

# Art and Aesthetic Appreciation in Children

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**Abstract-** Art is uniquely human and helps us to experience the joys and sorrows of life. Art plays a vital role in the culture of a society. A child begins to express itself from birth and the reason for a child's free expression is one of the ways of his adjustment to the society. It is important that we allow children to continue with the creative activities which has the power to heal them and the society and will ultimately make us united with nature and offer us beautiful hearts and minds. Art appreciation is an act and a state of understanding and enjoying art. Gustav Fechner is regarded as the pioneer in empirical aesthetics. After him, various studies were conducted to establish the relationship between different elements of art and beauty appreciation. Examples include studies conducted by Birkhoff, Eysenck and Berlyne. According to psychological approaches to art, aesthetic experiences of art encompass a complex interaction of emotional and cognitive processes whereas neuroscientists argue that various biological processes that occur in brain are responsible for an individual's art preferences. Art appreciation includes varied activities including the ways of responding to an artwork, interpreting an artwork and understanding the work with a focus on its meaning. It is a mental process that encompasses identifying various forms of perception and presentation portrayed in the artwork. It is suggested that children of all ages should be exposed to issues and debates related to art in order to cultivate an intellectual response to art. Art provides an ideal environment for teaching and learning. Promptly chosen artwork with well-designed educational patterns can foster children develop their thinking which will pave the foundation for lifelong viewing and learning.

**Index Terms-** Art Appreciation, Aesthetic Experience, Art Forms, Beauty, Emotional Response

## I. INTRODUCTION

What is art? Does it enrich our understanding of the world? Tolstoy (1896) contends that "art is that which makes beauty manifest, and beauty is that which pleases (without exciting desire)". Tolstoy argued that "an art product is a genuine art product when it brings a new feeling into the current of human life." This explains why people are greatly captivated by works of art which initially convey to them feelings they had not experienced before. Herbert Read (1968) provides the following definition for art, "art is an attempt to create pleasing forms. Such forms satisfy our sense of beauty and the sense of beauty is satisfied when we are able to appreciate a unity or harmony of formal relations among our sense perceptions" (p.18).

Though the western civilization has been regarding the concept of art and beauty for almost 2000 years, art as an area for scholarly investigation was initiated only in 1750 by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. He gave the name "aesthetics" to the "the science of sensory cognition" because he believed that the "perception of sensory awareness is to be found in the perception of beauty" (Osborne, 1968, cited in Du Terroil, Anna M, 1975). The term "aesthetics is derived from the Greek word *aiesthesis* meaning *pertaining to sense perception*." The term *aesthetics* is mainly used for two purposes in academic work: firstly, "to mention a philosophy that provides a theory of the beautiful and of the fine arts and secondly to mention a person's sensitivity to the beautiful." The exclusive notion of "the aesthetic" – a special form of disinterested knowledge and appreciation - was developed by the enlightenment philosophers to unfold the emotional responses elicited by the perception of great works of art (Shiner, 2003). However, Theodore Fechner (1801-1889) pioneered empirical research on aesthetics that centred on the influence of stimulus properties on the perceivers' preferences (Fechner, 1876 cited in Bullot and Reber 2013). He also developed principles of aesthetic preferences. According to Fechner, the work of art demands the cooperation of the viewer, and the energy which the viewer puts into the work of art is called as 'empathy'.

## II. IMPORTANCE OF ART APPRECIATION

Art is uniquely human and has direct relations to culture. It helps us to experience the joy, sorrow etc. of life. It is universal and exists in all cultures. Examples of prehistoric art date back to at least 80,000 years (Davies, 2012). A child begins to express itself from birth. "Free drawings by children are possible only if the children are free who has been allowed to grow and perfect himself in the assimilation of his surroundings and who when left free to create and express himself does so. The symbols young children create may be arbitrary and disconnected, but they are a social language of a rudimentary kind, and for adults it is a language which must be interpreted" (Read, 1943).

According to Löwenfeld (1964), a child has his own 'order of values', which is abstract or symbolic, and integrated by the intensity of his experience, and not controlled by external 'facts'. The motive behind a child's free expression is found to be one of the ways of his adjustment to the society. Adolescence is the period when the aesthetic modes of expression of the child changes as change of a psychological nature also takes place at this stage. The discovery of logical thought described by Piaget at this stage has a strong effect on the modes of expression of individuals.

