

# Art Education for Older Adults: Rationale, Issues, and Strategies

*“art educators can  
benefit from  
engaging with  
older adults”*

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## ABSTRACT

The authors assert that not only can older adults benefit from engaging in art education, but that art education can benefit from engaging with older adults. A rationale, and issues and strategies of facilitating art education for older adults is described through several vignettes.

## KEYWORDS

Older adults  
Intergenerational learning  
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For most art educators who work with older adults, there is likely a personal story of the circumstances that awakened our interest in this population. Whether caring for an aging parent, researching self-taught artists, engaging our students with older artists, or growing older ourselves, somehow, we found ourselves drawn to a segment of the population many in our field have never worked with, thought about, nor considered as an audience for our professional efforts. Those who have long endeavored to bring attention to art education outside of K-16 settings, into the community, and into the lives of older adults, specifically, have often felt tangential to the field. In this article we add our voices to those who assert that not only can older adults benefit from engaging in art education, but that art educators can benefit from engaging with older adults.

Scholars such as Cohen (2005), Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Hoffman, et al. (1992), have suggested that there are psychological, physical, and social benefits for older adults who engage in creative pursuits. For many adults it is during the second half of life that creativity is reawakened, when “age can enhance our intuitive powers for self-expression” (Cohen, 2000, p. 70) unleashing the creative potential that is built on life experience. Scholars, art critics, and historians have written about artists who continue producing and sharing exemplary works of art well into old age (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Feldman, 1992; Lindauer, 2003). Others have noted that for many older adults, artmaking helps them maintain social connections, fill empty hours with a pleasurable pastime, or produce objects that may be sold to supplement reduced incomes after retirement (Goulding et al, 2018; LaPorte, 2004; Miles, 2019).

Older adults may want to engage in participatory artmaking for a variety of reasons, but often lack opportunities to do so. Yet, recent research has confirmed that measurable health benefits such as fewer falls, fewer doctor visits, increased morale, and enhanced self-esteem accrue to older adults engaged in participatory arts (Cohen, 2005; Kent & Li, 2013; Rosier, 2010). Cohen (2006) states,

In that they also show stabilization and actual increase in community-based activities in general among those in the cultural programs, they (participatory arts programs) reveal a positive impact on maintaining independence and on reducing dependency. This latter point demonstrates that these community-based cultural programs for older adults appear to be reducing risk factors that drive the need for long-term care. (p. 1)

Encouraged by these and other findings, the *Creative Aging* movement has emerged to promote policies, programs, and best practices for engaging older adults with the arts. A growing number of philanthropies, such as the Aroha Foundation, the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, the Eisner Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) offer funding for creative aging programs and research.

In *Toward a New Policy Frame for Lifelong Learning and Creativity*, former National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Chairman Bill Ivey (2012) supported what he termed *the expressive life* as we age, equating it with having voice and noting that it encourages civic participation. He suggested that “the basics of access should be a public good, not a private good . . . this is something that government should be doing for all citizens” (p. 21). He notes that professionals involved in decisions about the well-being of older adults tend to disregard the role of creative expression in maintaining a healthy lifestyle:

How important is it to talk about purposeful high quality of life for older citizens without always defaulting to how healthy they are, how much food they have, what kind of housing they have, and so forth? I personally believe that once you get past absolute material scarcity, expressive life can be critical to a high quality of life. (Ivey, 2012, p. 18)

Unfortunately, despite the known benefits, many older adults lack access to quality arts programming. Nearly 37 percent of older adults reported that it was difficult to participate in the arts, primarily due to transportation issues or social isolation (Rajan & Rajan, 2017). This demonstrates the “importance of promoting accessible ways of experiencing the arts for older adults” (Rajan & Rajan, 2017, p. 16). If lifelong learning in art is a worthwhile and acknowledged mission of art education as a field, then perhaps we should ask how we might help improve access to the arts for this segment of the population. How might art education contribute to more equitable distribution of quality arts programming to older adults who lack access?

