments in light of them. This interaction between the artist and the medium may well result in a modification of the original purpose and this, Eisner says, is an important learning in art—the ability intelligently to modify purposes as you go. He calls this, following Dewey, 'flexible purposing.'

An associated way to say this is that in art-making one has constantly to make judgments about "rightness of fit," i.e., by intuition and without the security of established rules. This includes judgments about purposes.

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<sup>6</sup>Sometimes, when he wants to stress the complexity of thinking about artworks rather than the absence of rules, Efland uses the phrase "complexly structured domain." This removes the somewhat pejorative associations of "ill-structured" and captures better the point he wants to make about artworks.

Eisner also identifies “making judgments in the absence of rules” as a major cognitive ability that the arts can teach.

There is an important central section in the book, titled “What the Arts Teach,” that discusses these and other habits of mind that the arts promote. It is an interesting argument and represents, perhaps, the renewed influence of John Dewey in Eisner’s thought. In any case, Eisner develops it with considerable persuasive power and authority. This section is likely, in my judgment, to be much quoted by advocates for the arts. It communicates well, and in this respect contrasts (again, in my opinion) with the aesthetic argument, which has never had much popular success as advocacy—i.e., with non-arts people.

But this is a different argument from the aesthetic one and it leads to an ambiguity in the structure of Eisner’s thought. On the one hand, as we have seen, he insists that the educational value of the arts lies in the unique contributions they make to thinking, principally the grasp of aesthetic qualities. On the other hand, it also lies in these habits of mind, some of which are of general value and are practiced in many domains. This is surely true of “flexible purposing” and “making judgments without rules.” They may be characteristic of the arts, but are also learned and valued in other domains, especially in the “ill-structured” ones. And one has to add that, defining which domains are “ill-structured” depends on how they are taught, for even art can be taught as a matter of rules.

Other items in this central section seem to be unique to the arts. “Framing the world from an aesthetic perspective” and “shaping form to create expressive content” seem to be arts-unique and to derive from the argument about the aesthetic. Other habits of mind on Eisner’s short list, however, such as “exercising imagination” and “transforming qualities of experience into speech and words,” fall between these two poles. I think it would be unpersuasive to assign them uniquely to learning in any one domain (and Eisner does not seem to want to do this).

The importance of this “habits of mind” argument is not just that it introduces ambiguities into the more traditional defense of the aesthetic. It is also that Eisner continues to want to maintain distance from two contentious proposals in art education. One is an integrated curriculum. The other is the popular assertion that the arts can help achievement in other school subjects and that we should use it in advocacy for the arts.<sup>7</sup> Eisner has written considerably on this topic. He argues both that the empirical research behind the assertion is far from conclusive and that, even if it were conclusive, it should not be the major argument for including the arts in the curriculum because it would distract attention from the aesthetic (e.g., Eisner, 1998). But to advance items like “flexible purposing” and “making judgments in the absence of rules” as what the arts teach is to throw doubt on these arguments. For we do not need empirical research to know that these are at home in other school subjects as well. Then, why not take advantage, as Efland suggests, of the resulting kinds of overlapping and reinforcement of learning?

<sup>7</sup> For example, the Secretary of Education published a commentary in *Education Week* (see Paige & Huckabee, 2005) in which he argues for the arts in school by appealing to their effects on achievement in other subjects. The commentary says, in part: “Research has shown that those who study the arts improve their achievement in other subjects, including mathematics, reading, and writing” and it goes on to summarize that research.

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### The Imagination

Efland develops one these habits of mind—"exercising imagination"—in a provocative way and accords it much more importance. He agrees with Eisner, who says in his brief discussion of the imagination that, "The arts provide a platform for seeing things in ways other than they are normally seen" (p.83). Efland elaborates on this, drawing on the discussions of metaphor in the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999; Lakoff, 1987). Metaphor, he says, following Lakoff and Johnson, is the basic cognitive movement that leads to seeing things differently, describing them newly, transcending common categories and creating new ones. Metaphor is therefore fundamental to mental life and to new thought in general. And it is particularly salient in the arts. Most metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson have argued, have their origin in bodily experiences (this makes it clear that metaphors are not restricted only to verbal expression). They are therefore tied to the senses and are essentially non-discursive in character; but they may be discursively elaborated—that is, they rely on qualitative similarities and not on the logic of categories and propositions. Examples are standing vertically as an expression of character (an "upright" person) or "grasping" a thought. Efland argues that metaphor is a basic structure in the arts and that the arts particularly, though not uniquely, cultivate metaphors (that is to say, the imagination).

They also cultivate a kind of critical self-awareness in the use of metaphors. Metaphors are used in all domains and parts of life, but they usually pass by unnoticed, or at least unexamined, and consequently they can control our thought in ways we are not aware of. Metaphors are the stuff of advertising and political campaigns, as well as of all kinds of intellectual thought. Only the conscious scrutiny of metaphors can free us from their power<sup>8</sup> and this scrutiny is the stuff of art. Where other domains employ metaphors, art focuses attention on them. It has established traditions that promote their creation and modes of discussion that critique them. In effect, to learn art is, at least in part, to learn to examine metaphors in a conscious way, to trace their connections, assess their character, and to think about their implications. Art therefore cultivates the critical awareness that gives us control of the metaphors we use everywhere in life. One might say the same of philosophy, of course, but art has been a more accessible (and a politically safer) place for the elaboration of new ideas and the criticism of old ones. Its traditional associations have made it, for many, a source of freedom in an unfree world.

In short, Efland develops the traditional topic of the imagination in a way that connects it with metaphor and the body, establishing it as clearly cognitive and close to the arts. This allows him both to recognize the concerns art shares with other subjects and also to suggest how it can promote and deepen thought about them. This will be especially effective when art is taught in an integrated curriculum.

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<sup>8</sup>Lakoff has recently written of the hidden persuasive power of metaphors in the politics of the United States. See his *Moral Politics* (1996).

### Conclusion

It is encouraging to see two major figures in art education addressing these issues and producing books of such quality. I wish they were required reading for all art educators. To read them together is to realize how complex the issues are, and how important. The issues have roots in many disciplines, including the psychology of learning and of art, the philosophy of mind and of art, the history of art, and various parts of contemporary theory, especially of a semiotic bent. These interact complexly and many of the concepts seem to slip and slide into each other (including the “aesthetic” and “metaphor”). No one can master all the relevant material and Eisner and Efland demonstrate that art educators have much to contribute to the discussion.

These books also make it clear how much hangs on how we believe the arts contribute to the growth of mind. If we had a persuasive consensus on this, the arts would have a stronger place in the schools. In the almost 50 years since the cognitive revolution, we have made much progress but there is still far to go. While it would be wrong to say that either Eisner or Efland has a final and satisfactory account of what we learn in the visual arts, we should be grateful that they have raised the issues in such fundamental yet accessible ways.

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