Response and Responsibility: The War Veterans’ Art Center at the Museum of Modern Art (1944–48)

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Abstract

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From 1944–48 the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) offered free art classes to World War II veterans through an experimental educational initiative called the War Veterans’ Art Center. This project was run by Victor D’Amico, who served as the museum’s first Director of Education from 1937–69. Building on an existing institutional ethos of experimentation and civil service, D’Amico and his colleagues explored the role of creative engagement in facilitating the transition from military service to civilian life. As they experimented with new pedagogical approaches, they also worked to articulate and share their innovative methods with other professionals and volunteers, and to identify the relationship between their work, museum education practice in general, and rehabilitative services for veterans. This thesis outlines the development of the War Veterans’ Art Center and situates it within the context of MoMA as a young institution and D’Amico’s contemporaneous education programs. While the Center was defined by the particular institutional, societal, and political factors of its time, it nevertheless serves as a relevant example of adaptive, reflexive, socially-oriented practice, which, in the end, proved beneficial for participants, future education practice, and the institution as whole.
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Introduction

There is growing recognition among art museum practitioners that cultural institutions have and always have had a social purpose.¹ They are responsible for the study, collection, preservation and presentation of cultural objects. Their output reflects a collaborative and cumulative effort on the part of many individuals and groups. The stories they tell and/or allow to be told shape our cultural past, present and future. Art museums bring people together to create and share knowledge individually and collectively, mediated through in-person interactions with spaces, artworks, ideas, and others, but also through online forums that provide digital variations of those experiences. While some institutions may choose to prioritize their roles as aesthetic or intellectual authorities, that focus does not negate their social underpinnings.

Given the intrinsic social quality of cultural institutions, and the great power they wield in shaping cultural history and its value systems, it behooves museum professionals and patrons to identify ways in which these institutions can/cannot and do/do not respond to their publics and act as agents of social change. There are a number of ways to measure a museum’s social responsiveness, including but not limited to the following questions:² What kinds of works are collected and exhibited, and how do those decisions reinforce or challenge existing social and


². Elaine Heumann Gurian, Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian (New York: Routledge, 2006), 69–87. Gurian provides a comprehensive rubric for measuring the degree to which an institution’s various activities are socially-responsible.
artistic hierarchies? Who is invited into the museum and what degree of agency are they granted? Who shapes the museum’s narrative(s) and how? Does the institution incorporate perspectives of external individuals, communities, disciplines, and organizations? Is the museum responsive to the needs of its constituents? Does it identify issues present in its immediate community or society at large and attempt to address those issues from its limited though not insignificant position?

This thesis presents an example of a socially-oriented art museum practice: the War Veterans’ Art Center at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA). The Center, which offered free art classes to World War II veterans from 1944–48, was run by Victor D’Amico, the first Director of Education at MoMA. Building on an existing institutional ethos of experimentation and civil service, D’Amico and his colleagues explored the role of creative engagement in facilitating the transition from military service to civilian life. As they experimented with new approaches to learning about modern art, they also worked to articulate and share their innovative methods with other professionals and volunteers, and to situate their work within museum practice in general and the external field of rehabilitative services for veterans. In the end this exploratory programming proved beneficial beyond its effect on participants; it also allowed D’Amico to develop teaching strategies for a general adult audience and to further the museum’s overall mission of advancing the appreciation of the art of the times. In short, as D’Amico and his colleagues altered their existing program in response to one pressing issue of the day—the social fallout of World War II—they were presented with new challenges but also tremendous opportunities to expand their work.

This thesis outlines the development of the War Veterans’ Art Center and situates it within the context of MoMA as a young institution and D’Amico’s contemporaneous education
programs. The first chapter describes MoMA’s early years, including its founding mission, initial education programs, and wartime efforts, all of which informed the veteran-related programming to come. The second chapter provides a detailed overview of the War Veterans’ Art Center’s founding, development, and eventual closing. Drawing heavily on archival material from the Victor D’Amico Papers, only recently available at the Museum of Modern Art Archives, this section utilizes internal letters, memoranda and reports, as well as exhibition materials and documentation, to showcase not only how the Center’s work was publicized but also how internal conversations shaped its trajectory. Derived primarily from a review of D’Amico’s writings, chapter three ties his veteran-related approach to that employed with other audiences, identifying key tenets in D’Amico’s overall teaching philosophy. It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the full breadth of his career; accordingly, the third chapter focuses on how the War Veterans’ Art Center compared to other in-person programs that immediately preceded and followed its existence, covering a period from roughly the late 1930s to the early 1950s. The fourth and final chapter describes the broader goals of D’Amico’s educational programs during this time period, illustrating his belief in the potential for creative expression to impact change on both an individual and societal level.

Today the War Veterans’ Art Center might be classified as an outreach initiative, intended to broaden the museum’s audience by tapping into a previously underserved group. Thorough examination, however, reveals a more profound endeavor. The museum responded to an unavoidable social issue—full-scale American involvement in World War II and the return of injured veterans to society—which led its education staff into uncharted pedagogical territory. Accordingly, D’Amico sought to understand and meet the needs of veterans as they adapted to civilian life. At the same time, he identified qualities present in all people. This multifaceted
appreciation of the veteran audience led to new programming that could be applied more broadly. While the Center was defined by the particular institutional, societal, and political factors of its time, it nevertheless serves as a relevant example of adaptive, reflexive, socially-oriented practice, which, in the end, proved beneficial for participants, future education practice, and the institution as whole.

Chapter I

Laying the Foundations: The Early Years of the Museum of Modern Art

The War Veterans’ Art Center opened its doors just fifteen years after MoMA held its first exhibition in a temporary space in the Heckscher Building at 730 Fifth Avenue. In those early years MoMA’s founders and few staff worked to chart a course for the young institution. They sought to define the primary functions of a museum dedicated to such a new and evolving period of artistic development, and to determine how the core principles of modernism could be best communicated to the public. When World War II began the inchoate institution dedicated significant resources to support the war effort. It is important to examine these formative years, as they influenced the structure and teaching philosophy of the War Veterans’ Art Center.

The Arts in Everyday Life

The Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1929 to address an absence in the American cultural landscape. The Armory Show of 1913 had introduced New York City to European modernism, but New Yorkers had no museum to visit routinely in order to develop their understanding of this nascent artistic development. Accordingly, MoMA’s founders decided to
establish a space “for the purpose of encouraging and developing the study of modern arts and the application of such arts to manufacture and practical life, and furnishing popular instruction.” This provisional charter held two key ideas that provided the fertile ground within which the museum’s educational and wartime programming flourished: first, that modern art encompassed fine arts as well as applied arts; and second, that it was necessary to develop knowledge and facilitate education about modern art and ideas among the broader populace.

The multiplicity of media included in modern art as well as the contemporary nature of its production posed challenges for a museum dedicated to the subject. This new modern museum could not serve as a space for mere contemplation or reverence; rather, it was necessary to draw connections between art objects and everyday life. At the outset Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA’s first director, developed a multifaceted curatorial plan to collect not only fine arts such as painting and sculpture but also photography, design, film, architecture, and beyond. Barr’s belief in the validity of diverse media was drawn from his academic background as well as an influential visit to the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany, a new art school where fine arts, crafts, and design were all taught together. As a result, Barr used the museum to legitimize these various media, and solidified the museum’s position that art was not a discrete, external subject, but rather integral to human life.