Those of us involved in teacher preparation expect our students to understand the learning styles, stages, and needs of school-aged learners. State certification assessment instruments demand this expertise, but none evaluate an art educator's potential ability to work with older members of the community. Expanding the content of our coursework to include andragogical concepts and strategies as well as providing intergenerational field experiences in senior centers or residential facilities might help prepare future art teachers to be leaders in bringing creative aging to their communities either by initiating programming, serving as a resource, or being an advocate.

As teachers, we know that before we attempt to present any lesson, we must try to understand our learners. We might assume that older adults possess basic manipulative skills and cognitive proficiency; we should know how to accommodate the needs of those who face physical or mental challenges as they age, just as we would for younger learners. One basic difference in sharing art with older adults may be the circumstances of their involvement outside a formal school system with regimented curricula. This begs the question: What motivates older adults to engage in making art?

### Why Older Adults Engaged in Artmaking

In a series of descriptive case studies conducted over a period of two decades,<sup>1</sup> older adults living in rural and small-town Midwestern or East Coast communities were interviewed about their artmaking activities. In nearly every case, the subject of study had taken up artmaking after retiring from work in a non-art related field such as farming, factory labor, the service industry, or in one of many skilled professions. The reasons for their involvement in artmaking could be grouped in general categories.

#### Leisure

Freed from the responsibilities of providing for a family, older adults have time to explore creative interests (see Figure 1). Thus, artmaking could be understood as a pleasurable *leisure activity*. He or she might return to an artmaking activity that had been enjoyed or experienced earlier in life, as was the case for Annie Pittman.<sup>2</sup> As a teenager she had enjoyed drawing and painting. Working alongside her husband as a farmer and raising six children had diverted her attention away from artmaking. Once retired, her desire to draw and paint reawakened. She joined the county art association, attended paint sessions twice a month, and received monthly lessons taught by respected local artists (see Lawrence County Art Association).



Figure 1. Watercolor of Egret, by Roger Papadakos.

<sup>1</sup> The referenced findings are from a longitudinal descriptive study, comprised of over 70 case studies conducted between 1998 and 2019 of elderly artists living in rural, small-town, and suburban communities of the Midwest, East Coast, and Southern United States. The studies, conducted by Marjorie Manifold, were inspired in 1997 by a Getty Education Institute for the Arts grant to study folk artists working in the rural Midwest. The second and third phases of the study, between 2000 and 2009, were conducted in areas of the East Coast and South. The most recent (2019-2020) study collected interviews from older artists working in suburbs and small towns of the Midwestern United States. The subjects, who ranged in age from 66 to 90, were interviewed and their artworks photographed as data of the studies. All inquiries were conducted with IRB approval of Research 1 universities, Indiana University or Virginia Commonwealth University.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, actual names were used with written permission of the artists.  
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Tom Mitchum worried that once retired he would be unable to “sit still” (personal communication, March 7, 2019). During a camping trip to Florida, he met other retirees who were carving canes as a leisure activity. “I sort of took that up,” he said. “It keeps me busy and gives me a lot of pleasure. Then, of course, a lot of folks my age could use a cane!”

### Social Engagement

For Annie and Tom, artmaking also provided opportunities for *social engagement* at a time of life when their grown children had moved from home and many of their friends were being lost to illness or death. Annie’s membership in the art league increased her circle of friends and acquaintances. By creating something others of his age group might find useful, Tom attracted people with whom he could socially interact.



Figure 2. Creating art together provides an opportunity for socialization.

Older adults both gain and give benefit to their communities when they exchange knowledge with younger members of the community. Lacy Randolph,<sup>3</sup> the new art teacher to students of a rural community, volunteered to teach drawing classes for adults at the local library. Only 12 people signed up for the event. Yet, more than twice that many showed up for classes. Each adult brought along a friend or younger relative as driver or companion. Given a choice of the subjects they might draw or paint, participants of the class elected to represent landscapes with quaint buildings that reminded them of their childhood homes or rivers that wound amid tree lined banks, metaphorically referencing distant memories. As they worked together, members of mixed age group chatted amiably, sharing stories of their own experiences, local histories, and family traditions with one another (see Figure 2).

