

On Living the Artist's Way  
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Robert Henri (1865-1929) was a prominent American painter. Not long before his death, the Arts Council of New York chose him as one of the top three living American artists. Henri was also a popular and influential teacher of art.

Henri's ideas on art and life and education were collected by a former student, Margery Ryerson, and published as a book in 1923 entitled *The Art Spirit*. Below are excerpts from a book published in 1930 by the same title but with Henri as the author. A lengthy subtitle, which I won't reproduce here, includes "compiled by Margery Ryerson," so I assume the book I have, and excerpt here, is the one Ryerson published in 1923. The book I have: Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1930).

What drew me to Henri's writings is that when he is talking about the life of an artist he is not just talking about someone who creates paintings or sculptures; he is talking about a way to live in the world regardless of one's vocation. As I read what Henri said—or more precisely, what Ryerson recorded—I had the strong feeling, "He's talking about me--this is how I approach life." What Henri said eighty years ago has helped me get clearer about how I conduct my life and why I do what I do in the way that I do it. His writings have grounded and affirmed me, and they have given me strength and direction. They have also helped me understand better where I run into trouble in the world.

I offer these Henri excerpts with the hope that they will help people basically like me, going that route, get clearer and feel better about themselves and stronger and more focused. Too, I hope that people seeking a basis from which to live will be helped to find it by reading Henri's words. Perhaps they will decide that the artist's way fits them—either as narrowly defined (a painter or film maker, say) or as broadly defined (someone whose total life, whatever their vocation, and including their vocation, is conducted artfully, from that impulse; or another way to say it, their life is their art).

Since *The Art Spirit* appears to be a compilation of notes jotted down quickly at Henri's lectures, in places they are rough syntactically and disjointed and repetitive, so I have done a good bit of line editing to smooth out the prose and make things clearer and

more concise. I've done my best, however, to be true to Henri's ideas. As was the custom back then, Henri used "he" and "man" when referring to people in general. I've left those references as they are rather than try to "update" and "correct" them; plus, I didn't want to get myself involved with convoluted "he and she" sentence constructions. Enough to say, Henri in his remarks was speaking about both men and women.

The excerpts from *The Art Spirit*, Robert Henri speaking:

The question of development of the art spirit in all walks of life interests me. I mean by this, the development of individual judgment and taste, the love of work for the sake of doing things well, the tendency toward simplicity and order. If anything can be done to bring the public to a greater consciousness of the relationship between art and life, of the part each person plays in the world by exercising and developing his own personal taste and judgment and not depending on outside authority, it would be well.

When the art is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressive creature. He becomes interesting to other people. He disturbs, upsets, enlightens. He opens ways for a better understanding. Where those who are not artists are trying to close the book, he opens it. He shows that there are still more pages to be read and to be written.

The world would stagnate without the artist. The world will be beautiful with him. He is interesting to himself and he is interesting to others. He does not have to be a painter or sculptor to be an artist. He can work in any medium. He simply has to find the gain in the work itself, not outside it.

To become an artist you have to make up your mind to be alone in many ways. We like sympathy. We like to be in company. That is easier than going it alone. But alone, not with the crowd, one gets acquainted with himself; he grows up and on. It costs to do this, but if you succeed even somewhat you will enjoy it.

For an artist to be interesting to others he must become interesting to himself. He must become capable of intense feeling, and become capable of profound contemplation.

It is not important whether one's vision is as great as that of another. It is important to resolve the personal question of how one is to live in his greatest happiness.

There are moments in our lives when we see beyond the usual. We must reach into that reality. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. It is our task to continue in that experience and find expression for it.

If you want to know how to do a thing you must first have a complete desire to do that thing. Then go to kindred spirits, others who do that thing. Study their ways. Learn from their successes and failures.

The individual says, "My crowd doesn't run that way." I say, don't run with crowds.

Artists do not forget the present in looking backward or forward. They are occupied wholly with the fulfillment of their own existence. Because they are engaged in the full play of their own existence, in their own growth, their fruit is bountiful.

If you are to live as an artist, don't worry about originality. It will show itself.

Artists should be careful of the influence of those with whom they consort. They run great risks becoming members of large societies. Large bodies tend toward the leveling of individuality to common consent, to the adherence to a creed. In such a circumstance, artists have to pretend agreement or they live in broil, and this they should not permit themselves to do. Their principle is to have, and to defend, their personal impressions.