The arts play a vital role in the culture of a society, and an education without arts leads to an impoverished society (Hetland and Winner, 2010). Read (1943) argues that the art of children generally shows a decline after age 11 because it is pushed out of the mind by the so-called logical activities, subjects and even literature as it is taught in schools. It is important that we allow children to continue with the creative activities which has the power to heal them and the society and will ultimately make us united with nature and offer us beautiful hearts and minds.

According to Shklovsky (1988), the goal of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Though perception of beauty is interesting per se, art appreciation goes beyond the concept of beauty (Bundgaard, 2014). Thomas Munroe (1941 cited in Seabolt 2001) defines appreciation of art as an act and a state of understanding and enjoying art. Art appreciation is both affective and cognitive and engages emotions and feelings about art (Osborne, 1970). Art appreciation signifies comprehensive aesthetic experiences like the appreciation, understanding, and judgement of art (Wang and Ishizaki, 2002).

Herbert Read (1968) argues that we face problem in appreciating an art because of the notion that 'all art is beautiful', and 'all that is beautiful is art', and 'what is not beautiful is not art'. He further contends that a sensible person would either like an art at first sight or not all. He argues that an artwork moves us and appreciating an artwork is an emotional process.

### III. BASES FOR ART/AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

We live in a world where we are bombarded constantly with images and visuals of every kind and "every viewer has a certain aesthetic response to virtually everything they perceive" (Reber, 2012). Gustav Fechner (1876), "one of the founders of modern scientific psychology" is regarded as the pioneer in empirical aesthetics. Fechner pioneered the study of aesthetic responses of museum visitors to artworks (cited in Leder et al., 2013). After Fechner, various studies were conducted to establish the relationship between different elements of art such as order, complexity and the like and beauty appreciation. Birkhoff (1932) used polygons in his studies and argued that appreciation of polygons would increase with order and decrease with complexity. Eysenck (1941) used geometrical figures to study beauty ratings and found that various features of objects related to complexity and order help in predicting the beauty ratings. Eysenck (1942) suggested that both order and complexity positively impact the appreciation of beauty (cited in Nadal, M. et. al., 2010).

Experimental aesthetics investigates the importance of art in human society and its presence in all cultures. Most researchers agree that art provides pleasing, hedonic experiences (Berlyne, 1974; Dissanayake, 2007). Different studies are done to understand why art produces a pleasing experience and generate positive emotions. Some of the studies include: art is experienced as a "pleasurable states of arousal" (Berlyne, 1974); "art induce pleasure through interest and finding meaning" (Cupchik & Gebotys, 1988, 1990; Leder et al., 2004; Jakesch & Leder, 2009) and various kinds of "fluency and ease of processing" (Cupchik et al, 2009; Leder, 2003; Reber et al, 2004).

Psychological approaches to art suggest that aesthetic experiences of art encompass a complex interaction of "cognitive

and emotional processes" (Cupchik et al., 2009; Leder et al., 2004; Vartanian & Nadal, 2007). Leder et al. (2013) argues that art can provide fascinating and emotional experiences depending on content and style. Further, they found that those with higher art expertise can have more intense aesthetic experiences.

In psychology, research on children's aesthetic responses included aesthetic preference and aesthetic sensitivity (Child, 1964 cited in Wang and Ishizaki, 2002) and the use of visual aesthetic sensitivity test (Chan et. al., 1980 cited in Wang and Ishizaki, 2002). Gardner (1981) used the term aesthetic perception which focuses on skills and abilities in describing structural characteristics in artwork (cited in Wang and Ishizaki, 2002). According to Parsons (1987) understanding art help one recomposes meaning and provide interpretations with social and public connotations. He suggested that children enter the art world by restructuring their understanding of art.

Neuroscientists claim that various biological processes that occur in the brain determine a person's art preferences. Different neuroimaging studies identified brain activity associated with preferences of beauty of visual stimuli. It is argued that amygdala contributes in the affective processes that determines aesthetic preference. There exists a complex relation between cognitive and neural processes associated with "aesthetic appreciation" (Cela-Conde et al. 2011). Kawabata & Zeki (2004) conducted a study on participant's brain activity using fMRI while rating the beauty of stimuli. It was observed that "for beautiful stimuli there exists a greater activity in the orbitofrontal cortex whereas for stimuli characterised as ugly, a higher activity in the motor cortex was experienced." Vartanian and Goel (2004) also used fMRI to study preference ratings and noted a "decrease in activity in the right caudate nucleus when preference ratings decreased and an increased activity in the left anterior cingulate gyrus and occipital gyri when preference ratings are high." In order to study brain activity during aesthetic preference task, Cela-Conde et. al. (2004) used magnetoencephalography (MEG) and noted an "increased activity in the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex when participants judged the stimuli as beautiful."

