

# Is 'bad education' good for art? good for art?

## Exposure overrated in effect on creativity, symposium told

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SASKATOON — How do you "make" an artist?

"Discouragement," suggested Joni Mitchell, Thursday night's keynote speaker at Educating Van Gogh, a two-day symposium on arts education sponsored by the Canadian Conference of the Arts.

The singer-songwriter, who was raised in Saskatchewan, recounted her own education as an indifferent student who found many of her creative urges ignored or thwarted by the system. One Grade 6 teacher was important because he gave her "permission to be an artist, which I think is much more important than encouragement."

"Discouragement makes artists flourish," Mitchell said. "You need just a little bit of encouragement to keep you from slashing your wrists."

"I was sickly [from polio] and we moved a lot, so even in my greatest moments of happiness, there was a dissonance." That dissonance shows up in her unusual harmonies and chord voicings, she said.

"As bad as my education was, it couldn't have been better."

The message may not have been the one the 175 delegates, many of them arts administrators from across the country, were hoping to hear, but Mitchell's comments provided a counterpoint to the prevailing emphasis on the importance of exposing students to art.

"If exposure were all," she said, "everyone in Florence would be an artist."

Mitchell's presence (she was also in town for her mother's birthday) added some pizzazz to a conference on an apparently unglamorous subject. As CCA director Keith Kelly noted, "When you mention arts in education, peoples' eyes tend to roll back in their heads."

But for several reasons, the issue has become increasingly important, inspired partly by recent controversies over the National Gallery's purchase of the Barnett Newman painting *Voice of Fire* and the display of Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, a sculpture made of meat.

"A lot of people felt these events, and the reactions around them, demonstrated the need for more arts literacy, or arts awareness," Kelly said.

He added that the conference was designed to counteract "the drift toward marketing as a preoccupation in the arts in recent years. We tend to hear a lot of the sort of arguments

that say there are too many artists and not a big enough market."

He referred to Canada Council research that suggests that the best way of developing the arts is not through marketing but through education.

"The new marketing mentality that is being applied to this sector tries to be a quick fix and it encourages a disrespect for the individual who has no eye for the market. It's important to instill a respect and value for creativity, which affects every kind of work. You can complain about declining productivity until you're blue in the face but if people aren't trained in creativity, you're not going to change that."

The symposium's emphasis, in panels and workshop discussions, was on the ways arts education can work: through curriculums, artists-in-the-workplace programs and festivals affiliated with schools.

An expected debate about the role of the professional teacher compared to the artist-as-teacher barely materialized.

Ernie Fladell, director of the Vancouver Children's Festival, summed up what appeared to be a prevailing point of view that "it's the time for artists to get behind teachers. There'll be time enough for that fight [about who should teach art] when we've got the bucks."

There is apparently no consistency in the amount of arts teaching in across the country or even within provinces. Although several provinces have policies supporting arts in the curriculum, school boards often make their own decisions.

Several awards were given out at the event, including the Imperial Oil award for excellence in arts journalism, which went to The Globe and Mail's Montreal arts correspondent, Stephen Godfrey. The executive producers of two CBC productions received Rogers Communications Inc. media awards for coverage of the arts: the English-language award went to Armand Baril for *Bravo Alberta* and the French-language prize to James Dormeyer for *Ménuin-Prévost, une aventure créatrice*.

The *Diplôme d'honneur*, given each year to individuals who have contributed to the arts in Canada, was given to Nicholas Goldschmidt, the impresario and producer who in the 1940s was the first music director of the Canadian Opera Company, and founded music festivals in Guelph, Ont., and Algoma, Ont., and the International Choral Festival in Toronto. Goldschmidt is also the driving force behind Toronto's Glory of Mozart festival.