The new museum’s interest in the function of the arts in everyday life extended beyond its collection and exhibition program; it also affected its educational endeavors. Furthermore, the novelty of modern art made education a necessity. In fact, MoMA’s founders tapped Barr to serve as Director because he was the first person known to develop a proper course on modern art, offered at Wellesley College in the spring of 1927. An informed public was imperative to the museum’s survival, and Barr attempted to make modernism accessible to the layman. For instance, his 1932 catalog, *A Brief Survey of Modern Painting*, provided simple explanations of the technical innovations of modern painters and helpful instructions on how to look at their works. This catalog, among other writings and diagrams, introduced modern art to a general audience and helped define its evolving characteristics. Barr maintained this educational mission throughout his tenure at the museum, and his efforts were expanded with the piloting of the Educational Project.

In the mid-1930s MoMA’s trustees requested a report to assess the museum’s educational services. Artemas C. Packard of Dartmouth College compiled a comprehensive document evaluating the extent to which the museum had realized its educational mission and enumerating possible future programs for people of varying ages, experiences with art, and geographic proximity to the institution. Overall he stressed that MoMA should be particularly attuned to its audience’s needs and interests, noting:

> a museum devoted to encouraging an interest in the arts of the present must be very much more sensitive to the characteristic interests and needs of contemporary society than a historical museum if it is to serve as anything more than an indiscriminate clearing hours of information. And any standard of taste it undertakes to uphold will inevitably prove

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meaningless and abortive unless it is based upon a broad and sympathetic understanding of the major forces (spiritual and intellectual, economic and social) which dominate men’s lives in the present day.\textsuperscript{8}

According to Packard, MoMA’s relevance depended on its connection to contemporary society. Barr and the museum’s founders shared Packard’s belief in the essential role of art in everyday life and the museum’s responsibility in facilitating that relationship. This avant-garde perspective had implications beyond the exhibition program; it allowed future museum staff, including education staff, to explore other practical applications of the arts in modern life.

**Forays into Education at MoMA**

Barr hired Victor D’Amico in 1937 to lead the Educational Project, a two-year pilot to “study problems in art education on the secondary level and… to build up visual materials and techniques that may further the teaching and enrichment of the arts in high schools.”\textsuperscript{9} D’Amico was well-suited to direct this project, as he had previously led art programs in settlement homes in Manhattan and the Bronx, and also headed the art department at Ethical Culture Fieldston School in Riverdale, New York.\textsuperscript{10} During the pilot phase, D’Amico partnered with ten local high schools to offer practical demonstrations for students and conduct professional development sessions for teachers. He also created the Young People’s Gallery, a museum space for exhibiting student artwork and/or for arranging collection works around themes “prepared for the


\textsuperscript{10} Morgan, “From Modernist Utopia to Cold War Reality,” 155.
interests of high school students.”¹¹ This collaboration expanded over subsequent years to include seventeen schools, supported by a $20,100 grant from the General Education Board.¹² Not only did the number of participating partners increase, D’Amico also added new technical demonstrations on media such as printmaking and mural painting, and created rotating exhibitions of reproductions of modern art, which highlighted themes like Animals and People in Art.¹³

Another early educational endeavor was the Children’s Art Carnival, an annual holiday event where children engaged in independent art making while their adult companions looked on.¹⁴ The Carnival launched in 1942 and was open to children ages four to twelve visiting with their families or with classmates as part of school trip. It was divided into two spaces: the first was an Inspirational Area, which was filled with custom toys, or “motivations,” as D’Amico called them. These toys prompted children to explore fundamental design principles such as color and shape. The second area was a Studio-Workshop, which was organized around different materials and projects; there children could manipulate available supplies to create original artworks. Facilitators were present to provide technical assistance when needed. The Children’s Art Carnival was one of D’Amico’s longest-running and most-publicized educational projects,


¹² Ibid.


held at the museum annually until 1954, when it traveled internationally as a model of creative education, making stops in multiple cities across Europe and India.  

From the beginning MoMA’s educational work focused on art making rather than the presentation of art-historical slide and/or gallery lectures, which were increasingly offered in more traditional institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While this focus on creative expression was surely due to D’Amico’s background as an artist and art educator rather than an art historian (a relatively new discipline at the time), it was also influenced by the nature of the young institution. MoMA was still a fledgling museum when it piloted its Educational Project. It had yet to move into a permanent home and its collection was in its infancy. Early exhibitions relied on loans as well as works bequeathed to MoMA in 1931 by one of its three founders, Lillie P. Bliss. Another MoMA founder, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (AAR), established the first acquisition fund that same year, giving Barr $1,000 to spend on artwork in Europe. This allotment grew substantially in subsequent years; in 1938 she created a new fund of $20,000, with her son, Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR), contributing another $11,500 in his mother’s name. Mrs. Simon (Olga) Guggenheim was also a generous and influential early patron, offering monies to purchase new collection works in 1937. Together these efforts shaped a burgeoning museum collection. Barr and MoMA’s early patrons were writing the history of modern art with each purchase. As the museum’s collection and the overall history of this new type of art were

15. Ibid., 40.


still in formation, MoMA staff could not rely on art historical or collection-based lectures as the sole means of educating the public.

As an artist/educator D’Amico was an ideal candidate to take on the challenge of establishing an educational program in an unprecedented institution dedicated to the contemporary arts. The institutional characteristics outlined above allowed D’Amico to investigate hands-on processes as a means of understanding modern art. His focus on creative expression did not imply that the collection was irrelevant; indeed, the museum initiated the Educational Project in order to “make its collections more useful and more accessible to New York public and private schools in the teaching of art education, thus bridging the gap between learning about art and contact with works of art.”\(^{18}\) The high school partnership program allowed students to engage with what collection works did exist, but as a means of demonstrating techniques and design principles, which were then explored more deeply through students’ own art making. Similarly, the Children’s Art Carnival included reproductions of modern artworks in the initial Inspirational Area as one of many tools that could inform children’s personal creations. There was, however, consensus among members of the Educational Project’s Advisory Committee that “providing a place in the Museum where the students could do art work in connection with exhibitions, the set-up would tend to become artificial and imitative.”\(^{19}\) D’Amico was staunchly opposed to imitative art making; the rationale for his position will be discussed at length in later chapters.

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From the outset the goal of the Educational Project, which became a formal department in 1948,\textsuperscript{20} was not to impart information about the museum’s collection but rather to expose students to modern art through first-hand employment of its underlying principles. This tactile, experiential method would support the overall goals of the institution by “breaking down the isolation of the arts from everyday experience.”\textsuperscript{21} These principles remained relevant when D’Amico was charged with developing programs for World War II veterans of varying ages, experiences, interests and abilities.

**MoMA and the War Effort**

Just ten years after the museum was founded it reopened and in the newly-built Goodwin-Stone Building at 11 West Fifty-third Street. The new, international-style building was the first space designed specifically for the museum’s exhibition and staffing purposes, and remains part of the current MoMA complex. That year also marked the beginning of World War II, which caused to a drastic shift in the museum’s overall program. Waldo Rasmussen, who later directed MoMA’s International Program, outlined the museum’s extensive efforts to support the Allied cause:

The Museum executed thirty-eight contracts for various governmental agencies…. Nineteen exhibitions were sent abroad and twenty-nine were shown in the Museum, all related to the war. The Museum’s Film Department analyzed enemy propaganda films. An Armed Services Program was established under the guidance of James Thrall Soby, a collector and critic who was later to join the Museum staff; the program included sending materials and exhibitions to the Armed Services and providing therapy programs for disabled veterans. In the Museum’s garden a canteen for servicemen was installed and became a favorite recreation and entertainment center.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{20} D’Amico to Dr. Moe, VDA, I.15, MoMA Archives, NY, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Report on the Educational Project, VDA, I.2, MoMA Archives, NY, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Bee and Elligott, *Art in Our Time*, 76.
\end{enumerate}
Rasmussen’s account illustrates the concerted effort behind the museum’s wartime programming. The early 1940s were defined by a push on the part of MoMA staff not only to utilize their own expertise and resources but also to harness the talents and energy of the artistic community to contribute to the Allied cause and address the societal implications of the war.