The mere reproduction of things is the idle industry of those that do not value their sensations.

Artists are not done with their imaginings when they have passed childhood. They do not consent to the notion that the prancing horse they bestrode in those happy days had been only a broken broomstick.

One of the great difficulties for the artist is to decide between his own natural impressions and what he thinks should be his impressions.

Is it not fine to find one's own tastes? To select one's most favorable theme? To concentrate all of one's forces on that theme and its development? To expend one's constant effort to find that theme's clearest expression?

Artists should study their own individuality to the end of knowing their tastes. They should cultivate the pleasures so discovered and find the most direct means of expressing those pleasures to others, and thereby enjoy them over and over again.

Don't belong to any school. Don't tie up to any technique.

An artist can't be honest unless he is wise. To be honest is to be just, and to be just is to realize the relative value of things. The faculties must play hard in order to seize the relative value of things.

The essential quality of all great men is their intense humanity, and they all have an unusual power of thinking.

All true improvement results from fundamental laws and the deep current of human development rising to the surface. On the surface, there is the battle of institutions, the drama of events, the strife between peoples, upheavals and disasters. On the surface, there is propaganda; there is effort to force opinions. Artists search for the fundamental principles and forces that point the way to the laws of nature and beauty and order. Goya's subjects thinly veiled deep realities.

The artist must look things squarely in the face and know them for what they are worth to him.

Join no creed.

The battle of human evolution is going on.

There must be investigations in all directions.

Go in and find out; the future is in your hands.

Art and life should not be disassociated. No artist should produce a line disassociated from human feeling. We are all wrapped up in life; we should not desire to get away from our feelings.

The stronger the motive behind a painting, the more beautiful the line will be. Because we are human, our strongest motive is life, humanity.

The artist is teaching the world the idea of life. The artist teaches that the object of man's life is to play as a little child plays; only it is the play of maturity, the play of one's mental faculties. Therefore, we have art and invention.

The artist feels the wind blowing across the landscape. He may use a tree to express the splendid power of the wind. The next day, however, he goes out again, his active mind open to impressions, displaying interest in all directions. This time it is the tree that attracts his attention; the tree with its fecundity, rising and spreading from its roots, deriving its nutrition from the moisture in the ground and the sap in the trunk; the tree with its twigs and leaves, flowering into blossoms. In this tree the wind is blowing. The tree is resisting the wind.

The heart should be master and the mind should be the tool, the servant of the heart. The artist must have the emotional side first, the primal cause of his being an artist, but he must also have an excellent mind, which he must command and use as a tool for the expression of his emotions.

The best art the world has ever had was left by men who thought less of making great art than of living full and completely with all their faculties in the enjoyment of full play.

Age need not destroy beauty. There are people who grow more beautiful as they grow older. If age means to them an expansion and development of character, this new mental and spiritual state will have its effect on the physical. A face that in the early days was only pretty, or was even dull, will be transformed. The eyes will attain mysterious depths; there will be a gesture in the whole face of greater sensibility, and all will appear coordinate.

You can do anything you want to do. I mean it.

Find out what you really like if you can. Find out what is really important to you. Then sing your song. You will have something to sing about and your whole heart will be in the singing.

When a man is full up with what he is talking about he handles language with mastery unusual to him. It is at such times that he learns language.

I do not want to see how skillful you are. What is life to you? What reasons and principles have you found? What are your deductions? What projections have you made? What excitement, what pleasure, do you get out of it?

I should like to see every encouragement for those who are fighting to open new ways. I should like to see every living worker helped to do what he believes in, the best he can.

It seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world, he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others.

A man should not care whether the thing he wishes to express is art or not, whether it is a picture or not. He should only care that it is a statement of what, in his eyes, is truly worthy of being put into permanent expression.

To award prizes is to attempt to control the course of another man's work. It is a bid to have him do what *you* will approve. It is an effort to stop evolution, to hold things back to the plane of your judgment. It is a check on the great adventure of human life.

If you want to be an encouragement to the deserving young artist, become interested in his effort, and have keen willingness to accept the surprises of its outcome.

The pursuit of happiness is a great activity. One must be open and alive. Happiness takes wit and interest and energy, and there must be courage. A man must become interesting to himself and expressive before he can be happy.

