

ARTHUR LISMER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HIS PEDAGOGY IN RELATION  
TO HIS USE OF THE PROJECT METHOD IN CHILD-CENTERED EDUCATION

*Angela Grigor*

Arthur Lismer was an outstanding Canadian painter and art educator who was born in 1885 and died in 1969. He is best known for his work as a museum educator, where he was able to influence generations of children in his Saturday Morning Art Classes. The study which is outlined in this paper was concerned with his work in the Saturday Classes and the conflict which is evident in his pedagogy between his theory and his practice.

Lismer was born in the English industrial town of Sheffield. He left school at the early age of thirteen when he became apprenticed to a firm of engravers, and attended the Sheffield School of Art in the evenings, where he had a scholarship.

In 1911 at the age of 26 Lismer emigrated to Canada hoping to find employment which would also enable him to continue his painting. At the "Grip," a commercial art studio Lismer met other young men with similar ambitions. This was to be the nucleus of the Group of Seven, who became celebrated for their paintings of the Canadian north, and for their aspirations to develop a uniquely Canadian spirit in their work.

Two years after his arrival in Canada, Lismer, who was newly married and in need of funds, began to teach at the Ontario Summer School. With no previous training in the field of art education he based his pedagogy on trends in art education as well as on the progressive educational philosophy of the period.

During the 54 years in which he was active Lismer held several important teaching positions. In 1927 he was appointed the Educational Director at the Art Gallery of Toronto, eventually moving to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1940 where he remained until his retirement in 1967 at the age of 82. During his long career Lismer travelled across Canada many times on lecture tours, also journeying to Europe, South Africa and Australia promoting his philosophy of child-centered art education.

Three years after he joined the Art Gallery of Toronto Lismer started his Saturday Morning Art Classes. Hundreds of children came every week and Lismer chose young art students whom he had known at the Ontario College of Art to be his teaching assistants.

The children began by copying the Gallery exhibits, but after six months Lismer was dissatisfied with the results and changed his approach. He chose to use a version of the Project Method, a cooperative way of teaching developed from Dewey's theories. The children were given a topic by their instructors and were expected to gather information on their own to be shared with the group. There was much additional infor-

mation given by the instructors in the form of films, prints and photographs. This was necessary because the topics were sometimes outside the experience of the students, often being historical or geographical. The children were kept busy for weeks, and often months, making costumes, props and scenery in which the work was shared, frequently several children worked on the same piece. At the end of the season a performance was given to parents, public and press. At Christmas this consisted of a series of tableaux, and in Spring there was a grand pageant described by one student as being "quite glorious" (Yanover, 1980, p. 20). This was an occasion for music, dancing, and acting and Lismer who always had been interested in the theatre enjoyed his role as producer. He acted as "impresario, overall director...he ran a sort of structured chaos" (Yanover, 1980, p. 20). These affairs were a tremendous social success, and served to publicize Lismer's work at the Museum.

However, Lismer's method of working was inconsistent with his theory of art education. The emphasis in his practice was on social cooperation within the group; his theory, however, stressed the importance of freedom for the child in the art room. This contradiction can be explained partially by his admiration for the work of two men with very different philosophies: John Dewey, the American educational philosopher, and Austrian Franz Cizek, the father of 20th century art education. Dewey was concerned with designing an educational system which would serve to integrate society. Cizek, in contrast, was interested only in the development of the individual with as little outside interference as possible. He believed that art expression must come from the subconscious, and that it is inhibited by conscious intellection (Entwistle, 1970, p. 56). He said, "Art more and more dries up because it is supplanted by intellect" (Viola, 1944, p. 33).

Dewey's orientation on the other hand, was towards, "The scientific mode of enquiry and the systemization of human experience (Archambault, 1964, p. 153). He (1916) was highly critical of Cizek's way of working and called the development of what is "inner" that which does not connect with others. "What is termed spiritual culture has usually been futile with something rotten about it" (p. 122).

Lismer, who inherited his social idealism from the 19th century, was inspired by the breadth of Dewey's theory and its practical application to education. He adopted the Project Method as a conscious effort to integrate his students into a cohesive group, but seemed unable to relinquish Cizek's notion that "The unspoilt child is tremendously creative" (Viola, 1944, p. 27).

Lismer's admiration for the work of both Dewey and Cizek placed him in a position between two different modes of thinking, the intuitive and the intellectual. The theories he adopted were concerned with art which came from the child's spontaneous expression and therefore originated in the sub-conscious non-intellectual faculty. In contrast, the method he chose to use encouraged art-making which was supported by research and which was therefore designed to improve intellectual capacity. Contemporary research suggests that the brain processes

information in two different ways, one analytical, the other relational (Fincher, 1976). Lismer was supporting one while using the other. These and other factors would have made it impossible for Lismer to integrate his theory with his practice.

He was gregarious by nature, and enjoyed being with children, drawing pictures for them, and making suggestions for their work in the pageants. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for him to have adopted a passive position in the art room.

Undoubtedly Lismer enjoyed his position as Canada's leading art educator, however it is possible that his reputation was also involved in the production of the pageants. This study suggests that it was understood that some measure of control over the children's work be maintained.

Lismer's problem is not unique; art education has long been vulnerable to theories which do not harmonize with practices. In fact, Lismer's way of working suited the situation at the gallery where hundreds of children congregated and had to be kept occupied. These practical considerations and Lismer's social concerns seem to have outweighed his preoccupation with child-centered theory, which in the final analysis appears to have been the least important of his concerns. Like Cizek, Lismer was particularly interested in the pre-school child, and this may account for his promotion of a theory which is mainly of relevance to the very young.

There is no doubt that he brought much richness into the lives of his students, many of whom went on to become prominent in the arts, while others hold positions of importance to the arts. Norah McCullough, his assistant for many years said: "He has illuminated the arts for more than two generations of Canadians and as one of them I will not forget how much I owe him" (Ballantyne, 1964, p. 336).

#### REFERENCES

- Archambault, R. (Ed.). John Dewey on education: Selected writings. New York: Random House, 1964.
- Ballantyne, M. Childhood and the world of art. Canadian Art, 1964, 94, 336.
- Dewey, J. Democracy and education. New York: Free Press, 1916.
- Entwistle, H. Child-centered education. London: Trinity Press, 1970.
- Fincher, J. Human intelligence. New York: Putnam & Sons, 1976.
- Viola, W. Child art. Kent, England: University of London Press, 1944.
- Yanover, S. A celebration. The Gallery school 1930-1980. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1980.