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| **Aesthetics and the Development of the Concentration** |
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 | http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/common/shared/images/null_1x1.gif | by Steve WillisMissouri State UniversitySpringfield, Missourihttp://apcentral.collegeboard.com/common/shared/images/null_1x1.gif |  |
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 | http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/common/shared/images/null_1x1.gif | **Defining an Aesthetic Philosophy**Teaching the philosophy of aesthetics in the art classroom is a widely debated and complicated issue. However, when applied to the development of an AP Studio Art portfolio, the debate over aesthetics takes on a completely different meaning. Since the study of aesthetics is not directly addressed in the AP portfolio, the concern with a student's personal aesthetic becomes a more important consideration, especially in the Concentration section. "You just don't like my art, and I worked really hard on it," is not an uncommon student comment. The question is, are we teaching AP expectations and our aesthetic or AP expectations within the students' aesthetic?Ocvirk et al. suggest that aesthetics is a complex area of study that has not been resolved in relationship to the definition of beauty (1998, 7), but defining an aesthetic philosophy may not be as valuable as the pursuit of understanding an aesthetic journey through the AP Concentration section. Bates (2000, 208) proposes that aesthetics, within art education, "guides students to develop personal tastes and presents reasons for appreciation and valuing of art." It is precisely the teacher's guidance that is so crucial to the development of the students' understanding and aesthetic growth through the specific expectations of the Concentration. To this end, Anderson and Milbrandt (2005, 81-96) dedicate a chapter in *Art for Life* to addressing the question of aesthetics in the classroom and provide specific activities for students to approach a personal aesthetic inquiry and response. This approach may be more meaningful than teaching aesthetic philosophy independently from the studio practices and inquiry expected in the AP Concentration section.And so one might ask, what are important strategies to help develop students' visual awareness and personal aesthetic beyond the technical aspects of the Concentration? Since the 2006 *AP Studio Art Course Description* states, "A Concentration is a body of related works describing an in-depth exploration of a particular artistic concern. It should reflect a process of investigation of a specific visual idea," how can a teacher determine if the Concentration is successful within a student's particular aesthetic inquiry and response? After all, aesthetics is defined by many as a personal inquiry, understanding, and response. It is my understanding that this is exactly what the Concentration section is designed to determine, that is, a student's personal aesthetic and sustained inquiry within the excellent visual acuity expected in the portfolio. The AP portfolio scoring guidelines reflect this excellence with terms like "an unmistakable connection," "engages the viewer," "effective integration," "informed risk-taking," "an evocative theme," and "original vision," all of which are indicators at the Excellent level. http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/images/menubox.gif [2005 Scoring Guidelines (.pdf/164KB)](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/_ap05_sg_studioart_46837.pdf) **Interpretive Strategies in the AP Classroom**Since the Concentration asks for the development of technical acuity for a personal aesthetic through a sustained investigation of a visual idea, Dissanayake in *Homo Aestheticus* (1995, 140-141) reminds us that "We perceive, cognize, and respond emotionally to the world of which we are part." How can we guide our students to develop and enhance their perception and cognition within their visual responses? Barrett (2003, 198), for one, provides many strategies to engage students in the interpretive process so valuable in the AP classroom. Some suggestions adaptable to the AP Concentration can be found in his *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*: "Artworks are always about something; to interpret a work of art is to understand it in language; and, good interpretations have coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness." Essentially, that is what a Concentration addresses -- a personal idea and aesthetic presented visually with coherence and correspondence.Having students discuss their cohesive, thematic ideas and images communally and individually, and correspond critically and analytically, are positive steps toward an exciting and meaningful Concentration that must be sustained over time and investigated regularly and systematically. This is one of the many strategies to help students develop their own personal aesthetic. In addition to frequent correspondence, another strategy is to have students collect items that support their Concentration ideas and deposit those items in their personal journal. In addition to the technical studio procedures needed for the Concentration, these collections can take the following forms:* Collecting information pivotal to the emergence of the idea historically, socially, and culturally