There is hope of happiness. There is hope that some day we may get away from these self-imposed dogmas and establish something that will make music to the world and make us natural.

We haven't arrived yet, and it is foolish to believe that we have. The world is not done. Evolution is not complete

If a man has the gift of telling the truth and acting rightly, he will not fit into our present state; he will be very disturbing.

Our minds are so overlaid with fear and artificiality that often we do not recognize beauty. How little opportunity we give any people to cast off fear, to live simply and naturally. When people try to do that, we condemn them. It is only if they are great enough to outlive our condemnation that we finally accept them.

I have but one intension: to make language as clear and simple and sincere as humanly possible. An artist must first of all respond to his subject. He must be filled with emotion toward that subject. And then he must make his technique so sincere, so translucent, that it may be forgotten, so the subject and its value can shine.

The minute we shut people up we are proving our distrust in them. If we believe in them we give them freedom, and through freedom they accomplish. We harness up the horse and destroy his very race instincts. When we want a thrill for our souls we watch the flight of

an eagle. It is better that every thought should be uttered freely, fearlessly, than be denied utterance for fear of evil. It is only through complete independence that all goodness can be spoken, all purity can be found.

I sometimes wonder what my own work would have been if as a child I had heard Wagner's music played by great musicians.

Each man must seek for himself the people who hold the essential beauty. Each man must eventually say to himself, "These are my people."

It is not easy to know what you like. Most people fool themselves their entire lives about this.

Self-acquaintance is a rare condition.

There are men at the bottom of the ladder who battle to rise. They study, struggle, keep their wits alive, and eventually get up to a place where they are received as an equal among respectable people. Here they find warmth and comfort and pride. And here the struggle ends and a death of many years commences. They have stopped living.

Use the ability you already have, and use it, and use it, and use it, and make it develop itself.

Like your work as much as a dog likes to gnaw on a bone. Go at it with equal interest and to the exclusion of everything else.

It isn't so much that you say the truth as that you say an important truth.

We are all different. We are all to see a different life and do different things. Education is self-product, a matter of asking questions and getting the best answers we can get. We read a book, a novel, any book; we are interested in it to the degree that we find in it answers to our questions.

You have to make your statement of what is essential to you, an innate reality, not a surface reality. But you choose things seen and use them to phrase your statement.

It is a big job to know oneself; no one can ever entirely accomplish it. But to try is to act in line of evolution. Men can come to know more of themselves, and act more like themselves, and this will be by dint of self-acknowledgment. The only men who are interesting to themselves and to others are those who have been willing to meet themselves squarely. Today man stands in his own way. He puts externally imposed criteria in the way of his own revelation and development. He should push the restraining hands off himself. He should defy fashion and let himself be.

Of course it is not easy to go one's road. Because of our education we continually get off track. But the fight is a good one, and there is joy in it.

There are many who go through their whole lives without ever knowing what they have really liked and who they have really liked.

Keep up the work. Try to reduce everything you see to the utmost simplicity. Let nothing but the things that are of the utmost importance to you have any place.

It is only now and then that the great masters succeed, even though they have highly developed technique.

Each individual needs to wake up and discover himself as a human being with needs of his own. He needs to look about, to learn from all sources, to look within, and to invent for himself a vehicle for self-expression.

Men either get to know what they want and go after it, or some other persons tell them what they want and drive them after it.

An artist must educate himself. He cannot be educated. He must test things out as they apply to himself. His life is one long investigation of things and his own reactions to them.

All art that is worthwhile is a record of intense life. Each artist's work is a record of his special effort, his search, his findings, in language that best expresses that. The significance of his work can only be understood by careful study: no crack-judgments; looking for the expected won't do; and we can't even trust the critics with the best reputations.

I think the real artists are too busy with just being and growing and acting like themselves to worry about the end. The end will be as it is. Their object is intense living, fulfillment. A great happiness for them is creation.

A scientist is not a scientist in order to be a scientist. He is what he is because he wants to live fully.

Be a warhorse for work.

Enjoy even the struggle against defeat.

Art is giving evidence to the world. Artists discover the pleasure of giving and wish to give, love to give. Those who give are tremendously strong.

It won't do to blunt and dull your sensitiveness.

Those who express even a little of themselves never become old-fashioned.

Do whatever you do intensely. The artist is the man who leaves the crowd and goes pioneering.