

## What the arts can teach us

By Leo I. Higdon, Jr.

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As art collectors and music lovers, my wife and I have greatly enjoyed our first Spoleto Festival USA and Piccolo Spoleto festivals. And although we have always supported the arts, we've been struck by the palpable energy and excitement the festivals bring, not only to the arts community but also to the city itself. The innovativeness of both Spoleto and Piccolo Spoleto seems to extend well beyond their various stages and venues, and our conversations with friends and colleagues have often touched on the energy of these performances.

But one aspect of these conversations has surprised me. Because Spoleto is an annual event, some of us tend to look at the arts themselves as only an annual event. The plays, concerts, art exhibits and dance may be edifying to visit once or twice a year, but for some of us that's the extent of our involvement in the arts.

The truth of what the arts can do for us, and the positive effect they can have, is not a finite thing at all. The arts have an impact that permeates our day-to-day lives in lasting and tangible ways. In my experience in the business world, I have seen first-hand the benefits of a well-rounded education that involves participation in the arts. Often the people who are most adept at handling complex situations in the workplace are those who have studied the expressive arts. They possess a breadth of perspective that is particularly important given the ambiguities and dynamics of today's business world.

Also, certain studies have shown that the arts help students achieve educational goals. For example, the College Board, Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers reports, "...students of the arts continue to outperform their non-arts peers on the Scholastic Assessment Test. Several years ago, SAT scores for students who studied the arts more than four years were 59 points higher on the verbal and 44 points higher on the math portion than students with no coursework or experience in the arts." Studying the arts also contributes to creative thinking, problem solving and communication skills, all of which are highly valued in the work force. And whether participating, viewing, or creating, involvement in the arts has been shown to be a significant factor in encouraging the ambitions of our young people and broadening their horizons.

But the arts are not just a critical component of education. Think for a moment on how the arts affect us throughout our lives, and how they help us find expression and meaning in the face of inexplicable events. Music and poetry help us heal; visual arts commemorate, provoke, or expand our way of seeing. Most importantly, cultures are forged and social issues are addressed in music, literature, plays, and movement. The arts develop respect for these different cultures, cultures we have an obligation to preserve. We don't talk a lot about this obligation to make civilization better, but it is a responsibility we should take seriously.

Whether they are arts majors or not, we encourage our students to appreciate the meaning the arts hold for citizenry and culture. When they graduate, we hope that they will continue to experience the arts, not only because it's uplifting and pleasurable, but also because it benefits society. In light of this, we owe it to ourselves and to our children to encourage year-round involvement in the arts, in their formative years as well as in their advanced studies. We are indeed fortunate to live in a city that has such a rich cultural and artistic heritage. The fact that Charleston has the Spoleto and Piccolo Spoleto festivals is an even greater gift, and reminds us again of what the arts can teach us. My hope now is that we can carry those lessons with us for the remainder of the year, in all of our schools, and in all of our communities.

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Lee Higdon wrote this article while president of the College of Charleston from 2001-2006.