Does the Keystone Arch Meet a Hope of Ours?—or, Strength and Grace Can Be One!

Donita Ellison

I taught Art History at LaGuardia High School in Manhattan for many years, using the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method. It is based on the education founded by Eli Siegel, the 20th century poet, and critic. I’ve seen this method work in my classroom with thousands of students. For a teacher to know what I’m fortunate to have learned—that the purpose of education and life itself is to like the world on an honest basis—is an absolute necessity! Aesthetic Realism also explains the biggest interference with learning: the desire in a person to have contempt, to get an “addition to self through the lessening of something else.”

In teaching the unit on the art of ancient Rome, my class studied how the keystone arch was central to its great architectural structures. There is the Pont du Gard, a powerfully-built aqueduct consisting of a series of graceful keystone arches, built in the 1st century BC in Nimes, France. What makes this structure beautiful—and also made my students change, and want to learn—is in this principle stated by Eli Siegel: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

This aqueduct with its repeating curves and strong vertical supports, carried 100 gallons of water per day over a distance of 30 miles for each city resident, making possible the fountains and public water works. “Clearly this is powerful, but does it have something else?” I asked. “Is it also ever so graceful, with those curves?” I’ve seen that students—including the toughest young men—long to be both strong and graceful, or gentle, and suffer because they feel they can’t be both. They think if they have gentleness they’ll be weak and people will take advantage of them. My class began to see that this aqueduct does something they were hoping to do: it puts opposites together.

One student, David, wanted to know how the aqueduct worked, and we learned that the power of gravity is what made the water flow. Built on an exquisitely calculated decline, from the water’s source high in the mountains, the water flowed downward to the city fountains. Rafael was amazed to learn that this aqueduct was designed to withstand the strength of flooding river currents and has remained standing for 2000 years even as more modern bridges in the area have washed out in heavy flooding! “Wow, that’s strong!” he said. “What did this strength come from?” I asked. The strength actually depends on that curved, graceful thing—the arch. As we read from our textbook, Gardner’s Art through the Ages, this description of the Pont Du Gard, there was a sense of awe:

Each large arch spans some 82 feet and is constructed of uncemented blocks weighing up to two tons each.

The class saw the amazing relation of solidity and lightness in this structure. Vocabulary words for the lesson
were keystone and voussoir. The voussoirs, I explained, are the wedge-shaped stones fitted around the sides of the arch, and the keystone is the topmost voussoir. The keystone, the last stone placed at the highest point in the arch, locks all the other stones or voussoirs into place. The downward pressure it exerts gives the arch its strength. The other voussoirs, in turn, send a counter pressure upwards on both sides, holding the keystone in place. The strength of an arch, we learned, depends on something that has amazing delicacy—the precision with which the voussoirs are fitted together—and all done without any cement! The class was thrilled to see that the keystone which is at the center—the thing upon which all that power depends—seems to be the lightest, even the most vulnerable thing, with nothing but space underneath it! George, who rarely showed any emotion, was excited, "That's really cool," he said.

I read sentences from a historic class titled "Architecture is Ourselves," taught by Ellen Reiss, the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, in which she explained that the arch is a very elemental thing, and one of the big achievements of the human mind: "The crown of the arch seems unsupported from below: matter is making for this tremendous lightness. The grand moment in arch construction is when the keystone ... is inserted; it seems it would fall, but it's the thing that holds the two sides together."

In this arch massiveness is the same as lightness—strength is the same as delicacy or grace. Seeing these opposites as one in a structure that has joined earth, sky, and water for thousands of years, my students had more hope for themselves.

Bio:
Donita Ellson is a sculptor, printmaker and an Associate at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City. In seminars on the subject of art and life she has spoken about the lives and work of artists, including Barbara Hepworth, Hokusai, Louise Nevelson and Auguste Rodin. She has been a guest lecturer at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and El Museo del Arte de Puerto Rico, and regularly gives staff development workshops.
The Aesthetic Realism teaching method can be studied in person in New York City and at distance. Teachers, administrators, and persons studying to teach may attend education workshop classes at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, or via the internet through SKYPE video.

