

## Margaret Auerbach - Art Autobiography

### Recall

I went to Catholic school for 12 years. The first 8 years we had “art” as a class. Every year we would have an art fair where selected art work would be on display and there would be prizes awarded. I only remember one year when I actually had a picture in the art fair. Although I did not win an award, I remember how excited I was to “make the cut” and I was really proud of that picture which was simply a vase of flowers. I can remember going to the art fair every year and admiring, and maybe even being envious, of those whose art work was displayed and even more so of those who won. Art took on a very structured somewhat competitive environment in school and we got graded on how well we did. I do not remember any specifics about actual art lessons and I do not remember art being my favorite subject but on the other hand I do not remember dreading it either. But I can tell you, I was left with a definite feeling of inadequacy when it came to drawing. I went to elementary school before the computer age so art consisted mostly of free hand drawing and painting. I do not remember necessarily doing well in art nor do I remember much from those early art years – art was just another class. Music took on a bigger role in my life and I remember more from my days in the choir and the catholic youth organization (CYO) band. Outside of school, I always had a very crafty side and loved doing all kinds of crafts most of which I taught myself. I would often alter instructions or patterns to make my final product more personal and unique. I took sewing lessons on Saturdays and summers when I was in middle school which allowed me to channel my creativity into designing clothing items. In eight grade, I remember making puppets, writing a play, and performing a puppet show (with friends) at the annual project fair which was a modified science fair.

In college, I took a course in color somewhat reluctantly at the advice of my advisor. I must admit it was one of the toughest and most challenging courses I have ever taken. I learnt a lot in that class and to my surprise, my professor actually provided very unexpected and favorable critiques on some of the art pieces I turned in – in fact he verbalized artistically what my projects demonstrated – some of which I was not conscious of. He was very supportive of my artistic abilities. It was a very rigorous class. I worked really hard and grew tremendously- acquiring a critical eye. This course required no free hand drawing. Images and colors from magazines along with a paper color kit purchased for the course were used to construct projects introducing quite a different definition of “art” from the one I grew up knowing. I still have some select projects from this class some 38 years later and to this day, I remember many of the color principles I learnt in that class.

After college, I took a course in cake decorating which allowed me to be very creative and I continued to be very crafty creating things but not pictures or drawings. I did needlepoint –mostly following patterns and instructions but sometimes designing my own to provide personalized gifts. When my kids were little we had an art room in the house and I encouraged them to paint and be creative. We would make things together including paper mache piñatas and paint them. I tried to encourage my kids to be creative and tried not be judgmental in what they were doing. Over the years, my creativity was limited by time constraints so I would combine utility with creativity such as candy making or decorated cupcakes that would serve both a purpose and a creative outlet. Every year the family would make mini gingerbread houses from scratch (one for each child) and each child would decorate their gingerbread house with all kinds of candy and make scenes incorporating other foods like frosted tree cones, Swedish fish

ponds, pretzel logs, sugar decorations, cotton candy and chocolate Santas, etc. I consider all these activities “art” which not only created a source of pride but a lasting memory.

## Reflect

I believe having my art make it into the art fair once in the eight years of elementary schooling was a turn off on the “traditional art” I grew up knowing. It clearly left me with the feeling I was no good at “art”. However, interestingly enough, it was my creative side I began to explore when choosing a college major. Perhaps it was the absence of art in high school that led me to a small college with a major in Clothing and Textiles expanding on the creativity I had come to enjoy and practice outside of the school environment. In high school I worked on the year book committee, and I decorated for school functions and I saw a more creative side emerge along with the physics, chemistry and algebra. In college I took classes in chemistry and organic chemistry but also functional clothing, historical textiles and textile testing which ultimately correlated to the work I have done for the past 35 years in developing clothing and equipment items for warfighters. While my focus today is more on science and improving soldier protection, designing appropriate protection into a garment and fit is extremely important in providing comfort and protection.

I feel I have been successful in creating my own definition of “art”. Even now for holidays I create food centerpieces which are creative and tasty and serve as both an entrée and centerpiece. Can I draw? NO. But I am creative and I am artistic. Today, my definition of art has expanded from the simple “art” class in elementary school to include so much more.

## Connect

I am not an art teacher nor do I ever plan to be one but I believe a person's creative side is important in shaping them and allows one to think "outside the box". The most successful teams I have been on are ones composed of people with diversified backgrounds which allows the group to look at problems from different perspectives and come up with solutions. Nurturing an environment where everyone is comfortable in expressing their opinions no matter how outlandish leads to the most creative and successful solutions.

Perhaps because my school "art" environment was very strict and structured, arts and crafts became my creative outlet. Today, the school environment seems more flexible and accommodating at meeting individual student's needs. Not all students are expected to fit into the same mold and the environment fosters more creativity.

Today, I try to accommodate different students in my presentations by reaching out to their creative sides by incorporating videos, songs, and hands on learning activities with interactive discussions involving critical thinking instead of overloading them with facts. To me, this is what STEM is all about.

The use of technology in the classroom has also expanded the definition of "art". The art I knew as a student still exists but it is only a small portion of the current art world. When dealing with scientific data, visualization of the data through graphics helps people understand trends and interpret data in a more effective way. Models also help to predict what is happening. While these graphics are generated on the computer it is "art".

Recently, I took *Chemistry in the STEM Classroom* which is part of the Endeavor program and some classmates, who are teachers, shared some sources on superheroes in relation to chemistry. The Nuclear Option: 15 Radioactive Superheroes and Villains (Kantor, 2017) and Exploring the Electromagnetic Spectrum with Superheroes (Fitzgerald, 2019) for me, this really shed a different perspective on incorporating art into a science curriculum.

My goal is to incorporate “A” into STEM by sparking the curiosity of students and developing hands-on activities or interactive discussions to engage students and explore their creative, expressive self and inspire them to think “outside the box” to make memorable connections. No drawing required!

#### Reference

Kantor, J... (2017). The Nuclear Option: 15 Radioactive Superheroes and Villains. Retrieved from <https://www.cbr.com/radioactive-superheroes-nuclear-villains/>

Fitzgerald, B. W. (2019). Exploring the Electromagnetic Spectrum with Superheroes. *Physics Education Volume 54*(1), 1-10.