During this time period MoMA organized exhibitions and film programs representing wartime experience at the front lines and in civilian life. The film program in particular intended to shed light on the experience of international allies already at war and prepare Americans for the potential repercussions of full-scale American involvement. Staff also organized art competitions based on wartime themes as a means of galvanizing activity among professional and amateur artists. For instance, a national photography competition called for images exemplifying liberties enjoyed in everyday American life. The resulting exhibition, *Images of Freedom*, held from 29 October 1941–1 February 1942,23 showcased a selection of submissions, which included photographs of rallies and parades, among other scenes.24 Many of these shows were sent to other sites around the country following their presentation at MoMA.

In addition, MoMA used the arts as a tool for intercontinental diplomacy in order to unite the western hemisphere behind the Allied cause. Expanding on existing efforts to “lay the foundation of mutual respect for and understanding among the Americas,”25 the museum organized a *United Hemisphere* poster competition and educational exhibitions that described


Inter-American cooperation, and acquired and translated films for use in North and Latin America. It should be noted that during this time period both NAR, ex-president of the museum, and Stephen C. Clark, a founding museum trustee, held positions in the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs in the Department of State.26

Some of these initiatives took place prior to the country’s direct involvement in the war. Many were exercised under government contracts and thus intended to bolster diplomatic and military endeavors. The Armed Services Program (ASP), on the other hand, served a different but related purpose. Led by James Thrall Soby, the ASP (1942–45), considered service members as part of the museum’s audience, whether they were able to visit the museum or not. In early 1942 MoMA solicited donations of artworks from museum members and friends, to be auctioned in May of that year. Proceeds were used to provide art materials for troops stationed at military bases around the country and to organize recreation events at the museum. The materials sent to bases provided a means of diversion for troops and enhanced the aesthetic appearance of those sites; they boosted morale by addressing the aesthetic and creative needs of men and women in uniform. Similarly the museum events, including film screenings, concerts and parties, allowed American and other Allied troops to relax and socialize.27

The ASP also organized a number of exhibitions, including two that explored the therapeutic potential of creative engagement. The first, titled The Arts in Therapy, was held from 3 February–7 March 1943, and was “designed to encourage and broaden the use of the various arts and crafts in therapeutic work among disabled and convalescent members of the armed


27. Ibid., 16–17.
forces,” highlighting potential applications in occupational therapy and psychotherapy. A second exhibition, *Occupational Therapy: Its Function and Purpose*, held from 2 June–17 October 1943, expanded on themes introduced in the first show. While the two therapy exhibitions were organized under the auspices of the Armed Services Program, D’Amico played a key role in developing their content. In both cases, he and the other exhibition organizers examined how the arts might play a role in rehabilitation and the maintenance of physical and mental wellbeing.

MoMA’s wartime program was an expansive, concerted endeavor. The museum, already interested in the connection between the arts and everyday life, identified specific issues presented by the war and employed the arts to address them to the extent possible. The arts—including commercial media such as film, photography, and posters—were used to unite and educate the American public as the war moved closer to home. They provided connection among foreign yet allied cultures. They raised the spirits of and instilled pride in civilians and service members. While a multifaceted cooperation with the government and the military had political benefits, the museum did not act solely in service of these external obligations; it also identified men and women in uniform as part of its audience and sought ways to address their needs.

The War Veterans’ Art Center, piloted in summer of 1944, in a way represents just one facet of this multipronged effort. As other museum departments altered their programs to focus on new issues raised during the war, D’Amico also responded to a new social reality, namely the return of thousands of veterans to American society. With the end of the war in 1945 the museum shifted away from social concerns in favor of aesthetic priorities, which many staff felt

had been neglected. D’Amico and his education colleagues, however, continued to grapple with the social fallout of the war by exploring the rehabilitative potential of creative expression and sharing their teaching methods with other professionals and volunteers interested in the reintegration of veterans into civilian life. While D’Amico’s veteran-related programming was an outgrowth of the museum’s overall wartime program, it also drew on and was shaped by the character of the young museum and the philosophical underpinnings of the art to which it was devoted.

Chapter II
The War Veterans’ Art Center

This chapter provides a detailed account of the development of the War Veterans’ Art Center. From the outset the Center was overwhelmed by the demand for its programs; accordingly, D’Amico and his colleagues shared the teaching methodologies devised for this audience with occupational therapists and artist volunteers. As the Center began to take shape, the war began to wind down, prompting the return of veterans to civilian life and a broader societal transition to peace. D’Amico worked to define the role of his museum-based art programs amid a developing landscape of postwar programs and services. In the end this experimental work, though short-lived, proved beneficial not only for participating veterans but also for the museum’s educational program, whose connection with a new social group had implications for all adult programming to come.

29. Gianni and Bennett, “The Museum and the War Effort.”
Establishing the War Veterans’ Art Center

As with other early institutional initiatives, efforts to serve war veterans at the museum were spearheaded by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who remained deeply involved with the institution until her death in 1948. With the broader wartime program underway, AAR, then a museum trustee, along with Stephen C. Clark, then Chairman of the Board of Trustees, “proposed that free art classes be made available to veterans of World War II,” and provided the financial support for this new initiative. On 12 June 1944 the museum began pilot programming with about eighteen men, and on 30 October of that year the War Veterans’ Art Center officially opened in a new site at 681 Fifth Avenue, where it remained throughout its existence.

While the Center operated offsite and with a discrete budget, the museum still maintained significant oversight of its operations via the War Veterans’ Art Center Advisory Committee. This group was comprised of key museum trustees and staff, including AAR and Clark; as well as René d’Harnoncourt, an expert on Mexican and Native American art, who joined the museum in 1944 at Nelson A. Rockefeller’s instigation; and James Thrall Soby, who served as Director of Painting and Sculpture from 1943–45 in addition to his role as Director of Paintings.

30. D’Amico to Dr. Moe, VDA, I.15, MoMA Archives, NY, 2.


32. Minutes of the Meeting of the War Veterans’ Art Center Committee, 14 January 1947, James Thrall Soby Papers, III.F.3a, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. During this meeting Committee members discussed the revenue generated by D’Amico’s Art for Beginners book series being given to the Center rather than the museum, suggesting that the two entities maintained separate finances.
the Armed Services Program. Other committee members included Dr. Thomas A. C. Rennie, a local psychiatrist affiliated with Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic at Cornell University Medical Center, who was interested in community-based rehabilitation for veterans and other psychiatric patients; Frederic G. Elton, then part of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, New York State Education Department; and Mrs. Guy Mission, who served as secretary. Finally, Kenneth Chorley, who had worked with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. on other projects, including the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, served as committee Chairman. D’Amico directed the Center and was assisted by a secretary and a number of teaching artists.

In order to recruit participants Center staff sent personal letters and circulars to veterans agencies, the American Red Cross and hospitals. All former service members—men and women—from the armed services or merchant marines were eligible to participate. Classes were offered free of charge, although the Center introduced an optional payment of either five or ten dollars (depending on how frequently a class met) for veterans who wished to contribute to the Center. This nominal fee covered materials only; it did not cover instructional or operational costs. Individual veterans were selected on “the basis of their need, their length of service, and


the ability of the Center to accommodate them.”

though D’Amico did not elaborate on how need was determined. Registrants were accepted on a rolling basis and everyone went through an initial interview process with D’Amico to decide the appropriate class placement. The Center operated at full capacity throughout its tenure, serving 150–175 veterans at any given time, and maintained a wait list of over four hundred veterans up until the final year when news of its impending closure spread and the list shrank.

