

Beginning the Way of the Arts

by Donald W. Mathews

Introduction:

Something has moved you as an adult to begin creative expression again. As a spontaneous child you once sang, danced and made images instinctively. You also probably imagined yourself living many different roles in your daily play. Perhaps now you feel the absence of creativity in your life. Perhaps you remember the pleasure of an art experience. Whatever the cause, *trust the process* of the subtle push toward the arts and creative expression from inside you -- it is the gentle call of your heart and renewed search for soul. It is an opening to expansion of your expressive abilities and the discovery of hidden limitations ready to be challenged. Be open to what it means, it has many possibilities for action in every part of your life. Ultimately it will lead to significant personal changes -- to living life in a new way with new tools of creative expression.

This call is a mysterious awakening to new growth and development coming from your psyche over and over again throughout your life. It comes appropriately as you finish one phase and are ready for another. We know the patterns although each individual has their own timing. Perhaps you are aware others (mother, father, family, school peers, cultural groups, professional groups, etc.) really

What is art?

Art is any conscious human expression using sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements that arouses strong contemplation and the delight or pleasure of feelings. I use art in the larger sense as the whole fine arts spectrum of painting, drawing, writing, acting, music, dance, etc. The arts stimulate and affect us! This is true for the artist and others who share the effort in some way. It doesn't seem to matter if the stimulated feeling is joyful or sorrowful. Often it is the shared experience that seems to inspire us, to transcend our separateness and expand the richness of our lives. It is when we feel the pleasure of this inseparable bond with something or someone else that we feel a spiritual connection.

The artist is an expert in feeling and responding to the subtle inner process known as the muse or Muses. The Greeks identified nine different Goddesses as the Muses under Apollo -- the God of light, music, divination, poetry, and medicine. The Muses were young virgins with particular expertise who dwelled in springs of pure mountain water and who had the power of inspiration and prophecy. Likewise, flowing from the wellspring of our own feelings and emotions are virginal or original creative inspiration and answers from our deeper self in response to what ever questions we may ask. However, the answer or prophecy always requires imagination for interpretation since it generally travels as metaphor or is hidden in the mystery of our artistic expression and its content.

Emotional reactions to sensory input (five senses plus intuition) provide feelings of both attraction and repulsion to guide personal contemplation and expression in the arts. Creative expression is a gateway to self discovery and understanding of the hidden content or mysteries of life. Contemplation of our artistic works provides honest direction for our life action from our soul. Thus the Muses provide divine guidance and ultimately leads us into full participation with all life and its evolution.

The Craft -- Visual Arts

References:

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain -- Betty Edwards

The Natural Way to Draw -- Kimon Nicolaides

The Zen of Seeing -- Frederick Frank

Art as a Way -- Frederick Frank

Paintings of Henry Miller -- Paint as you like and die happy Edited by Noel Young

The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher creativity-- Julia Cameron

Material:

A soft lead pencil (Ebony)

A box of crayons

A child's paint box

A clip board

8 1/2" x 11" copier paper (1 ream)

11" x 14" multi-purpose art paper (1 pad)

Masking tape

An empty photographic slide frame or similar cardboard cutout

The Craft -- Subject & Content:

The subject is often the conscious outer focus of something with many deeper layers of hidden content. Subject is the handle or door to content both conscious and unconscious that has the motivating factor of mystery. There are two approaches to finding a subject or image to illustrate. One way is to randomly work or doodle using the elements of craft until a recognizable image comes forward out of the chaos. It helps to turn emerging work in different directions until a recognizable form or subject triggers the imagination. This is much like finding recognizable forms in clouds or other natural objects -- it is a wonderful screen for our unconscious to provide form. Chance often plays a significant part in this dance allowing the person to get outside of normal interests or subjects.

