**My Artistic Development and Influences** Debra Troyanos

My childhood art education consisted of crafts in Brownies an Girl Scouts, and Holiday Art at school, both of which I greatly enjoyed. I remember a mother coming in to school one day in third grade, and yelling loudly at the teacher because we were making Christmas cards. We were spatter painting snow on them with a toothbrush and I thought they were *so* beautiful! But the mother was Jewish, and in those days, before political correctness, that was not even considered in suburban Connecticut. I did not take high school art, since it was never even offered by my guidance counselor, and I did not know to ask. He did inform me that I scored higher than anyone in the school on the “Spatial Relationships” portion of the standardized tests, but he could not tell me what that would mean. He guessed it meant I could be an architect. However, coming from a poor uneducated family, I could not imagine how to pay for college and no adult explained how I could get grants, loans, or scholarships even though I was an A student. I did always ask for artistic gifts during childhood. and my parents bought me paint-by-numbers sets, candle-making kits, Spin-Art, bead and jewelry making sets, watercolor sets , rock tumbling, and a mini-pottery wheel etc for birthdays and holidays. My dad bought me my first camera, a Polaroid, for my 12th Christmas. This turned out to be a predictor of my future. So my early years of aesthetic development were influenced positively (and negatively) by the adults around me, as well as by the artistic materials and tools provided to me, as the Vygotsky’s theories suggest.

I went into the working world for a few years until I had two children and became a stay-at-home mom. Later when re-entering the work world I answered an ad to become a photographer at Olan Mills (a national photography chain). No photo experience was necessary, they hired based solely on personality, as long as you were good with people and children they would completely train me. I learned to photograph portraits in the studio, everything from a 2 day old newborn to a family group of twenty. Everything was based on standardized poses and lighting. When my husband got a new job as a police officer and we had to move nearer to his work, I took the opportunity to open my own photo studio on Main Street in a seaside town. I did more studio portraits, weddings, and beach portraits only now I could be more expressive and begin to develop my own style. I learned my artistic skill from joining groups such as Professional Photographers of America, Professional Photographers of Massachusetts, and other guilds and trade associations. Older, more experienced photographers mentored the younger ones, but in those days the field consisted mostly of men. A group of us young women started a professional group of female photographers, and we met monthly and supported, shared, advised and assisted one another to success. Having this group of peer artists was so valuable to all of our aesthetic growth. We would make dates to experiment with new techniques and try challenging new ideas. We helped each other with exhibits, and cheered one another when entering competitions. This kind of cooperative learning and peer sharing is another strong influences on my artistic development. After over twenty years, and a lot of work, I reached the top of the field, becoming a mentor and leader myself. I became President of the Professional Photographers of Cape Cod with over eighty members. I trained many new photographers, especially in Photoshop and Corel Painter. Meanwhile, I volunteered at my children’s school as an Art History teacher once a month, which I enjoyed so much I did it for fifteen years. I also became a Brownie and Girl scout leader allowing me to do artistic projects fairly often. All of these social and cultural contexts became a part of my own artistic development as well.

Following divorce, I went back to school to get my college degree, and teaching certification, which would enable me to still teach and do photography and Photoshop, as well as get health and retirement benefits and have the same hours and vacations as my kids. I majored in Fine Art, and Art Education, and minored in Art History. These experiences began a love affair with all the arts, both making and viewing it. I spent many happy hours perusing art history books, and going to the Museum of Fine Arts (<http://www.mfa.org/>), and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston whenever possible. Many famous European and American artworks are there. They specialize in two special local and beloved artists, who also became two of my favorites. One is John Singer Sargent, (<http://www.johnsingersargent.org/>) and the other is John Singleton Copley (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Singleton_Copley>). Both of these were portrait painters, who created realistic, but flattering, portraits of the wealthy socialite and upper-middle class families of Boston. This was something to which I could relate, since these were now my same clients. I felt a kinship and admiration for their work. I stared for hours at the posing and lighting, and placement of the hands and props in order to improve my own work. These lush, vivid paintings were an incredible influence on my artistic development and my work began to have similar qualities. My aesthetic choices at this point in my life were influenced by my exposure to art in museums and art history books, which have their own biases of course. However, these paintings became old friends that I visited on a regular basis and I felt a sense of heightened awareness. In the article *Aesthetic Experience and the Construction of Meanings,* Michael Parsons described this experience as a “sense of intense engagement with the art object. There is often also a sense of freedom, of release from the preoccupations of the self, and of insight into the world” (Parsons, 2002).

