



Mozart in the Blackboard Jungle: *Notes on the Artistically Gifted and Talented*

Morgan Appel, Director
Department of Education and
Behavioral Sciences

UC San Diego | Extension

The Arts Save Lives: Stranger Things



Although never identified as artistically gifted (other than a rather keen and profound connection to the prevailing fashions of the early 1980s), the arts saved my academic life.

Seventh period arts was the only course that quieted the voices of uncertainty and fueled my creativity. And beyond our high school band, the only reason I came to school at all.

Context for the (Artistically) Gifted

- **Being gifted is a gift**—unless you are the one experiencing it first hand (both blessing and burden)
- Gifted have a tendency to look **outwardly for approval and inwardly for blame**
- Gifted may experience unique pressures to 'perform' as if the **spotlight is always on—even when alone**
- The greatest risk is the social risk, and the **greatest challenges for educators and parents alike are socioemotional**
- **Gifted tend to be great starters**, but at times lack discipline for follow through (beginnings are always fun!)
- Things come **naturally—without having to work hard.**
- Wearing an **impenetrable suit of emotional armor** every day can be exhausting, both mentally and physically.

Artistic Wisdom from Those Who Knew Best

“Art is the Queen of all sciences communicating knowledge to all the generations of the world.”

-- *Leonardo da Vinci*

“The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”

-- *Aristotle*

“The art of a people is a true mirror of their minds.”

-- *Michelangelo*



Characteristics of the Artistically Gifted and Talented Learner (Creatively Gifted)

CHARACTERISTICS

- **Fluency of imagination** and expression / self motivated in a medium
- **Highly developed sensibilities** (movement, space and color, for example)
- **Faith in ideas** (no need to copy)
- **Directness of expression** and eagerness to engage arts activities related to a given topic
- **Identification with subject and medium** of the art
- **Design sensibilities and extraordinary skill** with a medium
- **Individual and inventive***

TRAITS AND SKILLS

- **Perceptual discrimination** – perceive and differentiate senses
- **Metaperception** – ‘artistic knowing’ and aesthetic sensibilities
- **Creative interpretation** — increasingly sophisticated as one reworks or refines the art (also building metacognitive skills)
- **Also:** rapidity of development; extended concentration; self-directedness; risk aversion (even creative); calculating capacity; memory and detail; and random improvisation (doodling, for example)

Characteristics of the Artistically Gifted and Talented Learner (Creatively Gifted)

- Early discovery of ways to create representations of **three-dimensions**
- Optically realistic and **convincing forms** (human bodies/animals)—drawing realistically
- **Tessellation** (ability to associate parts and wholes) and perceptions of fit
- Different ways of 'seeing' and abilities to **detect small shapes** hidden in figures (visual acuity)

Effective Affective Filtering Through the Arts

Engaging in artistic pursuits empowers a sense of determined purpose and focus. They tend to keep the mind rather busy in creative exploration, thus filtering exogenous static and opening the flood gates of inspiration.

Clarity and focus offers opportunities for flow to kick in in meaningful and productive ways.



Early Signs: Precocious Realists?

Although exhibiting signs of creative and artistic talents in childhood and through adolescence, the majority of gifted artists never pursue careers as artists in adulthood.

There remain important questions about whether realistic depictions of subjects at an early age are sufficient in and of themselves in determining giftedness.

Could it be that thinking like an artist insofar as process is concerned is not as important as a sense of playfulness and daring, abstraction and joy in a given medium (technical proficiency v. talent)?

Source: British Psychological Society, 2017

*Human representations by two three-year olds:
a typical 'tadpole' rendering and one by a
precocious realist*



Precocious Realists

Graphic Representation versus Action Representation:

lines or slashes to represent
action in typical 2-3 year olds
versus lines to represent
objects (action is in labeling,
not the drawing itself)

Line as Contour or Edge: For
typical young children, lines
represent 'things' (apples, etc.).
For precocious realists, lines
form contours, edges and
boundaries

