



# How can we authentically develop a child's creativity through an “artistic workshop”?

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## Reference

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## Abstract

Through the first decade of the 21st century, “artistic” workshops that adopt the Interactive Appreciation Method proposed by Amelia Arenas, who worked at MoMA as specialized staff for the Museum Education Program from 1984 to 1996, prevailed in elementary art education in Japan. These workshops were timely for both elementary schools that have been led to utilize local art museums by newly revised “Curriculum Guidance” and for art museums that have been impelled to increase their visitors. However, despite a title that uses “artistic,” we can see from a basic aesthetic point of view that these workshops contain a problematic point in regard to their way of proceeding with dialogue between teacher and student, but this problematic point has been overlooked, at least in Japan.

## Keywords

Workshop, aesthetic communication, appreciation education

## Introduction

Since Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi had identified children as having a productive nature (in Latin, *natura naturans*), Western education programs have sought to develop the inherent creativities of children. In addition, as we can see in Friedrich Fröbel's “Gifts,” such creativities have been developed during the course of aesthetic plays focusing on color, shapes, and numbers. Through the last half of the 19th century, when Japan westernized itself in haste, Japan also introduced this kind of educational thought, especially into its elementary art education. On the other hand, its general education program was designed under the influence of Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism and utilitarianism through the direction of the first Japanese Minister of Education, Mori Arinori. In those days, Japan, as well as other modernized countries, was striving to become a modernized nation.

The United States of America also had remarkable influence on the official Japanese education program after Japan's defeat in WWII. Even in the 1990s, this influence was still strong in the field of art education, where its main method moved from aesthetic plays to debates on eminent artwork. I feel that it was a very significant moment when Japanese elementary art education left behind the original goal of developing a child's aesthetic creativity. In this paper, I first explain the cause and result of this change, then show its problem in relation to a child's creativity from a basic aesthetic viewpoint, and finally I try to propose a necessary correction for today's form of Japanese elementary art education.



## 1. A brief history of Japanese elementary art education after WWII

The influence of the United States on the Japanese education program was considerable after the end of WWII. Since then, the Japanese Ministry of Education (it is now called the “Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology”) has established several “Curriculum Guidelines,” which are not laws but that entail authority that is almost legal. The first “Curriculum Guideline” was put into effect in 1947, where it cut out moral science, geography, and national history from the mandatory subjects. Needless to say, both moral science and national history entailed the risk of recalling past feudalism that placed utmost importance on the Japanese emperor, with geography provoking the ambition of expansionism in a defeated nation.

As for elementary art education, the first guideline continually posed “zuga kousaku,” a Japanese word that means “drawing and manual training.” Then, the guideline assigned the three goals of zuga kousaku: to cultivate an ability to observe and represent natural or artificial objects, to cultivate an ability to make useful or beautiful objects in domestic or school life, and to cultivate an ability to understand and appreciate practical objects or artwork. Here, we can find the old influence of European education practices that mixed romantic viewpoints regarding children and the tradition of a vocation program. It aimed to develop a child’s sensibility for the beautiful while playing the role of acting as a preparatory course for intellectual manufacturing.

The repartition of these two aspects of elementary art education has varied in each version of the “Curriculum Guidelines” reflecting economic circumstances. After the war, the more that Japan achieved economical growth, the more emphasis was placed on the romantic viewpoint regarding a child’s aesthetic creativity. In 1980, when Japan was culminating in its economical power, a new version of the “Curriculum Guideline” set the goal of zuga kousaku as “to cultivate a rich moral sentiment through experiencing the pleasure of self-expression, and to develop the basic ability for plastic creation through activities of expression and appreciation” (Curriculum Guidelines are originally published in Japanese and I translated in English for this presentation). Still, these two aspects determined the goal of Japanese elementary art education and competed with one another until 1998, the very year of Emperor Hirohito’s death, when a newly revised “Curriculum Guideline” added a sentence to the article regarding zuga kousaku. Further, this little additional sentence eventually caused little change. Instead of the old guidelines, which referred to the appreciation of artwork as “training for appreciation (...) must be pursued with the training of expression in principle,” the new one added the sentence “training for appreciation (...) must be pursued by utilizing local art museums according to the actual condition of children and the school.”

This new guideline established in 1998 was put into effect in 2002, when Japanese public museums were undergoing a serious change. The Act on the Transformation of National Museums into Independent Administrative Corporations, which was put into effect in 2001, established an independent accounting system for national museums to carry forward budgets into the next fiscal year without any compensation by the government. It meant that even a national museum with increasing debt had to take the risk of bankruptcy. We can see the result of this change in a magazine named, DOME, whose main readers are the directors and curators of art museums. Shortly after the beginning of this magazine in 1992, we can find many articles that identified the appreciation of artwork with “reading.” At that time, the Japanese art world began to embrace new art theories, such as Iconology and New Art History. These theories asked the viewer of artwork not only to look simply but to interpret with a reflective attitude in order to educe the messages or cultural codes. In fact, there was, in the first issue of DOME, a proposition that a “child’s appreciation presumes their positive tendency for investigation”(Maeda, 1992:16); or in its 7th issue published in 1993, a sentence that says “reading paintings (...) that is a form of dialogue with them”(Kamon, 1993:8). In one point of view, this reflective attitude toward artwork prepared the following change by putting aesthetic values aside, stressing intellectual “reading.” From the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, when a revision of the “Curriculum Guideline” tended to connect elementary schools to local art museums, and when the transformation of national museums impelled them to



increase their visitors, there arose a need for an easier mode of appreciation suitable for every school child. It demanded, I think, neither keen sensibilities for an artwork's aesthetic aspects nor intellectual reflection while "reading" it.