However, Brown and Dissanayake (2009) argued that though "aesthetic emotions are essentially an integral component of the arts", neuroaesthetics cannot in principle deal with arts because aesthetic emotions are not a requisite factor that characterises art. Therefore, a limited attention on aesthetic responses may divert the bigger dimension of what the arts are about.

Historians and philosophers argue that a viewer's knowledge about the artist's intentions when the work was created influence how he/she experiences a work of art. Bullo and Reber (2013) contends that a painting that is challenging but likely to interpret is found to be more meaningful than a painting that seems simple where a viewer understands immediately.

Researchers have recognised varied visual features such as symmetry, colour, contrast, clarity, prototypicality and complexity that affect preferences for art (Berlyne, 1971; Mc Manus et al., 1981; Schloss and Palmer, 2011). Berlyne (1971) proposed an inverted U-function, which states that "a viewer is likely to prefer artworks with higher visual complexity up to a certain level, at which point shows a decline in appreciation". Research also suggests that preferences for specific type of art depends on experience (Reber et al., 2004) and expertise (Winston and Cupchik, 1992; Silvia, 2006). Reber et al. (2004) argued that "if

an artwork is fluently processed, it enhances aesthetic appreciation depending on the viewer's perceptual experience." According to Winston and Cupchik (1992) and Silvia (2006), an increased aesthetic appreciation is reported when there is "deeper processing of an artwork based on beholder's expertise with an artwork." However, some individual differences in aesthetic preferences suggest that "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder."

Brieber et al. (2014) found that the time people spend on viewing artworks in a museum ranges between 11 and 38.8 seconds and thereafter attention is turned to another piece of artwork. However, viewing time of artworks in museums cannot be explained by aesthetic enjoyment. Sherman A et al. (2015) argued that when viewers discover varied relationships among patterns within the artwork, it helps viewers to enjoy artworks. A highly complex artwork contains more relatable patterns and therefore it is believed that art appreciation of an individual depends on the visual complexity of the artwork in compatibility with the visual working memory capacity of the individual. He further contends that visual object working memory (VOWM) is related to appreciation of visual complexity pertaining to artworks. And there may be a positive correlation between higher VOWM and appreciation of highly complex artworks.

Traditionally, art appreciation focused on the intrinsic values of art and centred on appreciation of artistic elements. It includes "composition, form, colour, light and space." According to the post-modern literary theory, "the way we perceive and represent the world is subjective and depends on personal, social and cultural factors which leads to the evolution of our visual field." As a visual language art itself acts as a sign of interpretation. Therefore, interpretation of art cannot be considered as generic, as it is contained within various discourses.

Art appreciation includes varied activities including the ways of responding to an artwork, interpreting an artwork and understanding the artwork that aims at its meaning. It is a mental process that encompasses identifying various forms of perception and presentation portrayed in the artwork. Art appreciation exposes viewers to a variety of disciplines. It includes "aesthetics, anthropology, history, cultural and social studies and science". Law (2010) argues that all students should be exposed to issues and debates related to art in order to cultivate an intellectual response to art. Moxey (1996) argued that "visual appreciation, how a work of art is presented, represented and perceived" should also be incorporated into art appreciation.

Art viewing and appreciation are active and constructive. Lachapelle et al. (2003) contended that art appreciation is a self-guided, active learning experience in which new knowledge is constructed based on an encounter with an art object and other related sources of information. Art appreciation is considered as a form of experiential learning.

There are considerable individual differences in art appreciation. Research suggests that people who enjoys complex music are likely to be creative and value aesthetic experiences broadly (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2003) and "intelligent and creative individuals possess higher working memory" (De Dreu, Nijstad Baas Wolsink, and Roskes, 2012; Luck and Vogel, 2013). Therefore, working memory contributes to creativity intelligence which in turn causes preferences for higher image complexity. Jakesch & Leder (2009) argued that moderate levels of ambiguity are appreciated while processing artworks.