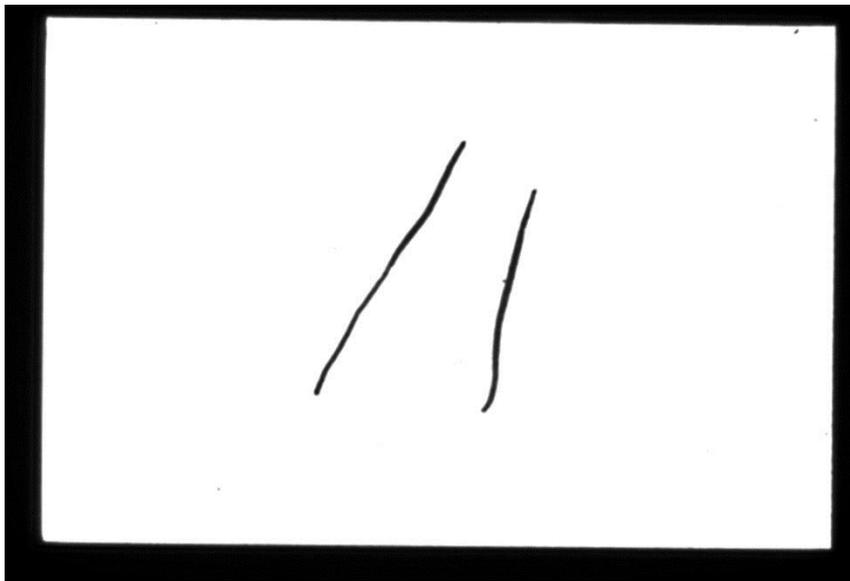
Differentiated Shape:
Precocious realists show
understanding of how objects
are structured and, for
example, how body parts have
different shapes