From July 1998 to March 1999, an exhibition titled "Why is it Art?" traveled around Japanese art museums, including Toyota City Museum, Kawamura Memorial Museum, and Mito Art Center. A woman, who worked at MoMA as specialized staff for the Museum Education Program from 1984 to 1996, engaged in the planning of this exhibition. In fact, this woman, Amelia Arenas, came to Mito Art Center in 1995 and gave a speech and a long-running seminar about her Interactive Appreciation Method for artwork. In teaching art appreciation, for her, artwork cultural codes, which require deciphering and a certain knowledge of art history and aesthetics, were not less intrusive for children than political propaganda, commercial advertising, or moral lessons. Arenas released children from this kind of knowledge and encouraged the facing of artwork with innocent eyes. She said:

Knowledge about the history or technique of art is useful only for those who have questions about them (...). Consciously or not, an interpretation of art begins with the mysterious imagery evoked upon the conscious encounter with images, and it is mixed with inherent or acquired sense, emotion, and thought. (Arenas, 2001:164)

Further, she said:

Art is not in artworks at the beginning, but it is a strange psychological phenomena that happens between things and human beings (...). It happens always when we give special attention to something from both sides of sense and intellect. (Arenas, 2001:40)

Through the first decade of the 21st century, her Interactive Appreciation Method of art connected the elementary schools that were seeking a manageable way of utilizing art museums with the art museums that were striving to increase visitors. Today, many Japanese art museums and galleries hold workshops as a part of the art classes of elementary schools, adopting this method. In addition, these workshops are, of course, entitled "artistic."

In presenting this newly introduced method, the magazine DOME began to encourage the freely-thought interpretation of artwork by viewers. Its 48th issue, published in 2000, featured articles on appreciation education at art museums defining the goal as to "draw various viewpoints from viewers including children"(anon., 2000a:29) and to "set up the viewers to communicate with their images though dialogue" (anon., 2000a:29), as "viewers can discover the meaning of works of art by themselves" (anon., 2000b:16) and can "build up personal imagery by rotating the images of art in their mind" (anon., 2000c:9).

## **2. Analysis of the interactive appreciation method of artwork**

These kinds of workshops are called "Arenas method" and are clearly distinguished from gallery talks in which a teacher or art historian offers information about art to students. Without any captions, the teacher holds dialogue regarding some particular artwork with students, such as "why did you think so?" and "gee, it is interesting!" Here, the teacher should not correct the student's answer even when it seems to be wrong. Rather, he or she has to maintain their dialogue as a facilitator by asking questions, such as "what?" "how?" or "why?" and must try to develop a student's experience of appreciation. Therefore, a teacher's questions must not be ad-hoc but must anticipate a student's answer and, to some extent, the end point of the dialogue.

Arenas herself shows an example of this dialogue held regarding a wood cut print made in the 18th century by Japanese printmaker, Suzuki Harunobu (Figure 1). She says:

Upon seeing this picture, some fourth-grade students from New York thought that she was preparing to attend a Halloween party (...). A student who did not think this image showed a mirror (...) said that she waved goodbye to one of her friends walking in front of her room, and she saw her through a round window on the wall (...). It is obvious that the interpretations of these children are wrong (...). But, we can understand exactly what they saw by reading these words. (Arenas, 2001:132-4)



Figure 1. Suzuki Harunobu, Seirou Bijin Awase (1770). A page from book of wood cut prints published in 5 volumes whose title means "Collected Portrait from the Yoshiwara courtesans". 27.0 x 18.2 cm.



From this last phrase, we can see that Arenas turned her attention from the artwork itself to a child's way of seeing it. She also says, "Art appreciation nurtures the ability of observation, then the ability to bring observations together systematically into thought, and then the power to express thought with words" (Arenas, 2001:151).

Here, we can find the ambiguity that the pioneers of modern education, such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and even Dewey, have experienced regarding art education. In *Emile*, Rousseau wrote that "All children in the course of their endless imitation try to draw; and I would have Emile cultivate this art; not so much for art's sake, as to give him exactness of eye and flexibility of hand" (Rousseau, 1762/1957:108). To cultivate a child's sensibility was surely the goal of art education, but it was not the last one. Its last goal was to develop this cultivated sensibility into an intelligence with which children became talented engineers or scientists.

