

Revisiting the Arts: Victorian Educational Valences in Contemporary Art Teaching

Mihaela Luminita LEVARDA

The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Abstract:

The paper analyses the way in which the Arts have earned their place in the English contemporary curriculum among other valuable programmes of study, knowing that by the beginning of the Victorian Age appreciation of beauty was outside the scope of schools. The foundation of schools of Art and the introduction of the academic teaching of the Arts took place during the Victorian Age on a larger scale due to an increasing interest in the aesthetic aspect. Young ladies were mainly educated at home and their education was focused on the arts and manners. A number of women writers like the Brontë sisters created stories in which young women were fond of music and drawing. Prince Albert had a leading role in the foundation of schools of Art, as well. Moreover, the Victoria and Albert Museum was opened in 1852 and it has become the world's largest museum of decorative arts and design, housing millions of works of art. Therefore, the English contemporary curriculum comprises a series of Art forms thanks to the Victorian initiative to set up educational institutions for the study of the Arts.

JEL Codes: I20, I26

Keywords: the Arts, works of art, artists, Schools of Art, Art teachers, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education innovative ideas aim to bring original solutions for a higher level of performance than the previous one, while in the Victorian Age innovation meant to find solutions to offer education to more children than the previous year. The history of English education has recorded the Victorian concern towards the study of various forms of Art, which led to the introduction of the Art and Design programmes of study into the English curriculum. The paper explores the way in which the Arts have found their place in the English contemporary curriculum, because appreciation of beauty deserves to be studied in schools for its important role in our lives, culture and education.

1. THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE VICTORIAN ARTIST

One may say that more artists could have been during the Victorian Age, coming from all social classes, but it was the extension of the Industrial Revolution that had made the English people focus on earning their living, rather than enjoying the world around them. The mechanical power had replaced the people's interest in spending their time walking outside, with walks in the new urban scenery, which was sober, gloomy and full of cramped buildings.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood emerged as a union of artists whose paintings were focused on imitating nature among other artistic themes. This became possible when they turned their attention to *mimesis*. The urban life lacked the loveliness of the nature which surrounded the peasants' houses. However, the people's interest was prone to the urban life rather than the rural one. Yet, everything around the townsmen gave the impression of heavy breathing and jamming because of the new buildings, the factories and the dense smoke. The trees, the flowers and the grass were present in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, while in the real urban life there was just a slight shadow of what had been before the new and impressive constructions. Not only the Pre-Raphaelites, but also other painters who were as talented as them, wanted to show their paintings to increasingly more people.

Prince Albert was aware that his people felt the need to enjoy the beauties of the art, therefore he took action. Before the opening of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Prince Albert instituted a Royal Commission to organize the Great Exhibition of 1851, where the most appreciated works of art were displayed for the public [1]. Michael Paterson noted that the Prince was sure of its success, and indeed it was the first and by far the most impressive exhibition ever seen in Victorian England. Prince Albert's initiative to bring together a large number of works of art under the same roof, a great place where talented painters could exhibit their beautiful paintings for the whole world, had a remarkable impact on the subsequent development of the Arts. The Victoria and Albert Museum opened in 1852 and at present it houses paintings of artists from all social classes and of many artistic trends and Schools of art. William Powell Frith was also a talented Victorian artist whose paintings reflected portraits of royalties, writers, characters from novels, and even other artists. He was not a Pre-Raphaelite, but he was as talented as them, creating incredible works of art as a portrait painter. The Pre-Raphaelites, Frith and other Victorian artists exhibited their paintings

at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Art galleries and museums, with their frequent exhibitions, have turned the cultural society of the nineteenth century into a well-documented and a passionate upholder of the emerging artistic values. Millions of works of art made by artists of the past and by contemporary artists have been displayed by these great Art galleries and museums, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, to the delight of the public ever since.

2. THE ARTIST EVOLUTION OF WOMEN

Deborah Cherry writes in the introduction of her book about Victorian women artists that women's artistic talent had not been fully acknowledged in the past. Therefore, the emergence of the feminist movement had a great impact on the history of art regarding the artistic evolution of women. Cherry points out that feminism has brought forth solutions to show the real value of a number of Victorian women artists who created inestimable works of art during restrictive times. Thus, one of the initiatives was to engage in projects for the recovery of the cultural heritage of women artists [2].

Victorian women were eager to show their talent at drawing and painting, but it was later that they became real artists with the paint brush on their canvas. Several women writers tried their hand at drawing, as well. The Brontë sisters were so talented at writing that they could reflect the desire for drawing in their novels. In one of the chapters of her book, *The Brontës and Education*, Marianne Thormählen highlights the importance of music and drawing for female education, reflected in the Brontës' lives and writings [3]. The Brontë sisters were remarkable, if we think of their education. Charlotte, Anne and Emily were accomplished young ladies of high aspirations and talent, despite the fact that they lacked the necessary financial resources to fulfil their dreams. Teachers hired by Mr. Brontë gave drawing and piano lessons, so that they could use their artistic learning later as educated young ladies. Emily and Anne could play the piano very well, while Charlotte was keen on drawing [3]. In the Victorian Age a boy's education was prone to the learning of practical school subjects, while a young lady's education was focused on the arts and manners, which was mainly outside the school space. In the contemporary world, the Art and Design programmes of study – for key stages 1, 2 and 3, included in the English National Curriculum, are taught to boys and girls in the same manner, there is no difference between the teaching lessons. The pupils, whether they are boys or girls, are encouraged to use their imagination in order to create what they desire in terms of artistic beauty.

