

Why Do We Need an Art Academy?

My father left school at the age of 15 and went to work on the railways. When he was 18, he was conscripted into the Army, and although he didn't enjoy it, said this was where he received a formal education in Maths and English. He re-joined the railways two years later, became a train driver and started a family.

As his eldest son, I realised growing up that we were very similar in many ways, we enjoyed humour, travel and talking politics, yet unlike him I was not interested in driving trains or the long hours of shift work that went with it. I was a daydreamer, with my mind detached from the realities of life. Instead of an environment surrounded by metal and diesel, I enjoyed painting and looking at the work of the great artists of the past. I was very fortunate amongst my peers as my father encouraged my artistic interests and helped pay for me to go to university, so that I could deepen my knowledge further by studying the theory and practice of art.

When I eventually graduated, there was high unemployment in our region and my work prospects looked bleak. I remember complaining to my parents about how hard-up I was and that the future seemed depressing. It was then that my father said something I have never forgotten; 'you may be poor in money, but you are rich in culture'. These words have stayed with me ever since, because this statement cuts to the heart of what an art education is really all about. An art education may not necessarily provide us with financial wealth, but it will always offer enrichment in the way we see the world. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have studied the liberal arts at an academy are especially blessed, as we carry that around with us for the rest of our lives. We have gained an enhanced understanding of ourselves and our societies through the art and literature previous generations have left behind.

Art has an ancient history which we can still find preserved in many remote and hidden landscapes. We can visit the 'Cave of Swimmers' of the Gilf Kebir plateau in the Libyan Desert, which dates back 10,000 years, the Wandjina figure paintings of Kimberley in Western Australia which are 17,000 years old, or the Lascaux cave paintings which were painted some 20,000 years ago. They display images of people, animals and cultures we will never know, yet they speak to us today and are united in carrying one universal message: "Like you, we also lived". This tells us something else, that like us, they had a desire to leave a mark which lives on past the inevitability of their death.

Just as these early examples of art are hidden away from view in enigmatic locations, there is one core truth to being a creative person, which at first glance also appears to be held as an elusive, well-kept secret. It is a secret that only slowly begins to reveal itself if you look carefully at the possessions you own and the things you value; it is that all creative acts are essentially an expression of love. Because

when any of us chooses to truly engage with making something, then we choose to make it with tenderness, in the hope that others will emotionally connect with what we offer of ourselves.

Our wish to express the nature of our lived experience to other people we do, and do not know, stretches beyond written history through the enduring traditions of music, dance, painting and the spoken word. Through these acts it becomes possible to transmit aspects of our lives to others we will never meet. This love, the love involved in creativity, is not a love of lovers but a love of humanity, of the desire to connect to a universal sensitivity which lies within us all. In his 1978 book, *The Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck describes a belief that 'true' love is an act we undertake to consciously expand the boundaries of our ego. In doing so we begin to include others into our sphere, and this can be directed towards oneself, as well as towards one's beloved, which frames love as an expansive act of spiritual nurturing and inclusion.

Peck's idea appears to align closely with the Greek concept of 'arete', which is located around the notion of how we find ways to live life to its fullest potential, and become the best versions of ourselves that we can be. It is a concept Robert M. Pirsig began to explore in his 1974 fictionalised autobiography, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. In this book, Pirsig writes about a 17-day motorcycle ride from Minnesota to California. The primary character is an unnamed narrator who we identify as Pirsig, who takes the trip with his son Chris. For the first 9 days of their journey, they are accompanied by their close family friends, John and Sylvia Sutherland. The interrelationship of these four people, the maintenance of the motorbikes, and the trip itself, are used by Pirsig as a metaphor. The narrator discusses John and Sylvia's aversion to technology, which he aligns with a 'romantic' approach to life which values surface impressions over rational analysis. The narrator by contrast is viewed as more analytical, being described as 'classic'. In this way, the different facets of subjective and objective philosophical approaches to living are explored by Pirsig. He seeks to develop his own ideas around how people might live an expansive life through the adoption of what he termed, a 'Metaphysics of Quality'.

Early in his career, Pirsig had worked as an English teacher at Montana State College. While he was there, he began to notice that he and his fellow tutors were under a legal contract to teach 'quality' to their students, yet 'quality' itself had not been clearly defined by the college. This led Pirsig to trace back the history of the term 'quality' so that he might find a concise definition of it. Ultimately, this led him to the ancient Greek philosophers and more specifically, to Plato.

What Pirsig came to see was that quality, beauty, truth and virtue had originally been intertwined concepts which were located in the term 'arete'. For the ancient Greeks 'arete' could simultaneously mean 'goodness', 'excellence' and 'virtue' in any given field. But this was not just a term confined to people, it could also be applied to ideas as diverse as the excellence of a chimney, or the superior quality of a bull for breeding. Typically 'excellence' here appears to be aligned to a belief in supreme effectiveness in the actions of people and things. For example, a warrior who has been brave in battle, an athlete who is strong in competition or a scholar who is clever in argument, might all be considered

to possess 'arete'. By extension, the Greeks believed those who were triumphant in their actions and possessed 'arete' held virtue or 'moral superiority'. Plato himself believed 'arete' was something hard to define, saying, 'Nor is there even an agreement about what constitutes arete, something that leads logically to a disagreement about the appropriate training for arete.'

