

COMMENT

Art lessons in our schools are pitiful

A solid grounding in art is good for both GDP and our mental health. So why isn't it in the national curriculum?

CATHERINE MILNER
8 June 2021 - 9:00am



Many schools have chucked out their kilns and thrown away their easels | CREDIT: Hill Street Studios

“Every primary school pupil should be taught Mozart!” screamed the newspaper headline of an article in March following the Government’s announcement that music was to become compulsory for all children. In 102 pages, it set out what musical knowledge children should be taught for each year of their school education up until the age of 14.

Compare that to the two sides of A4 that constitute the UK’s current National Curriculum for Art – last updated eight years ago. Primary school children should be encouraged, it says, to “produce creative work, exploring their ideas and recording their experiences”. But then it adds, “schools are not by law required to teach pencil, charcoal, paint, clay”.

Clearly art can be made out of a variety of materials from sharks (if you’re [Damien Hirst](#)) to silicon. Collage and photography have become increasingly popular, perhaps because they are less hard to manage in crammed classrooms.



Yet the top 10 most expensive works in the world sold at auction last year were all paintings. By offering schools an opt-out clause so they don’t have to teach painting, drawing, carving or pot-throwing, the curriculum is not only denying children the gratification and self-esteem that comes with making an object by hand, but also the possibility of becoming a well-remunerated artist. Equally, a training in art can lead on to all manner of other careers, too.

Many of the cars we drive start life as sketches, then clay models; plastic surgeons model faces and bodies in clay as part of their medical training. The view that a technical grounding in drawing, painting or sculpting is so unimportant that it can be ditched tells of an education system that fails to see how far-reaching its benefits are.



This tiny island of ours has a distinguished history in the visual arts: Constable’s The Hay Wain | CREDIT: Hulton Fine Art Collection

It was not always thus. A 2010 report by the Department for Culture recognised that “participation in structured arts activities can increase cognitive abilities across all disciplines by between 16 and 19 per cent”. Yet it is a point that today’s Department for Education – though enthusiastic about music – chooses to ignore when it comes to visual art.

There is also a strong economic argument in favour of fostering hand skills. In 2019, the UK exported almost £9.7 billion of art and antiques. Although this dropped to £5.2 billion in 2020 it is still more than the combined exports of all meat, fish and cereals over the same period. Britain’s artists also furnish our museums and brighten up our national parks and city centres, drawing in millions of tourists a year.

From Turner and Constable to [David Hockney](#), [Bridget Riley](#) and [Peter Doig](#), this tiny island of ours has a distinguished history in the visual arts and a high profile on the international stage, with an art market second only to that of America and China.



Damien Hirst | CREDIT: David Rose

But the artists of the future won’t be manifesting anything like the same finesse if not taught the necessary skills, now. If children are not shown how to use paints or pencils effectively they will not want to continue using them. This is one of the reasons why the number of children taking art at GCSE has dropped by 33 per cent in the past decade. Another, is that the GCSE syllabuses of many exam boards are prescriptive and restrictive, denying children the freedom to invent their own visual language, which is surely one of the main points of art.

“Every term we get three really boring and abstract artists to study,” wrote one disgruntled pupil in an internet post entitled “Do not pick GCSE art. Please.”

“What it means by study is, copy their work; create a presentation on them and then take pictures to create an art piece in their style. This repeats through all of Year 10 and 11. It’s hell; if you’re not good at ONE of the styles your grade will suffer a lot.”

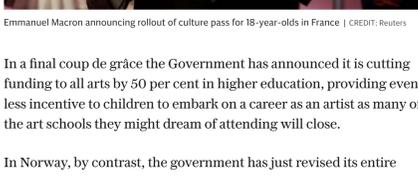


Boris Johnson tries his hand at painting while on a primary school visit | CREDIT: Leon Neal

Art is in everything from the design of a lamppost to a flyover, but without a training in perceptual and observational skills to appreciate line and form, children won’t develop good aesthetic sense and our cities will remain as grey and featureless as they have recently become.

Many schools have chucked out their kilns and thrown away their easels; paints are deemed expensive and oil painting too toxic, complicated and messy to use by schools keen to abide by health and safety regulations.

As a result, if they want to learn these things – and have rich enough parents – children must take private lessons, while those without such resources remain unaware of what they are missing or the paths that might have been open to them. It is worth pointing out that it was Damien Hirst’s art teacher who pleaded for him to be allowed to stay on at sixth form – without that he may never have gone to Goldsmiths, and the YBA era in British art may never have gained its world famous status.



Emmanuel Macron announcing rollout of culture pass for 18-year-olds in France | CREDIT: Reuters

In a final coup de grâce the Government has announced it is cutting funding to all arts by 50 per cent in higher education, providing even less incentive to children to embark on a career as an artist as many of the art schools they might dream of attending will close.

In Norway, by contrast, the government has just revised its entire national curriculum to encourage more “practical and exploratory” ways of learning and more vocational training with a new programme of “design and traditional crafts”. In France, meanwhile, [President Macron has announced he is extending his Culture Pass initiative](#) – which gives 18-year-olds €300 (£260) to spend on art materials, instruments or shows – to high school students in 2022.

Perhaps the most important issue, however, is mental health. The Children’s Society’s annual Good Childhood report this year found that the pandemic had affected children’s happiness and that, overall, 15-year-olds in Britain were among the unhappiest in Europe. Equally, the number of British children aged nine to 12 admitted to hospital after harming themselves has doubled in the past six years. Social media is often blamed for causing this epidemic of anxiety and sadness among the young.

Yet the Government doesn’t seem to have considered how, by simply changing the national curriculum in art and design so that children spend two or three hours a week making a painting, pot – or indeed anything – this situation could be improved. There is ample evidence that making art helps overcome mental health problems; it lowers cortisol levels and interrupts the cycle of stress and emotional burnout that can lead to neurological and mental imbalances.

“There is an increasing body of evidence that suggests that the arts play a key role in emotional and cognitive development throughout childhood,” says Christopher Bailey, an arts and health executive at a report by the University of London which traced 7,558 children from the age of seven and concluded beyond doubt that activities such as crafts, painting and drawing were associated with a lower risk of social and behavioural maladjustment by the time they were aged 11.

Just look at the UK’s [arts-on-prescription programme](#), which has led to significant reductions in anxiety, depression and stress. In Gloucestershire and Wiltshire GP consultation rates dropped by 37 per cent and hospital admissions by 27 per cent following the introduction of such a service.

Art is a language that needs no words. It requires no explanation or translation, measuring, researching or writing about, but it does have its own principles, strictures and skills that, if learnt, can help children develop a sense of control, to become less self-conscious, more socially connected and with wider horizons regarding the kinds of jobs they can do.

It can give children a spark – even during these worrying times – of some much-needed hope and joy.

Catherine Milner is chief curator for Messums art gallery

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