Source: Drake and Winner

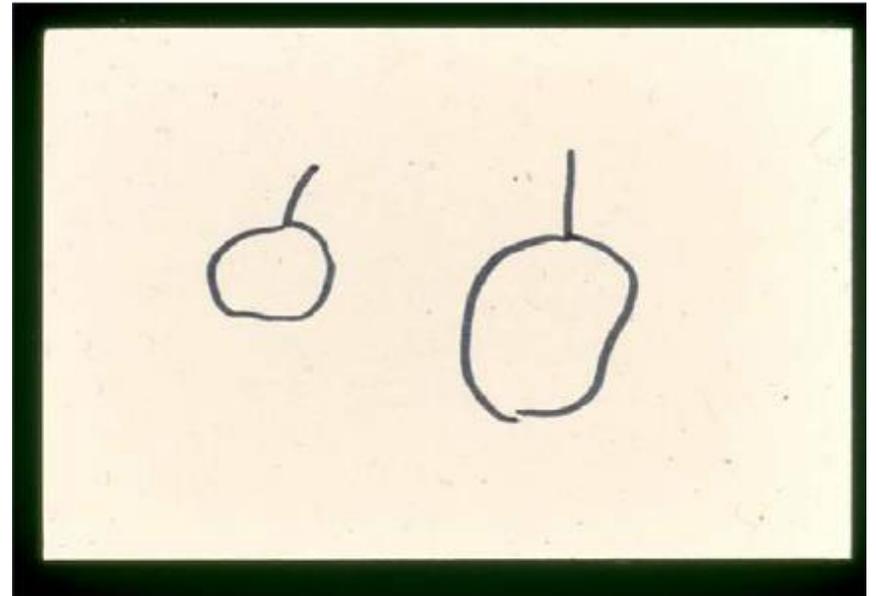


Apples T(w)o Apples

TWO APPLES, AGE 2



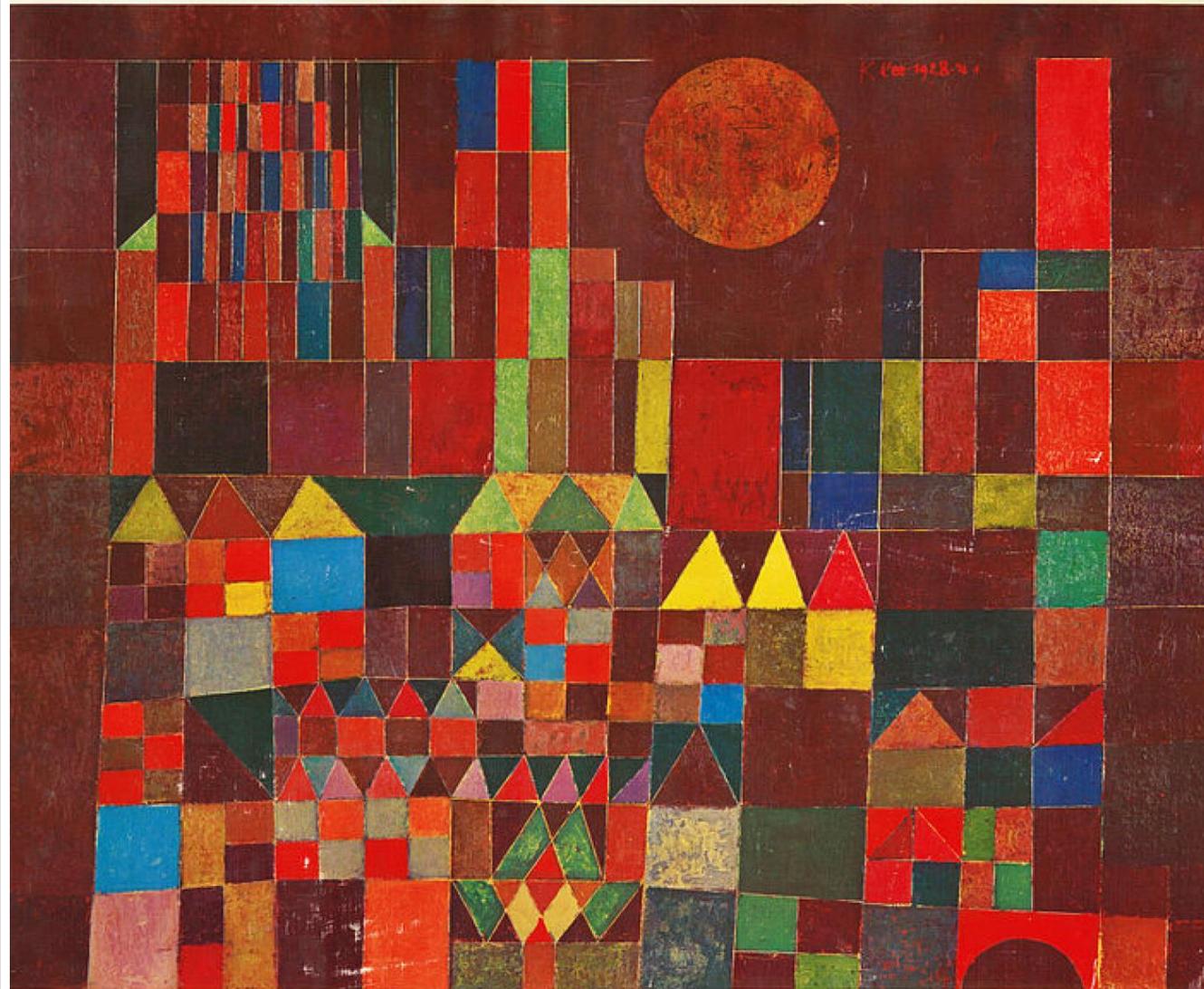
TWO APPLES, REALIST AGE 2



GO FIGURE

The greatest abstract artists drew quite realistically as children. Many of them understood abstraction to be an act of rebellion.

So what does that say about our precocious realists?



Precocious to Prodigy

How to spot a precocious realist:

- (1) Drawings have interesting and arresting compositions (depth, foreshortening, etc.)
- (2) Drawings have decorative, aesthetic features or expressive power
- (3) Hunger to look at art and related deep interest in art
- (4) Enormous drive and rage to master (prodigy), and
- (5) Desire to make excellent art and to be innovative and new

Most do not become artists...but instead...

Source: Drake and Winner



A Bit About Prodigies

- Superior **local processing versus global** (focused on details versus wholes—start anywhere)
- Showed **rage to master** (must draw all the time, constantly—at the expense of everything else) versus gifted
- **Not related to IQ, but did show shared characteristics with elements of autism** (especially local versus global focus)
- High measures of **visual memory**

A Few Characteristics of the Musically Gifted and Talented

- **Movement:** outside of playing, the musically gifted may tend to move in a rhythmic way or tap along to music/sounds heard (evidenced as early as three years old)
- **Listening Skills:** Musically gifted individuals tend to be very aware of specific sounds and can identify them, even in the middle of chaos/cacophony (hyperawareness)
- **Observational Skills:** Many musically gifted are able to notice immediately if an instrument is out of tune or if there are mistakes present in a melody
- **Pattern Recognition:** The musically gifted have a unique knack for identifying patterns or missing elements from a given piece of music
- **Love of music:** Dedication to practicing, eating, living and breathing music (often to the detriment of other interests). Enjoys all elements of the creative process in music, and music across genres
- **Quick Studies:** Tempo, dynamics, style, intonation all come quite organically, affording opportunities for leadership and peer teaching

