

# The role of an art gallery in schools

With the recent inauguration of the Karmenu Mangion Art Gallery at St Martin's College, Swatar, JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR explains why such an initiative is not only important in the overall educational programme for students, but could also be imitated by other schools

**A** MANIFESTO for art in schools has recently been launched in England, the rationale of which is based on three fundamental principles: difference, plurality and independent thought. It promotes the idea that knowledge and knowing is to be understood as a negotiation of ideas arising from the asking of pertinent questions and testing provisional answers rather than seeking predetermined ones. The manifesto states:

"The emphasis is on the learner and learning, negotiating what they learn, learning how to learn and understanding knowledge as a multiplicity of changing hypotheses or theories which are subject to evidence, proof, argument and embodiment. As such *difference* becomes a locus for action and discussion at a personal and social level, *plurality* points to a variety of methods, means, solutions and awareness for any issue and *independent thought* develops individuality, the capacity to challenge, and creativity through introspection into the nature of learning and teaching in art. These activities are as vital for teachers as they are for learners."

Such documents are essential to set policies which intend to bring significant changes in the educational field. They set out the educational principles on which future actions will be based; are useful in identifying and demonstrating concrete achievement at a time of increased accountability, and remain a basic tool to help teachers and administrators in identifying, selecting, prioritising and evaluating their roles as educators. The emphasis is on providing teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and on students' achievements.

Art education makes a unique contribution and is an essential component in the preparation for adult life. If we do not attempt to involve students in the arts we are simply failing to educate them as fully developed, intelligent and feeling human beings. Neglect of the arts in education is a very serious matter.

**C**hildren learn as much through visual images as they do through words. The understanding and use of visually communicated information has become a basic skill. Students today need to be taught that pictures and symbols can have several meanings and that understanding art is the appropriate path towards visual literacy which every citizen needs to maximise awareness and appreciation of the world we inhabit and to live effectively and productively.

The visual language in art is a system of marks, symbols and conventions with a syntax of its own, which must be learned systematically if

skill, knowledge and understanding are to grow and mature in a coherent way. Students need to be helped to acquire this visual language in the same detailed way in which they are helped to read and write.

Establishing an art gallery in a school is an occasion that brings students and teachers into contact with professional artists. Artists can help to cultivate a more critical approach while encouraging students to be more reflective.

The opportunity offered to teachers to work alongside an artist helps them to focus on their own creative practice to develop new skills, gain ideas for classroom use and work with a wide range of quality media. Exploring different techniques is in itself a valuable experiment and will help raise standards back in the classroom, thus supporting long-term curriculum development.

The Arts enable pupils to communicate. The purpose is to give the opportunity to students and visiting artists the possibility of exhibiting their work, as well as creating a setting conducive to lectures, discussions and critical sessions.

Bringing works of art within the school environment is a unique occasion that helps students in their development of aesthetic judgments combining appreciation, participation and critical self-evaluation. The gallery helps students to gain self-confidence by discovering their individual strengths; it ensures a secure base from which exploratory and adventurous work can be carried out; it gives them a great sense of accomplishment by increasing their self-awareness.

An art gallery within a school setting provides the means by which students can learn to appreciate the creative experience while studying the more theoretical aspects of the subject. The gallery is an exciting new space within the school, a welcome opportunity to be creative, and a source of new experiences.

The gallery should complement the displays of students' work within



the school corridors, classrooms and open grounds. It invites all subject teachers to be creative and find ways and means of integrating their area of specialisation with what is on display.

**W**hen original works of art are displayed within a school environment and then conceptualised through the use of visual aids such as reference books and reproductions, we will be offering students all the analytical tools with which to fully appreciate works of art. In this way we can look at the future of art and design education in Malta with enthusiasm as we approach the new millennium.

*Joseph Paul Cassar, the co-ordinator of the new St Martin's College Art Gallery, is an assistant lecturer with the Art Unit and Faculty of Education at the University of Malta and an associate member of the National Society for Education in Art and Design, Corsham, Wiltshire, UK.*

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A GENERAL VIEW of the art gallery at St Martin's College