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Learning to Teach

Art is an activity that mediates between the inner and outer worlds of reality and only through its creative force can we secure in the child "A heart prepar'd, that fears no ill to come."

Put into their hands and fingers what they can find of truth and beauty... to produce an undivided self.

Sir Herbert Read: on "The Significance of Childrens Art" UBC lectures, 1957
In 1922, when the Beaver Hall Hill group was in its second year of existence, Anne Savage got a phone call that changed her life. Dr. H.J. Silver, head of the Protestant Schools in Montreal, rang to ask if she would come in as a supply teacher for the Commercial and Technical High School. She had had no teacher training whatever. Later, to Arthur Calvin, she told a story of her first days at school.

Every morning from eleven to twelve she found she had a spare period and so would pack up, punch the clock, walk out and do her shopping. The principal watched this for the first week and asked her what she was doing. Thinking it was her own time and she could do what she liked she listened surprised when he explained that she was supposed to use this time to get ready for the next period.

So started the career that was to take her away from her own easel and send dozens of others to theirs. No one knows whether she might have painted more or better if she had gone at it full time. What really happened was that she came to love what she thought she had to do, and everyone who knew her later had no doubt that when she was operating in top gear in her art room, Anne Savage found as much joy and love as she gave. In the beginning she set out each morning, often she said with her heart in her mouth, to learn to teach art. Far from her thoughts was any idea of painting Canada. She was just concerned about getting through the next day. If she was anxious she did not show it. She was tall and carried herself proudly, not from conceit but because her father had taught her to. More important, she was candid about problems that were new to her and laughed at her own mistakes in a way that disarmed any critical colleague.

In that same year, Baron Byng High School opened on St. Urbain street; and Anne Savage was transferred to become the new school’s first art teacher. Baron Byng was a complicated place to reach before buses were put in to skirt Mount Royal. She could never have guessed at the beginning how many times she would make the trip. There are neighbours still living on Highland Avenue who remember her setting out for school. She left the brown doorway of her own house, stepped quickly across the street and swung past a big tree that marks the opening of a path leading to a shortcut to Cote des Neiges. On Cote des Neiges she would take the Number 65 streetcar downtown and then transfer north again on a Rachel car to the stop opposite Baron Byng. On bright days, she would skip the long streetcar ride and walk across the mountain. Eventually she drove along Pine Avenue. When she was taking the shortcut from Highland to Cote des Neiges she walked under the balconies of a courtyard of houses where Arthur Calvin was born. They never met until he came to interview her forty years later. She told him then that the Protestant Schoolboard had had the choice of buying the lot facing Fletcher’s Field for the new Baron Byng school but saved money by getting a back lot. Always interested in the visual side of things, she regretted the sheds and back alleyways that they looked onto and used to take her students out to Fletcher’s Field to sketch. It was to become a noteworthy school despite its location, chiefly because the children who went there were first-generation Canadians whose parents had fled the Jewish ghettos in Europe. They were hungry for knowledge and, if not especially crazy about school itself, eager to get ahead. This was the world of Mordecai
Richler’s *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz.*

The other side of that coin, however, were the parents of Baron Byng students, people who revered anything of the soul and spirit that reminded them of the old country. When these children turned up for art class or music class they did so with their whole heart. Anne Savage, art teacher, and D. M. Herbert, the choirmaster, had classes of some of the most vital kids in Montreal. She was to say later: “I don’t think the Anglo-Saxons have anything like the emotional drive the Jewish people do. We had good material to work with, no doubt about it. We lived in a wonderful period; there were so many clever and talented children there—very, very able.”

The retired mathematics teacher, A. Saunders, whose own pupils were topping the province’s matriculation lists, gives another view. “She was an exceptional person,” he says, “and would have got good results whatever the neighbourhood, or time, or kids.”

She was fortunate that her principal was Dr. John Astbury, a strict, fair-minded Nova Scotian. He had had a sister who was an artist and who had died in the Halifax explosion of 1917. As a young boy he had made her frames. He was predisposed to support any art teacher under his charge. Anne Savage got a free hand. She said she didn’t realize until later what it meant to have such backing.

