

Discussions on Youth Art Vs. Arrogance — Part 1

This is the 15th installment of a series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Kazue Igeta (young women's chief), representing the high school division members.

KIMURA: Today we're going to talk about art. I think for many people the word *art* immediately conjures images of something formal and even intimidating.

IKEDA: That may be true. But surely no one regards a bird's song as formal or frightening. Nor I'm sure does anyone gaze at a meadow of flowers and feel intimidated. Who can fail to be captivated by the beauty of cherry blossoms in full bloom in the moonlight? And on a glorious day, I'm sure we all look up at the blue sky and think, "How wonderful!" The bubbling of a stream certainly delights the ear, cleansing and refreshing our senses. These are all examples of our intuitive love of beauty and the spirit of art and culture.

Art is by no means something unusual or extraordinary. Great works of art, just like the beauty inherent in nature, are a relaxing, refreshing balm for the spirit — a source of vitality and energy.

Many of our daily activities resonate with the spirit of art and culture. For instance, when we make efforts to look our best, we are seeking to create beauty. When we tidy and clean a room so that it is spic and span, we are striving to create beauty. Just a single flower in a vase can sometimes completely transform a room, giving it a warm, gentle touch. Such is the power of beauty.

Art should calm and soothe us, not put us on the defensive or make us feel uncomfortable. It should encourage us when we are run-down, relax and uplift us when we are tense.

IGETA: Some young people may feel put off by art, since it is a required academic subject.

IKEDA: To begin by simply enjoying art is most important. If you start out with a scholarly or analytical approach, you're likely to end up confused and in the dark about what art really is. I doubt very much that people listening to a bird's song or gazing at a meadow of flowers try to analyze such beauty intellectually.

Of course, to fully appreciate some great works of art, one needs to concentrate and make a degree of mental effort. But appreciation starts with simply experiencing the work. With music, for instance, we start by just listening. With a painting, we start by looking. Too many people, I'm afraid, are so intent on analyzing art that they don't really see it.

For example, in Japan, even visiting an art museum is for most a rare, special event. But in Europe, people visit art museums frequently from the time they are young. They are used to museums, so they don't find them intimidating.

One reason may be that museums in the West are products of a democratic society. In earlier centuries, only the aristocracy or the very wealthy could collect and enjoy objects of art. Public art museums were born when the people insisted that they, too, had a right to have access to the great works of art. That simply is how museums came about — out of the public's growing demand for the opportunity to enjoy art.

In Japan, on the other hand, museums were first established in the Meiji Period (1868–1912), when Japan opened itself to the world after centuries of seclusion. The Japanese

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Subject: World Tribune 12/12/97 n.3169 p.8 WT971212p08

Author:

Keywords: Arrogance Dialogue Discussions Part Tribune World Youth

government then established museums imitating Western ones, believing Japan would be thought backward by Western powers if it didn't have them. As government-sponsored institutions, Japanese museums inevitably carried the condescending message "Here — we deign to let you see these works of art."

KIMURA: "And you should be grateful that we do so" is what was communicated.

IGETA: That really contributes to making a museum visit an unpleasant, even daunting experience.

IKEDA: Although things have changed considerably in Japan, that attitude still persists in the realm of art and culture, coloring the way we react to them. Culture actually exists to make people feel happy and at ease. Art is not meant to intimidate us, but many people don't seem to recognize that truth.

True art, true culture, strives to enrich the individual and encourage self-expression, while seeking to reach out, touch, communicate and bring together people. It promotes bringing joy and happiness to others over fame or wealth. Genuine art and culture mean to foster that spirit, but intellectuals and political leaders in Japan today seem to have missed that point. They tend to view art as something to serve their interests. Consequently, they may never come to know the essence of art and culture.

I hope, therefore, that all of you, the high school division members, will become individuals who appreciate the true spirit of culture. Visiting museums and attending concerts are important ways to cultivate that spirit. At the same time, you might try your hand at an artistic pursuit, perhaps singing or painting or doing some craft. In that way, you will gradually become a cultured person who can appreciate and enjoy art and culture.

If you spend all your time only studying for university entrance exams, your life will be limited. Of course, it is necessary to study for exams, but you mustn't forget what is important in terms of the larger, lifelong goal of cultivating your individuality and self-expression.

Taking time out to acquaint and familiarize yourself with art is important. Studying for exams is little more than information-processing. Art and culture enrich our lives and make them truly worth living.

