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L. LUIS LOPEZ

# Could Aristotle Teach the Honors Courses I Envision? Theory and Practice in the Arts

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In general, art survey and art history courses focus on the influence of culture on art and art on culture, and the changes in art from century to century or from any period to any period. When an art survey or art history section is taught at the honors level, what results is a class with fewer students moving at a faster pace so more material can be covered, the introduction of discussion into what is usually a lecture class, and a more concentrated study of the material presented. This, of course, is the case for many general education courses given honors designation. It seems to me, however, that something important is missing for the honors student who does not take two-dimensional or three-dimensional art courses. What is missing is the hands-on experience that is important in “fleshing-out” a more informed or, to use a term I will explain in arguing my case, a “wiser” honors student. In my opinion, an honors art course ought to incorporate three segments: lecture, a hands-on experience, and discussion after the first two segments. The teachings of Aristotle concerning what a wise man is plus some reflections on my own experience will be the basis for my insistence.

Early in his *Metaphysics* Aristotle claims that wisdom is the “knowledge of certain principles and causes.” Following that statement, he adds, “We suppose . . . that the wise man knows all things, as far as possible, although he has not knowledge of each of them in detail” (500a). By “in detail” Aristotle means the senses: “[S]ense-perception is common to all, and therefore easy and not a mark of Wisdom.” Obviously, then, sense-perception alone does not make a person wise for it is not a necessity for learning “certain principles and causes” well. Yet, he begins his *Metaphysics* with these words: “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves” (499a). He goes on to argue that a series of sense-perceptions produces memory in men which, in turn, leads to experience. That is, “several memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience.” He continues by claiming that art comes to men through experience. He clarifies by stating, “Now art arises when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgement about a class of objects is produced.” So, a man who has both theory and sensual experience realizes that the sensual experience has given rise to theory. Yes, it is possible to learn theory through reading or lecture, but obviously who has the

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better knowledge? Who is “wiser” about “the class of objects” (sculpture, let us say), the pure theorist or the “experienced” theorist?

After arguing that experience leads to art, Aristotle makes a very interesting distinction between men of art and men of experience. By men of experience he seems to mean those who experience with the senses but don't or can't bundle the experiences together to come up with theory—a *manual worker*, in another of his terminologies, as opposed to a *master worker*. He points out that the master worker is the artist in that he knows “the causes of the things that are done . . . “ (500b). He goes on to claim that the master-worker (artist) can teach, whereas the manual worker (the man of mere experience) cannot. I suppose that if the manual worker doesn't know the “why” of things, he cannot teach. But manual workers are human beings, not zombies or robots. Through the honors art class I briefly describe above, I believe the honors student will become more like the master-worker who has been taught theory but who has also experienced the *details* through sensory experience. That experience, it seems to me, leads to a man who knows. Of course, a person cannot have detailed knowledge of all subjects, so I believe that Aristotle might agree that a “wise” person would have knowledge of the “principles and causes” (theory) of many subjects, but of some of those he would have knowledge “in detail.” This, in my mind, describes the ideal honors student.

For a number of years, I studied the art of Spanish Colonial tin work and the art of carving santos, two crafts that are very important and particular to my New Mexican Hispanic culture. Among other things, I learned that tin replaced silver because it was cheaper and readily available. I learned that tin cans were used to make frames for holy pictures that decorate the altars of many Catholic churches. I learned to identify style. As regards the carving of santos, I first learned about the lives of individual saints and about their importance to particular communities. I learned to identify saints by symbols. I had knowledge about the “principles and causes” of tin work and carving. I thought myself wise in those crafts, but until I actually spent three summers in New Mexico cutting, hammering, punching, soldering, and polishing tin frames, I realized I could not *consider* myself wise in that craft. Until I actually spent time envisioning what saint might emerge from a piece of cedar, juniper, or pine, smelled the wood, felt the wood, actually put tool to wood, and cut myself a few times, I realized I could not *feel* wise in that craft. The use of my senses added to my knowledge of the subject. I understood the “principles and causes” with my body (physically and emotionally), not just my head.

When I look at a 1920 tin frame holding a picture of St. Francis of Assisi, and I notice the images of doves and various flowery and geometric designs stamped into the tin work, my knowledge of the expertise called for in the use of the tools and materials available to the artists of the time not only makes me appreciate the artist but links me to the artist in a kinship I could never imagine just by having learned about tin work from a lecture or book. When I look at the flickering image of San Longino, the Roman centurion become saint who is said to have pierced Christ in the side while he was hanging on the cross, standing on a shelf behind a flickering votive candle in a corner of a chapel, and I realize that I saw his image in the piece of cedar before I carved it, I am linked to the likes of Michelangelo. Even though wood is not

marble, I feel I can understand, at least to some extent, what was in his head and what was in his heart, before, during, and after he sculpted the *Pieta*.

My experience teaches me that honors art survey and art appreciation courses should include the practice of art. Obviously, there is not enough time to practice every type of art in a survey course, so one or two might be the maximum. I have discussed this problem with art teachers who have practiced art in their courses. They claim that just one experience gets the point across. However, survey courses are usually taught in traditional classrooms or lecture halls, places where one cannot practice the messier arts—but one can always adapt. If the weather cooperates, there is always the outdoors. At Mesa State College, we are talking about how best to adapt the practice of art to honors survey courses. That remains a difficulty, but a course that will include the lecture, hands-on, and discussion components I mentioned earlier is being developed for Spring 2003. This will be either a 115 Art Appreciation or a 396 Topics course. In either case, the professor will take one type of art and carry it through its various stages of development, for example the movement from wood cuts to etchings. Students will listen to a lecture in a regular classroom, do required readings, then actually practice the art of wood cutting in a studio classroom. This will be followed by a discussion of the entire process. Imagine my enthusiasm over the possibilities. Could music, dance, and drama benefit from this process?

But there is a further reason for experiencing art at the sensory level. That has to do with Aristotle's theory of the "original causes" of things—the famous four causes. Aristotle treats the four causes both in the *Physics* (271 and 275) and in the *Metaphysics* (501b). The four causes illuminate four ways in which a natural being or a crafted being can be understood: the efficient cause (the maker or doer), the material cause (the stuff the object is made of), the formal cause (the shape of the being which is connected to its use), and the final cause (the reason the being is made—its purpose). An honors student can easily understand these four causes on a theoretical level, but it is better to experience them on the sensory level.

Consider a crafted being, say a clay pot. A clay pot can be made by an honors student who starts the process (efficient cause). That student has an idea of what the pot should be and why he wants to make it (final cause). He gathers clay and prepares a mixture for the pot (material cause). Finally, he forms the pot into a shape that will serve the purpose for the pot (formal cause). He fires it, and now the pot stands before him—an object of satisfaction. He has used each of his senses to make the pot, so one can say that he not only understands the "principles and causes" of the pot (that is, the process) but has practiced the process by experiencing it at the sensory level. He understands the pot in his head and feels it in his heart. The outcome is an honors student who, in Aristotle's words, "succeeds . . . better than those who have theory without experience" (499b).

So I leave the reader with two questions. Whom would you rather have as a teacher, someone who only understands the clay pot in his head, someone who only feels the clay pot in his heart, or someone who understand the clay pot in his head and feels it in his heart? Aristotle claims that the man who has only theory can teach, whereas the man who has only experience cannot (499b). His master-worker will be the best teacher for a specific subject because he delights in the senses, derives his

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principles and causes from the details of life, and is therefore truly wise. I envision honors courses that reflect such wisdom as this. Could Aristotle teach the honors courses I envision? I'll leave this question with the reader.

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