Silvia (2005, 2006) argued that "art appreciation may depend on a relation between the viewer's cognitive and emotional goals and the semantic content of the artwork." Vision is a socio-cultural construction. Visual experiences are generally contextual and are determined by "social and cultural factors." Artists live in the society and are bound by time and therefore art appreciation is a study of cultures and times. According to Leder, Carbon and Ripas (2006) art appreciation depend on higher order cognitive processes such as finding meaning and comprehending the artwork. Studies were done to investigate the cognitive processes involved in art appreciation. Millis (2001 cited in Jakesch & Leder, 2009) argued that when elaborative titles were presented with representational paintings, there was an increase in aesthetic judgement ratings. Belke et al. (2006) in their study found an increase in aesthetic appreciation when style information was presented with art works.

#### IV. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ART APPRECIATION

Since the time of Berlyne's studies in art appreciation (1970, 71), it was noted that various psychological processes play an active role in aesthetic appreciation. Appreciation of beauty is determined by different psychological processes like pleasure, expectation, surprise, recognition and interest (Cela – Conde et al. 2011). Scientists in empirical aesthetics and neuroaesthetics believe that the science of art rely on the study of the mind's intricacies whereas psychology and neuroscience is applied in the psychological approach to study art appreciation (Bullot and Reber, 2013). On the other hand, historical approach to art appreciation aims at the importance of historical contexts.

Many contemporary theorists regard art appreciation and aesthetic experience as entirely different (Berlyne, 1971; Danto, 1974; S. Davies, 2006). On the contrary, neuroaestheticians believe that art "obeys" the aesthetic "laws of the brain" (Zeki, 1999). Ramachandran (2001) argues that a viewer's aesthetic preferences and art appreciation are determined by deep neurobiological laws. Martindale (1990 cited in Bullot and Reber, 2013) suggested that viewer's knowledge of art historical contexts does not play a role in art appreciation whereas psychological or neuroscientific methods contribute to understand various art appreciation laws. On the other hand, Bullot and Reber (2013) argued that the science of art appreciation needs to explore the viewer's "historical knowledge and integrate historical inquiry and the psychology of art."

Contextualists defend two important processes in art appreciation. They are "contextual knowledge of artifacts and their context-specific functions". Few contextualists (Currie 2003; Dickie 2000; Gombrich 2000; Lopes 2002) argue against the recent psychological and neuroaesthetic theories on art appreciation because it does not take into consideration "the contextual nature of art and the viewers' sensitivity to art-historical contexts."

To overcome the difference between psychological and historical approaches in art appreciation, a psycho-historical framework was proposed by Bullot and Reber. According to Bullot and Reber (2013), art-historical contexts, actions and mental processes of artists produce causal information in each artwork. There are three distinct modes of art appreciation for processing of this information. It includes the "basic exposure of

art appreciators to the work of art, causal reasoning resulting from an 'artistic design stance' and the artistic understanding of the work based on knowledge of the art- historical context" (Bullot and Reber, 2013).

## V. THEORIES OF AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

Over the years various psychologists and theorists have proposed a wide range of theories to explain art/aesthetic appreciation. The most effective theory of aesthetic appreciation is the theory of *Einfühlung*, expressed by Theodore Lipps, one of the accomplished writers on aesthetics. The word '*Einfühlung*' means 'empathy'. Read (1968) contends that "when we contemplate a work of art, we project ourselves into the form of the work of art and our feelings are determined by what we find there, by the dimensions we occupy" (p.39).

Zajonc (1968) proposed a theory called "mere exposure effect" where he argued that the more frequent a viewer perceive an object or image, the more the viewers tend to like it. Daniel Berlyne (1971) developed a theory of psychobiological concept of aesthetic response where he contends that the degree of arousal while viewing an image leads to aesthetic pleasure. He proposed that there is an initial increase in aesthetic pleasure as a function of arousal which then decreases as the arousal reaches its peak, thus making an inverted U function of the underlying variable. Martindale and Moore (1998) proposed the 'Prototype' theory which suggests that individuals may favour prototypical examples of categories to non-prototypical objects.

Several psychological studies have found that people's experience and knowledge of art results in significant differences in aesthetic appreciation (Barron and Welsh, 1952; Munsinger and Kessen, 1964; Winston and Cupchik, 1992). Further it was found that there are differences in the way art trained and naïve participants look into artworks. Art experts are engaged in a deeper visual exploration of overall composition while art naïve participants focus on the constituent elements.

