

# Essential Art

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IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT MY PATERNAL grandmother was a published poet and an accomplished musician and artist, I had no formal introduction to art when I was a child. I don't remember ever being taken to art galleries or museums. But I found art in my own way and in my own time because of my own intrinsic need to be creative. I did, however, grow up with the blessing of beautiful music around me at all times, for both my parents loved classical music and opera, and my mother and her parents played the piano. I have never lived without a piano in my house.

I discovered Paint by Numbers while growing up in England and delighted in completing a picture and being able to frame it—all out of one box! I also did a lot of coloring with crayons, and my best gift was always new colors by Derwent, usually given to me by my visiting maternal grandparents. Derwent crayons had wonderful, subtle shades, and they kept me company during the endless bouts of asthma and bronchitis I suffered as a child, which left me isolated upstairs in my chilly bedroom for days on end. They kept my imagination alive, and when not in use, I stored them in one of my grandfather's cigar boxes. I still have that box today, with my worn crayons nestled inside. I'm so glad I kept them because I pull them out for the children who visit me periodically.

Much later, in my thirties, living in Rome, Italy, when I was in the painful throes of Jungian psychotherapy, my unconscious made it clear that I was to start painting. I resisted, but my therapist insisted that I obey my unconscious.

My early paintings were mostly depictions of my dreams, but then I attended an art class in the house of a man named Mark Anthony—yes, really! Under his guidance I discovered that I had some talent. I graduated from pencil and charcoal to painting in oils on bigger and bigger canvases. It was very easy for me to lose track of the hours I spent at my easel, and I discovered that the time spent painting had the benefits of deep meditation. I plunged into the world of art at this time, visiting museums and art galleries all over the world, and my knowledge and love of art grew exponentially.

I mostly painted landscapes and still lifes, and one night, in a dream, van Gogh came to me. He didn't exactly instruct me, rather he encouraged me with positive words and expression. My brush strokes were rather masculine in their decisiveness, and van Gogh had always called to me in a special way. Somehow, he must have felt the connection and decided to inspire me further. From that time on I felt as though I had been blessed by the master and was vitalized in my artistic endeavors. My technique improved, and I began to participate in art contests and exhibitions, and to show and sell my paintings in various galleries.

I knew intuitively that painting, and any of the creative arts, kept me sane and held me back from the brink of neurosis. I have come to understand that creativity is an essential element of who I am. It's written into my DNA, and it is imperative for me to express it somehow, whether through painting, making music, writing, creating a beautiful garden, or even cooking.

I firmly believe that art in any form functions like antibodies to the sickness and greed found in society. It lifts us up and feeds the collective soul, inspiring children and adults alike. The artist is called to express not only the zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, but also to function as God's ongoing instrument of creation in the world. Creation, as we read of it in the Bible, was not a one-off, isolated act. It is ongoing, and we are all called to participate in it in some way. Personally, whenever I was about to start a new painting and was faced with a daunting white expanse of canvas, rather like a writer facing a blank page, I laid my hands on the canvas and prayed that I could participate in my small way in the eternal, on-going act of creation.

Perhaps I would define creative living as seeing life from a glass half-full perspective rather than the glass half-empty, impoverished perspective. I can also imagine it as a musical key in which we can choose to live our life in an attitude of harmony, spontaneity, and improvisation, which in turn leads to the healing of life's hurts—our own and those of others.

All societies need to encourage and inspire children to express themselves, to develop the creative, right side of their brains, to nurture their imaginations, and to trust their intuitions. Only in this way will they evolve and mature into fully rounded adults replete with inner resources. We must do what we can to keep the arts alive and to help fund art in all its forms in our schools and our homes. Besides, making art is not a chore, it's fun! We need to make time in our lives to play!

Art is such an allegory of life itself. If we stand too close to the canvas, the whole picture is unclear; we can't see the wood for the trees, so to speak. But if we take a few steps back from the picture, suddenly we gain perspective; everything comes together and we can see the whole rather than the parts. I have learned from this to step back from my problems and to view them in a broader, more objective way, and it has certainly helped me avoid becoming bogged down in the disconnected details of the problems that beset me in life. Perspective enhances my powers of prioritizing.

Music is the greatest balm of all in my life, however, and I consider it the greatest of the art expressions. It is the universal language that transcends the artificial divisions created by politics and national boundaries. It creates a connection between hearts, offering us a sense of oneness. I feel connected to the universe when I listen to beautiful music. And that includes the beautiful tones of a mockingbird singing to me from my pomegranate tree.

But perhaps that is the case with the arts in all their manifestations of beauty, for we all need beauty in our lives, inner and outer, and the arts more than anything else give us that eternal truth. As I advance in years, I find I have a very ready tear. Beautiful words, beautiful nature, beautiful art can reduce me to tears in a moment. I like to think that with age and the presence of art in my life, my heart is expanding and will one day dissolve the limiting confines of my individual body and be free to embrace everyone in the world, our one, beautiful, human family. ☞