The Voice of an Intimate Friend

As Sir Roger Scruton says in his short book on the subject, “Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend.” Such friendship with beauty was Elizabeth Butler’s personal experience of a classical education, eventually inspiring her to pursue a career as an artist. (See page 4 for Elizabeth’s story.)
By intentionally cultivating students’ abilities to recognize and produce beautiful artifacts—music, drawings, poetry, drama, etc.—K-12 classical education provides young people with the rudiments of a beautiful life. While paying careful attention to the masterful works of civilization, students begin to see and respond to the beauty surrounding them, eventually developing the skills to recreate beauty for themselves.
"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," goes the modern cliché, blithely suggesting that beauty is merely a matter of personal opinion. While there are certainly differences of opinion and individual preferences in fashion, style, or culinary taste, the human experience of beauty remains common to all: the panoramic vista of a snow-covered mountain range; the piercing movements of Mozart’s Requiem in D minor; or the bright eyes and sweet smile of a young child. Such experiences reveal features of the universal phenomena of beauty: a sense of proportion, the pleasure of order, and the intimate knowledge of another person.

Capable of conjuring the full range of emotion—awe, reflection, joy, etc.—our encounters with beauty draw us closer to “that which is there before us,” as the poet Richard Wilbur says:

...there before we look
Or fail to look; there to be seen or not
By us, as by the bee’s twelve thousand eyes,
According to our means and purposes.

While a beautiful scene, artifact, or person may provoke our interest, so much depends upon our purposes and intentions. What is beauty? How do we recognize it? And, how should we respond to it? These are questions for all—especially for educators.

From ancient times through the modern age, philosophers and educators have been deeply interested in the relationships among truth, goodness, and beauty. Works as diverse as Plato’s Republic and C.S. Lewis’s Abolition of Man are fundamentally concerned with beauty’s power to shape society. Numerous authorities have acknowledged that humans are simultaneously rational and appetitive, with a spirited element that has the potential to harness instinct to intellect—if humans are able to discern beautiful purposes. Wise men have recognized, as we all do, that intellectual justifications can easily be contrived to satisfy instincts, if the spirit is not tethered to beauty.

Enter the fine arts. By intentionally cultivating students’ abilities to recognize and produce beautiful artifacts—music, drawings, poetry, drama, etc.—K-12 classical education provides young people with the rudiments of a beautiful life. While paying careful attention to the masterful works of civilization, students begin to see and respond to the beauty surrounding them, eventually developing the skills to recreate beauty for themselves. Just as “art imitates nature,” students learn to imitate the beauty “there before us,” increasing their sense of wonder and delight in reality.

As this magazine continues to explore K-12 classical education in America, it seems fitting for us to consider the role of beauty in the formation of children and young adults. Classical, liberal arts education is chiefly concerned with pedagogies that promote beauty throughout the curriculum, especially the fine arts, thus inspiring students to learn—and to make beautiful things.

In this issue of Virtue, we will hear the testimony of a classically-educated artist, Elizabeth Butler, whose encounter with beauty came through her hands-on experience of the visual arts. We will read the poems of two contemporary authors, Christine Perrin and David Rothman, both of whom are passing on the tradition of poetry—“the best words in the best order,” as Coleridge put it. We will peek inside the Thomas MacLaren School in Colorado Springs, where music is integral to the entire K-12 curriculum. Finally, the poet-teacher, David Rothman, will recount his own joyful surprise at the return of a former student, whose classical education included the leisure that inspired his future vocation as a professional musician.

As the author (and trained artist) G.K. Chesterton once quipped, “Art is the signature of man.” Classical education provides every student with the essential skills of literacy, numeracy, and communication. Yet, of equal importance, classical education provides all students with an experiential understanding of objective beauty, preparing them to produce truth-seeking, artful signs that elevate the spirit to behold a more excellent way.

Dr. Robert Jackson is the chief academic officer of Great Hearts America and the founding director of the Institute for Classical Education.
According to the poet Ezra Pound, “The artist is always beginning. Any work of art which is not a beginning, an invention, or a discovery is of little worth.” In a similar vein, contemporary artist Elizabeth Butler doesn’t want to merely paint flowers—a subject that has been touched upon again and again—she wants to recreate the experience of seeing flowers for the first time.

“I want to show fullness and abundance. I arrange the flowers in compositions that challenge your sense of perspective and fill the frame for a powerful experience: to provide an arresting encounter with beauty for the observer.”