She was a good-looking teacher. To the students she was first and foremost “different.” They found her beautiful and original in her painter’s smocks. “She wore a different one every day,” recalls the painter Tobie Steinhouse. Some years later she used to dash off in a short, crimson bouclé jacket and grey skirt. She had a graceful figure and lovely carriage and a sort of careless way of wearing clothes which looked pretty but not fussed over. She took care of her hair which turned from dark brown to silver grey in her twenties. It was shiny and wavy and often wind-blown. She was one woman whose appearance was almost spoiled when she had to wear glasses. They gave her a severity that wasn’t justified and spoiled her open countenance and easy way of laughing.

She launched into teaching with a great deal of verve and energy. G. R. McCall, a friend from those days, remembers “she was wrapped up in that school.” Although A.Y. Jackson wrote time and again: “You shouldn’t be shut up in school all day, Anne, it’s all wrong,” Alfred Pinsky, who went to Baron Byng in the thirties, probably comes nearer the truth when he says: “We were all sort of in love with her . . . and through her had a love affair with art. I felt she had born me into the creative world.”

She taught from the eighth grade right through high school. She ran her art room as she liked. She made what were at the time revolutionary changes by pushing back the conventional desks and chairs and clearing the centre of the room for a display table. The idea was to get the students drawing and painting freely and stop the old methods of tracing and copying other people’s work. She had no “new method” but worked instinctively, basing her teaching on her own discoveries as a painter and remembering her own search as a child. Pinsky remembers: “She would give us a subject to motivate us and dance in front of the class waving her hands trying to express herself, but mostly it was her voice. She had a way
of speaking which sometimes rose into the higher octaves. We used to mimic her on occasion. All these things came together. Although the environment was permissive she wanted results, and we wanted to give them to her.” She had the blackboards covered with beaverboards so the work could go up and students could help by criticizing each other’s efforts. Then she got them painting panels to decorate their own school. It became a sort of model, visited by other teachers. Some of the panels remain to this day. The Home Economics room carries a wide, panoramic village scene, with spires and rooftops, done in what are now rather faded blues, yellows and reds, running along the length of one entire wall. It casts a serene atmosphere over the frantic activity among the pots and pans.

From the beginning Anne Savage shared with her students the excitement of sketching outdoors. She couldn’t go far afield in the early days and of course the high school students didn’t have oil paints. But with pencils, charcoal and sketchpads they would set out, delighted to leave the big concrete school for a while.

The east end of Montreal rolled by with all the colour and striving and racket of New York’s Lower East Side. Tram cars, pushcarts, women in black shawls, old men with long white hair and beards, young mothers in bandanas with babies in their arms, all passed by. The women were on their way to the market “on the Main” looking for food from home. There they found open stalls of oranges, artichokes, eggplants, square gallons of olive oil, and barrels of black olives covered with burlap, to remind them of Poland, Greece and Italy.

The Baron Byng students didn’t get to sketch this life;
they never would have returned to the school! Their teacher headed them west from St. Urbain Street over to Park Avenue which runs alongside big, open Fletcher's Field. She remembers "the lovely avenue of trees going from the Monument back to Rachel Street." They would draw the trees. With the boys she sometimes made an even more daring expedition to the Cemetery. She told Arthur Calvin:

_It was a nice place and easy to get to and nobody was there! We could sit on the tombstones and discuss what was good taste and bad taste and how they would like to take the iron off that and just leave the plain Gothic stone. It was the beginning of getting to know how to paint the outdoor world._

As for school life, she fitted in well at the long table in the staff lunchroom, taking her own apple or pear, hard-boiled egg and cheese from home. She would spend the balance of the lunch hour in the art room. Students could come in and work on their projects. It was a happy place. Leah Sherman, today a professor of art at Sir George Williams University, was once a pupil of Anne Savage's and her successor as art teacher at Baron Byng. For her, as for many others, the art room was a refuge. It was sometimes left open after school for a while with a student in charge.