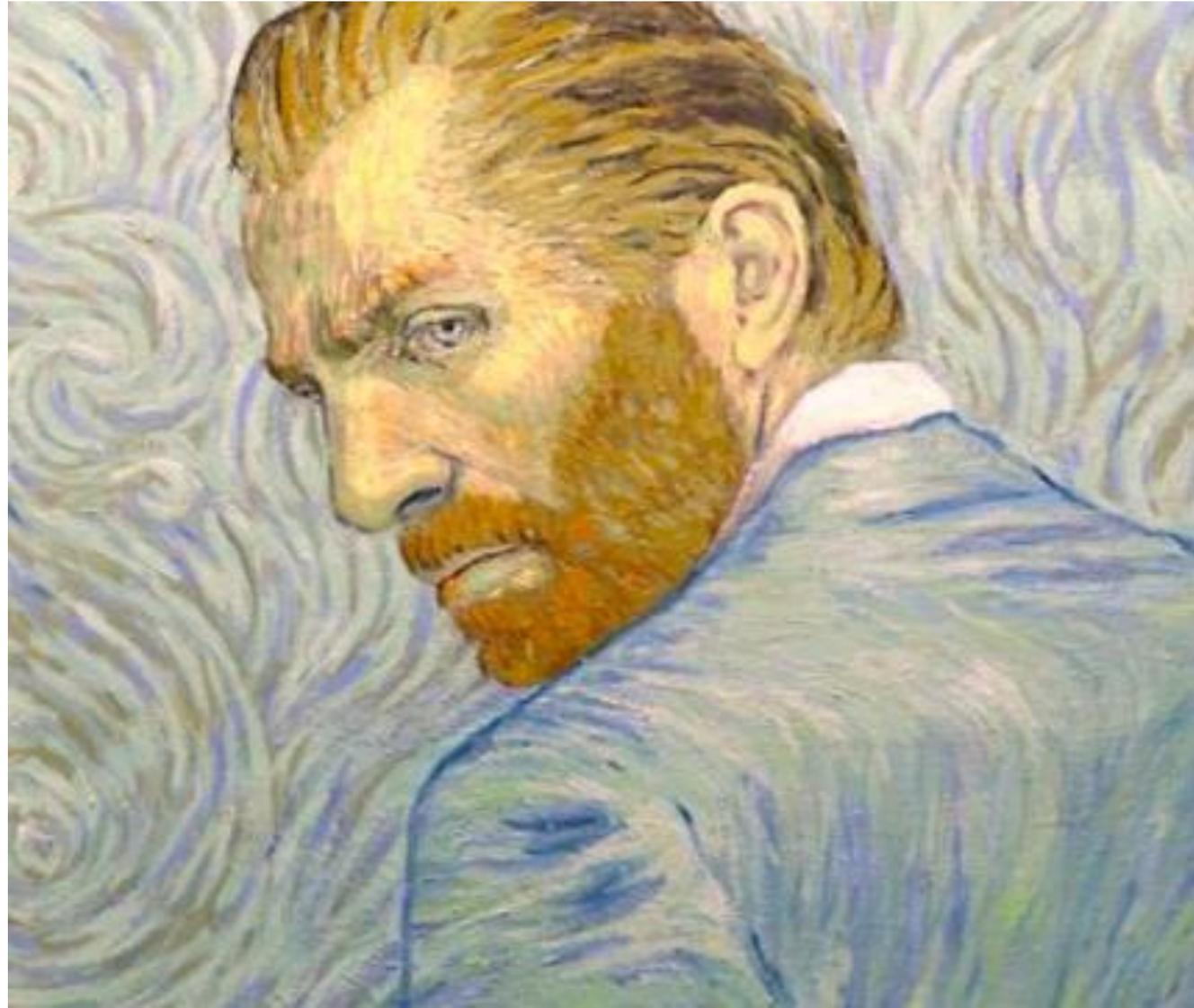
Playing with 'the Blood'

Drawn from the popular and binge-worthy Netflix series *Mozart in the Jungle*, the phrase 'playing with blood' **refers to the intensity and passion of the creatively gifted. It does not mean note-by-note perfection**, but rather the vitality of artistic product as living, breathing entities that warrant constant attention

I dream my painting then paint my dream

Although in some cases—specifically music—characteristics of artistic giftedness will emerge in early childhood, abilities in the visual arts (painting, sculpting, etc.) may not become truly manifest until later in life.

This is not to say that you won't see early signs, often beginning with a love of drawing and high levels of productivity beginning at the age of two.