Art classes at school are also important, because they can expand, deepen and enhance us as individuals.

IGETA: Many members complain that their art classes are boring and dull.

IKEDA: That may be true. One scholar said that in Japan, many art teachers are unreasonable and conceited. He asked why it isn't possible for them to conduct classes in a more straightforward, accessible way for students. One problem is that Japan lacks the spiritual soil in which minds that understand the true essence of art can be cultivated.

Under such circumstances, sometimes teachers become arrogant, forgetting that their professional skill is nothing more than that — a skill. For example, there are haughty, condescending English teachers who imagine themselves somehow superior because they can speak English and their students can't. In the same way, there are art teachers who, because they can paint or sculpt well, look down on their students who can't.

Surely an art teacher's merit can only be judged by whether he or she sincerely strives to nurture and encourage an understanding and appreciation in the student toward art and culture. Unfortunately, the culturally poor soil of Japan produces far too few of these

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individuals.

Since culture is ultimately the cultivation of the spirit, one's love of art is much more important than one's artistic skill. Culture is the expression of the inner impulse to cultivate the earth of the human spirit, bound and suppressed as it is by human tendency, so that more beautiful flowers can be brought to bloom and abundant fruit brought to bear.

Arrogance is the opposite of this spirit. Someone has said that an artist who is arrogant is not a true artist — such a person is only a purveyor of art, someone who makes his or her living off of art. Likewise, a seemingly cultured person obsessed with publicity and fame is only a purveyor of culture.

All of you, the leaders of the future, should know that genuine artists, people who appreciate culture, are those who can foster a shared understanding among the people, who always humbly maintain a sense of gratitude and respect for others.

KIMURA: I have an example of how the arts — in this case, music — can uplift people's hearts and bring them release. A high school division member played the violin at a meeting I attended. As the music filled the room, those present, some of whom had been looking down at the floor in a withdrawn fashion, all raised their heads and listened, their eyes shining. The change of mood was astonishing.

The Tohoku young men's high school division chief, Jun'ichi Saito, a music teacher, has had the same experience. He often plays the piano at meetings. By playing what he describes as "music from the world of the bodhisattva," it is his wish to encourage and inspire the members in some small way.

IKEDA: That's wonderful. A world without art is gray and lifeless. Only when the flowers of culture flourish does our world become bright and colorful. The SGI's movement to promote culture, reaching from the grass roots to the global level, is also a bright, colorful garden of flowers spreading across the globe.

KIMURA: That's true. Actually, Mr. Saito's first encounter with music was when he joined a Soka Gakkai future division chorus. From his second year in high school, he began to study music in earnest. He once said to me: "I believe that art is the joy of self-discovery. My happiest moments are when I am teaching children, and some new aspect or side of them comes to light through music. In this sense, art is the pursuit of our humanity."

IKEDA: I agree. It is the pursuit of our humanity, not the pursuit of fame, riches or honors. The great works of art from around the world, from throughout history, have survived and continue to inspire us and communicate to us precisely because their creators sought to leave behind a legacy of their spirit, without any thoughts of fame or wealth. Art created from ignoble motives is like brass compared to the gold of great art.

Great art is infused with powerful life force. It is alive, endowed with the creator's life and spirit. The renowned French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840– 1917) said that the important thing for artists is to feel, to love, to hope, to tremble, to live. It is to be, before an artist, he said, a human being. These human feelings — hope, love, anger, fear — are communicated to us through the artist's work. The vibrations of the artist's spirit set off similar vibrations within our hearts. This is the essential experience of art. It is a shared feeling that links the creator and the viewer, transcending boundaries of time and space.

IGETA: It is the spirit that counts.

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IKEDA: Dunhuang in western China has been called a great art museum in the desert. It is a marvelous storehouse of Buddhist paintings spanning a period of a thousand years, dating back to the 4th century. The late Chinese painter Chang Shuhong (1904–94) made it his mission to protect that valuable treasure and introduce it to the world. He was a remarkable person whom I met on several occasions. In fact, we published a book of our dialogues (*Tonko no Kosai* [The Radiance of Dunhuang], not available in English).

In his youth, Mr. Chang studied Western art in Paris and was on his way to becoming a leading artist. He had won many prizes, and his future was quite promising. Then, one day, he happened upon a book in a used bookshop along the banks of the Seine — a collection of illustrative plates of the grottoes of Dunhuang.

