A GENUINE VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Renting Pictures to College Students

Reprint from Journal of Adult Education
January 1932
A GENUINE VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY
Renting Pictures to College Students

The problem of teaching college students to appreciate art can be solved only by an attack from many angles. The last ten years have seen consistent progress. One can still find dormitory rooms the principal decorations of which are pennants and magazine covers, but such rooms are no longer fairly to be called typical. Despite all that has been achieved, however, there is a world of opportunities still unexplored. The project of renting pictures to students for use in their rooms has proved a genuine voyage of discovery.

When the issue was originally faced there was little hope of success. The architects seemed by rare cunning to have left too little well-lit wall space; walls were dingy and provided a poor background. Students seemed perfectly content with the decorations that seemed so hopelessly bad. But in the midst of these pessimistic factors were a few more hopeful signs. Art had long had a place in the curriculum, was well taught, and widely elected. And music occupied a large and significant part in the life of the college. Standards both of appreciation and performance were high. It did not seem reasonable that these evidences of artistic taste were less representative of student sensitivity than the poverty of pictures.

A beginning was made in the dormitory living rooms. An alumnus, resident abroad much of the time, sent excellent reproductions, large
in size and beautifully framed. The moment some of these pictures were
hung in one dormitory, delegations from others inquired the basis for
discrimination. For two years attention was centered largely upon
meeting the demand thus created. By that time observation had revealed
that after a picture had hung in one spot for a period of time the
students tended to become blind to it. It had become only an article
of furniture contributing to the general atmosphere of the room, but
its own individuality was submerged. The Japanese, who change the
kakemono and the vase of flowers with the season, learned that fact ages
ago. Acting on their theory the pictures were moved about and became,
thereby, new. However perfect its setting, no picture now has a per-
manent home. It stays for a time and is then replaced by one with
different characteristics.

From the dormitories the movement spread to the classrooms. As
in most colleges, each department had its own rooms. Yet the rooms
were not at all characteristic of the subject matter. They could have
been exchanged among departments without moving a single inventory item.
Pictures have been used to redeem some of them from this bleak uni-
formity. The teaching collection given by the Carnegie Corporation has
been utilized actively. Frames with removable backs have made possi-
ble a wide variety of pictures at little cost. Professors on sabbatical
leave abroad have brought home the characteristic art of France, and
Germany, and Spain. Much still remains to be done, but at least some
classrooms have taken on individual qualities which contribute to good
teaching.

The second step was to develop interest in loan exhibits. Be-
ginnings were timid because there was no adequate space properly lighted.
A makeshift arrangement in the lobbies outside the administrative offices was utilized with many apologies. Shortly, however, it was discovered that apologies were needless. Students must come to see administrative officers. Not infrequently they must wait a few moments. Naturally their attention turned to the exhibits, which changed frequently so that all but the inveterate cases saw something fresh on almost every visit. A little ingenuity vastly improved the lighting and made possible more space. Some of the time the person in charge of the exhibits stood about talking to the groups. The purpose was not to tell much about the pictures, but to break down fear of them. "What do you think of that painting?" "Oh, I don't know enough about it to say!" That was the opening for a typical conversation repeated many times over. And always the theme was the same. "Look at it, and make up your mind what you see instead of being worried about what you are supposed to see. If it means nothing, look at others till you find one that has some significance for you. Search out the basis of its appeal and then others will begin to mean more to you."

The third step was in process during the first two. Dormitory rooms were redecorated and the walls refinished in colors adapted to pictures. Literally, the dark places were made light, and the walls made hospitable to beauty. But despite efforts to bring exhibits of moderately priced pictures, students could not afford to buy them. And many were afraid to do so because they lacked confidence in their own taste.

At the beginning of the academic year 1930-1931, therefore, the experiment of renting pictures was undertaken. Artists and friends had been contributing prints and reproductions to the college collection.
One of the trustees paid the cost of framing them. Great care was lavished upon this detail. In several cases the frame cost more than the print. When the pictures were ready, the students snapped them up at an astonishing rate. Thereafter, a gift from the Carnegie Corporation made it possible to go about the project much more boldly. That gift was followed by others until there are now two hundred and seventy pictures catalogued.

They were not purchased in large lots. A representative group was assembled, and then made available for rental. Careful watch was kept to see which ones "moved" and which went without attention. After a reserve stock was built up we invited a group of students in for a Sunday afternoon discussion. There was one "art major," but there were also "majors" from several other departments. In short, it was a fair cross section of the college. Picture after picture was shown and then discussed by the students. On the basis of that revealing experience fifty new pictures were added, and within a week forty-three had been rented. Appeal to this jury was not the only method used to gather student opinion. The person in charge was continually asking questions, seeking to discover the bases of preferences, and to find out what kinds of pictures were lacking. Many boys, for example, showed a strong preference for etchings of dogs and of wild animals. Boys also showed a marked eagerness for good portraiture.

The rental price was fixed at fifty cents a semester. At the inception of the plan it was intended to charge a fee proportionate to the cost of each picture, but that idea was abandoned as soon as the first group of pictures was ready. It would have involved consideration of cost as well as taste, whereas the plan was designed to give a free
outlet to taste and untrammeled opportunity for esthetic experience. Again, many students might confuse cost with value—a fatal distortion in artistic judgments. So all the pictures were rented at a fixed price. The rate was put low enough to bar no student, however needy. There are reproductions which cost fifteen cents before framing, hanging side by side with etchings that cost as much as sixty dollars and more—all available at fifty cents a semester.