Routine, Ambiguity and Anxiety: True Across Giftedness

Neurochemically speaking, departure from routine is difficult for the gifted individual, especially if the pathway is ambiguous or where the chance of success is undetermined.

Ambiguity tends to activate the survival mechanism (fight, flight or freeze) and the associated adrenaline and cortisol that signals the brain to focus can produce an unpleasant experience we are trained to avoid.

Thus, the trick is to remove the danger from the unknown and to provide a sense of stability and predictability moving forward. Clarity is king.



Be Here Now: Mindful Painting

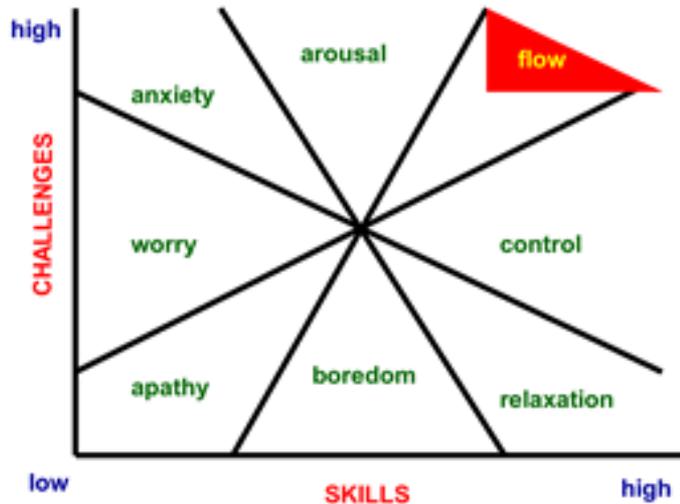
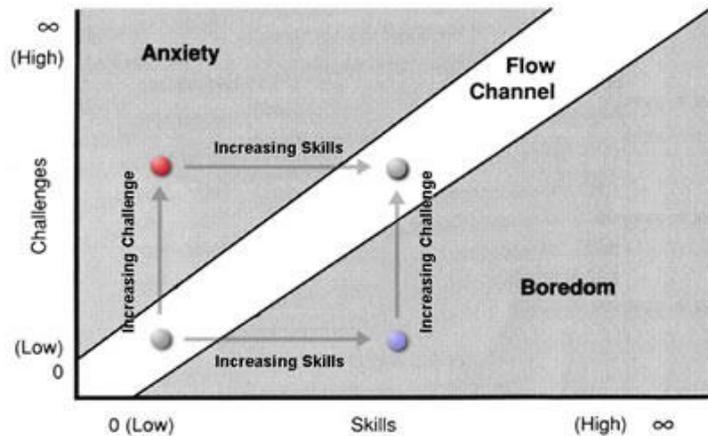
Part of the joy associated with the art of painting lies in the sensory experience: the smell and texture of paint and brush. The visual sensation of a messy palette.

All parts of the process stimulate the senses

Purposeful attention to the scrape of the brush against canvas is an act of mindfulness and an entry point for *Flow*.



Flow: Where the Artist Lives



- Csikszentmihalyi (1970s)
- High challenge, high skill
- Clear goals (CLARITY)
- Balance between ability level and challenge
- Immediate feedback
- Total immersion (intrinsic)—completely absorbed
- “In the groove,” “on the ball,” “in the zone”
- Produces **feelings of enjoyment, confidence and balance**

But I am not an Artist!

Picasso correctly asserts that everyone is born an artist, and the challenge before us is to maintain an artistic spirit as we age.

We know that by about third grade or so, we feel compelled to ensure that our work is accurate and representational, and so snuffs out the joyful notes of creativity.

Rest assured in that the parents and teachers of our most talented artists were not great artists themselves, but found ways to support their creatively gifted children and students.



Artistic Perceptions: Andy Warhol

"What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke. Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too."



