



Censorship and the Arts

The freedom to create and to experience works of art is essential to our democracy. At present this freedom is under attack. Private groups and public leaders in various parts of the nation are attempting to remove certain artworks from public display, to censor exhibitions, to label particular works as “controversial”, and to identify some artworks and artists as “objectionable”. These actions arise from a view that censorship is needed in order to avoid the subversion of politics and the corruption of morals.

Moreover, it is not only artworks that are being subjected to efforts at suppression. These efforts are related to a larger pattern of pressure being brought against education, the press, film, and television. It is important to note that even when such efforts do not actually suppress particular types of expression, they cast a shadow of fear which leads to voluntary curtailment of expression by those who seek to avoid controversy. The arts cannot thrive in such a climate of fear.

Art educators should be deeply concerned over efforts at any kind of suppression of works of art. Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution. This freedom of expression includes both verbal expression—speech and writing; and non-verbal expression, which includes the “language” of the various arts.

Free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture. Now, as always in our history, artworks—literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, music, and dance, are among our most effective instruments of freedom. They are powerful means for making available ideas, feelings, social growth, the envisioning of new possibilities for humankind, solutions to problems, and the improvement of human life.

On the other hand, suppression of ideas and of artistic expression leads to conformity, the limiting of diversity of expression to a narrow range of “acceptable” forms, and the stifling of freedom.

As art educators in a free society, we confirm the following:

—Freedom of expression in the arts must be preserved.

—The individual has the right to accept or reject any work of art for himself or herself personally, but does **not** have the right to suppress those works of art to which he or she may object or those artists with whom he or she does not agree. The free individual and the free society do not need a censor to tell what should be acceptable or unacceptable, and should not tolerate such censorship. All censorship is contrary to democratic principles.

—It is the duty of the art educator to confront students with a diversity of art experiences and to enable students to think critically. The art educator need not like or endorse all images, ideologies, and artists he or she makes available to students, but should allow the individual student to choose from among widely conflicting images, opinions, and ideologies. While some works of art may indeed be banal and trivial, and some works may be repugnant and unacceptable to some individuals, the art educator should insist upon the right of every individual to freely express and create in his or her own way and to experience, accept, or reject any particular work of art.

—The art educator should impress upon students the vital importance of freedom of expression as a basic premise in the free democratic society and urge students to guard against any efforts to limit or curtail that freedom.

Adoption: *Adopted by the National Art Education Association Board of Directors Motion #17, September, 1991*