

Robert Henri on Education
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Robert Henri (1865-1929) was an American painter. Not long before his death, the Arts Council of New York designated him one of the top three living American artists. Henri was also a popular and influential teacher of art.

Henri's ideas on art and life, including education, were collected by a former student, Margery Ryerson, and published in a book published in 1923 entitled *The Art Spirit*. Below are excerpts dealing with education from a book published in 1930 by that same title but with Henri as the author. A lengthy subtitle, which I won't reproduce here, includes "compiled by Margery Ryerson," so I assume the book I have, and excerpt here, is the one Ryerson published in 1923. The book I have: Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1930).

What drew me to Henri's writings is that when he is talks about the life of an artist, or as he calls it, the art spirit, he is not just talking about someone who creates paintings or sculptures; he is talking about a way to live in the world regardless of one's vocation. And when he is talking about education he is not talking just about art education; he is talking about all education, or, more precisely, all schooling.

Since *The Art Spirit* appears to be a compilation of notes jotted down quickly at Henri's lectures, in places it is syntactically rough and disjointed and repetitive, so I have done some line editing to smooth out the prose and make things clearer and more concise. I've done my best, however, to be true to Henri's ideas. As was the custom back then, Henri used "he" and "man" when referring to people in general. I've left those references as they are rather than try to "update" and "correct" them; plus, I didn't want to get myself involved with convoluted "he and she" sentence constructions. Enough to say, Henri in his remarks was speaking about both men and women.

The excerpts from *The Art Spirit*, Robert Henri speaking:

Life is being wasted. Human beings are not having half the fun that is their due, not making the beautiful things they could make, and each one is not the good news to the others he might be; and that is

because we are educated off our natural track. We need another form of education.

We are all different. We are all to see a different life and do different things. Education is self-product, a matter of asking questions and getting the best answers we can get. We read a book, a novel, any book, and we are interested in it to the degree that we find in it answers to our questions.

The school is not a place where students are fitted into the groove of rule and regulation, but rather where personality and originality of vision are encouraged.

Different men must learn different things. Each man must put himself as far as possible in the way of knowing what is known, and he must make choices. Everything is his to use or leave. The school is a place of strengths and weaknesses. There is all sorts of advice, good and bad; and there is advice that will serve one and not another.

The question of development of the art spirit in all walks of life interests me. I mean by this, the development of individual judgment and taste, the love of work for the sake of doing things well, and the tendency toward simplicity and order. If anything can be done to bring the public to a greater consciousness of the relationship between art and life, of the part each person plays by exercising and developing his own personal taste and judgment and not depending on outside authority, it would be well.

No matter how fine a school you are in, you have to educate yourself.

An artist must educate himself. He cannot be educated. He must test things out as they apply to himself. His life is one long investigation of things and his own reactions to them.

The best advice I have ever given students who have studied under me has been this: "Educate yourself, do not let me educate you—use me, do not be used by me."

By my teaching I hope to inspire you to personal activity and to present your vision.

Men either get to know what they want and go after it, or some other persons tell them what they want and drive them after it.

Few people ever mention that they have studied under themselves. Their attitude is, "Here I am, a student, a ball of putty, roll me."

The self-educator judges his own course. He judges advice to him. He judges the evidence presented him. He judges himself. He realizes he is no longer an infant. He is already a man; his own mature development is already in process.

Find out what you really like if you can. Find out what is really important to you. And then sing your song. You will have something to sing about, and your whole heart will be in the singing.

We haven't arrived yet, and it is foolish to believe that we have. The world is not done. Evolution is not complete

Our education has led away from the realization that the mystery of nature is in each man. When we are wiser we not assume to mold them, but will watch their development. And we will learn from them. This habit of conducting nature is a bad one.

It seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world, he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others.

I do not want to see how skillful you are. What is life to you? What reasons and principles have you found? What are your deductions? What projections have you made? What excitement, what pleasure, do you get out of life?

I should like to see every encouragement for those who are fighting to open new ways, every living worker helped to do what he believes in, the best he can.

If you want to be useful, if you want to be an encouragement to the deserving young artist, become interested in his effort and have keen willingness to accept the surprises of its outcome.

The minute we shut people up we are proving our distrust in them. If we believe in them we give them freedom, and through freedom they accomplish. We harness up the horse and destroy his very race instincts. When we want a thrill for our souls we watch the flight of an eagle. It is better that every thought be uttered freely, fearlessly, than be denied utterance for fear of evil. It is only through complete independence that all goodness can be spoken, all purity can be found.

Each man must seek for himself the people who hold the essential beauty. Each man must eventually say to himself, "These are my people."

When a man is full up with what he is talking about he handles language with mastery unusual to him; and it is at such times that he learns language.

Self-acquaintance is a rare condition.

It is a big job to know oneself; no one can ever entirely accomplish it. But to try is to act in the line of evolution. Men can come to know more of themselves, and act more like themselves, and this will be by dint of self-acknowledgment. The only men who are interesting to themselves and to others are those who have been willing to meet themselves squarely. Today man stands in his own way. He puts externally imposed criteria in the way of his own revelation and development. He should push the restraining hands off himself; he should defy fashion and let himself be.

Of course it is not easy to go one's road. Because of our education we continually get off track. But the fight is a good one, and there is joy in it.

A good school offers itself up to the student to be used by him in building himself into a force that will be of stimulating value to the world. The student uses the school, its facilities, its instruction. The

instructors are back of him, interested, watching, encouraging, as ready to learn from him as to teach him. They are anxious for his evidence. They recognize him as a man—another force, a new force. They give him the use of their knowledge and experience. Their only demand is that he work both body and mind to the limit of his endurance to find in himself whatever there is of value; that he find his truest thoughts and the simplest, straightest, fittest means of making a record of them. The goal is that the student becomes the deepest thinker, the kindest appreciator, the clearest and simplest, frankest creator he can be today. Mastering today is the most dependable evidence that the student will master tomorrow and next year and the year following. If the student has dignity, worth, integrity, and courage in his thought and action today, he is worthy of the name student in its finest meaning.