



George A. C. Holt and students in the Design & Materials Studio. Mr. Holt, who has taught at Bennington since 1941, wrote the accompanying article and also did the cover for this issue of the Magazine.



Teaching the VISUAL ARTS at BENNINGTON

by George A. C. Holt

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THIS COLLEGE, creative work in the visual arts has been judged to have equal standing as a discipline with the other fields usually found in the liberal arts curriculum. This is not surprising, since the educational philosophy at Bennington owes so much to John Dewey and among the intents of the founders was to adapt and test out at the college level those principles and practices previously found only in some progressive schools. Creative art as a potent force towards mental and emotional growth had generally found an important place in such schools. We believe that art, the active involvement in imagining, thinking and making, is an immensely important means in the pursuit of liberal education.

The activity itself is of prime importance in the total development of a person, combining as it does a large reliance on intuitive process with critical, analytical judgment. It demands and stimulates resourcefulness, invention and independence. It challenges

individual choice and taste and a striving for aesthetic excellence. It develops skills. It's a significant fact that our good students are almost without fail good in other areas as well.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of art as a discipline lies in this—that every aesthetic problem basically originates with the individual and can find satisfying solution only in the autonomous efforts of that person. Others may indicate direction, encourage, criticize, stimulate, instruct as to techniques, but they cannot solve what is essentially a personal problem. That has to be grappled with on one's own, and even partial solutions are valuable.

The uniqueness or near uniqueness in the position of art at Bennington lies in the fact that acceptance of it as an integral part of the curriculum is an operating and effective reality, not just a policy on paper. There may be other colleges where this obtains to the same extent, but I don't know of them.

Students correlate in their own minds quite readily, it seems to me, the work they do in the visual arts field with what they do in others. There is no need for any artificial crossing over from this essentially non-verbal area. Speaking of the non-verbal, it is probable that in a teaching-learning situation where we must make use of verbalization, the struggle to do so effectively can contribute greatly to clarity of thought.

In our attitude here (art as a means towards liberal education), in the amount of time at our disposal and to a great extent in our way of operating, we differ sharply from the professional school or the vocationally oriented college art department. We have little or no set progression of courses and even within a given course, projects and assignments are most often geared to the needs, interests and abilities of the individuals in the group instead of adhering to a pattern which often has logic and validity chiefly in the instructor's mind.

Also we differ completely from those college art departments where the emphasis is almost entirely on the history and philosophy of art and where any so-called "practical art" is an extra mural affair conceivably of some therapeutic value, or is used as a supplementary means of further "understanding" the Masters and the styles. It seems to us that in order to get more than a superficial understanding of the work of artists, past or present, it is absolutely necessary to gain an understanding of art in its own terms.

Work in the visual arts at Bennington is open to any student at any time during her years at the College, regardless of talent or previous experience. She may take much or little of it depending only on the degree of her interest and on what makes good sense in terms of her total program.

Any beginning student, beginning that is in the sense of her experience, not as regards her year at College, is always advised to take our first course currently called *The Introduction to Visual Art*, and if she intends to major in the field she must do so.

The title of this course has changed several times over the years as has procedure in handling it, but the essential purpose has remained pretty constant and generally all or most of the art faculty take a share in giving it. Present practice corresponds closely to that which obtained during the first ten or twelve years of the College, and requires that each student work with two instructors during the course of a year, so that she may experience variation in the angle of approach and also in the use of media. There are usually five or six members of the art faculty giving *Introduction to Visual Art*, each of them responsible for his own group. We assign students to one section or another, allowing for personal preference insofar as possible, but also making sure of a fairly even distribution of numbers.

In literal terms the purpose of this course is to confront the student with the problems involved in the organization of space, mass and plane to an aesthetic end, and to help her develop the ability to solve such problems. At the same time provision is made for the acquisition of necessary skills in the handling of media and tools.

This is important purpose enough, but such description leaves much unsaid. The course aims also to open eyes and minds to fresh, unconventional, unstereotyped and vivid awareness of visual qualities, and to excite response to visual form; to stir up and set free imagination; to enrich and turn that imagination to account. Horizons of vision can be widely extended to encompass new and exciting experiences of the world. Another aim is to develop through exercise the capacity to make discriminating choice and judgment; to bring into play to the greatest possible extent whatever of uniqueness an individual may possess. It aims to provide some method of approach in making and in analyzing, flexible though this method may be.

From one section to another there is always considerable variation as to procedure. Active studio work is at the centre of each, with its concomitant of criticism and analysis carried out through discussion. Beyond this there may be varying degrees of emphasis on history or theory of design or questions of a philosophic nature. Questions of imagery and communication and the relationship of content to form may be more fully dealt with in some sections than in others. Written assignments may or may not be given but it should be emphasized again, in case the course sounds like a grab bag, that the studio work is pivotal and that other matter and manner is used where appropriate to invest that experience with the maximum meaning and worth possible.