Elizabeth developed her technical skills through her classical training, beginning as a student at Tempe Prep Academy (Arizona) and proceeding to post-secondary study under Dr. Gingher Leyendecker. Using methods that included advanced life drawing, art anatomy, figure drawing, and figure and portrait painting, Dr. Leyendecker drew from a technical tradition of painting and apprenticeship that stretches back to the French Academic method of the 18th century. As Elizabeth explains, “An instructor helps you through the process. You watch it happen; you are given instruction; and then you do it. People say they can’t draw, and then I ask them, ‘Has anyone ever taught you?’”

Not only did she have instructors guide her, but the replication of masterworks gave her the opportunity to emulate great masters: her ultimate guides. “When copying a masterwork, it’s as though the problem has already been solved, and you are now trying to use someone else’s solution. If you copy a DaVinci using a different method, it’s just copying. You must follow his method to learn how he approached the challenges—like values and proportions. You learn about the method, and then you learn the discipline.”

Yet, when copying a masterwork, you also learn about yourself, says Elizabeth: “You walk through the artist’s solution and see how it fits you, how it sits with you. Then you must practice your own art to understand, ‘How do I make this work?’”

Elizabeth’s apprenticeship and careful practice honed her technical capacity, but her disciplined classical training brought more: a deeper appreciation for beauty and excellence. “A classical liberal arts education prepared me to approach my art education in an intelligent and sensible way. I wanted instruction and methodology that would enable me to do something well. I wanted to develop my skills before studying concepts. Moreover, my classical education taught me that there was objective truth and objective beauty, which allows us to have objective conversations about art. Simone Weil once said, ‘Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul.’ That is to say, our intuition recognizes beauty, even before we discuss or describe it. The intellectual side comes later. Our imagination knows, and for some people that’s a little scary – even wild!”

Melanie Narish previously taught prep school science as well as elementary school, prior to becoming a talent officer for Great Hearts Academies. She is also a gifted amateur artist.
Elizabeth Butler describes the artist’s path as a way of finding universal truth: not reinventing but revealing truth. As she sees it, the job of an artist is to gather experiences and to produce something universal. “That’s why a work from centuries ago still resonates. The artist was grasping something universal. Beauty allows you to approach the truth.”

As of January, Elizabeth is displaying her work at the “Celebration of Fine Art” in Scottsdale, Arizona. She also substitutes and teaches studio art at a few Great Hearts academies in Phoenix. See more of Elizabeth’s artwork on her website: elizabethbutlerfineart.com.

**Trusted Voices**

These three scholar-practitioners of the arts provide contemporary criticism and counsel for those eager to explore the realms of fine art, with resources to go deeper.

1. **Professorcarol.com**
   Music historian (retired from Southern Methodist University), Dr. Carol Reynolds delivers online talks, courses, and podcasts, as well as guided tours (with Smithsonian Journeys). “Professor Carol” shares an intense interest in classical education, working with a variety of schools and home educators.

2. **Tedgioia.com**
   Renowned jazz historian and music critic, Ted Gioia is this generation’s most compelling spokesman for jazz. Gioia’s *The History of Jazz* is considered a modern classic, and his scores of nationally syndicated essays provide the beginner as well as the aficionado with insight, eloquence, and trustworthy recommendations.

3. **Danagioia.com**
   Award-winning poet, critic, and professor, Dana Gioia (Ted’s older brother) is the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and one of the nation’s leading proponents of traditional arts and letters—from poetry to opera to literary criticism. As one of the “New Formalists,” Gioia has promoted today’s avant-garde through the recovery of traditional metrical and rhymed verse.
Ars Poetica:
THE PRINTMAKER IN ASSISI

by Christine Perrin, Ph.D.

The printmaker bursts his throat
telling us about light, telling us
about the hillside unveiling
in sequence each new day,
each hour—the sun layered
like paint on groves of olives
or lines of dark cypress that spill,
no, are quilted, diagonally
across the field. The saturated green
is one thing next to yellow
and another against white stone;
it flames if he etches a border
and fills it with red from burnt ocher.
In one print he varies the sweep
of light from right to left,
another manifests the rain
in its dim blueness. Think
how his eyes tended the hill
and his hand traced it,
then tore out the shapes
to uncover its gratuity,
its teeming abundance.
This is the earth where Francis,
also in pattern, picked up stone
after stone to rebuild
the ruined church and learned
from the finch about gold.

Orvieto - June 18 (Fathers Day), 2016, watercolor,
by Brenton Good, part of artist’s collection.

Christine Perrin (MFA) teaches at Messiah College in the English Department, where she is also director of the writing program. She has published a book of poems, Bright Mirror (University of Saint Katherine Press). Brenton Good (MFA) is a printmaker and painter living in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. He has exhibited his prints and paintings both nationally and internationally. He is also an associate professor of art at Messiah College and chairman of the Department of Art and Design.
Moth’s Song

by David Rothman, Ph.D.