No charge is made for exchanging pictures. Indeed, the students are encouraged to make new selections as often as they like. The procedure is extremely simple. Pictures are catalogued precisely as are library books. The student takes a picture from the display panel, carries it to the charging desk, and either pays the fifty-cent fee, if it is his first venture, or returns his previous picture. Some of the most interesting phases of the whole plan have revealed themselves in this process. One can trace the growth of interest and the development of taste in the succession of pictures chosen by a single student. Color and "story" make the simplest and most direct appeal. A good etching or a Japanese print is seldom chosen by a beginner. It is only as his self-education goes forward that line and form and composition come to have more significance.

The collection, for these reasons, has a very wide variety of pictures! There are not only different kinds of taste to be considered, but also taste in all stages of development. If, for example, one were to insist upon the collection's being "modern," many students would simply never give it a chance. It would instantly be labeled as esoteric. There are, therefore, pictures almost photographic in their precise delineation; they seem "familiar" to a beginner. Others emphasize a "story"; they
seem "comprehensible" even to a novice. From those simple types they range far and wide over the various media and schools.

Each picture is provided with introductory material calculated to explain something about it. Pasted on the back of each one is a brief statement giving the title, the name, and a short biography of the artist, and, in the cases of prints and reproductions, a brief description of the process by which they are made. As soon as it can be done a very short bibliography is to be added in each case.

Beyond this very obvious method other means are taken to inform the students about the pictures. Among the rental pictures, for example, a lithograph was selected. The artist who produced it has given his original sketch and tracing, the stone, and his crayons and tools. When a group of lithographs is displayed, this paraphernalia, together with a complete description of the process, is also displayed. In like manner Helen Hyde's block prints explain the methods of the Japanese. The collection includes one of the few surviving complete sets of blocks used by her in Japan. The same method is used to illustrate dry points, etchings, and wood engravings. The library also has shown a helpful spirit of cooperation. When there is an exhibit of rental pictures which lends itself to library assistance, books and reproductions are displayed at the same time. In addition, lectures are given by artists and by members of the college staff. Two of the artists whose work is largely represented have visited the college to talk to the students about their methods of work.

Not all the unrented pictures are kept upon display. Too many pictures are confusing. Every two or three weeks a new group is put upon the display panels in the library reading room. These groups are sometime:
all of one character, such as Japanese prints, for example; sometimes, on the other hand, the group is made up of pictures of contrasting methods or periods—a sort of cross section of the whole collection. The students notice the changes in the displays, and the change always stimulates a new recruit to rent a picture or brings an old picture back for exchange. The purpose is to refresh interest and keep it lively.

Special pictures were purchased for fraternities and sororities, but the cost of rental was kept uniform. These pictures are much larger in size and have proved costly. But the results have fully repaid the cost. One very interesting episode took place when a fraternity which had recently purchased a commercial painting of a ship, framed with cut-off corners, considered replacing it with a singularly beautiful reproduction of an old master from the rental collection. The discussion was animated and vigorous; some of the terms would have made an art critic cringe. But the old master won out—on its merits! It was a heartening beginning. One of the boys who had been on the winning side remarked with naive earnestness, "It seems good to have something really beautiful in a fraternity house."

It must be emphasized that the rental plan is no substitute for the regular courses in art history and appreciation. It is a supplementary enterprise which gives clear proof that it stimulates interest, and by so much improves the will to learn, which we are coming to recognize as one of the critical points in the educative process. One of the laws of economics is that bad money will drive out good money. All too often it is assumed that, so far as students are concerned, bad pictures will drive out good ones. This experiment has seen the reversal of that process, and far from slowing up, interest is still increasing despite
the fact that the "experiment" is now an old story. More pictures were taken out in the first six weeks this year than during the whole of last year, and steadily the better pictures within the collection outstrip in circulation the poorer.

We have come to recognize that it does not necessarily follow that a student who reads in a library reading room during college years will read at home after graduation. It has been discovered that in some communities with an active art program the interest is not reflected in the house decorations of the leaders of the enterprise. There is always danger in any formal enterprise of instruction or appreciation that it will not become vitally attached to life itself. But the rental project serves as a sort of bridge of interest between art classes and exhibits and the daily life of the student. If he becomes hungry for good pictures about him, he is building habits of appreciation. That the project has such an effect is evidenced by the many requests last June for permission to take pictures home for the summer. All such requests were granted.

The whole program has become interdependent. Dormitory pictures increase interest in the exhibits and in the rental pictures. The library circulation of books on the fine arts has advanced notably and the teaching collection of reproductions has shown phenomenal growth in use. The rental plan has stimulated students to buy pictures, and has awakened interest in the study of art. It need hardly be said that the project will not run itself. Its success depends not only upon the validity of the idea involved but upon the interest, to the point of devotion, of some person with time and a gift for the work.
I am eager, now, to see the same idea exploited upon a community basis. There is no reason why there should not be libraries of pictures, just as there are libraries of books. It would require money, but not in impossible amounts; and the results would be rewarding to a degree which can be imagined only with an effort.