* Locating different mass media and pop culture connections to the idea
* Charting lyrics, rhythms, and tempos (musical, seasonal, universal) that might be exploited visually
* Discovering textures and colors found in common items such as candy wrappers or fabric designs
* Distilling the myriad of visual information into a meaningful connection to the Concentration idea that supports individual growth and discovery through visual literacy to enhance a personal aesthetic

A good Concentration is one the student determines and directs with the guidance of the teacher. However, students who take full control of the Concentration are more specifically empowered and will be involved with a highly personal and potent image. The students must take control and develop their own ideas, and by doing so, collide with the unseen and unknown items at first hidden by a naive perception. A Concentration is like a raw jewel. It takes abrasion and determination to form the facets that reflect so brilliantly. It is specifically the student's personal engagement that propels the Concentration past the stereotypical and convenient responses so easily accessible at the beginning of the research. Easy and trite answers come first, but through a sustained investigation, students acquire a deeper personal, visual statement of excellence.I ask my students to analyze their images frequently, both objectively and critically, based on three categories that have been labeled "the three Cs":* Composition: Is there evidence of competent visual organization?
* Craftsmanship: Is there evidence of technical proficiency and visual acuity?
* Concept: Is there evidence of a clear conceptual idea present that most viewers understand?

By answering these questions honestly and objectively in class critiques and individual conversations, students can be empowered to make important decisions to develop a sustained investigation of their ideas that is translatable to a larger audience. This personal skill, once developed, can propel a student well beyond the scope of the AP Studio Art Concentration.**Using the Concentration to Express Values**Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how can a personal aesthetic be shared equally in the AP classroom and in the AP Concentration that is perhaps driven on socioeconomic or geographic differences, gender, culture, or race? How can the teacher promote the development of the student's personal aesthetic voice instead of insisting that the student adopt the teacher's aesthetic? It is really quite simple. Demand that the students develop their own aesthetic perception through the technical expectations and visual acuity of the Concentration. What does the student value? What is the single most important issue to the student? How can this be developed visually? These simple but demanding questions can open portals for a student's epiphany, which becomes a wonderfully amazing visual journey that the student and teacher can share. When the student becomes engaged with a particular idea, the aesthetic moment emerges from this core. The teacher's responsibility is to ensure that the **student's idea**is competently composed, technically proficient, and clearly expressed visually. As the idea emerges, the student's aesthetic understanding grows stronger, requiring less direct studio influence by the teacher, and is frequently replaced with a sophisticated student-teacher dialogue. The student's technical skill, visual organization, and personal aesthetic become tightly interwoven, thereby providing the clarity expected within the AP portfolio.An excellent Concentration is a sustained personal investigation that develops critical and analytical skills in visual literacy and has the potential to move well beyond the walls of the classroom into the student's society and culture, knowledge and literacy, and personal growth and development. These skills can be applied to any academic discipline in any location and in any time. These are life skills. Plain and simple -- this is good education.**References**Anderson, Tom, and Melody K. Milbrandt. 2005. *Art for Life*. McGraw-Hill: New York.Barrett, Terry. 2003. *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*. McGraw-Hill: New York.Bates, Jane K. 2000. *Becoming an Art Teacher*. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning: Belmont, California.Dissanayake, Ellen. 1995. *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why*. University of Washington Press: Seattle and London.Ocvirk, Otto, et al. 1998. *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. McGraw Hill: New York.*Steve Willis has taught studio art and art education for 29 years in Florida and Missouri. Presently he works in the Art Education Program at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. Additionally, he has worked as an AP Studio Art Reader, Table Leader, Exam Leader, Development Committee member, and College Board consultant for teacher training. He has written extensively about art education and Native American topics.* **More...*** [AP Studio Art: 2-D Design Course Home Page](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/3987.html)
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