**Workshop for Teachers: The Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method**

- Taught by All For Education, the workshop meets on alternate Saturdays seven times per semester. Registration for one semester (7 classes, 1 1/2 hours each) is $60, To audit workshops individually is $12 per audit. (Again, you can attend in person or by SKYPE video.) All For Education consists of Barbara Allen, Patricia Martone, Arnold Perey, PhD, and Rosemary Plumstead, Aesthetic Realism consultants and New York teachers. See www.AestheticRealism.org

**Workshops in Your School, Professional Organization, Union, Library, or Museum.**

- Teachers with All For Education conduct workshops in schools, at educational conferences, and in other staff development milieus. For example a staff-development workshop/seminar could be scheduled at your school or teachers' union.

**Aesthetic Realism Consultations**

- In individual consultations a teacher studies the self — one's life, one's individual way of seeing the world — in relation to subjects we teach and how we see our students. Consultations are given in person and by telephone; or a SKYPE video consultation can be arranged. (Read about “Consultations” on www.AestheticRealism.org.)

**Seminars on the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method**

- The dates and titles of seminars at the Foundation are announced on the Aesthetic Realism Foundation website (see www.AestheticRealism.org/Education_link.htm) and in Education Week and The Chronicle of Higher Education. We can arrange for either a live video feed — or a recorded video feed — via internet for groups of teachers meeting in their schools, unions, or through other organizations such as museums and libraries.

**Follow-up Study via Interactive Conference — SKYPE, Telephone, or Webinar**

- Teaching Method Conferences. You and several other teachers in your school or area can join together and have a series of interactive conferences with All For Education. These would be workshops at a distance.

--- For more information call the Aesthetic Realism Foundation 212.777.4490 ---
Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?

1. FREEDOM AND ORDER

Does every instance of beauty in nature and beauty as the artist presents it have something unrestricted, unexpected, uncontrolled?—and does this beautiful thing in nature or beautiful thing coming from the artist’s mind have, too, something accurate, sensible, logically justifiable, which can be called order?

2. SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE

Does every work of art show the kinship to be found in objects and all realities?—and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness, that one can find among the things of the world?

3. ONENESS AND MANYNESS

Is there in every work of art something which shows reality as one and also something which shows reality as many and diverse?—must every work of art have a simultaneous presence of oneness and manyness, unity and variety?

4. IMPERSONAL AND PERSONAL

Does every instance of art and beauty contain something which stands for the meaning of all that is, all that is true in an outside way, reality just so?—and does every instance of art and beauty also contain something which stands for the individual mind, a self which has been moved, a person seeing as original person?

5. UNIVERSE AND OBJECT

Does every work of art have a certain precision about something, a certain concentrated exactness, a quality of particular existence?—and does every work of art, nevertheless, present in some fashion the meaning of the whole universe, something suggestive of wide existence, something that has an unbounded significance beyond the particular?

6. LOGIC AND EMOTION

Is there a logic to be found in every painting and in every work of art, a design pleasurably acceptable to the intelligence, details gathered unerringly, in a coherent, rounded arrangement?—and is there that which moves a person, stirs him in no confined way, pervades him with the serenity and discontent of reality, brings emotion to him and causes it to be in him?

7. SIMPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY

Is there a simplicity in all art, a deep naiveté, an immediate self-containedness, accompanied perhaps by fresh directness or startling economy?—and is there that, so rich, it cannot be summed up; something subterranean and intricate counteracting and completing simplicity; the teasing complexity of reality mediated on?

8. CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

Is there to be found in every work of art a certain progression, a certain indissoluble presence of relation, a design which makes for continuity?—and is there to be found, also, the discreteness, the individuality, the brokenness of things: the principle of discontinuity?

9. DEPTH AND SURFACE

Is painting, like art itself, a presentation of the “on top,” obvious, immediate?—and is it also a presentation of what is implied, deep, “below”?—and is art, consequently, an interplay of surface and sensation as “this” and depth and thought as “all that”?

10. REPOSE AND ENERGY

Is there in painting an effect which arises from the being together of repose and energy in the artist’s mind?—can both repose and energy be seen in a painting’s line and color, plane and volume, surface and depth, detail and composition?—and is the true effect of a good painting on the spectator one that makes at once for repose and energy, calmness and intensity, serenity and stir?

11. HEAVINESS AND LIGHTNESS

Is there in all art, and quite clearly in sculpture, the presence of what makes for lightness, release, gaiety?—and is there the presence, too, of what makes for stability, solidity, seriousness?—is the state of mind making for art both heavier and lighter than that which is customary?

12. OUTLINE AND COLOR

Does every successful example of visual art have a oneness of outward line and interior mass and color?—does the harmony of line and color in a painting show a oneness of arrest and overflow, containing and contained, without and within?