### Staying Productive

Needing or desiring to supplement one’s income or continue being a productive

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym.

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member of society is another reason why an older adult might seek to create art. When retirement resulted in decreased financial resources, homemaker and seamstress Dorothy Allee turned to making dolls and teddy bears based on classic children's stories and offered them for sale in her local community center (see Figure 3). Even when economics are not a factor, the older adult might choose to seriously apply their career skills and knowledge to a new endeavor (see Figure 4). Arthur Cohee's career as a meteorologist provided a



*Figure 3. Dorothy Allee with some of the bears and dolls she created to be sold in her small-town community center.*



*Figure 4. James W. Butcher's dollhouses and desks (Kane, 2008).*

foundation of knowledge and skills useful to becoming a creator of fine jewelry (see Figure 5). Mastering jewelry-making required intense study of techniques, elements of design, and knowledge of working in fine gems and metals that challenged him intellectually while affirmed his sense of efficacy as a productive member of society.



Figure 5. Arthur L. Cohee's former career in metrology prepared a foundation for learning how to design and create fine jewelry.

### Creative Fulfillment

To those for whom earning a living had been ponderous or joyless, aging might free them to experience *creative fulfillment*. For 45 years, Jim Fox made good wages working in a factory, but it “was time wasted,” he declared. “That was time I spent doing something that I didn’t want to do. Now making the dulcimer, I get satisfaction out of that” (personal communication, May 20, 2007). In teaching himself to build beautiful instruments, he was following a previously unrequited need for meaningful self-expression.

### Therapeutic Effect

Of more than 70 elderly subjects interviewed as data for these descriptive case studies, nearly all described some element of *therapeutic effect* as a result of or as the purpose of their artmaking. Frequently, the art or craft created and the obvious purpose for which it was made masked deeper metaphoric connections to a source of suffering or grief. Hazel Goodpaster sat by her husband’s bed during the long illness that accompanied a surgical amputation of his leg. To pass the time she took up crocheting, a skill taught to her by a teenaged granddaughter. The repetitive motion of the crochet hook had a therapeutic effect, calming her anxieties over her husband’s health. Consequently, she made 30 to 40 pairs of slipper socks as gifts for the nurses and doctors who helped care for her husband.

### Sharing “Histories and Interpretation”

Many rural and small town communities, like those that are home to subjects of

these case studies, have been ravaged by the flight of young adults to urban centers where they find more economically sustainable futures (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Older generation are left to fend for themselves emotionally, physically, and economically. Community supported art and craft making *guilds* or associations provide opportunities for older adults to learn skills of making from one another and from locally identified experts and teachers. They also provide a space where memories can be shared and celebrated. Memory work has been found to be beneficial to the well-being of older adults. Creating images and objects that stir memories helps establish a positive self-identity, sense-of-continuity with past and present, and self-reflection about that which is meaningful in life (Chapman, 2006). Certainly, many of the voluntarily made drawings and paintings created by the subjects of these studies referenced remembered places or events that were important to the artist and their family and community. Sharing these artifacts with younger members of the community builds continuity between the past and future and supports sense-of-belonging within a common human experience. When asked the meaning of his craft work, for example, Robert Hembree, stated, “If I could give to the young people of this community, I’d like to give histories and interpretations, so life wouldn’t be so hard for them. They’d know what had value, and honor that” (personal communication, July 10, 1998).