How Artistically Gifted Benefit from Their Artistic Endeavors

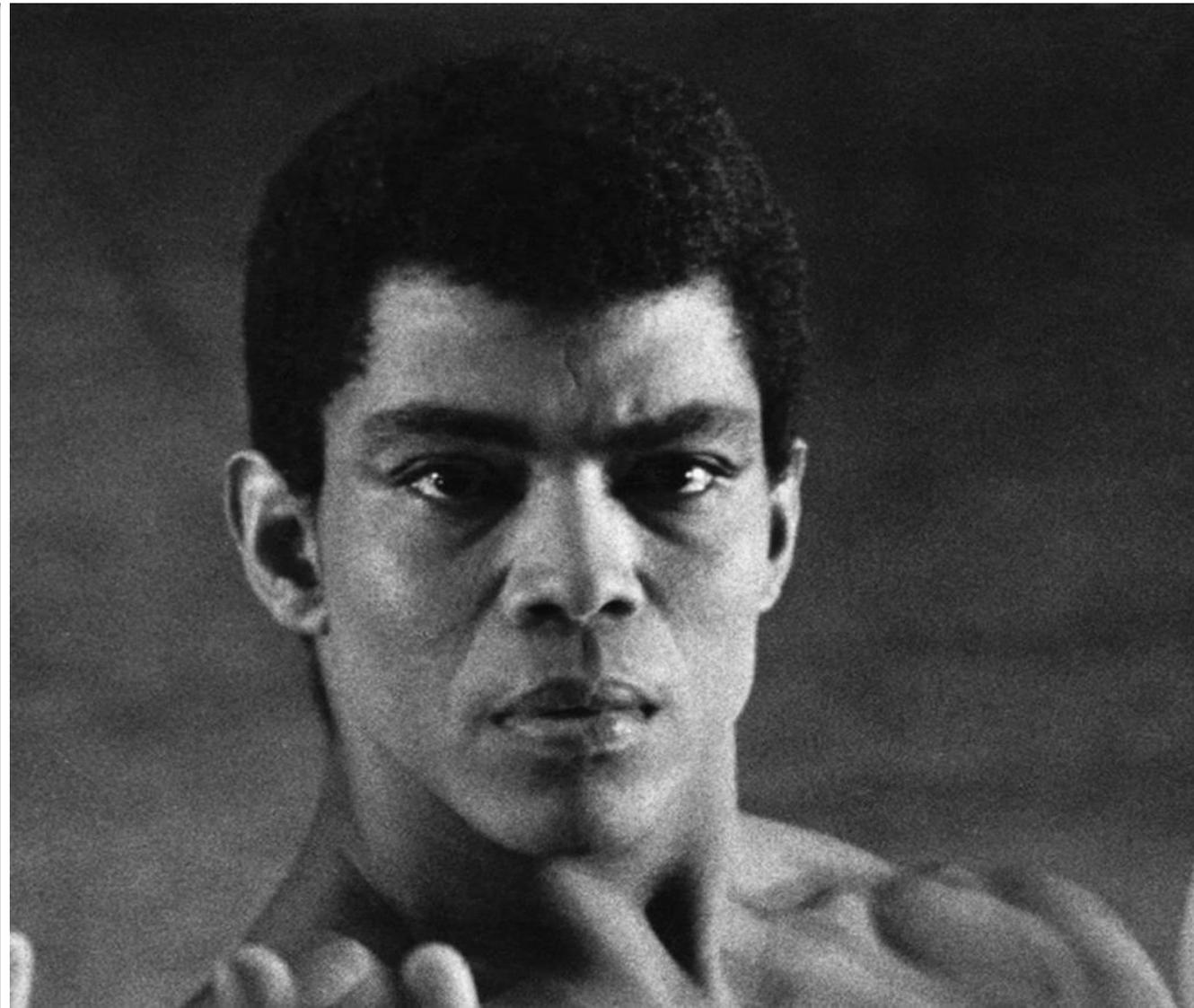
- Provides **'safe' environments** (no 'right' or 'wrong' answers) and a means to develop sound metacognitive habits and mitigate the impacts of perfectionism through revisions and refinements
- Facilitates **freedom of expression** and seeing 'shades of gray'
- Socially constructed learning that connects to the 'real world' and helps to **explain it, realistically**
- An outlet for both **empathy and intensity** – not always verbal
- Inspires **risk taking, confidence and competence** (but a journey)
- Discovering **role models** who have much in common with themselves—but this process must be purposefully supported

On the Creative Process

"The creative process is not controlled by a switch you can simply turn on or off; it's with you all the time." – *Alvin Ailey (dancer)*

"I'm a very restless person. I'm always doing something. The creative process never stops." – *Oscar de la Renta (designer)*

"When I started 'Record Collection,' I had no idea that it would come out sounding the way that it did, and that's one of the best things about the creative process, taking turns with the things you didn't know." – *Mark Ronson (musician and producer)*