However at the beginning, most artists have some kind of idea or image in mind as a starting point that holds their interest. Master artists often use a combination of these two approaches -- having learned to follow loosely a subtle subject, interest or idea with curiosity until content has enough energy to demand hard personal work. At some point, the mature artist generally wants to shift motivation from external to internal or personal rewards of creativity. To always slave to a tyrant of outer accomplishment ultimately kills off motivation and the creative muse. The difficult discipline of the arts is best fed by personal motivation and internal rewards as every educator knows -- thus it is important to be clear with one's goals and purposes. Mature artists do not become discouraged by lack of skill, rather they respond with the challenge to learn and expand their skills and interests. It is an interesting dichotomy of the arts -- although the artist is frequently creating an illusion or communicating subjectively, the artist is also trying to objectify something personally meaningful but very intangible at the beginning.

The Craft -- Drawing:

There are three classic approaches to drawing: contour, gesture, and analytical methods. Eventually all three are incorporated by an artist when drawing. The main idea however is to connect the eye as a visual sensor to the hand as the tool of expression without hindrance or distortion from the mind. (Although later, paradoxically, distortions of the mind's filters reveal interesting personal styles that make art interesting!) Using the left/right model of brain function, both hemispheres are called upon for use to capture inner and outer representation. This is learning representation with its inherent accuracy.

Drawing -- Contour:

In contour, the sense of touch is connected to the sense of sight in order to map the surface detail of subjects. It is the most accurate method of seeing a subject and proves the innate ability of any person to make true representational images. This is the method:

1. Fix paper to table or board with tape.
2. Determine area of subject's composition to be investigated.
3. Observe proportional area on paper to give the mind rough limits of scale.
4. Let your eye come to rest on the subject and locate your pencil on the paper in the same relative place. (This is the last time you will look at the paper and helps eliminate self-criticism.)
5. Relax with a full breath in and out and let the focus of your eye be on the starting point somewhere on the surface of the subject. (Begin to let your intuition decide where to start.)

6. Imagine you are becoming smaller and smaller until you are a microbe on the surface of the subject -- move your pencil slightly to feel the surface of the paper -- imagine it is the surface of the subject you are touching. Feel the textures present.
7. With the concentration of your mind and your eye together on the surface of the subject - - begin your journey with your eye and pencil moving together over the texture of the terrain without lifting the pencil from the paper. *Move only when your eye and mind are together* -- otherwise stop and reconnect them before going on. Do not be in a hurry. Forget you are drawing and be fully present with the subject.
8. Follow whatever path (contour) appears interesting, including those contours that are at the edge of the form (outline). You may retrace your route or always find a new path along the surface. See how long you can remain in this relaxed contemplative state.

Drawing -- Gesture:

In gesture, we are concerned with the inner essence or life of the subject rather than the surface or shape. The idea is to move the hand and eye so rapidly in a relaxed non-thinking way that it automatically follows the spontaneous intuitive expression of the subject. It is an expression of the action of the subject, not a picture of it. It feels like the gesture used in writing your name. Gesture provides the sense of life of the subject and is usually the basis of other more objective drawing. It is also called scribble drawing because it normally doesn't give a good representation or likeness of the subject. Once again it is important to keep your eye on the subject and not on the drawing. Drawing time is measured in seconds as a burst of energy.

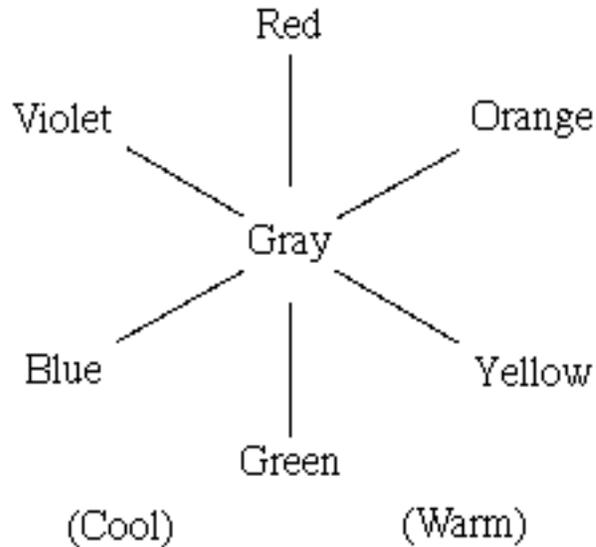
Drawing -- Analytical drawing:

Analytical drawing uses many objective methods and concepts. It also introduces composition in making art. For the artist, composition is more about the relationship of the space around the subject (negative space or “ground”) compared to the space within the form of the subject or subjects (positive space or “figure”). Since the artist is working within a bounded drawing surface, all forms are important like the pieces of a puzzle in order to arrive at a particular expression of the artist.

