

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

One of the things I find the most intriguing about teaching art is simply trying to define what it is. One exercise I love to do with my students is to start off a course by asking them how they define art. Expectedly, I get a range of answers, although most of them are some variation of "a person expressing themselves", or "being creative". I then say OK, that all sounds reasonable, and proceed to show them two images, side by side, projected onto the board: *Madame Moitessier*, a portrait by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1851), and *Full Fathom Five*, a drip painting by Jackson Pollock (1949). I ask which painting is the better work of art. This tends to elicit a wide burst of responses, some in favor of the Ingres, some in favor of the Pollock, with a few angry "But I could do that!"s (referring to Pollock), and plaintive "But it's just a portrait"s (the Ingres) thrown in for good measure. I then ask which of the two images is more expressive, reminding them that this adjective was *their* baseline definition for art. This gets them thinking.

I believe that this (admittedly simplified) split in viewpoints speaks to the differences in how many people view not just the definition of art, but the proper approach to art education as well. Some art teachers prefer a more classical, traditional approach, teaching students the various techniques and steps to follow when working with a certain process or media. This may take the form of an exercise in two-point perspective, how to mix tints and shades of color, or the proper way to throw a bowl on the pottery wheel. Others teachers may prefer a more conceptual approach, assigning open-ended projects with no pre-determined form or outcome and letting students interpret them as they will. So which is better? Like most things in life, I think the answer lies somewhere in between.

Although my own philosophy of art has remained fundamentally unchanged since my days as an Art Ed student, observations gleaned from my first few years as a teacher have forced me to question the purpose of a secondary art education. Seeing multiple, large sections of freshman art classes condense into a single, smaller, senior-year Portfolio class has made me come to terms with a simple truth about high school art: only a small percentage of graduates actually go on to study art in college or become serious artists. Much in the same way that I have yet to use Calculus in my post-high school life, I imagine that most high school graduates are never confronted with having to remember which where to put the vanishing points, or how many heads tall the average person stands. They are, however, faced with a society that increasingly asks them to be more visually literate and sophisticated, more able to think critically about the information presented to them, and more able to think creatively and out-of-the-box.

This way of thinking about the courses I teach— that a given art class will just probably be the last art class the students in it ever take— has become the cornerstone of my philosophy. I strive to confront students with their own preconceptions and misconceptions about art, to educate them about where the art they see online and in museums comes from, and explain why the strange things they see in contemporary galleries look that way. I hope to help them see the beauty and benefits of having art in their lives, so that as adults they will become patrons and consumers of the arts. I challenge them to find new and innovative ways to solve a given problem, to fill in the purposefully empty blanks on the assignment sheet where they were perhaps expecting a proscribed step one, two, and three. I try and get them to look past the basic "how-to"s of a process and instead use art as a springboard to examine themselves and the world around them, to ask themselves who they are and what they one day hope to be. And I hope to inspire them to love art enough to keep studying it, to not make this art class their last art class, to one day be that student in the senior art class who has decided that art is too important a part of their life to have it end there.