Students in this course, as would be expected, are for the most part freshmen and sophomores, many of them with no intention of majoring in art. However a good number of non-majors go directly into studio or history courses without taking the introductory course at all, and this we feel should be allowed even though in some ways it increases our difficulties as instructors. If it weren't true that we deal with all students at all times on such an individual basis, such flexibility would be impossible.

In large measure, what is done in other studio art courses is informed by the same ideas and purposes as in the course just described. Problems are certainly much more particular as is most obvious in the case of architecture, which has to deal with function as well as form, or in a course centering around the problems of visual communication by means of the graphic media, which also has a functional side and where clarity and direct impact are important. Skills, techniques, media, tools are also more specific in the "specialized" studios which currently offer work in architecture, ceramics, design and materials, graphic arts, painting and sculpture. Work in these studios is on a very individual basis, in fact almost completely so. Students work at their own level and their projects are mostly of their own choosing, though at times a set progression of projects for all members of a group to work on is found useful. In most cases there is a meeting once a week which all students in a particular studio attend, and which is devoted to discussion and criticism. Both majors and non-majors are in the studios, some of the latter doing almost a major amount of work.

Mention should be made here of one other phase of studio work. Drawing is never given as a separate course, but there are at least four drawing classes held each week given by as many separate instructors. These classes are spotted through the week so that every student can schedule at least one of them, and we require her to do so if she is working in any of the studios.

There are other courses listed with the art offerings which to a considerable degree cross over into other fields. These are the course in art history which was added to the curriculum about seven or eight years ago, and three courses more recently added which separately center around the art museum of the past and the present, the relation of art to science, and the teaching of art to children.

The three parts of the history course, each one-semester in length, form a sequence and whenever possible a student takes them in the given order. The first of these, *The Art of the Magical Mind*, is concerned with the magical thinking and seeing which developed from pre-history to the great civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China and Central America. The second, *The Art of Western Tradition*, is devoted to the phase of Western vision which covers the sequence of Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque art. The third, entitled *Contemporary Art*, deals with the movements of Enlightenment and Romanticism and the art of our time. The two courses entitled *The Art Museum* and *Art and Science*, respectively, are one-semester each in length and are given alternately about every second year. The former deals with the philosophical and the practical problems of the art museum and the latter with the split between our humanistic and artistic life on the one side and our scientific and industrialized life on the other. The art history is essentially a lecture course while that dealing with the museum, and that concerning the relation of art to science are conducted more like seminars. The students taking these latter courses may be more advanced, fewer in number, and they participate actively in the planning and the progress of them. This is particularly true of *The Art Museum*, in which the members of the group, under direction of the instructor, take over responsibility for the hanging of art exhibitions which we have here during the time of the course and do extremely well with them. They also make at least

one trip during the semester to visit museums in New York and Boston.

In the course called *Seminar and Workshop in Art Teaching*, each student teaches at least an hour weekly, sometimes more, in one of the rural schools in the vicinity of Bennington. In a weekly seminar she joins in discussion of teaching methods and problems. In a special studio she familiarizes herself with techniques, materials and projects useful for teaching art to children at various age levels. At least once a year an exhibition is held of work done by the children. Sometimes they and their regular teachers are invited to the College to visit the studios or to see art movies especially chosen for them.

The Art Division's requirements for graduation as a major are uncomplicated. A student must have taken the introductory course, have worked in at least two of the studios during her four years, and have taken courses in the history of art to the extent that we feel satisfied her needs in this respect have been properly met. As well as this, her work in art as a whole, including her senior project, must meet with our satisfaction both as to quantity and quality. Quality, of course, has to be judged in relation to any given student's particular ability and considered along with her attitude and the understanding and insight she has gained. In this matter we have no aesthetic yardstick, only our combined judgment.

Senior projects are placed on exhibition in a large group show for a week or more at the end of the spring term. They may consist of work done in one studio only, or a combination of work done in several. They generally comprise simply the best and most recent work which a student has done. Sometimes in part or in whole they represent some quite specifically formulated undertaking, such as a group of illustrations for a given text, a building or a group of buildings, a series of cover designs suitable for a particular periodical. These senior exhibitions vary a lot from year to year, but the general standard is a very high one. There is always a wide variety of styles, and works may be quite representational on one hand or completely abstract on the other. There is remarkably little sign of influence by the work of instructors. Technical competence is often markedly high.

The field of the visual arts is one in which Bennington now offers an M.A., and during the last few years we have generally had one candidate for that degree. Sometimes such a student is qualified to do some teaching while here, or does other work in connection with exhibitions. We accept men or women as graduate students. As for total numbers taking courses in art, for the last two or three years this has amounted to something over half the student body. Our faculty consists of an art historian, five artists and an architect.

As a last word, it should be said that while we do not emphasize craft at the expense of what we consider more important things, our students who wish to go on find themselves well equipped technically to continue at graduate or professional school, or to make directly a good beginning in the commercial art field. Some go on to do graduate work in architecture, some in art teaching, some start in as professional painters and sculptors. A good number are awarded scholarships for further work.