Pirsig used *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, to explore these ideas in depth and concluded that the modern western concept of 'quality', originated in Plato's division of the human soul into differing aspects of 'reason' and 'emotion', with reason, for Plato, having a primary place over emotion. Reason, Pirsig believed, occupies the same sphere in the West as objectivity and logic, being backed by scientific rationality and located specifically outside of the realm of the individual. Whilst emotion on the other hand is viewed as creative, imaginative and located unambiguously in the self, being ultimately non-rational. This, Pirsig argues, is an artificial separation initiated by Plato which has led to much unhappiness and disharmony in the world. In proposing his concept of a 'Metaphysics of Quality', Pirsig sought to establish a new way of thinking which would unify both the objective and the subjective within the self, where both of these stand for truth.

With Pirsig's help we can see today that notions of truth are divided into subjective and objective factions. Subjective truth is widely presented as good and aligned with liberal politics, whilst objective truth is largely viewed as being associated with right wing political thinking, and the suppression of the individual. We have witnessed this most acutely in the rise of intersectional politics, and the growing dominance of identity hierarchies within the cultural arena. This belief system has seen artists drawn to identify themselves as a member of a discriminated group first, and speaking to that (and only that) second as a way to see their work programmed. This ideology is located in liberalism, which is formed on the identification of the suffering of the individual at the hands of the state. In art we see this expressed in historical works such as; *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* by Édouard Manet, *The Third of May 1808* by Francisco Goya, Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* and in Nick Ut's 1972 Vietnam war photograph, *Trang Bang after a South Vietnamese Air Force Napalm Attack*. What we notice when looking at these pictures is that we tend to identify personally with the distress of the subject. Their pain metaphorically becomes our pain. This is in part because of the way the images are composed, with the main character being the focus of the core narrative around which all the other components revolve. In their suffering, the subjects gain a voice of moral authority, which echoes through the rest of society.

I believe that in focusing on ideas around the suffering of individuals (which has strangely been promoted by the establishment) we are currently seeing art go through a reductive phase. In 21st century Western democracies, we are witnessing the promotion of art where the artist has to identify themselves as a part of a cultural sub-group, and then make art only about being part of that sub-group. This is reductive, and we have had to pay an artistic price for this, and that price is the removal of beauty, hope and wonder. As a practice, it focuses entirely on the subjective and in doing so belittles both the artist and the audience, as it removes the opportunity to imagine yourself in someone else's place.

Like Pirsig, maybe we can see that both subjective and objective truth can co-exist in harmony, where subjective truth is located in our own experiences of the world while objective truth lies outside the experiences of any one individual, yet is fundamentally a part of it. This would involve an acknowledgment on our part that life is fundamentally a duality which we can choose to accept. And perhaps if we do, we acquire a sense of 'being' in the world where life is experienced as balance and perhaps sometimes even harmony.

Our experience of 'being' alive in the world naturally creates a conflict between our 'lived experience' and what we might consider to be the hard facts of reality which exist outside of ourselves. For example, like everyone else, I experience myself only in the moment of now, and know that as I get older my body will slow down, deteriorate and eventually die. Death is an inevitable objective truth which exists outside of ourselves, it is something which we cannot stop. Exploring the intersection of these two concepts, the way our inner reality navigates its meeting with external reality is, I would argue, expansive, and the realm of the true artist. It is a series of meditations on our emotional responses to the inevitable, unstoppable objective realities as they apply pressure on our subjective realities.

Arete offers us an intersection where the terms 'quality', 'truth' and 'beauty' meet. As we know, concepts around quality, truth and beauty are experienced at both the subjective and objective level. Scientists are primarily focused on exploring the world from an objective position, seeking to deepen our understanding of the world from a rational and impartial perspective. Creative people are the opposite, they are students of the liberal arts and therefore primarily focused on exploring life as it is experienced from the personal, subjective viewpoint. Where I think art becomes really interesting is when that experience is applied to a meditation on universal and rational concepts, examples of which might include Mark Rothko's Seagram paintings, which contemplate the unknowingness of the eternal void, Vija Celmins's 'Night Sky' series which study of the vastness of the cosmos, or Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, which express the enduring condition of pain and suffering as a universal part of the human experience. I believe this is where arete lives today.

When we encounter something bigger than ourselves it encourages us to be our best, to strive to be better in the world, to offer up the best version of ourselves to others. This does not mean we necessarily make financial wealth for ourselves. No one ever meets a poet and thinks here is someone out to make a fortune, live in a mansion and drive a Porsche, there is something else at play, something much bigger. Artists seek to create cultural wealth. It is an exploration of our humanity, as we experience it across countries, cultures and millennia. The role of the art academy is to help nurture the next generation of artists and historians, to help them learn to make connections to previous generations and different cultures, as well as each other today. This makes art at its best an expansive practice, one which reaches out to all people in a holistic way, a way which embraces our common humanity.

In the tale of the journey to California in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Pirsig identifies himself as logical, while John and Sylvia Sutherland are cast as the romantic characters. While they occupy different sides of the objective and subjective divide, what they all shared together was a motorcycle road trip across America.

My father is 83 years old now, he retired from working on the railways 20 years ago. Today, one of the things I enjoy most in life is when we take a train journey together.

Robert Priseman, 20th October, 2021