His homeland of China possessed such magnificent art! And it had been plundered by foreigners! He decided then and there to return to China and guard these great treasures with his own hands.

The young Mr. Chang abandoned his budding career and Paris life, and traveled to Dunhuang in the desert. In what others might regard as a life sentence of hardship and suffering, he gave his all, right up to the end of his life, to protect and restore the Dunhuang paintings.

His struggle was grand, heroic. Life was so hard in the desert that his first wife left him. Mr. Chang's dedication to preserving Dunhuang's beauty and making it available to the people was such that he needed nothing for himself. His was the true spirit of art.

Chang once said: "The paintings of Dunhuang are so fresh and vibrant even today because their creators painted from their souls. The creative energy that comes from the depths of the soul is always genuine. True works of art never lose their power to move us, even after thousands of years. Works of art that may be beautiful at first glance are sometimes revealed as fakes upon closer examination."

No doubt that is correct. In today's art world, there is the tendency to judge works highly if the creator is famous or if the work has a high price. This is a warped, unfortunate attitude. But whatever our present situation may be, the pursuit of culture is an eternal concern. Culture is indispensable to making our lives richer, more enjoyable and more worthwhile.

There is no denying that human beings have a cruel aspect of rivalry, war and jealousy. But we also have another side — our wish to live richer, more beautiful and brighter lives. The interaction of these two tendencies is the story, the history, of our species.

That's why culture and art are so crucial. They encourage our better aspect, helping us enjoy the most fulfilling lives we can. And they nurture the virtue of goodness, the desire to make this earth a paradise. This is the ideal way to live as human beings. It's what distinguishes us from other animals.

KIMURA: Art that comes from the soul is also often art expressing religious faith. Great religions give birth to great culture.

IKEDA: That is true as long as the religion does not ally itself with authoritarian forces.

Without the backing of a sound philosophy rooted among the people, a culture will not flourish long. Religions — Buddhism in particular — are indivisible from culture. Religion and culture are two aspects of the same thing. Both culture and Buddhism aim to inspire people from within. As Chang said: "The source of the creative inspiration for the art of Dunhuang may very well have been religious. If the painters had not believed in Buddhism, they could not have created the wall paintings that they did."

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IGETA: Oppressive authority and arrogance are fatal to culture, aren't they?

IKEDA: Yes. When I was a boy, all Japan rushed headlong down the road of war. In that atmosphere, anything artistic was widely regarded as unpatriotic. The only music we had were military songs. At school, we were taught only to draw soldiers and tanks or nurses tending the wounded on the battlefield. Strong oppressive forces were brought to bear on our culture. Such is the demonic nature of tyranny.

While art and culture liberate people from within, authoritarianism oppresses people from without. These are opposing forces.

KIMURA: There are not many leaders in our society who have a real understanding of beauty. Rather, they try to exploit culture to realize their ambitions.

IKEDA: That is why it is important for the people to support and encourage culture. In a certain sense, the art of the European Renaissance articulated the people's liberation from the oppressive authorities of church and state. "This is the way people are meant to live!" it expressed. It was an assertion of the tremendous power of the people. And the eternal worth and beauty of Renaissance art are still recognized today.

That those in power do not try to understand art and culture is frightening, actually. Their lack of appreciation for the finer aspects of human life makes it easy for them to go to war, to lean toward fascism.

Of course, there are also examples of leaders who understood and appreciated art. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was a great German Renaissance painter and printmaker. One day, he climbed a ladder to work on a large painting in the palace of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. The ladder began to wobble, and the emperor, looking on, called for one of the aristocrats in the room to steady it. No one made a move. The social status of a painter at the time was low — they would not stoop to help Dürer. The emperor himself rose from his throne and steadied the ladder.

One of the courtiers began to grumble, commenting how inappropriate it was for the emperor to assist a lowly painter. When the emperor heard the complaint, he said: "I can make any number of aristocrats at my choosing. I cannot, however, make another great artist like Dürer."

IGETA: I guess he knew what kind of person is important.

IKEDA: People who appreciate art and culture are important. Cultured people value peace and lead others to a world of beauty, hope and bright tomorrows. Tyrannical authority, on the other hand, only leads people to darkness — the opposite of art.

For that reason, nurturing and spreading an appreciation for art and culture are crucial in creating peace.

(To be continued)

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