



FUTURE SCHOOL

Circular 3

For Teachers, Staff and Friends

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Art and Education

What is Art? The appreciation of beauty

Mother and Sri Aurobindo never applied a rigid definition to the word Art. At times, it is clear from their conversations and prose that they were referring specifically to painting on canvas. At others, they included other pursuits such as poetry, music and sculpture. On one occasion, Mother went further still. She said, “I believe that all those who produce something artistic are artists!” This included the skilled topiarists of Japan. ¹ The key was to understand the purpose of an activity. If its intention was to reveal beauty then it was art. “True art,” said Mother, “means the expression of beauty in the material world.”² “True painting,” she said, “aims at creating something more beautiful than the ordinary reality.”³ Her words echoed Sri Aurobindo’s. In 1933, he said art could only be judged “by its revelation or discovery of Beauty. Whatever is capable of being manifested as Beauty, is the material of the artist.”⁴ A decade before that, he said, by “art – I mean the appreciation of beauty pure and simple, without the sensual grasping at the object... The true artist has always the pure love of beauty – free and impersonal.”⁵ “Art as the “appreciation of beauty pure and simple;” was something of great importance to Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Sometimes they referred to the appreciation of the beautiful as aesthetic culture and discussed the need for everyone, adults and children, to develop it. One obvious way was by encouraging the sorts of pursuits mentioned here, such as painting.

¹ CWM Vol 5, p 324

² CWM Vol 12 p 233

³ CWM Vol 12 p 233

⁴ CWSA Vol 27, p 120

⁵ 29 May 1923, Evening Talks recorded by A.B. Purani

Art as a key aspect of education

Mother not only believed that art could give a “contact with the infinite,” but was clear that that “all true artists” in fact did “have some feeling of this kind, some sense that they are intermediaries between a higher world and this physical existence.”⁶ On one occasion she said art was “not very different from Yoga.”⁷ On another, she went further still and said art and yoga as disciplines had, in their essence, the same principles.⁸

Because art could unlock the highest potential in a child, that which connects it with the infinite, Mother saw it as a critical component of education. She advised that a child should be taught “artistic taste,” “a true aesthetic culture,” one that taught him “to love beautiful, lofty, healthy and noble things...”⁹ Sri Aurobindo agreed. He said, “Every child has the gift of imitation and a touch of imaginative power. Use it to give him the groundwork of the faculty of the artist.”¹⁰ The tendency to keep “artistic training apart as a privilege for a few specialists” was deplored. He advocated for a national system of education where everyone would “have his artistic faculty developed, his taste trained, his sense of beauty ...made habitually active, correct and sensitive.”¹¹

The aspect of education that art falls in

Mother categorised a complete education as covering five elements: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual.¹² Art’s significance is such that it can be seen as having a role in each of these five:

a. Art as physical education: In 1958 Mother briefly spoke of art’s relationship to physical culture which she defined as “the process of infusing consciousness into the cells of the body.”¹³ She told her audience, “I have already told you several times that the artist infuses a very great consciousness into his hands.”¹⁴ While she stressed that physical culture was aimed at creating a more generally “receptive instrument” (i.e. the whole body), her reference to art’s ability to draw consciousness into a part of the body was not casual. It invites reflection on what we think the scope of physical education to be.

b. Art as vital education: Sri Aurobindo defined the vital as the “...part of the being that responds to desire and is the instrument of the life forces.”¹⁵ Mastery over it is essential. Maybe it is “the most indispensable”¹⁶ aspect of education altogether. That was Mother’s speculation. She thought that a key element of training the vital was to introduce the child to “artistic taste and refinement...,” to nurture in him a love for “beautiful, lofty, healthy and noble things, whether in Nature or in human creation.”¹⁷ Mother viewed this exposure to “aesthetic culture” (as she called it) as part of the process of purifying the sense organs, to

⁶ CWM Vol 3, p 103

⁷ CWM Vol 3, p 103

⁸ “The discipline of Art has at its centre the same principle as the discipline of Yoga.” CWM Vol 3, p 105