The Center offered a range of courses in commercial and fine art. Practical or prevocational courses included subjects such as Lettering, Layout and Typography or Jewelry and Metalwork, while fine arts options included Drawing and Painting, among other media. A few of the initial classes were discontinued in accordance with participant interest and so that resources could be reallocated to professional development sessions. Classes met on weeknights “in three-hour sessions, for a period of three months for either one or two evenings a week, the former totaling 36 hours, the latter, 72 hours.”

Immediately following her/his initial intake interview, each veteran was assigned to a particular course and began to create. For the veteran who was unsure where her/his interests or aptitudes lay, an initial orientation course provided a sample of different media and materials from which s/he could select one for closer study. In describing the veterans’ activities at the

37. Ibid., 7.


40. Ibid., 7.

Center, D’Amico stated: “The creative method demands that the individual observe life and express his reaction to it. He selects and invents, he draws freely on his imagination as he manipulates texture, form, color, and material in his efforts to express ideas.” While offerings were presented as courses, they did not follow a set curriculum or a particular lesson plan on any given day. Rather, each course explored the relevant fundamentals of a given medium through a series of projects that individual veterans could complete at their own pace. These creative projects were presented with increasing complexity, building on the learning that had taken place and providing an indication of progress—an approach that allowed participants to not only develop their aesthetic and technical skills but also to gain confidence. The teaching methods utilized at the Center will be further explored later in this and the following chapter.

**Spreading the Word: *Art for War Veterans***

In the fall of 1945 MoMA mounted an exhibition of artwork created at the Center titled *Art for War Veterans*. The exhibition was accompanied by a MoMA *Bulletin* issue of the same title, which was distributed to the museum’s membership. D’Amico and his colleagues used both formats to explain the Center’s overarching goals, instructional methods and course offerings. Museum staff and military personnel attended the exhibition opening on 25 September 1945, where they had the opportunity to visit the Center and converse with veterans at work. The museum used the exhibition and *Bulletin* issue to broadcast the Center’s work to a general audience and share practical information with stakeholders as well as individuals who might be interested in replicating the programs.

42. Ibid.
Victor D’Amico and Admiral Monroe Kelly at the *Art for War Veterans* exhibition opening. (Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.)

The *Art for War Veterans* exhibition, held in the Auditorium Galleries from 26 September–25 November 1945, described the teaching methods utilized at the Center, presented images of veterans at work and displayed examples of student artwork. It was as much a celebration of students’ accomplishments as it was a didactic showcase of D’Amico’s experimental work with this novel audience. Early panels illustrated key principles of the Center’s philosophy. For example, one introductory panel included a photograph of a veteran working at a pottery wheel.

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He and a female teacher lean over the wheel as she guides his hands to shape the clay. Both individuals focus on their work; they do not acknowledge the photographer. The text written above and below—“each veteran is different” and “individual instruction”—reiterate the point that individual attention was given to each student and her/his unique skills and interests were recognized. Key concepts like prevocational training, personal satisfaction, and creativeness were presented in a similar manner on separate panels, giving visitors a succinct description of the Center’s core principles.

Following these introductory panels, the bulk of the exhibition was dedicated to each course’s various projects and resulting student artworks. Course panels included written
descriptions of the particular materials and processes explored, photographs of veterans at work, reproductions of artworks in progress and completed objects.

Installation view of the Jewelry and Metalwork section of the *Art for War Veterans* exhibition. The two wall panels introduce the course and present examples of elementary, intermediate and advanced projects. The center display showcases finished works.

In some cases finished artworks were grouped by subject matter, for instance, “War Experience,” or a specific technique or process, such as “Using Perspective” or “Overcoming a Cliché.” In other instances the panels illustrated the Center’s pedagogical approach, presenting different projects and denoting their respective levels of difficulty. Overall the exhibition was highly didactic; it not only showcased work created at the Center but also the work of the Center, namely the teaching philosophy, instructional methods, and course structures developed by D’Amico and his staff. At this time the museum not only exhibited the art of the time, but also highlighted how its educational programs addressed relevant social issues through exploration of modern art and ideas.
Much of the exhibition material was also included in the accompanying issue of the MoMA Bulletin. D’Amico used the publication to explain the core principles of the Center, logistics of finding and enrolling participants, overarching teaching methodologies, and goals for veterans.\textsuperscript{44} His comprehensive overview was followed by descriptions of each of the courses, including information on how frequently each class met, the interest and experience level it was geared toward, structure of the sessions, and examples of how that structure was informed by the Center’s key tenets. Reproductions of participant artwork further illustrated the concepts put forward in the course descriptions.\textsuperscript{45} As with the exhibition, the Bulletin provided insight into the veteran audience and tailored teaching strategies, which informed the museum’s membership of the institution’s various activities but was also useful for professionals interested in working with this group in other settings.

\textbf{Reconsidering the Center’s Role amid the Transition to Peace}

The \textit{Art for War Veterans} exhibition and Bulletin issue presented a year’s work at the Center; they were released at a point when D’Amico and his colleagues had developed a solid method for engaging this new audience with art. Of course, by the time the Center’s work was presented publicly, World War II had officially ended. While the publicity drummed up new interest,\textsuperscript{46} at the same time the future relevance of the Center was called into question. Given the war’s conclusion, where should the museum direct its attention and resources? Museum staff

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{44} D’Amico, “Art for War Veterans,” 3–7.
    \item \textsuperscript{46} D’Amico, Report of the Director on the War Veterans’ Art Center, EMH, I.3.p, MoMA Archives, NY, 3.
\end{itemize}
asserted that the institution had maintained a robust intellectual program during the war years, but, as previously noted, others disagreed and were eager to reestablish a strictly aesthetic as opposed to socially- or politically-oriented program. On the other hand, the end of the war would lead to a large influx of veterans returning to civilian life. What would this population shift mean for the country and more specifically the Center?

In December 1945 Chorley commissioned his employee, Allston Boyer, to compile a report summarizing the Center’s role within the broader context of veterans services and to recommend a future direction. Boyer conducted a series of interviews with personnel from military and veterans hospitals and service organizations at the local and state level in order to create a comprehensive account of arts programs for returning veterans and to gather feedback on the Center’s work thus far. His findings revolved around two key issues: the Center’s inability to meet demand and its relative anonymity within the greater field of veteran services. As such, Boyer recommended closer cooperation with veterans hospitals and service organizations in order to spread the word about the Center’s offerings and approach and to provide trainings so that staff from these organizations could conduct similar programming at other sites. He also proposed that stronger collaboration could aid in the selection of participants,


48. Gianni and Bennett, “The Museum and the War Effort.”

49. Allston Boyer, Study of the War Veterans Art Center, January 1946, Victor D’Amico Papers, III.A.11, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York; Kenneth Chorley, Memorandum, 19 February 1946, Early Museum History: Administrative Records, I.3.p, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. The version of Boyer’s report available in the MoMA Archives is incomplete; it includes the summary of findings and relevant recommendations but is missing ten of the thirteen interview summaries. The synopsis provided here is derived from this incomplete version, as well as the findings Chorley highlighted in a memorandum to the War Veterans’ Art Center Advisory Committee.
suggesting that the Center implement a referral process that would prioritize wounded veterans in need of rehabilitation over those merely seeking diversion. In addition, Boyer recommended that the Center organize a traveling version of the *Art for War Veterans* exhibition in order to raise awareness of its work, and that it move forward in producing a series of how-to manuals that would share its teaching methodologies with veterans, occupational therapists, artists and volunteers.