My artistic development was also led by trends in the industry, what the clients wanted and the market demanded, and even the mercy of the weather for outdoor portraits (lighting conditions, wind, tides, etc.) all affected my aesthetic decisions in making images. I became known for portrait images that showed a great deal of love and emotion among the family members or couples. They were always touching and connecting in some way. On individual portraits I had a knack for helping people relax and show their natural selves, and to bring out their inner beauty and soul. I strove to make people look like they wanted to look, (with a little help from Photoshop, I could even do digital diets). I also created the appearance of the perfect family relationships, the fantasy family we all meant to be, with everyone happy and healthy and even the dog smiling. I know this is a psychological influence on my artistic development, since I subconsciously try to “create” the happy family I didn’t have growing up. I do it with my own family now, and I did it in my artwork. This means I was influenced artistically by family and culture. Clients kept coming and I was busy 60 hours a week or more, even with an employee to help. It was a difficult pace to keep up for so many years, but it was rewarding, fulfilling work that had meaning to me, and to my clients.

I remarried, to a music educator, and had a daughter. While she was very young, it was ideal for me to continue to shoot weddings on weekends or photograph beach shoots at sunset, since it enabled me to be home with her during the day and then my husband took care of her while I worked. Being with a spouse and child who also love the arts has given me a positive environment to create art and view it. Years later, I eventually became a high school art educator. I was hired to start a Digital Photography program into the school. In addition, I inherited the courses of the previous teacher, which were Clay, Fashion Design, AP Studio Art, and 8th grade. In college, I had only taken one semester of ceramics, and had never run a kiln. The Fashion Design class was just added so there was no existing curriculum or books for it, so it was up to me to create one. Therefore, I had to develop artistically very quickly in these areas in order to teach them. I researched for months online, and bought books on the topics. I designed two excellent programs. In fact, one of my students won an award for her portfolio from Fashion class, and she got a scholarship to go to Boston School of Fashion. She beat out students in long-established high school programs, so I guess I was on the right track. In this case, my artistic development was based on access to resources and my strong commitment and intention to growing artistically in these areas.

Traveling has been a large influence on my artistic (and personal) growth and development. It is so life-changing to immerse oneself in other cultures, and the beauty of their environment, their architecture, their food, their music, and their art. I have been particularly inspired by visiting Ireland (The Book of Kells, Dublin), New York (MOMA), Chicago (Chicago Institute of Art), Washington DC (Smithsonian and National Portrait Gallery), New Orleans (Professional Photographers of America Convention), and most of all Italy (all of it!). I find with travel and viewing art, that the more you see- the more you want to see. “Each encounter with a work of art builds on the subsequent encounters.” (Smith-Shank, 1996).

I began the program at University of Florida and have had my artistic development altered once again. All the art history courses I had taken had never covered anything after 1970, so I have had my mind really opened up to contemporary artists for the first time. I have taken pride in getting the highest grades possible all my life, but I have come to realize that this has been a hindrance in making artworks since I have been trying to please the teacher or professor for the grade, rather than producing work that truly speaks from my soul. Making work that fits within the specific parameters of the assignments, under such demanding conditions and time constraints was very damaging to my creativity. The more pressure I was under, the less I liked what I came up with, and I would revise and redo until I didn’t recognize myself in the work anymore. I realize now that I require more gestation time to let an idea percolate in my mind, even while I sleep, in order to work it out visually. I like to have several days when possible. Since being a student in this program, I have gotten many more insights into the way we make our students feel too. Expecting them to come in from other classes, other personal dramas and moods, and then forcing them to be creative-on-demand, every single day, is actually a lot to ask. I now have more empathy for that, *and* for the students who are afraid to really take a creative leap or experiment because ultimately they are worried about getting a good grade.

A couple of articles, books, and courses in the program have had great effect on me. One book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, by Stephen Nachmanovitch, spoke to me because it encouraged “letting go” and allowing yourself to play in your art like a child. Being accustomed to doing art for so many years that had to please the paying client, and then for teachers/professors who were grading me, this was a new concept for me. In the summer studio class in Printmaking we made a lot of abstract, non-representational art, based on the senses. We were drawing lines and shapes according to sounds, tastes and sensations. This was so liberating for me. I am attempting to do more of this Holistic type of artwork, with my students and in my own art in the future. “The Holistic Theory of art education recognizes the inter-connectness of body, mind, spirit, and emotions.  It is about learning art through experiences in an organic process.  Through contemplation and making connections it can make art a medium of transformation.  By using this context, it gives purpose for artmaking, and it deepens the engagement and meaning to the student”. (Carroll, 2006)

We also did collaborative group artwork, which was a first for me. I was trying to think of fresh new ways to incorporate collaborative into the classroom and now that I experienced it I can see how it would work. (Wilson, 2007).

I now know that art is so much more than I thought, and is enriched socially, culturally, globally. I have created contemporary art pieces such as a Derive, a video, even using Google Earth. I have done things I didn’t know I was capable of. This program has greatly influenced me artistically and aesthetically, giving me new ways to enjoy making art and seeing the world.

**Resources-**

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