⁹ CWM Vol 12 p 21

¹⁰ A System of National Education, CWSA Vol 1, p395

¹¹ The National Value of Art, CWSA Vol 1, p 453

¹² CWM Vol 12, p9

¹³ CWM Vol 10, p 30

¹⁴ CWM Vol 10, p 30

¹⁵ CWSA Vol 28 (Letters on Yoga Vol 1), p 185

¹⁶ CWM Vol 12, p18

¹⁷ CWM Vol 12 p 21

make them open to beauty. She wrote in the aftermath of the second world war and saw “aesthetic culture” as a method of countering the “terrible nervous tension” and growing acclimatisation to ugliness and vulgarity that had taken hold of society.

Mother also spoke of the need for vital education to help transform a child’s character but it was Sri Aurobindo who first discussed the role of art in this regard. In 1909, he suggested that we as a society were largely ignorant of how “our sense of virtue is a sense of the beautiful in conduct and our sense of sin a sense of ugliness and deformity in conduct.” At least part of our “shuddering recoil from cruelty, blood, torture” was, he said, not solely due to the inherent wrongness of the conduct. There was something in us that found such evil “intolerably hideous to sight and imagination.”¹⁸ Art had the power to habituate us to the beautiful. Because of this he concluded, “art purifies by beauty.”¹⁹ This was not a new idea. Sri Aurobindo made it clear that he was merely endorsing a sentiment Aristotle articulated thousands of years ago: Aristotle had written of the purifying power of poetry on “feelings, passions and emotions in the heart.” In so doing he could, said Sri Aurobindo, have gone further. Aristotle could have declared that all art had this purifying power.²⁰

c. Art as mental education: Sri Aurobindo discussed the role art plays in contributing to and exceeding the contributions of scientific analysis. This, he thought, had never been sufficiently recognised by society. Art helps in making minds “subtle and delicate.” It is “a powerful stimulator of sympathetic insight.” Science helps a mind understand what is on the surface of reality but there is a limit to its field application. To look further, other methods of insight are required, methods that can open “a door into the deeper secrets of inner nature where the positive instruments of science cannot take the depth or measure”²¹ This is where art plays a pivotal role, by opening the mind to ever subtler insight.

d. Art as psychic and spiritual education: Ultimately, all reasons for the importance of art in education lead to one ultimate point: Art helps to open one’s life to some higher force, some grace from above that can change our lives. How that force is experienced is, in one sense, determinative of whether we deem it psychic or spiritual. Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s comments may be read as an appreciation of art’s value for both of these critical modes of being.

Sri Aurobindo saw art as one of the tools “best calculated to cultivate the growth of the spirit.”²² In a spiritual culture art would, he said, aim at “a revelation of greater things concealed in man and Nature and of the deepest spiritual and universal beauty.”²³

Mother would say that the purpose of art was “to give those for whom it is meant a freer and more perfect communion with the Supreme. The first contact with this Supreme Reality expresses itself in our consciousness by a flowering of the being in a plenitude of vast and peaceful delight. Each time that art can give the spectator this contact with the infinite, however fleetingly, it fulfils its aim; it has shown itself worthy of its mission.”²⁴

¹⁸ The National Value of Art, CWSA Vol 1, p 442

¹⁹ The National Value of Art, CWSA Vol 1, p 440

²⁰ “Aristotle was speaking of the purification of feelings, passions and emotions in the heart through imaginative treatment in poetry but the truth the idea contains is of much wider application and constitutes the justification of the aesthetic side of art. It purifies by beauty.” The National Value of Art, CWSA Vol 1, p 440

²¹ The National Value of Art, CWSA Vol 1, p 449

²² The National Value of Art, CWSA Vol 1, p 438

²³ The Renaissance in India, CWSA Vol 20, p 36

²⁴ CWM Vol 2, Words of Long Ago, p123-p124