“Art, craft and design embody some of the highest forms of human creativity. A high-quality art and design education should engage, inspire and challenge pupils, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to experiment, invent and create their own works of art, craft and design. As pupils progress, they should be able to think critically and develop a more rigorous understanding of art and design.” [4]

At the same time, they are taught that the Arts should “reflect and shape our history, and contribute to the culture, creativity and wealth of our nation” [4]. The paper revisits the Arts to emphasise one more time that the beauty of things should have a unique place in the educational space of each people.

3. SCHOOLS OF ART FOR EVERYONE – GENDER IS NOT AN ISSUE ANY MORE

London has had its Royal Academy of Arts for painting, sculpture and architecture since the eighteenth century. Moreover, the Royal Academy has flourished since the nineteenth century together with the newly-founded Victorian schools of Art and teacher-training colleges for the Victorian Art teachers. Also, the Art galleries that opened in the Victorian Age used to organize exhibitions quite often so that the artists had the chance to be known by more and more people. All these Victorian art institutions have disclosed some of the most beautiful works of art with which the English people are so proud of today. At first The London Academy of Arts welcomed gentlemen and much later a small number of ladies, for instance Hereford Laura, who was the first woman to be admitted to the schools of the Royal Academy, “became a pupil of that institution in 1861 or ’62, and sent to the Exhibition of 1864, ‘A Quiet Corner’; in 1865 ‘Thoughtful’; in 1866, ‘Brother and Sister’; in 1867 ‘Margaret’; etc.” [5]. The number of male and female art students increased, therefore a greater number of Art schools were founded for everyone and together with them there was a growing need for Art teachers.

4. TEACHING ART

James Welton, professor of education at the University of Leeds, was aware that the training of teachers varied. In the preface of *Principles and Methods of Teaching*, professor James Welton pointed out that he wrote a book on teaching with the sole purpose of helping other teachers in their daily work. The practice of teaching might be improved and should always be at the verge of perfecting the teachers’ methods used in class. Thus, professor Welton set up several principles and methods in order to help solving some of the problems usually faced by teachers during their lessons [6, p.vi].

“The last thirty years of the nineteenth century saw effort concentrated on supplying the material deficiencies in English schools. The few years which have already elapsed in the present century have been marked by a movement towards a wider curriculum and more effective methods of teaching. If this book – the outcome of years of thought and of much experience in the work of school-room and training college – helps that movement even to a small extent, the labour, bestowed on it will be amply rewarded.” [6, p. vii]

Welton published his book in the first years of the twentieth century, stating that its content was the result of his experience in Victorian times when the educational shortcomings were a priority for the educationists and he hoped that his teaching methods would help the less-experienced teachers. He encouraged the study of the Arts admitting that:

“the aesthetic aspect of things must not be neglected. Nature offers much of beauty, and man has produced much more; and the influence of beauty is very real in the world of today [...]. To train appreciation of beauty is, therefore, part of the work of the school. Indeed, in the case of the primary school it is a factor of the greatest importance, for in no sphere has the school to supplement the deficiencies of the home more than in this. Some cultivation of music and of at least one of the arts which aim at beauty in form should, therefore, enter into the

curriculum.” [6, p. 37]

The Committee of the House of Commons which in 1835 wanted to “inquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and of the Principles of Design among the people [...] of the country” decided to institute the Science and Art Department [7, p. 3]. Sandiford asserted that the Committee opened a School of Design in 1837 with a grant and an election of artists and supporters of the Arts for the formation of the Council of the Government School of Design. In 1841, “schools in the provinces were opened and courses were offered for the training of teachers” [7, p. 3]. The Royal Academy established its own teacher-training schools during the nineteenth century together with other newly-founded training colleges which were spread throughout the country. In 1852 the Department of Practical Art replaced the Council and, within a year a Department of Science and Art was formed [7, p. 4]. Sandiford noted that in 1856 the Education Department took over the Science and Art Department and the Committee of Council on Education [7, p. 4]. Eventually, in 1899, the Science and Art Department was redirected to the Board of Education [7, p. 4]. Today we can find the Art and Design programmes of study within the Department for Education, so that the Art teachers can teach their lessons in a professional way.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the Victorian Age the Aesthetic Movement celebrated the beauty of the visual Arts and made the Victorians understand that it was essential to value such an accomplishment.

“Without the artist’s power to embody his ideas in visible and tangible form the world would have been infinitely the poorer. Indeed, one cannot imagine a world in which man was devoid of all power of shaping things to his own needs.” [6, p. 485]

Thus, more and more people have promoted the Arts over time, being convinced that they should be present in their lives and in the education of their children. The English contemporary curriculum comprises different programmes of study for the creative work and now the children can study the Arts in a professional environment. At present there is a great number of Schools of Art founded in the Victorian Age, but the aim of the paper is not to give the names of all the Schools of Art, rather it is to highlight the fact that their level of performance has risen since then. The positive effects of the Victorian educational valences have brought performance in Arts to a new level. Thus, a number of Victorian Schools of Art have become Colleges of Art, Universities for the study of the Arts and Teacher-Training Institutions for the future Art teachers. In Victorian times books on Art were written to help the Art teachers in their lessons and methods of teaching were designed to make the Victorian students understand the value of the Arts and to create beautiful works of art. Contemporary art teaching owes its success to the first Victorian books on Art and to the Victorian Art teachers who taught in schools without the help of modern resources. In May 2015 the Royal College of Art, or the Government School of Design, as it was called in the Victorian Age, earned a well-deserved first place for Art & Design in the World University Rankings by subject, the eight place being taken by the University of the Arts London, while the tenth place was occupied by the Glasgow School of Art [8]. Therefore, the contemporary Schools of Art have reached such a high level of performance due to the Victorian initiative to set up professional educational institutions for the study of the Arts.

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