

What is Art? Who is an Artist?

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A number of years ago when my daughter was in high school, I remember asking her what seemed like a simple question. As I walked past her room at home on a Saturday afternoon, I heard the familiar sounds of her playing scales on the flute. She had worked hard during her high school years to become quite an accomplished young musician in the high school band and orchestra. She stopped playing when she saw me and I asked her this question: “When you’re playing the flute, do you ever feel like an artist?”

We had an insightful discussion about what we thought it meant to be an artist. She admitted that most often during her practice time, she didn’t think of herself as an artist. She felt more like a technician trying to learn a skill, much like a softball player attempting to perfect her swing or a mathematics student trying to master a new technique for solving an equation. She did admit, however, that during performances when everything seemed to come together as it should, she knew what it meant to be an artist. Although she was playing notes that were written by someone else, she felt tremendous satisfaction and accomplishment as a creator of beautiful music.

I remember also a conversation with Laurie Spencer a year ago in Wichita at the ISAS Fine Arts Festival. I had been walking through the displays of three-dimensional art when she stopped me and asked that I look at the pottery exhibit from one of our peer schools. As we examined their collection of wheel-thrown pots and bowls, we both agreed their work was beautiful. It was also obvious that their students had been taught one technique and had been asked to perfect only that technique. Laurie mentioned that every year she had attended the arts festival, this school’s exhibit consisted of work that was virtually identical to what we saw on that day. I remember very well what Laurie said next: “Some schools approach their art in a manner similar to this school and that is fine if that is what they believe. We don’t believe that at Holland Hall.”

A year later as I was taking in the sights and sounds of the ISAS Fine Arts Festival at the Kinkaid School in Houston, I remembered my discussion with my daughter years ago as well as what Laurie Spencer had said to me last year. As I witnessed our student performances, as I listened to them discuss their art work, as I watched them try out a new technique, I gained an even greater appreciation for the commitment of our arts faculty in trying to create true artists. The key, I believe, is to receive expert instruction and then be allowed and encouraged to create.

Earlier this month in Houston, our students demonstrated time and again what it means to be a true artist – by creating the most beautiful sound, by creating the most unique and inspirational work of art, by creating the perfect relationship between two characters on the stage. Students who have been allowed and encouraged to become true artists - to engage in the creative process - have been given a precious gift. Every student enrolled in the fine arts program at Holland Hall has been granted this gift and I am proud that so

many of them have used that gift to enrich their lives and the lives of those who see and hear what they have accomplished.