From Praxiteles’ statue of *Aphrodite*, to Bosch, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, and others, numbers of ingenious, creative artists throughout the ages have been criticized and/or attacked for insulting, abusing, or misinterpreting man, nature, society and religion. Consider the fairly recent example of Mapplethorpe’s photography exhibit that offended the religious beliefs of a large number of people. Mapplethorpe’s work alarmed some ethicists and raised both old and new questions about the rights and responsibilities of artists. Questions such as: Do artists have ‘special’ rights, or a freedom of expression that is different from that of other citizens? Are there some rules and standards that they ought to follow? What is the source of this kind of expression in the arts? And has subjectivism gone too far? These questions and possible answers lie beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will discuss the above issues in connection with this paper’s main point of the artists’ education and education’s influence on, and importance to, artistic creations.

Following Platonic advice, the critical role of a good, solid education will be discussed as the foundation for the enhancement of the artist’s talent and understanding of society and nature, and subsequently on the way the artist perceives the world. One of the most relevant questions we need to answer is whether the artist’s perception of the world changes under the influence of a strong, solid education. This type of question and its answer will naturally take us back to the very first great philosophers, who analyzed the notion of beauty, Plato and Aristotle.

Greek education of the fifth century B.C. will be discussed first allowing us to see a contrast between Classical Greek education and today’s rather minimal liberal arts education offered in our schools and particularly in modern Universities.¹ I will argue that one of the reasons
some 20th century art works focus on a specific subject, albeit they are called “abstract,” which emphasizes content while neglecting form, is because the artist only intends to shock the public and attract its attention. This may be the result of deficiencies in the artists’ education leading to a limited understanding of human nature.

Praxiteles, in the fourth century B.C., did not insult anyone or anybody’s religion by sculpting his Aphrodite. He just thought that since it was admitted that the human body is beautiful, and since artists were making sculptures of male nudes, the next logical step was to reproduce the female nude. Sculpture certainly was not the most important component of the Greek curriculum, rather it was a reflection of that which was the most important, namely philosophy, true philosophy, that which teaches students how to think rather than what to think.

In his most recent book, Professor John Anton describes the role the study of Greek philosophy played in education and in peoples’ lives in general. He refers to Santayana who said: “The Greeks created a culture of profound humanistic values. We come to know it as the heritage of democratic life and political humanism, with philosophy, art, science and reason as its pillars.” It was the life of reason that directed the Greeks’ imagination and ideas. Through their emphasis on the study of nature, “the free mind could disentangle its true good, and could express it in art, in manners, and even in the most refined or the most austere spiritual discipline.” Along the same lines as Anton points out, the 20th century American philosopher John Dewey praised the Greeks for their art which “brought grace and dignity to the collective and individual lives of the Greeks.”

In our century, it is not easy for readers to understand Plato and Aristotle’s attitudes towards poetry, fine art, music, and their relation to the state. This is partly due to their being largely ignored by today’s schools. However, a well educated, cultured individual understands the importance of a strong curriculum consisting of philosophy beginning with the study of the Greek philosophers. It is refreshing to hear a politician referring to Aristotle in the twenty-first century. Senator McCaine, for example, in one of his speeches addressed to the President noted the importance of youth’s education by quoting Aristotle who, in his Politics, said: “All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of the youth.” When Aristotle made the above statement, Greek education was at its peak, a solidly and thoughtfully organized curriculum taught at the Platonic Academy, and in Aristotle’s Lyceum. A genuine liberal arts educa-
A humanistic curriculum was designed to give youths (albeit only male youths) the opportunity to develop and cultivate their minds as well as their character (ethos) through reason.

Aristotle pointed out three things that make men virtuous: nature, habit, and rational principle. Man’s nature is that he is born a man and not an animal, and has body and soul. Therefore as a human being, man must develop proper character through habit. And man is the sole being capable of rational principles. These three: nature, habit and rational principle, “must be in harmony with one another for they do not always agree.” All else, he adds “is the work of education; we learn some things by habit and some by instruction. The latter is the task of education.” In order for man to keep his nature, habit, and rational principle in harmony, he has to go through the steps of education and cultivate his mind. For the Greeks, education was the ultimate justification for both the existence of the individual and of the community. Education embodied the purpose of all human effort and that was their goal.

... it was ultimately in the form of *paideia* ‘culture’ that the Greeks bequeathed the whole achievement of the Hellenic mind to the other nations of antiquity. Augustus envisaged the task of the Roman empire in terms of Greek culture. Without Greek cultural ideals, Greco-Roman civilization would not have existed.

The word ‘culture’ today is used in a general sense “to denote something inherent in every nation of the world, even the most primitive.” It is used as an anthropological concept and not as a concept of value, a “consciously pursued ideal.” As Aristotle points out “there is a sort of education in which parents should train their sons, not as being useful or necessary, but because it is liberal or noble.” The Hellenic world was established on the basis of a formative principle of a holistic cultural ideal. Their culture, based upon having education, art, and philosophy in every part of their life, resulted in a unique educational system. The structure of Greek society and the spiritual life of the individual was based on the most profound laws of human nature and their standards, for this was the universal logos that is common to all minds. The Greeks realized that it was the natural principles that governed human life. Thus, Greek education in theory and in practice, contrary to contemporary education in the United States, aimed at producing the best possible
citizen, not the best possible money maker. It sought the good of the community, not the good of the individual.\textsuperscript{13}

Even though the methods and materials of education differed from the conception of good citizenship held in each place, the ideal objective was always the same. Furthermore, the goal of Greek education was not to produce professional knowledge of one subject. Technical instruction was not considered worthy of the name of education and therefore was excluded from the schools. The curriculum consisted of subjects that were a means, not an end, “just as someone takes a walk to keep the muscles of the body in good condition.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Hellenic education was meant to exercise the mind, character, and imagination, and not to just acquire technically ‘useful’ information.\textsuperscript{15}

Let us analyze closely Plato’s and some of Aristotle’s ideas on education and its role in life. The idea of the spirit’s cultivation in harmony and balance with the exercising of the body was a cornerstone of the Athenian democratic governing system. More simply stated, the Greeks sought a balance between the body’s strength and that of the mind. This was expressed in the idea of the freedom of speech (\textit{logos}), and was inspired by classical sculpture. The law became their god, and art an important and necessary foundation of their life. Human existence, as rational beings, attained dignity. Above all, the spiritual principle was not about individualism but about humanism; and human existence was “godified.” The human form became the center of attention in life, the arts, and education in general.\textsuperscript{16}

Art in Greek education probably did not become part of a liberal education distinct from a technical education until the fourth century. In the \textit{Republic}, Plato regarded art as a “dangerous enemy,” for he knew of its influence on human beings. It was only around 300 B.C. that art became part of the educational curriculum. In addition to the illusionist and subjective character of the arts, we should keep in mind that in ancient Greece, and therefore in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, there was no distinction between ethics and aesthetics; that is, between the notion of morality and beauty or as Plato put it, between the good and the beautiful. The true, the good and the beautiful go hand in hand. This is one of the main reasons Plato discredited Homer’s poetry, for it did not tell the truth — it lacked philosophical truth. