



# The Power of Art to Educate and Inspire

By Suzy Birstein

If your children are intrigued by the neighbourhood houses donning brightly painted or mosaic doorways, works of art and found objects strewn about colourful, funky gardens, it just may be that that house belongs to an artist—an Artist in our Midst.

The first weekend in May will see the celebration of an annual Vancouver tradition—Artists in our Midst. Vancouver’s original Art Walk, offers the public the opportunity to enter an artists’ life and appreciate their art on an intimate basis by visiting the artists in their home, studio, or garden. This accessibility demystifies the notion of “artist” at the same time as evoking a magic and mystery, which can become a part of everyone’s everyday life.

I have been living in Kitsilano for 30 years, raising my family and creating a vibrant career as an artist and art educator. As a child I did not consider myself an artist. I was taught to believe that a *real* artist could draw a horse that *looked* like a horse and I was sensitive to reprimands from art teachers for using too much oil paint on my canvases. I maintained my expressive tendencies by creating and wearing my wild hand knit outfits, complete with accessories, and cart wheeling my way down the street.

As an art educator and practicing artist, I am able to nurture emerging and experienced artists of all ages. My sources of inspiration come from both the ancient and contemporary world and include folkloric cultures, music, film, dance and the pantheon of artistic greats such as Picasso, Chagall, and Frida Kahlo. By interpreting these themes in a way that is relevant today, children are encouraged to express their inner voices.

Participating in art camps and programs allows children to develop their artistic skills and express themselves. Children can learn and explore their artistic muse through various media and techniques, including, ceramics, drawing, painting, mosaics, papier-mache and more.

We now know that we all learn in different ways. The skills learned in the studio are transformed into life skills. There is an openness, receptiveness, and sensitivity that go along with learning the technical and critical skills to manipulate materials and express imagination. Experimentation, decision making, risk taking, recognizing mistakes as opportunities, these all provide us with the self-confidence, motivation and inspiration to understand our world and carve our dreams within it.

Such dreams have been expressed to me by Juliana, a very wise nine year old. “I have three big wishes in life: that there be world peace, that people never have to die, and that we open up our basement into a full-on artists’ studio.”

Learning about different cultures and their art through the hands on experience of creating gives us an intimate connection with those cultures. This understanding and appreciation creates a familiarity that helps develop better relationships within our multi-cultural world. As time passes, this may inspire our children to travel, study or volunteer amongst different cultures envisioning themselves as useful compassionate world citizens engaged with the world and their place within it—hopefully bringing us closer to Juliana’s wish for world peace.

Wonderful works of art touch and inspire us. When we study a particular artist we are engaged in their personal story within the context of their time. We come to realize how creating art can challenge us (and the viewer) and evoke feelings of passion, transcendence, and inner calm. Children often experience these same feelings while discovering their own creativity.

The “full on” art studio is a safe place to be for children in their imaginations, experimenting and thinking outside of the box. It takes tremendous discipline and focus to acquire the aesthetic and technical skills necessary to transform materials into art. The measureable successes attained through

creativity build self-confidence and a feeling of connectedness that moves far beyond the art studio.

A very wise man told me “children are sent to their parents as teachers” and I have found this to be true. When we least expect it, the child becomes the teacher and the adult becomes the child.

In my own experience, I grew up with a Dad who was always drawing but became a chartered accountant. My mother was a writer but became a full time parent and is a movie buff. I have had the opportunity to be a full time parent, artist and educator. In retirement, my Dad became interested in creating ceramic figures and I could finally teach him. Art brings us together to experience the best in our culture and inspire us to be the best we can. ★

---

*Suzy Birstein is married to a wonderful husband and they have two wonderful sons. She has been an artist-in-residence for private and public schools in the Lower Mainland and the ceramic sculpture instructor for Arts Umbrella for 19 years. From her Kitsilano Garden studio, she offers after school and home learner workshops in ceramics as well as art camps during winter, spring and summer holidays and adult workshops including Skopelos, Greece. [www.suzybirstein.com](http://www.suzybirstein.com) Suzy is a participant, co-coordinator and on the Board of Directors for AIOM. Studio #14. [www.artistsinourmidst.com](http://www.artistsinourmidst.com)*