Moth: “Hail!” – A Midsummer Night’s Dream

All you guys ever do is try to measure,
As if that could tell you who you are:
Away to pain? To grief? How much for pleasure?
How long for light to travel from that star?”
But what’s the news when you get down to treasure?
When you subtract your dollars from your leisure?
Review the years since you embraced each scar?
Tonight, the shortest of the year, the moon
Is full of honey. Sunset lasts forever.
Gratuitous forgiving cannot fail:
Come on, let it be now, you ass, and soon
That lovers wander, never knowing never.
My song? It has only one word: “Hail!”

In 1877, George Eliot wrote that she believed she had coined the term “meliorism,” meaning the belief that the world tends to improve, and we can help to improve it. The word was probably in circulation before that, but she certainly drew attention to it and is always associated with it today. Perhaps the wittiest retort to Eliot came from A. E. Housman, who, in 1936, near the end of his life, observed that he was an egoistic hedonist and a pejorist. When we survey the status and role of the arts in American education today, it is hard to resist Housman’s sharp rebuke to any optimism. All one need do is read the angry follies displayed daily in a slew of supposedly serious journals to become skeptical of any claims of excellence, let alone progress. At times, any melioristic claim seems to make as much sense as pointing out the excellence of the wine list on the Titanic.

And yet…there are Signs of Life, which I will be discussing regularly in a column bearing that title to appear in future publications of the Institute for Classical Education. The Stalinists, the Maoists, the Nazis, and even television could not kill poetry, and bad English departments, while they may destroy themselves, will not destroy it either. So, we should remember that while the larger issues of curriculum matter, the lasting triumphs of education take years, even decades to announce themselves, and the evidence occurs primarily as personal testimony, long after students leave school. As any teacher who has lived long enough to hear them knows, those testimonies and memoirs of what happened in a classroom many years earlier are the most convincing evidence that we have staked our professional lives on something that matters—that our leap of faith was and still is justified. Here’s one from my personal journal.

In 1998 I became headmaster of Crested Butte Academy (CBA), a small, independent co-ed boarding and day high school in Crested Butte, Colorado. The school specialized in strong, classically oriented core academics and was set apart by its mountain sports programs, which were some of the best in the country—if not the world. CBA sent almost all students to college and many of them on to high-level collegiate and even professional careers in athletics.

In our first year, we looked at the campus and decided to make a few improvements to enhance the spirit of the place, in keeping with our vision for academic rigor that would be accompanied by beauty. To that end, we made a simple decision: in spite of tight finances, we purchased a good but inexpensive upright piano and maintained it.

Shortly thereafter, a gifted young man named Eric Andersen came to us for winter tutorials. He was not only a strong student and budding musician,
but also one of the top-ranked male ski racers of his age (13) in the country. He mostly studied viola, but I would hear him occasionally working through songs on that piano.

Life went on and we didn’t hear from Eric for a while, then lost track of him as he attended several different colleges and stopped racing, which meant we didn’t see his name in the results lists. Then, unexpectedly this fall, at least a dozen years later, he wrote and said he would be passing through town and wanted to get together. It turns out that he now is a songwriter, pianist, and the leader of a very successful indie band, The Novelists, based in Reno. We had heard about this through the grapevine, but to hear him play some of his excellent material—now that he was a mature, skilled artist—was a gift to be long remembered. Here is what he had to say, twenty years on, in a subsequent note, about that piano at CBA:

I’m glad you mentioned how you had insisted on the academy having a piano. I too believe that a school isn’t complete without one. It would be hard to overstate the impact of that instrument on my development as a musician, composer, and singer/songwriter. I lost countless hours in the dining hall learning the songs and discovering the brilliance of Billy Joel, The Beatles, Jamie Cullum, Beethoven, and so many others. My first instrumental compositions were birthed from that piano as well as parts of some of the songs I still perform today. It’s certainly possible that I wouldn’t be a professional musician today if it weren’t for that piano. Thank you!

Meliorism is a tough row to hoe. But without ignoring the tremendous challenges we face as educators now, it is worth observing that the present is not all that exists—and it is a profound spiritual error, a manifestation of despair, to forget the future. Education matters, every day, even if we cannot see its results for decades, even if we work in the dark. Keep the faith. Make the leap. And, pay attention to those signs of life.
A roomful of sixth-graders cradling stringed instruments nods soberly at the instruction. With practiced grace, Mr. Kolb tucks a violin under his chin and places the bow on the strings, and the students’ own bows—silently, instantly—leap to their own instruments. He pauses to remind them to “Walk up to the first note, don’t play it,” and then he slices the strings and they launch into “French Folk Song,” a Suzuki standby. The wistful little tune is made massive: twenty-five violins, violas, celli, and basses dominate the bustle of kindergarteners having lunch in the cafeteria just outside the door.