Boyer’s report also described an evolving postwar landscape of veteran services, including increasing opportunities for creative engagement. He mentioned similar programs in development at other sites in New York City, namely a Community Rehabilitative Center sponsored by the Baruch Committee as well as a then forthcoming Veterans’ Curative Center, which was affiliated with the Veterans Administration. With these external efforts underway there was concern that the Center’s work might be duplicated in the health sector and eventually rendered unnecessary. Given these possibilities, Boyer suggested revisiting the topic of the Center’s relevance in a year’s time.

While there is no indication that the referral system or traveling exhibition were ever carried out, the Center did continue efforts to expand its work by offering professional development workshops and moving forward with the aforementioned instructional manuals. It should be noted that both of these projects were initiated prior to Boyer’s report, having grown out of the Advisory Committee’s early recognition that the Center could not possibly meet demand.50 In 1945 the Center held six classes for volunteers working with veterans in hospital settings: two for the New York State Association for Occupational Therapists and four for the

Arts and Skills Corps of the American Red Cross. These practical workshops shared the Center’s teaching methods as they pertained to certain course subjects, for instance, design and jewelry making.\(^{51}\) In addition, the museum partnered with Simon & Schuster to publish an *Art for Beginners* book series that would translate the Center’s teaching methodologies to print. While the publication project began as means of encouraging self-instruction—the pamphlets originally proposed were to be distributed to veterans specifically—it grew in ambition and scope. Eventually the museum realized four books, beginning with *How to Make Ceramic Sculpture*, which was released to the general public in December 1947.\(^{52}\) Of course, during this time the classes for veterans continued, informing the content of the professional development sessions and publications.

Sometime in the winter of 1947 D’Amico submitted a report to the Advisory Committee that reflected on those outreach efforts and addressed a few of the issues raised by Boyer a year earlier. He asserted the Center’s continued relevance, highlighting its positive impact on participating veterans past and present. Letters sent to veteran students showed that “Even men who had been out of the Center for two years were still enthusiastic. The general recommendation was that we should expand our facilities, and all men asked to return for more classes.”\(^{53}\) The sustained attendance numbers and continued wait list provided further justification for maintaining and even expanding the Center’s capacity.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 10.

More telling, however, was his description of the contemporary social climate, one marked by diminishing support for veterans. D’Amico cited a radio interview, wherein Winthrop Rockefeller, son of AAR, noted that “in many cities and towns the attitude of ‘everything for our boys’, widespread during the war, has changed to one near apathy.”54 Similarly, arts programming spearheaded by the Arts and Skills Corps of the American Red Cross had fizzled out. Indeed, the professional developments begun in 1945 found themselves without an audience in 1947, as the volunteer groups they were meant to serve had disbanded.55 As the country moved on from the war, society’s concern for veterans also began to wane—a far cry from the situation predicted by Boyer a year earlier.

Amid this environment of diminishing support and decreasing opportunities for artistic engagement, the Center remained possibly the only site where veterans could enroll in art classes without sacrificing the benefits provided through the G.I. Bill. Indeed, the Center maintained a robust wait list. D’Amico proposed a new fee structure in order to address the high demand: after taking a free orientation course, veterans would be charged for advanced classes on specific media. This strategy would allow the Center to serve more individuals without increasing the budget.56 It is unclear whether or not the payment system was ever restructured.

Regardless, the Center’s relevance amid society’s transition to peace remained an issue, and nearly a year later the decision was made to cease veteran-specific programs. In a letter to NAR, dated 6 January 1948, Chorley wrote:

54. Ibid., 4.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 5.
The Committee has very seriously considered the expansion of the War Veterans’ Art Center into a People’s Art Center where classes would be conducted not only for veterans but for non-veterans and children. The Committee felt that there was a very definite need for an institution of this character…. It has seemed to us that the logical place was the Museum of Modern Art.57

The War Veterans’ Art Center wrapped up classes on 30 June 1948. Over the course of its four-year run it employed twenty-six staff, twenty-four of which were instructors, and served 1,485 veterans.58 The People’s Art Center opened in the same space in the fall of 1948, inaugurated by a second exhibition of artwork produced at the War Veterans’ Art Center. This new iteration of the Center welcomed veterans “as civilians along with non-veteran civilians rather than as a special member of society,”59 essentially solidifying, or perhaps imposing, their reintegration into the civilian population. The People’s Art Center offered free classes to children and adults until 1970. It closed almost immediately following D’Amico’s retirement in 1969.

The Veteran as Art Student

The above overview of the War Veterans’ Art Center illustrates how D’Amico worked to establish the Center’s programs within a larger field of rehabilitative services for World War II veterans. Despite the classes’ positive impact on participants, he struggled to justify their continued existence, as the spirit of civil service that dominated the museum during the war dissipated in the years that followed. That said, the brief window of the Center’s operation


59. Exhibition of Work from the Veterans’ Art Center and Inauguration of a People’s Art Center at the Museum of Modern Art, James Thrall Soby Papers, III.F.3a, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
allowed for important pedagogical experimentation based on the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the veteran audience.

In general, veterans represented a new audience for MoMA’s educational program: adult novices. MoMA had offered professional development workshops for teachers working in secondary education and also for parents interested in harnessing their children’s creative proclivities, but these workshops focused on adult’s supportive roles for young learners. Veterans were the first adult art students at the museum and accordingly, D’Amico and his colleagues worked to develop teaching strategies and course structures based on characteristics not previously encountered in their youth programs.

The veteran community included individuals with diverse professional backgrounds. Prior to their service, many had worked in fields unrelated to the arts, with students, doctors, salesmen and others counted among their former occupations.60 While the Center literature references prevocational training and some of the skills taught could have been parlayed into a new profession, D’Amico maintained that the main goal of the Center was “not to find artists, but to help veterans find themselves.”61 It was not meant as a site of formal instruction and professional development; rather, it aimed to develop veterans’ skills in creative expression and their relationship with the arts.

Aside from their varying professional experiences, another characteristic of this group was their unfamiliarity with but enthusiasm for the arts, as described by D’Amico in the Bulletin:

One thing is certain, the veteran is a unique individual in the history of art teaching. He is both young and old—young in his development in art, and old in his accumulation and


intensity of human experience. He is deadly serious and works with an enthusiasm and concentration that is rare in younger art students. Art holds something of life which the veteran feels he has missed.\textsuperscript{62}

Despite—or perhaps in light of—this inexperience, the veteran approached her/his art making with eagerness and focus. Typically s/he did not know where or how to channel that energy, an uncertainty resolved through the aforementioned orientation course. It was developed in order to expose the inexperienced yet enthusiastic veteran to myriad options, allowing her/him to discover the medium best suited to her/his interests and aptitudes.

Of course, aside from diverse professional backgrounds and relative unfamiliarity with art, the veteran audience also shared the common experience of military service, alluded to somewhat obliquely in the above quotation as an “accumulation and intensity of human experience.” While military service was something all veterans had in common, each individual’s wartime experience would have been unique, both in terms of the nature and location of her/his service but also its physical and/or psychological effect. In materials published during the operational years of the Center, D’Amico seemed hesitant to identify specific examples of physical or psychological trauma among members of the group, but he did make a more direct reference in a 1948 summary report, noting, “in the first year most of the veterans who applied had been discharged as neuropsychiatric cases. The succeeding years brought some physically disabled veterans, but emotional disturbances were still common to most.”\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{63} D’Amico, The War Veterans’ Art Center, 1944-1948, VDA, III.A.12, MoMA Archives, NY, 7.
Accordingly there was a calibration of the Center’s goals to address the potentially extreme experience of war and its stark contrast to civilian life. In the “Art for War Veterans” issue of the MoMA Bulletin D’Amico articulated the Center’s purpose as working to “discover the best and most effective ways of bringing about, through the arts, the readjustment of the veteran to civilian life,” though he did not prescribe a set of steps required to complete that transition. A potential example of how this process might unfold was provided earlier in the issue:

At the beginning, most veterans use art as a means of getting rid of disturbing experiences, which they try to project onto paper or canvas. A former Navy man paints a vivid recollection of an experience at Pearl Harbor.… Happily, after this period of emotional release the veteran relinquishes his preoccupation with the war. The war themes of the sailor disappeared from his canvas, and he began to use his own environment, drawing freely on his imagination for ideas.… By first expressing his disturbance through an art form, the veteran recreates it and divorces it from himself forever. Then he is ready to recognize the characteristics which set him apart from others, and to take pride in expressing this difference creatively.

