

A Few Words From Down Under

A View From Down Under
How Important is Art?

by Judith McGrath, first run in our Jan. 2001 issue.

There's enough evidence to suggest Australians share the same attitude toward art as Americans. In fact I'm willing to bet if I ask the question "How important is Art in your Life?" of urban Americans and their counterparts in Australia, they'd all answer "Very". Then if I ask "Why?" the majority would respond with a mumble and shrug. It's a difficult question to grapple with when you consider the mixed messages we receive on the subject.

For example, in my city politicians beat the art-is-important drum to glean votes from that sector of the electorate but when it comes to art policies, they're pretty thin on the ground in this an election year. I ask, how can a state government find money to assist in the construction of a new cinema complex (that shows Hollywood movies) when our own ballet company, theater group and art gallery are in desperate need of funds just to maintain the status quo? No doubt I'll be told it's a case of different wells of wealth and if the art well is dry it will be primed, when they're returned to office!

Then there are the educators who tell us how valuable art is to the overall development of children. Yet somehow it's always the student with the double digit IQ that is steered in the direction of painting, pottery and wood working, while the gifted child is pushed toward science or sport. It begs the question: Why do schools place toxic materials and sharp objects in the hands of a child with a less than average intelligence? Perhaps it's because parents believe art is an easy subject that will keep children in school, out of trouble and provide a constructive hobby for them as unemployed adults.

The community also sells the importance of art as a way of creating a 'sense of place' in a world where people often migrate between suburbs, cities, states, and countries. Adult education art classes and public art projects bring people together in the pursuit of a single goal - organized creativity. But if the feeling of belonging can only emerge from the homogenization of an eclectic citizenry, if art is employed to create a cultural beige rather than enhance those polychromatic qualities of diversity, then it loses originality, interest and significance.

If we really believe art is important, even if we can't explain why, how do we maintain its potency? What we must do is identify arts' relevance in our lives. One explanation for arts' importance is that, more than language, it sets us apart from other life forms on this planet. Only humans make art, we have an innate want and need to express ourselves beyond language, to communicate via imagery, music and movement. If that sounds too heavy, observe the child. After a trip to the zoo, 4 year old Millie will sway to a song she has made-up about the giraffe while twin brother Billy employs arbitrary colors to paint a distorted tiger. Lacking sophisticated vocabulary to explain the new or the unknown, children tell us more than just what they see, they communicate their emotional responses to the total experience, to the undulations of the giraffe or the ferocity of the tiger. It is inherent.

Art evolved as a means for humanity to communicate with the unseen, unknown inhabitants of earth and sky. Everyone made art; it was part and parcel of every day life. It included sewing a beaded motif on moccasins to protect against snakebite, telling of a battle between the gods in the language of the hula, or break-

ing the circle drawn around a clay pot so trapped spirits can escape. But civilization evolved, science usurped wonder and answers to questions about life and the universe were found. When the order of things became known, communication with gods and spirits was truncated into rituals, performed by the initiated to serve and preserve a political hierarchy.

Today art continues to be political and hierarchical. While boasting about the importance of art in our lives, the powers-that-be remove it from the reach of most people. Art deemed important is locked up in Corporate Collections, Museums and Cultural Centers, codified, contextualized, commercialized and validated by giving it a financial value. We measure the importance of an artwork by its price and grade artists by their earning capacity rather than ability. So we have the professional (makes a good living), experienced (adequate income via sales), emerging (supplements income by teaching art part-time), amateur (few sales, teaches math full-time) and hobbyist (gives art away to fundraisers). To reinforce this hierarchy, 'important' commercial galleries are located either at the high price end of the shopping precinct or nestled in quiet streets of up market suburbs.

As an arts writer, I receive invitations and information from practicing artists who follow their muse because they need to make art. This is a more inclusive section of the art world where people are welcome to come in and engage with the work - not just to buy it but become involved and share the experience. The best places to find this art are smaller galleries, halls rented by artist co-operatives, private studios and university art rooms. Here you can attend in tatty jeans sans earrings and feel comfortable, no one will approach and ask "Which one are you interested in?" then ignore you when you answer "Just looking." These are venues for exhibiting real art, not artistic commodities, the work may not be perfect or pretty but it's honest and communicates with clarity. Here there is little attention paid to an artist's curriculum vitae but lots of interest in what they do and how. Prices aren't inflated, and if you 'must' own a work, a system for payment can be worked out.

Thankfully there are places that still recognize there are some artists who choose to produce highly skilled works that keep alive well-respected and much loved traditions, and patrons for this genre. Thankfully there are also places that accept there are artists who create controversial works in contemporary new media that make social and political statements to shock us to the core, and eager buyers of this edgy work too. Thankfully art is important to some practitioners, venues and appreciators because it reminds us that no matter how many barriers the powers-that-be try to place between us and our inner excited four year old who's rendition of a visit to the zoo is taped to the fridge door. Thankfully there are still enough people who are in touch with their innate want and need to express themselves beyond language and others who realize that even if they don't know much about art they do know it's part of our humanity and therefore very important.

Back to that original question. Ask the art academic on either continent "Why is art important?" and the response will consist of a treatise in polysyllabic hyperbole that traces the socio-cultural significance of yellow anthropomorphic shapes placed within the 'golden section' of an ochre colored textural surface, complete with quotes from a French literary theorist writing in the 19th century. This translates to: "It's a philosophical question therefore unanswerable." Ask the same question

of people who go to open minded art spaces to buy an original art work for their American or Australian suburban home and their mumble-shrug answer will translate to "Just is." You see, they understand how to really communicate.