For her own development as a teacher, however, Anne Savage had to look further afield. She apparently realized this from the start. She sent off some of the Baron Byng work to the College of Art in Toronto and got in reply this encouraging letter from another art teacher, Arthur

of a Canadian Painter

Lismer, already well established as a teachers' teacher and getting ready to set up the Children's Art Centre at the Toronto Art Gallery. On August 11, 1922, he wrote:

_Dear Miss Savage,_

_Pardon my apparent neglect in not replying to your letter and the parcel of drawings you sent. I have had them on exhibition in the College during our Teachers' Summer Course in Art, just concluded._

_There is no doubt that your methods are proving successful. I think the work admirable. Any class that can produce such work proves the ability and enthusiasm of the instructress, for one can only get out of a class that which one puts into it. Results return to one in a way unbelievably stimulating, demonstrating convincingly that the teacher has to be the aesthetic inspiration for the student. Few people recognize this as yet. The colour work is splendid and the grouping of objects admirable. There is a delightful childlike quality to the imaginative illustrations that only a woman's sensitiveness — and a painter's at that — can inspire. My own efforts seem rather matter-of-fact after seeing yours._

_I must confess I'd like to see more actual drawing attempted but perhaps I'm over-estimating the kind of work you are asking from your pupils. Personally, in teaching drawing to youngsters I make an effort to give them as much experience as possible in visualizing form, but also in being able to present it in three dimensions and I've had some good results in drawing from life, from models; by showing them how to present the "volume" of an object or figure, tree, or bird form, etc., movement and_
Anne Savage: Story

action first, proportion and solidity next, they soon realize that an object or figure has length, breadth and thickness and gives the appearance of height and texture to their work. I'm trying to do this with colour now.

We have had a wonderful time with the Ontario teachers recently. I'm going to send you a batch of their work soon so you can see what we do with them after only 20 days teaching. The result is amazing. It needs people with vision to put it through — and we needn't be ashamed to own up to having a little — painters make excellent teachers once the idea of giving out the things they know grips them. I've had four members of the Group of Seven on my staff this summer and we have given them the course in a thoroughly modern way. We have had 250 people to deal with and they all go away with something in them they didn't realize before.

For one thing they realize more fully the beauty of the objective world, and they know that although the artist is living in a world of imagination, he is using a tremendous organizing faculty to bring forth his outlook, to make vivid his impressions, and that organizing faculty is in itself a great educational factor . . . .

I enjoy so much receiving your letters and seeing your work. It's a great incentive to effort.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Arthur Lismer

One way or another, Baron Byng got a lot of attention from the Group of Seven. Through her own imagination, Anne was to inspire some remarkable work which was to

of a Canadian Painter

William Brymner (1918)
continue for the next decade or so. A.Y. Jackson showed a continued interest in the school and what Anne Savage was doing. In his book, *A Painter’s Country*, he quotes from a letter he wrote J.E.H. MacDonald from Baie St. Paul, January, 1924: “There is no great stir in Montreal art circles. Anne Savage is getting wonderful results teaching art at the Baron Byng High School from youngsters, mostly Jewish; this is about the most interesting development in Montreal.”

These were the years when Jackson wrote his friends bemoaning the snobbishness of Montreal art dealers who were buying Dutch copies while New York was picking up French Impressionists. He was happier with the colleagues in Toronto who had found a fresh approach, and a city that had a more open attitude to art developments. The stir in Montreal art circles would come later, and it would be of French origin.

Baron Byng, meanwhile, became the springboard for a large number of artists working today. Among them are Rita Briansky, David Silverberg, William Allister, Maurie Rohrlich, Seymour Segal, Moe Reinblatt, Sylvia Lefkowitz, Frances Karanofsky, Tobie Steinhause and Leah Sherman. Even those who didn’t “take art” will tell you what an effect the art room had on their homes, their ideas of decoration, their way of dressing. The only trouble is that the years have polished the memory, and the descriptions are almost too flattering. Annie Hirsh, for instance, a pretty, dark-haired matron living in St. Laurent, says she lives differently because of Anne Savage. She remembers her as “a burst of light and vision” to the average student. Alfred Pinsky gives a more objective opinion. He says that
in his day "art was for girls." The boys did manual training. When Pinsky insisted on painting and drawing during these periods, he was allowed to go to the art room where he and one or two other boys caused a sensation in the all-girl class.

He says Anne was an innovator in art education in this country, in a class with the great European teacher Frank Cizek, or Marian Richardson and R.R. Tomlinson of the UK. She was of the "enlightened English explorer type," he feels, and got away with it, perhaps in some instances, just because she was a woman. He adds: "The Protestant Schoolboard threw all the crazy people into Baron Byng... Herbert, Savage. Maybe the Jewish community helped. Lismer [he was to succeed Anne Savage at the Montreal Gallery children's classes in 1942] used to say that without the Jewish community his classes would never have gone anywhere." Yet the effects were pervasive. "I am starting the graduate program in art at Sir George Williams today," Pinsky concluded in an interview in the early seventies, "directly because of Anne Savage."