According to D’Amico, the adjustment from military service to civilian life was a matter of regaining one’s individual identity. In order to do so the veteran needed to exorcise traumatic experience by externalizing it, a process made possible through creative expression. That said, there is no indication that the Center’s instructors prompted students to focus on wartime experience specifically in their artworks. All course descriptions indicate that they focused on materials and techniques and not any particular content, which allowed veterans to explore whatever theme they preferred.

In that specific anecdote D’Amico emphasized the individuality of his veteran students, a point he reiterated in the 1948 summary report:

64. D’Amico, “Art for War Veterans,” 7.

65. Ibid., 5.
The veterans on the whole were men and women with only one characteristic in common: they were injured—mentally or physically, or both—by participation in the greatest and most devastating war in history. In all other aptitudes, interests and training they differed.66

While D’Amico expressed sensitivity to the potential psychological and physical trauma veterans may have experienced during their service, he recognized that any attempt to generalize that experience would be have been misguided. Wartime experience represented just one component of a larger mosaic of qualities or factors that influenced the veteran student’s motivations, interests, and outcomes at the Center. Nevertheless, it is important to outline the characteristics that D’Amico and his colleagues identified in the veteran audience in order to explain how the War Veterans’ Art Center compared to previous, concurrent, and future educational offerings for other student groups.

Chapter III
A Comparison between the War Veterans’ Art Center and Other Early MoMA Education Programs

D’Amico outlined four key tenets of the Center’s approach: creativeness, fundamentals, individual instruction, and personal satisfaction.67 This chapter explores how these core principles manifested in courses at the Center and in other early MoMA education programs, including initial programs for youth audiences—the Children’s Art Carnival, the Young People’s


Gallery, and the high school outreach program—and the general adult classes offered at the People’s Art Center beginning in 1948. An examination of the Center’s programmatic context illustrates the ways in which D’Amico and his colleagues adapted existing teaching methods to the new veteran audience. Through the experimental work with veterans they also developed a more nuanced understanding of the adult student. In other words, the War Veterans’ Art Center served as a continuation of D’Amico’s core teaching philosophy but also a springboard for pedagogical experimentation.

Creative Expression

The War Veterans’ Art Center was a space for active participation; on a weekly or semi-weekly basis veterans engaged with art materials to explore fundamental design principles and create original works of art.

Students at work in the War Veterans’ Art Center.
The Center was located near though outside of the museum building, and accordingly it had little connection to the gallery spaces and collection artworks. As discussed in the first chapter, many of D’Amico’s initial education programs were relatively detached from the collection for both logistical and philosophical reasons. That said, the Center was exceptionally removed. Whereas teenage audiences might view a rotating exhibition of reproductions at their school through the high school partnership program, or a child might play with a jigsaw puzzle of Pablo Picasso’s *Three Musicians* in the Inspirational Area of the Children’s Art Carnival, there is no indication that veterans visited the museum galleries as part of their Center classes or that reproductions were displayed in the studio space. This separation was maintained when the War Veterans’ Art Center was converted to the People’s Art Center in 1948, although the new iteration was integrated into the museum complex upon the completion of the “21” Building in 1951. Despite its stronger physical connection to the galleries, the People’s Art Center continued to prioritize creative endeavors for youth and adult audiences over viewing and discussion of modern art objects.

**Fundamentals**

Instruction at the War Veterans’ Art Center focused on fundamental design principles and techniques associated with a given medium or material. For example, veterans enrolled in the Sculpture and Ceramics class learned to shape clay and/or carve into plaster, while those enrolled in Wood Engraving and Book Illustration experimented with texture and value. The


70. Ibid., 12.
Inspirational Area of the Children’s Art Carnival employed similar strategies; there children could engage with different “motivations” that explored fundamentals such as color or shape, which informed their creative work in the Studio-Workshop to follow. Mediums and processes such as etching, painting, and stone sculpture were also explored in the practical demonstrations given to high school students. Across all of these programs, technical skill was not considered an end in and of itself, but rather a means of enabling successful visual expression.

D’Amico advocated for a focus on fundamentals in response to two dominant trends in contemporary art education: “laissez-faire” practices, wherein students were given materials but no guidance; and imitative methods that compelled students to copy the works and/or style of established artists. Proponents of the former believed that instruction inhibited the creative spirit, especially for children. D’Amico, however, asserted that unguided exposure to art materials would produce limited results, for whatever inherent creativity one might possess, s/he “cannot as a rule sustain this creativeness over an extended period without skilled guidance.” He saw the other extreme in art education—rigid, imitative methods—as particularly destructive. He believed that attempts to mimic the work or techniques of masters would inevitably lead to frustration, and more importantly, such an exercise “deprives the individual of the chance to discover his own creative power.” In opposition to these two dominant but insidious methods, D’Amico proposed an approach that would harness and develop the creative abilities present in all students by helping them to build both technical skills and confidence in their own ideas.

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D’Amico’s method was aligned with modern artistic practice and its anti-academic underpinnings. Scholars have noted the connection between his philosophy and that of the aforementioned Bauhaus, the German arts and crafts school established in the early twentieth century as an alternative to traditional art academies. The first chapter described how the Bauhaus influenced Barr and his curatorial vision for the new Museum of Modern Art. For D’Amico, the Bauhaus provided an instructional template that encouraged students to “experiment with various media and materials to develop original ideas.” Beyond the emphasis on material exploration, the philosophy of the Bauhaus, and indeed that of modernism in general, espoused the primacy of original expression rather than the reproduction of traditional styles and genres. While in the past artists may have apprenticed in a master’s studio and/or adhered to established hierarchies of media or subject matter, those of the modern era worked independently to develop visual styles unique in technique and chosen subject. As modern art was defined by originality and independence of thought, imitation was a poor means of study.

**Individual Instruction**

Focusing on the individual necessitated a particular class structure and instructional approach. The Center employed a rolling admission process that allowed veterans to join at any time and work at their own speed. In conjunction with this enrollment policy, Center staff devised a new strategy to facilitate independent work:

the program for each course was organized in graded projects beginning with the simplest
and becoming progressively more complex and difficult. This made it possible to adjust
the project to the individual. A veteran who had no experience began with the first and
simplest project while one with experience selected a more advanced project. This
procedure simplified the teaching and permitted the instructor to give more time to those
who needed special attention.75

This flexible, project-based structure allowed new students to begin working at any point and at a
level appropriate to their abilities. From there, each student could progress at her/his own speed.
D’Amico described this system as having been developed specifically for the veteran audience,76
but a more informal variation existed prior in the Children’s Art Carnival. There facilitators set
out materials in the Studio-Workshop in advance and assisted only when a child required
technical assistance.77 Children chose from a diverse selection of material-based projects, which
set parameters for independent art making. In both cases D’Amico respected the autonomy of his
students, giving them space and empowering them to create in their own unique ways.