“No frog! No frog!” Mr. Kolb calls out over the music. They are eleven weeks into their new life as musicians, and, improbably enough, they sound…good.

This is what it looks like to be on the very threshold of the upper school music program at Thomas MacLaren School in Colorado Springs. Their colleagues in the twelfth grade, who are in their seventh year of orchestra, play Mozart and Haydn and win statewide competitions. They are public-school kids; most have never had private lessons. That they are so accomplished is due not only to having excellent teachers (many of whom have doctorates and play in the philharmonic); it is born out of the school’s curriculum and culture.

“The Unconscious: Influence of Beauty
by Nico Alvarado

This is another piece that’s a no-frog zone.”

Named after a classically-trained architect who moved to Colorado at the turn of the century to “take the cure” for tuberculosis, MacLaren is not a private music school nor an arts magnet school but a K-12 charter public school that works to give its students a genuinely liberal education—that is, one that liberates, sets free. Such an education, the school’s founders believed, would be incomplete if it gave unequal weight to the disciplines. So along with the copies of Locke and Rousseau and Dostoyevsky that MacLaren purchases for all its tenth graders, in addition to the computer labs equipped with MATLAB for all eleventh graders to learn programming, the school buys a stringed instrument for every single upper school student and makes music a core, non-elective course: everyone does it, all the time.

The centrality of beauty—not just its appreciation but poiesis, its making—is felt everywhere at MacLaren. One wall is lined with dozens of accomplished self-portraits done by middle schoolers in another non-elective course, studio art. In a literature classroom, the teacher frets about leading students to write towards clarity, yes, but also toward the aesthetic possibilities of an English sentence. The math team debates the right way to lead students into an understanding of mathematics as more than mere computation but as a language in its own right. If the math teachers believe that it is (and they do), then like the greatest teachers of Spanish, or Latin, or Russian, they cannot be content with proficiency. Instead, they ask

Nicolas Alvarado is the head of the lower school at the Thomas MacLaren School in Colorado Springs.
themselves: “How can we immerse young people in this language? How can we lead them to fall in love with its idiosyncrasies and delights, its ability to say that which no other language can say?"

Up the hall and tucked away, Ms. McCune sings to herself in an otherwise-empty room with colorful felted squares velcroed to the floor. Her song: “The Boatman.” She is preparing for class by rehearsing the song her second graders will sing for the first time today. Although they don’t yet know it, it’s a big day for these students. Having now sung many songs containing the essential run of notes do, re, mi, today they will be introduced to the solfege do, re, mi. They have learned to hear the notes, and sing the notes, but in keeping with their program’s teachings, only now that they have mastered praxis will they learn the theory behind it. Only today will they learn to name the notes.

Such meticulous planning is fundamental to a sequenced course of study. The school’s music program and commitment to providing daily music classes doesn’t begin with the orchestra program in sixth grade. It starts at the beginning, in MacLaren’s elementary grades, where music is also a part of the core curriculum. Unlike the orchestral program in the 6-12 program, the K-5 music program is vocal, based on the Kodály concept.

Kodály’s principles are at once simple and profound. Everyone has the right to music literacy. The voice is the first and most natural human instrument. Folk music is the musical mother tongue of the child. And perhaps most fundamentally: music gives joy and is meant to be enjoyed.

It puts a stamp on the students, on the entire school. All day, children’s voices echo in the halls as they line up for music class, singing, singing, singing. All day, passing adults stop to listen, and smile.

“[We] hope that ere long it will be recognized how great is that unconscious influence of the beautiful,” wrote Thomas MacLaren, architect, in a letter from 1901, “particularly in the minds of the young in forming their tastes, and that their environment should be the best that can be obtained both from a practical and an artistic standpoint.”

Would that he could see us today.
The splash page of the Institute's website (www.classicaleducation.institute) includes reports “From the Field,” detailing how K-12 classical schools are providing a beautiful model of education to students in public, private, and home schools across the country. That means we are interested in telling your story, as you promote the liberal arts in your community. Submit a vignette, anecdote, or essay from your experience in K-12 classical education to info@classicaleducation.institute, and we’ll do our best to get the word out!

The Institute is pleased to support the Academy for Classical Teachers (ACT), a collaborative initiative of Great Hearts and partners in higher education that equips K-12 teachers to deepen their understanding of the classical tradition by studying with scholars and experienced practitioners. ACT offers short courses and seminars on the study of the traditional liberal arts. For more information about this year's courses, dates, and locations, visit www.greatheartsamerica.org/act.