She was, in fact, teaching art at a crucial time in the development of art education on both sides of the Atlantic. She was aware of the movements to the south in the United States where "progressive education," which had been interrupted by the First World War, entered a vigorous decade in the twenties and came to maturity in the thirties. More and more educational leaders were coming to believe that development of children's natural interests and creative abilities in all fields would give a better curriculum than the old, adult-designed one. As for art, it was pushed as the most creative of all possible activities for children in school.

There were examples of men and women all over the United States who held to this belief. Anne's bookshelves were an indication of her interest and awareness of the work of teachers such as Margaret Mathias at Cleveland Heights public schools, Patty Smith Hill, Hughes Mearns, Frederick G. Bonser, Belle Boas, the Francis W. Parker school, C. Valentine Kirby in Pennsylvania, William G. Whitford at Chicago University, Leon L. Winslow in Baltimore, Victor D'Amico, Ralph Pearson, Robert Henri and Kimon Nikolaides. All these teachers were freeing students from old methods of "learning art" so that when the Bauhaus exhibit opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1939 there was an audience ready for its message. This called for a wide use of all kinds of materials, including old crafts, and followed Walter Gropius' idea of "unity of art," wherein one art form influences another. Industrial design leapt forward as a result. John Dewey, the philosopher, championed the quality of awareness in his book *Art as Experience* (1934) and deplored the isolation of art objects in a museum. By the time the art critic Herbert Read came to write *Education through Art* in 1943, there were many who accepted his introductory sentence which he borrowed from George Bernard Shaw: "I am simply calling attention to the fact that fine art is the only teacher except torture."

Anne Savage, along with Arthur Lismer, was recognized as leading the new art teaching in Canada. And yet they both were painters first. She said to Arthur Calvin:

*We were really painters more than teachers. It never*
entered my head to be a teacher. The wonderful thing was that I bought five years solid training in nothing but art which stimulated the whole of my teaching career. I think that’s the whole secret, that you get a good base, then you can work. Many people who train to be teachers try to hitch onto something like art afterwards. It can be done. It takes them longer to do it, that’s all.

As a painter she couldn’t help influencing the students. The strong rhythms that mark her best painting also emerge in their work.

Leah Sherman recognizes that teaching and painting feed each other. In teaching, she says, one learns the possibilities of the media, as well as the possibilities of the pupils.

“What saved Anne Savage,” Mrs. Sherman says, “was her value of the child as a creative person. She never put one down. She always found something to like and encourage in a child’s drawing. In all the years I knew her, and she had hundreds, thousands, of students going through her classes, she never lost this attitude. Well, it was part of her. She couldn’t help seeing beauty, she couldn’t help passing it on. She had these strong perceptions and visual sense and the kids knew it and no matter how she expressed it they knew it was completely genuine with her and she never changed. At Sir George we have been studying what makes a good art teacher. There are no rules. It is not a matter of technique. With Anne Savage it was her set of values which underpinned everything else. The kids felt this. She never deviated from them.”

Finally Mrs. Sherman said: “Anne Savage needed to teach. It was her vehicle,” and added that she could have been a minister if she had been a man.

Anne Savage was a Presbyterian who deeply believed in the Christian teachings. She was teaching Jewish children who held to quite another faith. Yet between them they touched the same wellspring. When she died the church was packed to the edges with pupils who loved their God the same way Anne Savage did hers.

She was to teach art at Baron Byng from 1922-1948. After that she supervised art education for the Montreal Protestant School Board for another four years, retiring in 1952.

There is little doubt that the big east end high school was the overriding influence in her life. It was the key to another world, far removed from the conservative Montreal she lived in. It gave her total freedom to express herself through art. For her, it was much more “amusing,” as she was fond of quoting the French as saying, than taking a lonely studio and putting up her easel. She had the contact, stimulus and enthusiasm of generations of bright students. All winter she painted alongside them. Come summer she was ready to try out new ideas in her own painting. As an outsider in the Jewish environment of St. Urbain street, she could forget everything but the painting she loved. For this she thanked Baron Byng High School until the end of her life. For her affection the students, on their part, are still thanking her.