This wholeness concept is referred to as the gestalt -- a unified physical, psychological, or symbolic configuration having properties that cannot be derived from its parts. It is essential to realize that within our own unique choice of subject and composition as an artist lies the hidden mystery of our own human content -- of our own deeper unconscious. The forces (feelings) of attraction or repulsion indicate what has energy for each of us and can lead to the expression of a personally meaningful art piece. This is often quite different than styles set by culture, where what is attracting or distracting is measured by the society. Of course it is possible that what is appealing to many is what is also important to us individually. But to grow as an artist, we must develop our own inner reference expressing our own inner mysteries. This takes time.

We all have experience with cameras where we convert three-dimensional reality to two-dimensional pictures. Intuitively we adjust the image until it fits us. Thus we make composition. The empty photographic slide frame or similar cardboard cutout allows us to become aware of compositional choices. It is a cheap and wonderful way to envision life subjects and their relative images. Notice how the mind easily converts the image so you can more accurately see the picture. Literally reproducing what the eye engages reveals how much the mind usually intercedes in this process. We really have to relearn the art of seeing when we begin the way of the arts!

The Craft -- Color:



Colors of the rainbow (Hues) conveniently appear in a clockwise circle as shown in opposite pairs that mix to gray (red-green, orange-blue, etc.). This circle also illustrates relationship of the three primary colors (red, yellow, blue), and three secondary colors (orange, green, violet) that evolve

by mixing neighboring primary colors. Complimentary colors are neighbors. When mixed they provide a harmony of colors more and more complex without turning gray or muddy as do the opposites (blue-green, red-orange, etc.). Notice some colors are warm while others are cool giving many color possibilities to reflect feelings and ideas of an artistic expression. Blends of opposite colors also provide complex gray colors toward one or the other polarity of cool or warm.

Value is an important element and is the relative quality of light or dark from white (high) to black (low). Since color hues do not approach these extremes, we introduce white and black to our color field. White mixed with other colors provides tints (pale pastels). Black mixed with other colors provides shades.

I believe this brief theory is all a person needs to enter the artist's world of color -- the rest comes from experience, lots and lots of experience! In reality, when mixing various pigments from color manufacturers, the colors do not behave as theoretically outlined so one must spend some time playing with the materials to build a personal pallet of color expression. Don't forget the colors that put you off!

One can begin with a simple child's watercolor box or purchase some water based pigments. Traditional watercolors are transparent and remain soluble in water to a certain degree. Traditionally white comes from the paper and calls for planning to achieve certain images. Acrylic paints turn to plastic when dry and can be used as opaque paints to cover or change color using a little polymer medium to thin to a sensuous mix. Although the colors may not be as rich as oils, the quick drying quality and lack of odor are very convenient. When thinned a lot with water, acrylics handle very much like watercolors.

The Craft -- Painting:

With painting, we are dealing with major surface areas rather than the linear aspect of line as used in drawing. In both cases we normally are trying to create a three-dimensional realm using a two-dimensional approach, although the modern school typically accepts two-dimensionally as the primary idea. In the beginning, do not be too concerned about form or shape details -- just see the relative relationship of major areas that make up the complete surface of the painting as interlocking puzzle pieces that form a whole picture. Once the major shapes are set out, they can be reformed and refined as often as necessary using the opaque quality of the paint until they take on the required form to convey the illusion of the painted realm. With traditional watercolors, the white of the paper is frequently used as a fixed primary form thus creating a challenge in planning for the artist. Since the color is generally not opaque, selected detail can be added using line or layered form to organize the emerging image. And of course, there are no limits to use of mixed media. Anything goes beyond the creative edge!