13. LIGHT AND DARK

Does all art present the world as visible, luminous, going forth?—does art, too, present the world as dark, hidden, having a meaning which seems to be beyond ordinary perception?—and is the technical problem of light and dark in painting related to the reality question of the luminous and hidden?

14. GRACE AND SERIOUSNESS

Is there what is playful, valuably mischievous, unreined and sportive in a work of art?—and is there also what is serious, sincere, thoroughly meaningful, solidly valuable?—and do grace and sportiveness, seriousness and meaningfulness, interplay and meet everywhere in the lines, shapes, figures, relations, and final import of a painting?

15. TRUTH AND IMAGINATION

Is every painting a mingling of mind justly receptive of what is before it, and of mind freely and honorably showing what it is through what mind meets?—is every painting, therefore, a oneness of what is seen as item and what is seen as possibility, of fact and appearance, the ordinary and the strange?—are objective and subjective made one in a painting?

The Beauty and Ethics of Linear Perspective—a Lesson for Art & Ourselves!

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Donita Ellison
“The world, art and self explain each other; each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.” -Eli Siegel
Perspective
Per + Specere
to look through
SOME HISTORY on Perspective
“Linear perspective with a single vanishing point amounted to more than a combination of mathematical laws: it was instrumental to the expansion of scientific knowledge and to the understanding of reality.”

*From Renaissance Art by Cristina Bucci & Susanna Buricchi*
“The purpose of perspective is to have a surface function as if it were also inclusive of distance, also inclusive of depth; which is very wonderful. It will be wonderful for a long time.”

From 1951 lecture “Aesthetic Realism and Painting” by Eli Siegel
One-Point Perspective

Lines or edges of objects which in reality are parallel, appear to come together as they go away from the viewer.
The study perspective will enable students to see that:

1. The mathematical strictness of one-point perspective has been used by artists with tremendous beauty to show what the world truly is.
2. Great distance and spatial depth can be depicted on a flat surface, creating a oneness of depth and surface.
3. Through the use of perspective, things near and far to each other—objects, people, buildings—are always seen in an accurate relation.
4. The subject of perspective is about *us* and how we see!
THE TECHNIQUE OF
ONE-POINT PERSPECTIVE:
SURFACE TAKES ON DEPTH
“All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” –Eli Siegel
“Perspective signifies objects seen from afar and represented upon certain planes in various scales depending on their distances. Since painting is nothing but a representation of surfaces and solids foreshortened or enlarged, and placed upon the picture plane according as the real things viewed by the eye under various angles appear on the said plane; and since in every magnitude one part is always nearer to the eye than another, and the nearer part appears upon the assigned plane under a greater angle than the farther part; and since our intellects are unable by themselves to estimate these measures, that is, how large the nearer part should be and how large the farther; I conclude that perspective is necessary, inasmuch as it determines as true science the apparent size of each magnitudes indicating by means of lines how much each must be shortened or lengthened.”

Piero della Francesca

**One-Point Perspective**

Perspective: “a system of representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface so that the effect is the same as if the actual scene were viewed from a given point, the objects appearing three-dimensional and receding in depth with the same space relationships.

Art Terms and Techniques by Ralph Mayer
Quotes on Perspective

Leonardo da Vinci
“Perspective is to painting what the bridle is to the horse, the rudder to a ship.”
“There are three great aspects to perspective. The first has to do with how the size
of objects seems to diminish according to distance: the second, the manner in
which colors change the farther away they are from the eye; the third defines how
objects ought to be finished less carefully the farther away they are.”

Paolo Uccello
“What a delightful thing this perspective is!”

Eugene Delacroix
“At a distance this fine oak seems to be of ordinary size. But if I place myself
under its branches, the impression changes completely: I see it as big, and even
terrifying in its bigness.”

Eli Siegel
“The purpose of perspective is to have a surface function as if it were also
inclusive of distance, also inclusive of depth; which is very wonderful. It’ll be
wonderful for a long time.” 1951 lecture “Aesthetic Realism as Beauty: Painting”

Great Works Using One-Point Perspective

| The Last Supper                  | Leonardo Da Vinci              |
| Bapistry Doors of San Giovanni  | Ghiberti                        |
| Flagellation of Christ          | Piero della Franscesca         |
| The School of Athens            | Raphael                        |
| La Grande Jatte                 | Seurat                         |
| Paris Street; Rainy Day         | Caillebotte                    |
| The Avenue at Middelharni       | Hobbema                        |