### Teaching to and Learning from Older Artists

Like any other student of art, older adults learn by observing, asking, and seeking out others who have expertise. They find books or websites with step-by-step instructions and practice, building their skills through trial and error. Also, much like any other student of art, they benefit from access to tools and materials, expert guidance, demonstrations and explanations, and the time and space to practice what they learn. But unlike younger artists, the lifetime experiences and knowledge acquired by older adults privilege them as natural collaborators, teachers, and mentors to those who instruct them. As older students, they may seek information about unfamiliar processes or how to use contemporary materials, tools, and technologies. In turn, they gift their teachers with important knowledge that might otherwise be forgotten. During the recent pandemic, for example, when schools closed to face-to-face teaching and learning, and teachers were forced to teach students online, many teachers were frustrated to find students lacked access to commercially made art supplies, such as paints and drawing papers or clays. Elders who had experienced periods of lack and hardships early in life, were quick to suggest alternative ways of mixing paints from everyday foodstuffs, using paper bags or cardboards for paint surfaces, and making air dry clays from kitchen ingredients. Interactively exchanging older and newer information contributed to an enriched knowledge base for both learner and teacher across generations.

What we already know about teaching young learners can be applied to a group of learners of more advanced age. What we do not know about teaching this population, such as the developmental stages they may be experiencing, diminished cognitive and physical abilities, or best age-appropriate practices for engaging older adults in art activities, can be learned. The challenge is to include this content in our preparation as art educators. As



Lawton and LaPorte (2013) asserted, “Given the growing demographic of adults over the age of 65 (US Census Bureau, 2011) the art education profession needs to consider additional coursework and experience related to the special cognitive and physical needs of the aging population and how this benefits art education” (p. 312).

### **Preparing Our Students to Work with Older Adults**

While some art education programs offer a community-based track or field experiences in informal settings alongside preparation for K-12 certification, many do not. Change is constant and we are frequently tasked with finding space in our curricula for new topics, approaches, or mandates. Finding ways to incorporate art education for older adults into limited class time may be challenging but could be integrated as an intergenerational teaching approach within elementary or secondary methods classes, or developed as a special topics course for those interested in teaching intergenerational populations. If there is a gerontology program, art educators could partner with their gerontology colleagues or adult learner colleagues in education to create a course that would meet the needs of students in each program. Why do we teach art, if not to lay a foundation for lifelong involvement?

When discussing artistic and cognitive development, we can incorporate andragogical (Cohen, 2000 Erikson, 1959; Hoffman, 1992; Knowles, 1975; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991) as well as pedagogical theories of learner development. When preparing future teachers to individualize instruction for gifted and talented, English language learners (ELL), and students with disabilities, we can include resources designed to meet the cognitive and physical challenges (dementia, decreased manual dexterity and mobility) some older adult learners face. More importantly, we can include among our field experience assignments opportunities for our students to work with older adults. In our experience, often just a few visits are sufficient to help students overcome their trepidation, build empathy, and begin to appreciate, listen to, and respect these learners as unique individuals—all of which makes them better teachers for any population. Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, and Gilbert (2010) found that “students became more positive in their attitudes toward older adults and felt they had more in common with them ... socializing these groups through art can foster positive attitudes and enhance commonality with older adults. The arts provide a sense of community through sharing an activity, looking past stereotypes, using the mind, and engaging the senses” (National Education Association, 2011, p. 27).

### **Intergenerational Art Education**

When pre-service art teachers experience hands-on interaction with students of any age, we understand that they are not just practicing teaching, but rather, they are also learning from and with those they instruct. There are many ways to provide pre-service art educators with experience working with older adults. Organizing pre-practicum field visits to community arts organizations with programming for older adults, connecting with social events’ coordinators

at assisted-living facilities, and observing and assisting in museum-based art classes for older adults are just a few. In addition, finding ways to integrate older adults into art education experiences with young people creates a more realistic picture of how people engage with the arts in the real world outside of school. Working with elementary and secondary cooperating teachers to bring older adults into the classroom or have students work on collaborative projects with older adults are just a few possibilities.

Through age-integrated arts learning students express and share their personal voice, lived experiences, social, moral, and political concerns while transgressing barriers between school and community, middle age, old age, and youth. Thus, effecting positive, emancipatory social change that allows them to see and make connections between their classroom learning and life after school. (Lawton, Walker, & Green, 2019, p. 37).

