

Art Matters

HAVING NOT TOO LONG AGO REACHED A CERTAIN AGE, I've noticed that memories are increasingly difficult to recollect. What I once considered my most vivid experiences are beginning to fade to sepia tones with some fraying at the edges. However, one memory that



remains bright is proudly walking home from school with an oversized print, mounted on cardboard and wrapped in cellophane, of the painting *The Circus* by Georges Seurat. I remember carefully positioning it on the radiator across from my bed and feeling terribly pleased that

this beautiful, bursting image I adored so much could be mine, even for a brief time. At age eight, I was truly, deeply, passionately in love with art.

Growing up in a college town in the 1970s, I had the benefit of outstanding arts programs in my school and in my community. Despite the turmoil of a troubled economy, an unfortunate earth tone-dominated pallet in fashion (ponchos, anyone?), and a sense of general malaise, the arts were a bright spot and genuinely valued at that time. This was reflected by the regularly scheduled art classes in my primary school, the trips to local museums, and the many children's classes offered at the nearby community arts center. Our school also enjoyed visits from volunteers who brought with them a trove of well-known paintings in poster form that could be checked out like books. Surrounded by the stacks of our little library, I sat cross-legged on the rug among my classmates and listened as the volunteer talked about her selection. Much to my delight and surprise, she asked us to share what we saw.

Being invited to explore and discuss the visual arts as an elementary school student was transformational for me. It was enthralling to use my imagination and a different set of skills to understand the larger world. Yes, I was a diligent student who behaved well and completed my lessons as I was told. I was a capable reader, loved my

Georges Seurat (French, 1859–1891), *The Circus*, 1890–91. Oil on canvas, 185 cm × 152 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

history classes and any form of storytelling. I soldiered through my math and science. Yet it was in art programs where I could share my unique perspective through a variety of media and where my creativity, love of learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills flourished.

Looking back, I was lucky that my parents chose to live in a town where adults believed in the value of art and committed resources to it. Sadly, for many this isn't the case any longer—especially for children who live in economically challenged communities and who consequently attend schools where there is no budget for the arts, let alone for basic needs. Even in more affluent communities, art is perceived as an “extra” or frivolous and lower on the list of priorities. Distressingly fewer college students see the benefit to pursuing arts and humanities degrees and instead favor courses that offer, in theory, stronger earning potential. This, to me, is limited and shortsighted.

My experiences have shaped my belief that every child's potential deserves to be nurtured and that arts education is central to helping youth become active, engaged, and thriving members of the community who lead fulfilling, examined lives. Children need opportunities to learn, to explore, and to delve into the arts—and to be invited to express their own feelings and ideas by sharing their views or making art of their own, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Today, as a leader of a community-based charitable organization, my hope is that more art institutions will work closely with organizations such as the YMCA to connect to children, especially at the elementary school level, and to bring them meaningful opportunities to see, feel, and gain a deeper understanding of the visual arts. I'm heartened that the Princeton University Art Museum has formed the Community Leadership Council to welcome our region's diverse communities to the Museum and to embrace its extraordinary collections as their own. I look forward to being a part of the Council's discussions, and I especially look forward to helping find ways to give more children the opportunity to fall truly, deeply, passionately in love with art.



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