*Fluency* theory proposed by Reber et al. (1998, 2004) suggest that people's preference of artworks depends on the "fluency with which the artworks are processed." Fluency theory predicts various factors that contribute to aesthetic effects. It includes viewers' preferences for "larger stimuli" (Silvera et al. 2002), "more symmetrical stimuli" (Jacobsen and Hoefel, 2002), and "highly contrastive displays" (Reber et al.1998). Fluency theory authenticates 'mere exposure effect': an artwork or image which is viewed more often will be easily and fluently processed which leads to increased preference. But it disagrees with Berlyne's proposal where "preference is regarded as a function of complexity."

Later Leder et al. (2004) introduced the 'information-processing model of art appreciation'. The model suggests five processing stages in an aesthetic processing experience: the first stage is perceptual analysis, "which responds to stimulus factors, such as complexity, symmetry, colour, contrast, and organization." The second stage corresponds to implicit memory integration which encompasses "integrating this perceptual information into related information stored in memory concerning familiarity, prototypes, and conventions." The third stage relates to explicit classification of the artwork which leads to explicit representations of either depictive content or explicit style

information of the image. This stage may be moderated by art expertise and art experience. The fourth stage is cognitive "mastering" of the style and content of the artwork. This may be achieved through interpreting the artwork using "one's knowledge about related art and with respect to the viewer's self" and the last stage in this information processing model is evaluation which includes the "artwork's cognitive aspects (e.g., understanding of meaning and ambiguity) and the cumulative effect of all the previous stages of processing on the viewer's affective state."

Silvia (2005, 2006, 2012) proposed the 'appraisal' theory of aesthetic response. This theory focuses on the emotional components of aesthetic response. He argues that different kinds of emotions including "positive emotions (happiness, enjoyment, pleasure), knowledge emotions (surprise, interest, confusion), hostile emotions (anger, disgust, contempt), and self-conscious emotions (pride, shame, guilt, embarrassment)" are essential in understanding aesthetic responses to art.

## VI. IS ART APPRECIATION BENEFICIAL TO CHILDREN?

Art provides an ideal environment for teaching and learning. It acts as an object of concrete attention where children observe and experience, prompting thoughts and feelings. As children engage more and more with artworks, there is still more to see thus making deeper and intense learning experiences. Promptly chosen artwork with well-designed educational patterns can foster children develop their thinking which will pave the foundation for lifelong viewing and learning (Stojilovic & Markovic, 2014).

There are claims that arts activities improve children's "self-awareness, self-confidence and acceptance of others." Through arts education, children can improve their "tolerance and appreciation of diversity in people and ideas." Thus, arts claim its position as part and parcel of education of a child. Art helps human beings to probe the external world and to express their inner world. Even for young children, art is considered primarily as "a language of thought and a tool for expression." Research studies have shown that appropriate introduction of arts education in the school curriculum enhances students' "aesthetic development, socio-emotional development, socio-cultural development, cognitive development and academic achievement" (Iwai, 2002). This does not mean that the only purpose of incorporating arts into the curriculum is instrumental (example, to improve mathematical skills or to enhance literacy learning).

Art engages the student with an experience and helps children to construct their own opinions and get those opinions tested by their peers. "Children should be provided with opportunities for creation and appreciation of meaningful visual art forms so that children will better understand the world they live in" (Lin and Thomas, 2002). "It is suggested that formal education should introduce young children to the world of art from an early stage by focusing on constructing interactive, cumulative, progressive, and sequential visual art programs integrating theoretical (cultural and critical aspects) with art making activities" (Savva & Trimis, 2005).

## VII. IMPLICATIONS OF ART APPRECIATION IN CLASSROOMS

Providing learning experiences for children in classrooms is pivotal for optimal education. If we really intend to make education valuable to our students, it is imperative to provide positive aesthetic experiences to them in their classrooms. A learning experience involves the activity of meaning making. An experience itself does not teach the children but rather the way the children undergoes through that experience and makes meaning helps in learning. Children need educative experiences which enhances their ability to learn. Through art and aesthetic experiences, a child's imagination can be broadened and can be made responsive to everyday situations. An individual's aesthetic development occurs through continuous art experiences. Learning through aesthetic experience involves aesthetic perception and it alters the way a child learns and will provide a positive impact on his/her future.

It is important to understand how children view and appreciate art if we plan to evolve a curriculum incorporating "critical analysis of works of art". Direct contact with real objects is important in enhancing young children's thinking and engagement with works of art. The present school curriculum provides opportunities to children for art making though children rarely get chances for art viewing and engaging with original works of art. So, let us not be the last to incorporate art viewing, art making and reflecting on artworks in our classrooms.

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