How Artistically Gifted Benefit from Their Artistic Endeavors

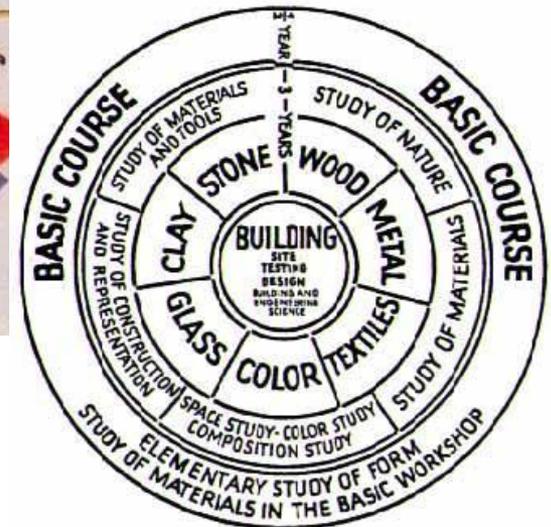
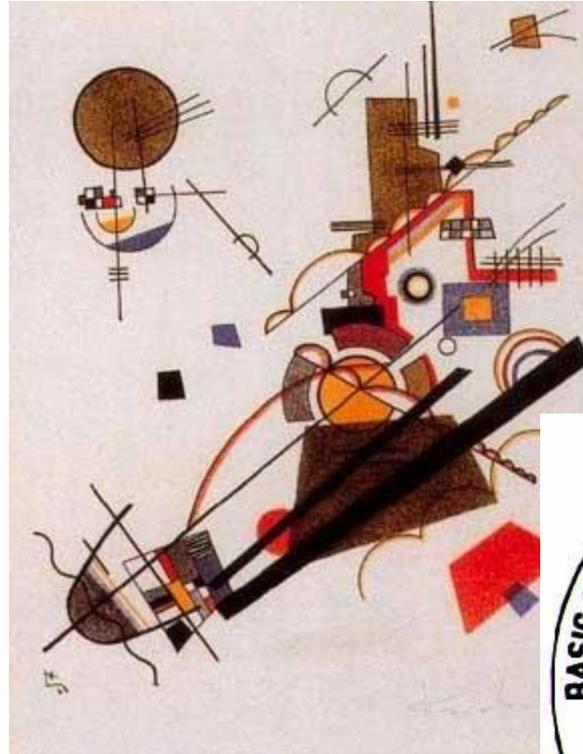
- **Cultivating social competencies** (and relationships)
- Impacts on self-regulation and **understanding of social justice and equity**
- Opportunities to **enhance socioemotional development** (must be undertaken in a purposeful way)
- **Empowerment, voice and the creation of healthy social scripts** (decision making related to focus and methods)
- Opportunities for **'bite-size' successes**, competence and confidence

Recommendations for Teachers

- Provide **opportunities for artistic experimentation**, including allowing students to select their own projects and emphases within the broader curriculum
- **Avoid instincts to *correct* proportionality, color, time spent, etc.** Allow creativity to flow and beware 'over-teaching'
- Use **arts as a vehicle to explore and to connect with other disciplines** (part of the day versus creative enhancement)—STEAM, for example
- Understand that **not everything the artistically gifted child produces will be outstanding**—avoid competitiveness in the arts (enhance enjoyment, playfulness) and do not teach 'how to paint'

Creative Movements Over Time

- Involving
- Spirited/Manic
- Chaotic
- Porous/Focused
- Tense
- Artistic
- Creative Play
- Collaborative
- Competitive
- Energetic
- Purpose-Driven
- Synergistic
- Differentiated
- Epiphany-Based



And for Parents...

- Understand **artistic endeavors as a record of personality**
- Engage the **process as much as the product** (do not solely focus on end result)
- **Curate the work of your child at home**, almost as a museum would
- Provide **suitable space and materials for creativity**
- Teach **respect for the works of others—and visit artistic spaces frequently**
- Be prepared to **weather the storm** of emotional uncertainties (ups and downs, doubts and costs)

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Understanding Depth and Complexity In and Through the Arts



2000s



1940s

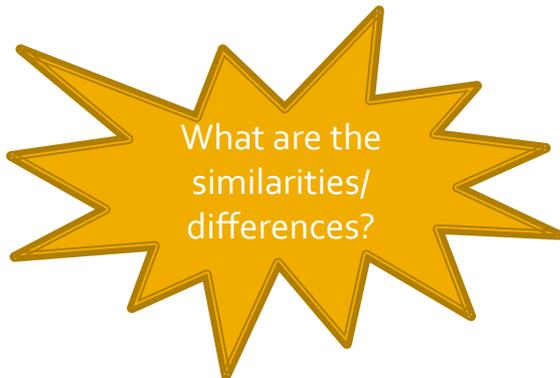
Elements of Depth and Complexity

- Details
- Big Picture
- Perspectives
- Ethics
- Over Time
- Rules
- Language
- Patterns
- Unanswered ?s
- Across Disciplines