In my point of view, the advantage of this method in this direction should be examined. This kind of workshop sets its goal as maintaining dialogue between a teacher and their students. Students put into words what they observed and how they felt about it, and the teacher has to interpret these words in order to put another question to them. Interaction is mediated by words, whatever the first impression students might have. Therefore, at a basic level of sensibility, it happens that no one can be sure that some word exactly expresses a given quality. For example, when a student expresses his or her impression of color, such as "reddish-green," as Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested, a teacher's reaction is only to correct this incorrect use of words or to praise it as unique expression, but he or she can never know what color that student saw. This is why, as we can guess from the answer of a student who saw a "woman waving goodbye to one of her friends," the teacher asks to students rather what they saw than how they saw it. An article from the *Smithsonian Magazine* provides a good illustration of this. It says that the New York Police Department introduced this kind of workshop for its police officers. Officers gathered in front of a painting at the Metropolitan Museum and discussed what was painted on it. It reported that the NYPD found this workshop very effective in helping them to objectively describe the scene of a crime or the appearance of a suspect to their colleagues, and that one of the graduates of this workshop said that, "Instead of telling my people that the guy who keeps looking into one parked car after another is dressed in black (...), I might say he's wearing a black wool hat, a black leather coat with black fur trim, a black hoodie sweatshirt and



Timberlands” (Hirschfeld, 2009:4). In this article, we can see that this method certainly develops one’s attention and ability to express what one sees with common, if not mediocre, words and that it does not cultivate police officers’ sensibility at any rate. Timberland boots are not other than “Timberlands boots” even if there one can see an aesthetic feature.

The dialogue is apt to neglect an impression from a truly aesthetic aspect of art, as it is often unable to express it in words. A sincere attempt to identify what kind of impression is expressed in a child’s words would stop the dialogue. Thus, we can easily expect that a smart student who wants to please his or her teacher will answer riddles, but this has nothing to do with his or her sensibility. The problem is that: the dialogue between the students and the teacher are consistently conveyed by words, that we cannot confirm whether these words truly reflect the student’s sensibility, and that the teacher’s decision to continue or stop the dialogue depends on his or her language-based judgment of the student’s reply. If a teacher judges that there is no meaning in the expression “reddish-green,” the dialogue with the student who uses this expression comes to an end.

On the other hand, as we know, Immanuel Kant has already claimed that aesthetic judgment is free from any concept. In his Critique of Judgement, Kant says:

the judgement of taste is simply contemplative, i. e., it is a judgement which is indifferent as to the existence of an object, and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. But not even is this contemplation itself directed to concepts; for the judgement of taste is not a cognitive judgement (neither a theoretical one nor a practical), and hence, also, is not grounded on concepts, nor yet intentionally directed to them. (Kant, 1790/2007:41)

In addition, for Kant, this impossibility of conveying an aesthetic judgment using concepts assures its autonomy and difference from cognitive or moral judgment. Therefore, at least in developing a child’s sensibility, the “artistic” workshops held in Japan adopting the Interactive Appreciation Method inevitably seem to fall into a paradox by asking students what they see. If they affirm that an aesthetic judgment cannot be grounded on concepts according to Kant, they have to radically change their methodology. Or, if they contest that their stake is not aesthetic judgment but a judgment that can be conveyed by concept, there is no necessity to hold this kind of workshop at art museums and to call it “artistic.” Any type of object, such as flowers or PCs, could be appreciated.

## Conclusion

It is obvious that this paradox into which Japanese elementary art education falls stems from the ambiguous coexistence of the two goals of art education itself. As we have seen before, such education tried to offer an occasion to develop a child’s creativity as well as a vocation program to train their aptitude for industry. Of course, the focus of the latter aspect of new art education differs from that of the old one. While the old one focused on an old manufacturing industry that demanded an exact movement of the hands, the new one focuses on a new service industry that demands an ability to talk. If we estimate seriously the importance of art in society, we should distinguish those two aims and limit the goal of art education to develop a child’s aesthetic sensibility. It does not mean that we would have to identify elementary art education as something higher for training professional artists. Already in 1879, Alexander Bain, who was a psychologist questioning Herbert Spencer’s education theory, wrote in his book as follows:

There can be little doubt that one way of attaining to Art-Emotion, is to become an artist (...). But a wide view must be taken of the cultivation of the feeling for Art; only a few are artists, the rest enjoy the works produced by these. It is considered desirable that people generally should not merely have access to performances and treasures of Art, but should be taught, or in some way assisted, to reap the full pleasure that these are fitted to afford. (Bain, 1879/1896:426)

On the other hand, it is true that art for which we have recognized as having a high value has lost its charm in the eyes of children today. If video games or TV shows have more attraction for children than the great masterpieces in art museums, it is rather the adults including contemporary artists who have to change the recognition of what actually is art, and we must rethink what kind of object could provide children with the joyful experience of developing their sensibility regarding aesthetic qualities.



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