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and Visual Literacy at various colleges around the Perth area, and was an art reviewer for *The Sunday Times* and *The Western Review* both published in the Perth area. McGrath was also a freelance writer and reviewer for various art magazines in Australia. She also co-ordinated the web site *Art Seen in Western Australia* found at (<http://www.artseeninwa.com>). McGrath is currently enjoying retirement.

How About an Art Book for Holiday Gift Giving? Try These

During 2011 we received several art books from publishers here at *Carolina Arts*. We thought we would revisit them to remind you that art books can make great holiday gifts. Why just these books when many others were probably published in 2011 about the arts or artists in the Carolinas? These are the ones that were sent to us. Here's four good selections.

*Selected Letters of Anna Heyward Taylor
South Carolina Artist and World Traveler*

Edited by Edmund R. Taylor and Alexander Moore

Published by USC Press

7" x 10", 360 pages, with 79 illustrations
ISBN 978-1-57003-945-4

Heavily illustrated with representative color and black-and-white artwork, the selected correspondence of Anna Heyward Taylor (1879-1956) captures the globe-trotting adventures of an intrepid South Carolina artist and a guiding spirit of the Charleston Renaissance. These letters and articles frame her intriguing life against the changing events of twentieth-century American art history and global events to illustrate how this acclaimed South Carolina original came to view and be viewed by the world.



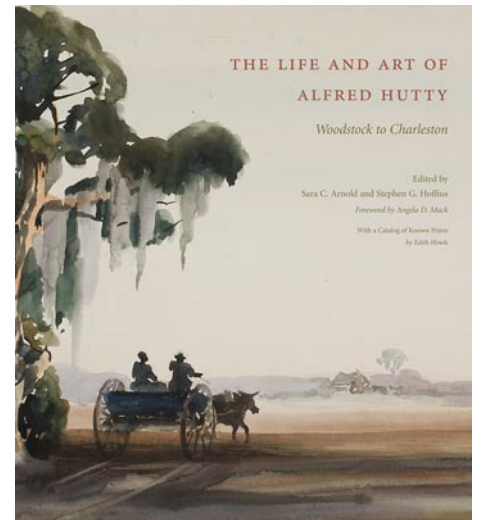
The City, No. 1, 1939, "For Helen Semple," a view of Charleston, by Anna Heyward Taylor (American 1879-1956). Work on paper. Images© Gibbs Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association.

The highly skilled artworks of Anna Heyward Taylor - especially her celebrated woodblock prints and watercolors - are well known to students and collectors of southern art. However, Taylor was also a dedicated letter writer and persistent student of art. Edited by her descendant Edmund R. Taylor and Alexander Moore, this first publication of Taylor's letters provides a new dimension to the artist's life and works. A native of Columbia, SC, Taylor received professional art training from William Merritt Chase in New York and B. J. O. Nordfeldt in New England. In Japan she studied the works of the classical printmakers and developed an appreciation of textile arts.

Drawn to roam abroad, Taylor traveled to the Far East before World War I, served in the American Red Cross in wartime France and Germany, and visited Europe both before and after the Great War. She also made lengthy excursions to British Guiana, the Virgin Islands, and Mexico to study and create colorful works of art in several media: watercolors, woodblock prints, and textiles. She traveled to British Guiana in the capacity of scientific illustrator, and her correspondence and art from such excursions are emblematic of her well-informed interest in botany. Between the wars and amid her travels, Taylor worked and studied at the re-nowned artists' colony in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

In 1929 she settled in Charleston, SC, and became one of the key participants in the Charleston Renaissance. In the mid-1930s, Taylor spent time at an artists' colony in Taxco, Mexico, fully immersed in the bohemian life among the artists, which she keenly describes with an anthropologist's eye. Wherever she traveled, lived, or worked, Taylor made her life a celebration of innovation, independence, and creativity—traits that illuminate the vibrant character of her chronicles of exotic people, places, and events.

The accompanying illustrations and photographs add a visual element to the remarkable story of this versatile artist. The introduction and extensive annotations by southern historian Alexander Moore establish a broader place for Taylor in American art history and the intellectual life of the twentieth century.



*The Life and Art of Alfred Hutty
Woodstock to Charleston*

Edited by Sara C. Arnold and Stephen G. Hoffius with a foreword by Angela D. Mack and a catalog of known prints by Edith Howle

Published by USC Press

9 1/2" x 10 3/4", 224 pages, 96 color and 231 b&w illustrations
ISBN 978-1-61117-041-2

Alfred Hutty (1877-1954) was a master painter and printmaker whose evocative landscapes and realistic studies of the human condition represent the best aspects of the Woodstock and Charleston art traditions of his era. Edited by Sara C. Arnold and Stephen G. Hoffius, this illustrated survey of Hutty's career offers the first comprehensive examination of his impact on American art in the South and beyond. The text and catalog of prints offer authoritative documentation of more than 250 of Hutty's works.

Among the first artists to settle in the Art Students League colony at Woodstock, New York, in the early 1900s, Hutty established himself as a leading painter of the town's natural environs. For more than a decade, he honed his skills in oil and watercolor, producing intimate portrayals of Woodstock's mountains, lakes, and streams before his career took him to South Carolina.

Hutty first visited Charleston, SC, in 1920 and, according to one of the staple legends of the Charleston Renaissance, he excitedly wired his wife back in Woodstock: "Come quickly, have found heaven." Hutty began dividing his time seasonally between homes and studios in Charleston and Woodstock, teaching art classes for the Carolina Art Association at

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