

A CONTEMPORARY ROLE FOR THE CAMPUS ART GALLERY

BY GENE COBB

"There is an art show opening at the Bartlett Gallery tonight. Do you want to go?" One hears this each month on a Wednesday evening immediately after joint worship at Atlantic Union College.

If you asked, "What's happening tonight?" you might hear a variety of answers. "Carlos and Tawnya are playing selections on flute and classical guitar." "They're having hot cider, cheese, and crackers." "A whole crowd of people are going . . . like a party." "It's warm, and my friends will be there." "It's neat to see faculty and students mingling, and there are so many off-campus visitors . . . all together." "I really don't understand the art, but it is fun and the artist explained how the art mirrors his own experience." "The paintings make me feel like I'm being swal-

lowed in a mass of blue, but peaceful . . . like drowning, maybe."

The campus gallery has two main functions: (1) to increase visual literacy by promoting the visual arts; and (2) to establish a relationship with the community. Each concern is directed to the primary audiences: the student body and the surrounding neighborhoods. The student observations above recognize the art gallery's programs as both social and aesthetic experiences.

The Campus Gallery as Classroom

The college gallery has many of the same objectives as the classroom. When the gallery, acting as a classroom, exhibits works of art, it asserts that there is some thing serious in art to be under-

stood. Art provides some of the knowledge necessary to make responsible decisions.

Art is a model of the human condition, it provides possibilities for thinking, feeling, and imagining. Thus art provides the individual with the freedom of mind that is necessary for full development of character. . . . Involvement in art causes a person to perceive the visual aspects of life with intense active perceptions of a kind that tends to build mental images of a conceptual nature.¹

Art deals with aesthetic objects and their meaning. Works of art need to be understood differently than corn flakes, canning jars, and carburetors. An object is thought of as art when it meets an aesthetic standard and is created primarily to provide a visual experience rather than to satisfy a utilitarian purpose.

The art gallery operates on the premise that teaching people to have an aesthetic experience is as worthwhile as teaching them how to have lifelong habits of healthful living. One objective nourishes the body while the other teaches respect for perception and worthwhile emotions.

According to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, there are three basic kinds of cognition: the empirical, dealing with the external world; the moral, dealing with social norms; and the aesthetic, dealing with the inner world of self. Traditionally, art has been thought of as an expression and exploration of ourselves and human nature. The liberal arts college therefore includes the visual arts in the humanities category.

Objects recognized and judged for their intrinsic aesthetic and visual pleasure find their way to the campus gallery. These objects are beautiful and pleasingly organized, whether the subject and content is realistic or abstracted, happy or profoundly depressing; whether they deal with themes of fantasy and imagination or the illusions of reality. The object may defy verbal description, but it still has value.

Our culture has given the art museum the responsibility of preserving and promoting works of painting, drawing, sculpture, and photography as important, and by definition "useless," except as "vehicles of something felt." Adventist colleges should provide a location where objects can be displayed exclusively for aesthetic development. In times of austerity the need for this commitment is compounded. When communities and constituencies feel financially stressed and practical needs take priority, it is even more important to nurture the spirit of the student and surrounding community.

Why should the college display artistic creations? Being near art on a regular basis helps us appreciate its ability to make us feel—in the broad sense of experiencing both emotional excitement and the more complex emotions of intel-

***The campus gallery
has two main
functions: (1) to
increase visual literacy
by promoting the
visual arts; and (2) to
establish a
relationship with the
community.***

lectual tension or the feelings of conscious life. Art does something for the student that nothing else does. The gallery as classroom makes contemporary art available before historical significance is established; it allows it to be judged, evaluated, and ingested by the student body. Art students particularly need to see and talk about art endlessly; the college art gallery enables them to accomplish this objective.

To watch students grow visually is to watch them learn to feel quantitatively and qualitatively. They become more tolerant, better able to make judgments, to critique their values and their neighbors' values agreeably, and to communicate human needs.

Language is an astonishing and well developed human device. By this discursive means we can conceive the intangible and have ideas. It is by this means that we think, remember, imagine, and conceive facts. It is the basis of communication. Yet even discursive pattern has its limits of usefulness. . . . There is one aspect of communication that defies discursive formulation and therefore verbal expression; that is what we call the subjective aspect of experience, the direct feelings of it; what it is like to be waking and moving, to be drowsy, slowing down or to be sociable, or feel self-sufficient but alone; what it feels like to pursue an elusive thought or have a big idea. The felt experiences have no other name other than an expression of the most common emotions as an outward condition of anger, love, fear.²

There are not useful descriptions of many of our emotions. The visual arts bridge the gap left by language. Art as nonverbal communication has educational value for Adventist college students. Exposing young adults to art helps make their lives meaningful. Michael Parsons, professor of education at the University of Utah, states:

Art is not just a series of pretty objects: it is rather a way we have of articulating our interior life. We have a continuing and complex inner response to the external world composed of various needs, emotions, thoughts, both fleeting and long term. This inner life is not trans-

parent to us, not self interpreting; if we are to understand it we must give it some more perceptible shapes, and then examine the shapes. Art is one way of doing this.³

The Campus Gallery and Community Relations

The second goal of the campus gallery acknowledges its responsibility to society. Our culture has neglected the aesthetic in favor of the empirical and moral. We take art less seriously than science or morality. The average American is uninvolved in the arts and rarely discusses them seriously. The college gallery can provide a forum for discussion. Exhibiting works of art may result in greater community appreciation and response to visual concepts. As artists are invited to exhibit on campus, a line of discussion concerning philosophy, lifestyle, diversity, and tolerance can begin.

