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## The Classics: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Art Educator  
**MANDY HALLENIUS**

# Classical Training in Art Opens Creative Choices

By Sharon Kilarski | Epoch Times Staff

In our series “The Classics: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” practitioners involved in the classical arts tell why they think the texts, forms, and methods of the classics are worth keeping and why they continue to look to the past for that which inspires and speaks to us. For the full series, see [ept.ms/LookingAtClassics](http://ept.ms/LookingAtClassics)

Mandy Hallenius, an artist and art teacher, says children can master the skills needed to draw or paint whatever they can imagine. To help children gain these skills, as well as open up many avenues for cognitive development, the classic method of training visual artists should be salvaged from the past and incorporated into the curriculum today. She co-founded The Da Vinci Initiative (DVI) with this objective in mind.

After all, if these skills already exist and can be taught, why not use them? Why should we reinvent the wheel? “It’s more efficient, more practical, to use the knowledge of engineering rather than relearn how to build from scratch,” Hallenius said.

In the past, skill-based methods for the visual arts were collected, shared, and expanded upon by artists in a workshop-like environment that today we call an “atelier.” The atelier system lasted from antiquity through the 19th century. “Hundreds of years of knowledge, which generation after generation built, has left us a library of literacy for the arts,” Hallenius said.

Despite this history, adults think that people either have the ability to draw or they don’t. At 3- to 4-years-old, children who draw stick figures “can [already] distinguish the width of lines and know that arms have sides and thickness,” she said. They are poised to learn additional skills.

But adults often remain stuck at this level, not realizing that drawing can be taught. “No one thinks that we either play piano or we don’t. People realize we need to take piano lessons in order to learn to play,” Hallenius said.

According to the DVI website: “Like teaching rhythm, tempo, and scales in music class so that a student has many tools to express themselves through music, so too is there a need for a skill-based education in the visual arts. By learning solid draftsmanship, color theory, paint handling skills, perspective, etc., students can expand their own toolbox for visual expression.”

**Gaining these skills in drawing allows children to do more than just compose pretty pictures.**

### What DVI Offers

DVI (The Da Vinci Initiative) aims to connect willing teachers with the training, offering online classes, weekend retreats, district-wide workshops, free K-12 lesson plans to train teachers, and scholarships for teachers to attend courses.

### A New Counter-Culture

DVI is actually part of a still largely unknown movement. From the handful of ateliers in the 1980s, a contemporary atelier movement has sprung up, with nearly 100 schools now teaching this rich inheritance of visual literacy.

The toolbox of skills allows the artist to control what they draw. As Hallenius explained: “I’m looking at a houseplant, and I see that its leaf has a spiral pattern. If I want people to see it as I see it, I could use chromatic colors and change the quality of the line, accent the sharp edge of the leaf.”

This toolbox of skills was put aside at the end of the 19th century, due to the rise of modern art and its emphasis on creativity. Today, most contemporary art curricula for children focus on encouraging them to be creative and express themselves, she said.

But having skill and having creativity is not an either/or proposition, Hallenius explained. Although at first students need to focus on learning a new skill, once it becomes second nature, the students gain freedom. At that point no antagonism between skill and creativity exists. On the contrary, this toolbox increases the number of creative choices.

“We have forgotten these skills because first one generation, and then another, was not taught them. This is a loss of cultural memory and a loss of choices,” Hallenius said.

### What Was Lost May Be Found

Hallenius hadn’t known about atelier training herself until she’d already started her career. She was a certified K-12 art teacher in rural Montana for only three years when the 2008 recession led to the school’s art programming being cut. As she was exploring other options, she discovered atelier training and found it so compelling that she stuck with it, even after the economy picked up. After about a year of training, she posted her work on Facebook and began receiving offers for commissions as well as invitations from art teachers to present workshops on atelier training at art education conferences at the state level.

Soon Hallenius realized that if she continued teaching, she could reach maybe hundreds of students over her lifetime. But if instead she trained teachers, she could reach thousands, and so she helped found the DVI.

The institute’s first objective is to make teachers aware that this training exists. “I’ve had teachers in tears because they didn’t even know they could learn to draw,” she said. “There’s a hunger in the art community for this knowledge. So they’re eager to pursue it.”

In order to get the word out about these skills, DVI representatives give workshops and attend state conferences for art teachers. Hallenius travels 60 times a year and has visited 20 to 30 states.

She is about to be a keynote speaker at a Wyoming teachers’ conference and has been invited by Colorado, as well as other states, to work closely on special training projects.

### More Than a Pretty Picture

Gaining these skills in drawing allows children to do more than just compose pretty pictures. As DVI’s website outlines, in practicing these techniques, students gain hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. They gain an awareness of history when they are introduced to the background of these techniques. The draftsmanship skills they learn give them a working knowledge of geometry and ratios that will serve as an experiential foundation for abstract math encountered later. And as children explore the subject matter of paintings—how characters and details in paintings help tell stories—students are learning language skills.

Of course, students gain visual literacy, too. They begin to understand information that the eyes take in a new way. “New colors, new values, your eyes see more than they could without this training,” Hallenius said.

“By teaching students how to break objects down and reconstruct them in a different dimension, students gain advancement in their visual perception, and therefore their visual intelligence is increased,” the website states.

Hallenius says her sister learned to read before she did, and so her sister had access to vistas beyond Hallenius’s imaginings. No one would deny that reading opens the world to us in calculable ways.

It’s the same with visual literacy. When Hallenius sees a billboard with a model lying on a beach, she immediately knows whether that image has been photoshopped or not.

“I can see that the 12th rib has been removed in the model,” she said. Erasing the bottom rib in an image of a woman makes her waist appear smaller. But in knowing how masses move in space, Hallenius can spot the lie.

Another example comes from the video game industry, which is always seeking to create games that feel real. “Yet most often, all of the edges in their scenes are very hard. This kills the illusion of space as there are a range of edges [soft to hard and in-between], and when everything is rendered really sharp and hard, it makes it feel cut out and not integrated into the scene,” she explained.

Such training offers “a whole new way to understand the world,” she said.



Mandy Hallenius in front of her paintings at an exhibit.



(Top) Teachers at a training given by Mandy Hallenius.

(Left) Children learn technical skills.

(Right) A teacher demonstrates his skills.