

Guest Editorial

We received many interesting and thoughtful responses to the editorial "Architecture, Music, Painting, Dentistry" (Int J Periodont Rest Dent 1993;13:4-5). Among the most provocative and stimulating was the following.

The Art of Dentistry: A Reader's Response

I greatly enjoyed your editorial "Architecture, Music, Painting, Dentistry" (Kramer GM. *Int J Periodont Rest Dent* 1993;13:4-5), because it hits on ideas that I have held close to my heart for some time. I feel, however, that the need goes far beyond that of new wordsmiths: We need not only new words but new perspectives.

There frequently are articles in disparate journals that reflect much of what you've said, their recurrent theme being the relationship of a particular field to an artistic endeavor or creative act. The fascinatingly consistent phenomenon is, however, a failure to realize that to imply that a field is "like" architecture, art, or music is to acknowledge a separation that does not exist. There is a thread that runs through all creative acts, including dentistry—they all deal first with perception. And a problem that they all run into is the difficulty of language. While language might be satisfactory to explain technique, it cannot adequately convey perception—hence "wordsmiths" simply will not be enough. It's also of interest that, at the end of your article, you wish that the world would look at us and our profession "differently." I believe we really want and need to be looked at as the same as these other endeavors. Indeed, it is even more important that we dentists look at ourselves as being the same—it is a matter of perspective, perception, and language.

A few years ago I began a journey of research, introspection, and writing that left me with this central thought: We as dentists are taught to do what we do backwards. I was taught, for example, that periodontics is "that branch of the dental art and science that deals with the supporting structures of the teeth." I spent the next 4 years learning about the science, but was given no reference to the art—that was left to me to discover (or not) for myself. The same was true of every other discipline: you either got it yourself, or you didn't. Harold Shavell, to whom I am deeply indebted for having, if unwittingly, started me thinking about these things, wondered about this in his lectures and an article in this journal: "is this something that can be learned, but not taught?" If in fact you believe that dentistry is an art guided by scientific principles, why is there no education in art, as there is in other disciplines? I believe dental education can and must contain *both* art and science; that basic artistic principles and thinking *can* be taught. And I have some ideas on how they might be integrated into the dental curriculum.

Interestingly, there is almost no dental literature concerning perception. I found this fact alone unbelievable. A field totally reliant on perception devoid of any literature on how we think

about and through what we do. For my writing I've had to turn, as you did, to the other arts. For example, while Shavell has pointed out that neither form nor function "comes first," that they are "flawlessly fused," I had to go, for further discussion on this issue, to an Austrian architect, Eduard Sekler. Sekler stated in an essay in 1964 that, in the ideal case, architecture creates a form that presents a direct response to the play of forces in the building, and that "it takes tectonics to make structure and construction visible and endow them with expression." Tectonics deals with the perceived relations between visible shapes. Or to Ludwig H. Heydenreich, who stated, in his 1928 biography of Leonardo da Vinci, that "Leonardo's theory of anatomical forms is inextricably bound up with that of their functions; it is impossible to isolate the point at which description of form ceases and investigation of the functions of the organism begins." Leonardo, by the way, started his scientific anatomic studies long after his artistic training: he could "see" as an artist first—the science followed.

This issue is but one example of the ways that seemingly different disciplines can be harvested for their fruits, which will help us hear (if we will only listen) the similarities, not differences, that our field has to theirs. And the more we attend to such insights, and seek them out for ourselves, the more we will enlighten our profession and heighten our creativity and enjoyment as dentists. Leonard Bernstein, in his series of Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1973 entitled "The Unanswered Question," quoted a philosophy professor he had studied with as an undergraduate: "The best way to know anything is in the context of another discipline." If only this interdisciplinary approach were applied to dental education!

It is my hope that one day some of these esoteric topics, even those espousing the heretical thought that dental education takes the wrong turn from the get-go, will find a place in dental literature and education. Your editorial is a step in that direction.

One last thought: The art of Sondheim notwithstanding, the scene described in "Sunday in the Park With George" is impossible. If Seurat actually thought those things when he sat down to paint, he could never have created what he did. Language impedes the creative process; do you actually think "incision outline," "reflection," "homeostasis," "debridement," etc., while you practice your art?

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Similarities to dentistry abound in other creative fields, but this one is particularly profound. Doesn't Magritte's "La condition humaine" (oil on canvas, 1933) represent what we try to do in dentistry? To almost fail to perceive the difference between our art and what is real? This applies, by the way, not only to what is seen, but what is perceived in speech and mastication. We in dentistry face the daunting task of not only trompe l'oeil (fool the eye) but "trompe les sens" (fool the senses) as well.

René Magritte, "La condition humaine." Gift of the Collectors Committee, © 1993 National Gallery of Art, Washington. Reprinted with permission.