The following examples of age-integrated artmaking projects are models for successful intergenerational art education.

### **Carving Out Freedom**

The *Carving Out Freedom* big woodcut project was a collaboration between community participants from Wards 7 and 8 in Washington, DC, aged 10 to 70, which included pre/in-service education students in art, math, and English education, and faculty and staff from the Corcoran College of Art + Design, the University of Maryland, and the ArtReach studio in the Town Hall Education, Arts, and Recreation Campus (THEARC), a community center in the Ward 7. Participants worked in mixed-age groups to create four large (4' x 8') woodcuts on the concept of freedom. Outside of the professors, art education students, and ArtReach staff, few of the participants had any experience with printmaking, and certainly not at this large scale. In addition to creating the woodcuts, participants wrote poems about freedom and produced a short film. There were opportunities for creative engagement that met everyone's interest. Even those not interested in carving woodcuts participated in printing them, including members of the neighborhood, who came out to watch and help on printing day in THEARC parking lot. Through creative collaboration, participants felt a sense of accomplishment and purpose and developed meaningful relationships with people they might not normally encounter. The resulting prints, poems, and film were exhibited in THEARC Gallery, at the Corcoran, and the University of Maryland (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Carving Out Freedom Project.*

### **Artstories Quilt**

The Artstories Quilt project, while small, paired eight art education students from Virginia Commonwealth University with two older adults in the Richmond community. The Health Hub, a newly opened wellness center in an underserved section of the city, invited us to create a quilt for display in the center promoting healthy living and provided classroom space. As a group, faculty, students, and community members developed the theme, *Body, Mind, Spirit* as inspiration for their individual quilt squares. The squares were sewn together into a quilt that now hangs in the center (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Body, Mind, Spirit health and wellness quilt.*

The students taught community members how to create fabric cyanotype prints and community members talked about their health concerns for their community, shared stories of life experience, and all shared sewing expertise. This experience was key for pre-service teachers to better understand the community they will one day teach in.

### Artcart

Artcart, an intergenerational arts legacy documentation program developed by Joan Jeffri, brings together aging professional artists with graduate students in the disciplines of art education, arts administration, fine arts, oral history, social work, public health, and occupational therapy. Its primary mission is to involve graduate students in an intergenerational experience that assists aging artists in the documentation of their artistic and cultural legacy, as well as studio organization and preservation of their life's work. The experience provides all participants with opportunities to further develop as skilled practitioners.

### Preservice Art Educator Workshops

Other projects have involved pre-service art educators in developing art-making workshops for older adults in facilities such as the United Way day programs, assisted living facilities, and retirement communities. In our experience, students have expressed appreciation for these opportunities and greater respect and empathy for the individuals with whom they became acquainted.

Intergenerational arts learning offers great promise for leveraging the strengths, skills, and experiences of older adults. Studies should be conducted to identify the unique potential benefits that result from programs engaging older and younger people together in arts learning as individuals, families, and community members. (National Endowment for the Arts, 2011, p.28).

### Considerations

As the older population in the United States increases and the percentage of school aged children declines, art educators need to consider:

- How can art educators contribute to expressive life for older adults?
- How can we involve our students in intergenerational learning opportunities?
- What resources are available to support development and delivery of course content related to:
  - Creative and social-emotional needs of older adults,
  - Age-appropriate teaching and learning strategies,
  - Funds of knowledge/cultural capital of older adults, and
  - Advocacy for participatory art programming for aging populations?

Older adults bring a lifetime of experiences and knowledge, personal purposes, and skills that might be applied to artmaking. Engaging with this population can help art educators learn to identify and plan for learners' individual needs, as well as gain insights into personal and community stories. Artmaking has the potential to enhance quality of life throughout the lifespan. Preparing preservice teachers to engage with older adults in their communities may help alleviate the lack of access to these benefits, particularly in underserved communities. If we truly see art as a lifelong activity, as professional art educators, we need to integrate this content into our teaching and research and find ways to ensure high quality art education experiences for learners across the lifespan.

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