Prolonged Engagement

Though not specifically identified by D’Amico, prolonged engagement was another
hallmark of his work at MoMA. This important characteristic may have been taken for granted at
the time; however, it provides a notable contrast to current museum education practice, which
increasingly entails sporadic, one-off experiences instead of/in addition to multi-session
programs. D’Amico’s pilot high school partnership program allowed for repeat engagement with
collection works and art-making processes. Its aim was to embed art education within secondary

Archives, NY, 7.

76. Ibid., 6–7.

77. D’Amico, Experiments in Creative Art Teaching, 36.
schooling. Although the Children’s Art Carnival was a temporary event, its annual recurrence meant that children could return each year and continue to exercise their creative proclivities.

At the Center classes were organized into fifteen-week semesters, and veterans could re-enroll as they liked. This in-depth focus on art making was continued in the new People’s Art Center. A 1951 MoMA Bulletin issue dedicated to D’Amico’s various educational programs highlighted how the veteran-related course structure was translated into subsequent adult programming at the People’s Art Center:

Each class meets once a week for a two- or three-hour session, fifteen sessions each term. Day and evening classes are offered. In each class the first projects are so simple that a measure of success and confidence on the part of the beginner is assured. As the class progresses, the projects become more complex and the student gradually gains confidence and becomes able to proceed on his own motivation, and to explore new materials. Individual attention is given to each student because there is great variation in ability and speed in learning.

Indeed, through their experimental work with veterans D’Amico and his colleagues devised a new learning environment, class structure, and instructional method that was adaptable to a general adult audience and thus remained useful for years to come.

**Personal Satisfaction**

In the *Art for War Veterans* exhibition and accompanying Bulletin issue, D’Amico stated that the purpose of the War Veterans’ Art Center was “not to find artists, but to help veterans find themselves,” a spirit that continued after the transition to the People’s Art Center:


The adult classes are offered to provide an opportunity for personal pleasure and cultural enrichment. The aim is to help people derive satisfaction from participation in a creative activity, and not from the promise of becoming professional artists or craftsmen, or of selling or exhibiting their work. The attempt to compete with professional artists usually leads to disappointment and frustration, and the student misses the important contribution that creative activity can make to the enjoyment of daily living.  

He asserted a similar philosophy regarding youth art education, discouraging teachers from sorting children by skill level or holding competitions that praise certain students at the expense of others. These impulses to celebrate a child’s talents or creative gifts were in fact harmful to her/his creative spirit because they established arbitrary value systems and prioritized external reward mechanisms.  

The key components of MoMA’s initial education programs—creative expression, focus on materials, independent work with nonintrusive instruction, prolonged engagement, and personal satisfaction—were adapted to suit the particular requirements and contexts of different audiences. Naturally the classes offered at the War Veterans’ Art Center did not mirror exactly those delivered offsite in high school classrooms or for youth in the Children’s Art Carnival. A review of the various programs, however, clearly demonstrates that these audience-specific endeavors were all part of an ideological family, tethered together by common goals for participants, regardless of age or skill level. Overall, D’Amico and his colleagues worked to provide meaningful experiences with art that empowered participants and developed their creative proclivities.


Chapter IV
Art and Everyday Life: Responding to Individuals and Society

Across the board D’Amico emphasized that his programs were not intended to make or discover artists, but to meet “the needs of the child and the adult who seek art for personal satisfaction.” At first glance, the goal of mere satisfaction may seem casual or even frivolous. In reality D’Amico was advocating for a more profound appreciation of the arts and their place in everyday life. These early MoMA education programs elevated the process of art making over finished objects—a hierarchy that enabled a richer, more sustainable relationship with art. Despite the Center’s distance from the museum’s other activities, it extended the institution’s overall mission of bridging the gap between art and modern life. More importantly, D’Amico sought to use creative expression to address individual needs and interests as well as broader social issues through his work at the Center and beyond.

Addressing Individual Needs

As mentioned in the second chapter, D’Amico was reluctant to identify specific psychological issues present in the veteran audience. There are a number of possible reasons for this sense of caution: he may have wanted to avoid generalizing a complex audience, as posited earlier, or perhaps he felt that the artist/educator should abstain from diagnostic tendencies. Of course, it may have been the result of a limited understanding about the psychological effects of war. Today discussions about veteran rehabilitation, through the arts or other means, inevitably reference specific instances and the overall prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder and

traumatic brain injury, among other effects of war. In the long history of warfare, these manifestations of trauma are only recently classified as such due to scientific (and cultural) advancements. D’Amico may not have had the knowledge or vocabulary to articulate the psychology of trauma; however, he was undoubtedly interested in the psychological effect of the war and the condition of returning veterans. In describing the work of the Center he emphasized art’s ability to bring about “the feeling of personal satisfaction, of release from tension, of physical and emotional relaxation,”84 for the veteran and, in turn, to “revive his spiritual vigor and help him to find greater enjoyment and security.”85

Indeed, D’Amico explored the potential for the arts to address the physical and emotional needs of individuals affected by war prior to establishing the War Veterans’ Art Center. In the winter of 1943 he collaborated with the museum’s Armed Services Program to organize the aforementioned exhibition, The Arts in Therapy. The exhibition’s initial section showcased occupational therapy objects that could be recreated by service members convalescing in military and veteran hospitals. These objects were solicited via a national competition and the final selection included submissions from artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Louise Nevelson, among others.86 The second section highlighted various uses of creative expression in psychotherapeutic practice, primarily through examples of artworks created by patients in therapeutic or other clinical settings.87 In the exhibition’s accompanying Bulletin issue D’Amico


85. Ibid.


87. Ibid.
enumerated characteristics of the burgeoning field of art therapy, describing how the arts were used as a tool for diagnosing patients, expunging emotional disturbances, and/or ameliorating and even correcting mental, emotional, or physical disabilities. He identified modern warfare, among other consequences of a more technologically-advanced society, as responsible for an increase in such physical and mental health issues among the general populace.  

It should be noted that D’Amico never characterized his or the museum’s work as art therapy, but instead recognized the therapeutic potential of creative engagement, among other benefits. As opposed to adopting the goals and language of clinical practice, he encouraged art educators to partner with psychiatrists and other health professionals.  

The Arts in Therapy and its accompanying Bulletin issue included perspectives from the fields of occupational therapy, psychiatry and clinical psychology, and D’Amico went on to organize another therapy-related exhibition titled Occupational Therapy: Its Function and Purpose with colleagues from the American Occupational Therapy Association. The aforementioned War Veterans’ Art Center Advisory Committee also included two medical professionals. In each of these instances D’Amico and the museum explored practical applications of the arts to address service members’ emotional and physical needs, while maintaining their philosophical distance from the external fields of art and occupational therapy.

D’Amico’s focus on individual needs was also tied to educational reforms that had gained traction in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. As previously noted, prior to and


89. Ibid., 9–10.

during his early years at MoMA D’Amico led the art department at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, a progressive private school located in Riverdale, New York. Moreover, seven of the ten high schools involved in his 1937 pilot project were private schools of the same progressive vein.  

91 Schools that fell under this umbrella maintained certain maxims, including:

the beliefs that teaching and learning should be based upon the natural development of the child and that education should be grounded in real experiences, organically related to the social life of the community…. These schools ascribed great importance to children’s interests as the main criterion for selecting school experiences.  

92 More specifically, scholars have noted the connection between D’Amico’s approach and the principles put forward by Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker in their seminal publication, The Child-Centered School (1928).  

93 These influential educators shared a belief that children possessed an innate sense of creativity and that creative self-expression should therefore be an essential component of general education. In fact they identified strongly with modern artists who sought to confront academic dogma.  

