

Christin McNeil
Art Autobiography

If I am being perfectly honest, I have always just accepted that art isn't my "thing". I have never taken the time to reflect on my experiences with art education and exposure. I have always had other interests, other talents so I haven't spent much time thinking about it at all. I went to a Catholic elementary school and transferred to a public high school in 10th grade. I do not recall the name of an art teacher or having a specific art class in elementary school. In fact, I have no recollection of creating art as a young child outside of the homemade Christmas ornaments that have hung on the family tree for years. I had to consult a childhood friend about whether we had an art class. She told me that we did not and that any art that we created was done within the walls of our classrooms, taught by our grade level teachers. Which means from grades K-8 I did not have any formalized art education. After transferring to public school in 10th grade, I remember taking an art class and really struggling to get through the class. In my undergrad program at PITT business school, I suffered through the art history requirements. However, I do remember reading about growth mindset in my early days of teaching. The text that I was reading highlighted a group of adults who did not consider themselves to be artistically inclined and coached them on this idea of "growth mindset". The group of adults took a drawing class, and the book highlighted the improvement from the beginning of the class to the end. I remember being completely fascinated by the study and the remarkable improvement that the adults were able to achieve just by changing their mindset. Still, it never occurred to me to think about my experiences more deeply, I just continued with the mindset that I was not artistic. Now that I am taking the time to look back, I suppose this narrative makes perfect sense. In early childhood, I was underexposed to art education at home and school and by the time I reached

high school I was far behind many of my peers, leaving me to dismiss art all together and pursue other areas of interest.

Aside from my experiences with BEING the artist, I have had hundreds of positive interactions with art. When I was a child, my friends and I loved to make and perform dances for our families. I spent countless hours listening to music and going to the movies with friends. As an adult, I have enjoyed traveling domestically and internationally and learning about architecture. I love to go to the theatre and have seen numerous performances on stage. I have always enjoyed watching film and attending concerts. I imagine that my memories full of these interactions stand out to me because of the entire experience. It wasn't just about the art; it was about the people and the social aspect. Traveling on new adventures with my husband, friends, and family, experiencing new cultures, cuisines, and meeting people along the way has always been appealing. I see my success with art strictly through interaction, I have been entertained by it, learned from it, and enjoyed it in many regards. However, I do not feel that I have experienced success as a creator of art.... yet.

Once I became an educator, I discovered that I really enjoyed being creative when it came to designing and executing lessons. I am extremely passionate about incorporating creative ways for students to show their learning and have fun while they are doing it. I have never felt that my lack of artistic ability has inhibited my teaching ability. In fact, my stick figure drawings have become "teachable" moments many times in my classroom over the years (Perhaps it is time for that drawing class!). Creating a safe learning environment where students feel empowered to take risks and make mistakes has always been at the core of my teaching pedagogy. As a second-grade teacher I felt that my impact on my students had an expiration date as they would leave my room and move to the next grade. I left the general education classroom

in pursuit of encouraging students to take these risks day in and day out, year after year. I feel that working with the same group of students allows for the time and space to move the needle and empower students to internalize a growth mindset. I hope to allow them to exercise their creative thinking and problem-solving skills weekly over the course of several years. I know I can do better though. I know that I am on the right path, but that incorporating art in a more meaningful way will have a powerful impact on my students' success. I am looking forward to having the tools that will empower me to be a stronger art teacher and not shy away from the unknown. At the end of the day, the lack of exposure has resulted in a deficit of knowledge in art education that still exists today.

As a child, I would have narrowly defined art as visual arts such as painting, drawing, photography, etc. That definition expanded to include performance art as I moved into adulthood and was exposed to musical theater, Cirque du Soleil, etc. The game changer for me was when I entered education and specifically when I started to learn about STEM education. That was the moment that I started to see creative arts in all aspects of life and across industries. Art can be anything that involves creativity and self-expression. In my class, when students are designing unique solutions to solve problems, they are flexing their artistic muscles. It has been amazing to watch the growth in just one year's time. Last year, with each new STEAM challenge or Engineering Design Challenge, my students would really struggle to tap into their creative sides. They wanted to know what to create, how to create it, and more details about my expectations. When they created, most of the designs looked similar as students were looking around the room for answers, not trusting their own creativity. This year has been incredibly different. When I pose a challenge or problem to the group; they run with it. Their creative minds are moving before we even get started, the solutions are unique, I no longer see students stealing glances at

other peers' designs, and most importantly the engagement is high. Many of my students are involved and willing to take creative risks and make mistakes. I am looking forward to watching the program grow and the students' flourish as I find ways to incorporate art in a meaningful and productive way. I am also looking forward to continuing to grow my artistic talents and pursue the idea of moving out of art interaction and into art creation!