As the community and the college come together at art openings, a common social/aesthetic experience is established. The community finds that college faculty are community minded—willing to contribute to local needs. The visitor to the gallery finds people who are interested in a common purpose; people who are social and who also enjoy cultural endeavors that enhance their emotional and intellectual development. As the community and the college find common ground in art, they may also find through that social contact that each can contribute to the other's well-being.

Common myths concerning Seventh-day Adventists may be dispelled as people mingle together at the college art gallery. As it represents the college, the gallery can look for remedies to misunderstanding. The community comes to know us for our idiosyncracies as well as for our commonalities. The Adventist college gallery can act as a diffuser of community/college tension. Judgments can be based on personal experience rather than on hearsay. The principles of tolerance in artistic style that art educators traditionally endeavor to teach their students can carry over to tolerance of life-style among members of the larger community. The gallery as social enterprise not only contributes to aesthetic development but also to an expanded view of our responsibility as ambassadors of Christ.

As the gallery extends its responsibility toward the community it concurrently offers students a role model of community involvement. College young people get the opportunity to test and compare their values with community values within the context and environment of the Christian college. The opportunity to examine these competing values helps students to clarify Christian values.

The small art gallery on a Christian col-
Continued on page 45

A CONTEMPORARY ROLE FOR THE CAMPUS ART GALLERY

Continued from page 31

lege campus has a unique place and opportunity in a contemporary culture. Through it the community can see us responding to the needs of present society rather than longing for the romanticism of the past. Much of contemporary art is based on "newness" and innovation. The history of art over the past century has shown us that the creations that lasted have been fresh and inventive. The large museums generally are careful about acquiring "new" works for fear that they may not stand the test of time. The college gallery can accommodate the avant-garde through its format of small shows. The role as justifier of "good" art can be put aside in favor of simple reporting. The small gallery can say, "This is what is going on. What do you think of it?"

The Seventh-day Adventist-operated gallery can say the same to its community: "This is what is going on... What do you think of us?... Are there ways we can meet and mutually benefit?"

The responses may vary from "The cider was good" to "The painting looked unfinished, but it gave me a feeling of movement;" or, "It made me uncomfortable to look at that photograph, but its subject kept drawing me back... It made me think about my family history;" or, "I didn't know your gallery would exhibit non-Adventist artists... Can other religions come to your school?"; and, "I'm glad I came out on a cold Wednesday evening... I'm glad I met you."

If the viewer can come to an art gallery with an attitude disposed toward learning... accepting each artist and his art as a serious statement, whether it be humorous, satirical, philosophical or experimental... then the ability to appreciate and understand will be greatly

enhanced and rewarded.

If an audience can avoid having judgmental attitudes... "I like it... I don't like it... It would look good in my house... I wouldn't want it on my wall"... then enjoyment becomes paramount and criteria is expanded.

If an observer can have a willing openness to view visual statements unlike any he may have seen before... then artistic phenomena may become an accepted form in the same way new scientific and natural phenomena become understandable.

If the viewer can accept works which are not repetitions of traditional art forms or works which please a collectable nature... then he may learn something of himself as well.

The challenge of new forms does not do away with tradition.

By recognizing traditional as well as contemporary directions in art, the viewer becomes more aware how each era complements the other through the very thing that makes clear the difference... that is, the tremendous creative power with which each period is endowed. To narrowly define the ever-widening concept of art is to relegate the artist to a depersonalized form of copying and to admit that creative energies no longer exist in contemporary society.—*Mabel Bartlett Gallery Statement.* □

Gene Cobb is Associate Professor of Art at Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts, where he teaches studio and art history classes and has been the Mabel Bartlett Gallery director for 13 years. He is an exhibited photographer, and will soon be on leave to do visual research for a portfolio entitled, "The English on Holiday."

The Mabel Bartlett Gallery is named for Dr. Mabel Bartlett, who founded the art department at Atlantic Union College. She died December 9, 1988, at the age of 89. Art openings at the gallery are regular events that usually attract at least 300 students and members of the community.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Kenneth M. Lansing, *Art, Artists, and Art Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 52.
- ² Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1957), p. 17.
- ³ Michael J. Parsons, *How We Understand Art* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 13.