D’Amico explored these ideas in the informal educational environment of the museum. He was interested in the role of the arts in human development, and provided a detailed example of these principles at work in the Children’s Art Carnival:

The Carnival is run on specific principles of child psychology and according to particular theories about creative growth… play can be used as a source of orientation for the


child’s creative learning because it stimulates his imagination and gives him opportunity to assume adult roles usually denied him in real life—a basic need in growing up.  

Creative engagement afforded children the opportunity to experiment, imagine, and exercise individual agency, developmental needs identified in the theories of Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, among others. D’Amico’s approach was thus rooted in another tenet of the progressive education community: that teaching should draw on research from the social sciences. Indeed, he believed that a working knowledge of child psychology was essential to art education practice, so much so that he asserted that instructors should be “trained in both child psychology and creative techniques.” This dual training would give educators the skills to devise projects and provide guidance that employed children’s existing skills and addressed their developmental needs. Overall, D’Amico showed a concern for the individual interests and needs of his participants, drawing on trends in education as well as developments in the social sciences and the growing fields of art and occupational therapy. His experimental and reflexive practice brought different disciplines together in varying ways, resulting in innovative museum education programs for students of different ages, interests, and experiences.

Beyond the Individual

Of course, D’Amico’s educational work had implications and motivations beyond the impact on individual participants—an artistically-engaged public was important to the

95. Morgan, “From Modernist Utopia to Cold War Reality,” 156.
institutions. As discussed in the first chapter, MoMA’s founding mission was to establish a connection between the arts and everyday life, which informed its collection and exhibition program, among other activities. For D’Amico this meant fostering a creative spirit in his students, and finding ways for them to internalize and experiment with the practices of modern artists. Prompting museum attendance was a potential byproduct of his efforts, which would have aided the museum in its larger goal of developing an audience and ensuring its future existence. D’Amico, however, was no cynic—he provided a justification for engagement with modern art and ideas that extended beyond institutional sustainability, highlighting instead how individual creative engagement could lead to broader social change.

The potential for arts engagement to address emotional issues took on greater importance in the years following the war. At the War Veterans’ Art Center creative expression was recognized as a means of rehabilitation, of facilitating (in part) the transition from military service to civilian life. In the wake of World War II—including the political tensions of the Cold War and the technological advancements that escalated that tension—there was again an interest in how the arts might help adults cope. D’Amico illustrates this point in the following reflection:

The majority of adults however betray a deadly earnest interest, one almost approaching spiritual hunger…. One wonders whether there is not a relationship between the growing power of destructiveness on the part of our scientific genius, and that indescribable urge for creation on the part of the general public.98

Experience of war’s destruction provided an impetus for creative expression, not only for veterans, but for adults in general. In a time of increasing social conflict, anyone could find solace in the constructive nature of art making.

98. Ibid., 10.
The above quotation reflects D’Amico’s concern for the emotional state of his participants and also speaks to the social context that caused such distress. Perhaps his loftiest and most essential goal was for creative expression to transform participants and their way of being in the world. D’Amico saw the potential for artistic engagement to create more attuned and empathic individuals, as expressed in a letter to People’s Art Center students in 1956:

> art makes people more human, more tolerant, and more ethical. If this is not so, I like to think that creative experiences draw people together--- a group of sufficient volume of such people drawn togethers [sic] in an active campaign of creativity could make an appreciable effect on the world and future direction.  

In other words, robust participation in collaborative, creative endeavors—such as art classes—could have a positive impact on society at large. D’Amico was responding not just to the effects of war on individuals; he identified his work within a social climate defined by strained and unstable geopolitics. He further noted that “creative art education is an investment towards peace... Art education must help to orient the individual to a world concept of living,” reiterating a belief that engagement with art was a fundamental tool in promoting social harmony. It addressed the creative needs inherent to all humans, rendered all the more essential in times of large-scale destruction and social instability.

At the War Veterans’ Art Center D’Amico drew on existing art and education practice to develop innovative creative engagement programs for veterans, while also exploring connections to therapeutic practice. The Center’s work highlighted the importance of being attuned to the psychological and emotional state of participants in a time of war and conflict—fulfilling Packard’s earlier definition of institutional relevance. This concern was extended to all students


in the postwar period. As a result, D’Amico tailored his teaching to ensure participants’ personal satisfaction, enabling relationships with art that would extend beyond their time in his classes. He believed that a deep connection to the arts, and by extension other people, could help to ameliorate the psychological impact of postwar geopolitical tension, felt on an individual and collective level, and perhaps galvanize a movement to address the root causes of those issues.

Conclusion

While MoMA’s educational work with veterans was unprecedented, the actual courses offered and underlying teaching philosophy applied to this new audience represented a continuation of ideas already under development in the museum’s experimental educational programs. During the Center’s brief run it had a positive effect on participants, as evidenced by their enthusiastic feedback, and on staff, who described the Center as “one of the most significant experiments in creative education,” and a place marked by a “unity of spirit and enthusiasm for creative experience and fine craftsmanship.”¹⁰¹ The benefits of this innovative work, however, extended beyond its operational years; concentrating on the veteran audience led D’Amico and his colleagues to develop teaching strategies applicable to a diverse adult student body. Further, this endeavor drew attention to the war’s effect on individuals, spurring D’Amico to determine how creative expression might alleviate issues experienced by service members and laymen alike.

It is important to consider the context out of which the Center emerged. In the early 1940s MoMA was a young institution. A broad founding mission and inchoate identity allowed for experimentation across the board. Such unbounded exploration is less feasible in the Museum of Modern Art of today, whose collection, square-footage, number of staff, budget, and international reputation have grown tremendously. It is dedicated to being “the foremost museum of modern art in the world,” the preeminent authority on the subject. Moreover, modern art is no longer a burgeoning field; its broad history has to a certain extent crystallized, although continued contribution to that history is also listed in the museum’s current mission statement. Museum education followed a similar path, having formalized as a discipline over the past few decades. In the years since D’Amico’s time at MoMA many museum education departments have favored didactic in-gallery experiences with art objects over hands-on creative teaching methods. Under this model, museum educators are often considered authorities themselves, sharing art historical information in order to build understanding and appreciation of artworks, artists, movements, and institutions.

That said, museum scholars and practitioners are identifying increasing examples of visitor-driven experiences in various aspects of museum programming. Carol Morgan has noted a return to experiential museum education, prompted in part by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s research into visitor experience, as well as Philip Yenawine’s work with educational psychologist Abigail Housen to develop “an empirically-derived theory of aesthetic development based on the cognitive processing of a wide range of viewers as they view works of art.” Both


of these endeavors consider the ways in which visitors learn about and/or experience artworks to be the central concern for museum education, rather than communication of ideas essential to the artwork at hand. More recently, Nina Simon has extended this notion of active engagement, encouraging museum practitioners to create sustainable opportunities for visible audience participation in multiple aspects of their institution’s program, including but not limited to educational offerings.¹⁰⁴ D’Amico’s experiential approach, based on a belief that engaging in creative expression was the best way of understanding the creative impulses of contemporary artists, can be seen as a precursor to these efforts.

There are important reasons for this recent interest in audience-driven programming, ones that recall the defining features of MoMA’s early years. An art museum’s relevance is sustained by its visitors and its connection to contemporary culture. In order for individuals and social groups to feel compelled to visit an art museum they must believe that the experiences they can have there serve an essential purpose in their everyday lives. Accordingly, as museum practitioners seek to create meaningful experiences with art, it is imperative for them to work to understand how different visitors define or derive relevance, identifying both unique and common characteristics. The War Veterans’ Art Center provides an excellent example of how such work can be entered into with an experimental and optimistic spirit, and how the benefits of a targeted effort can ripple out indefinitely.

Bibliography