Different Cultures, Different Times – Same Themes

Yo trabajaba, mis hijos iban creciendo
Todos nacieron bajo de esta gran nacion
-- y mis derechos los han ido pisoteando
van formulando leyes de constitucion
Que ha ya viejo si me quitan mi dinero --
yo solo quiero mi seguro de pension

Los Tigres del Norte, "Mis dos Patrias,"
1997



Now fill your glasses up, my boys, a
toast come drink with me,
May Erin's Harp and the Starry Flag
united ever be;
May traitors quake, and rebels
shake, and tremble in their fears,
When next they meet the Yankee
boys and Irish volunteers!
God bless the name of Washington!
that name this land reveres;
Success to Meagher and Nugent,
and their Irish volunteers!
Chorus--God bless the name, etc.

"The Bonny Blue Flag," 1861

Past as Prelude

What is the symbolism? How do things change over time?

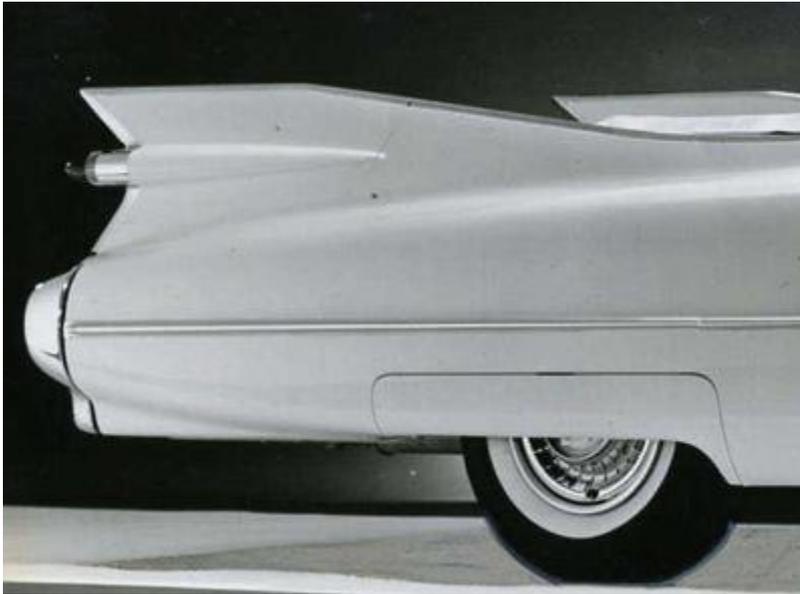


1940s, Iwo Jima



2000s, Baghdad

Design a 'Retro-Inspired' Car



When was this car built?

How do you know?

How does the design of the car reflect the times?

Beyond style, is there purpose behind the design? What is it?
How do you know?

Your assignment: *Design a modern car with a 'retro' influence—taking into consideration cost, price, fuel efficiency, environment, etc. Alternatively, design a car that best fits the times we live in today!*

The Night James Brown Saved Boston

*Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud!
Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud!*

Some people say we've got a lot of malice, some say it's a lot of nerve. But I say we won't quit moving until we get what we deserve. We have been bucked and we have been scorned We have been treated bad, talked about as just bones.

But just as it takes two eyes to make a pair, ha Brother we can't quit until we get our share! Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud! Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud!

One more time! Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud! I worked on jobs with my feet and my hand. But all the work I did was for the other man Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves. We're tired of beatin' our head against the wall And workin' for someone else.

--James Brown, 1968



Blackbird Singing in the Dead of Night

*Blackbird singing in the
dead of night*

*Take these broken wings
and learn to fly*

*All your life, you were
only waiting for this
moment to arise*

*You were only waiting for
this moment to arise,
You were only waiting for
this moment to arise*

--Paul McCartney, 1968



Comments and Questions

Contact Information

Morgan Appel

Director

Department of Education and Behavioral Sciences

UC San Diego Extension

9500 Gilman Drive #0170-N

La Jolla, California 92093-0170

858-534-9273/ mappel@ucsd.edu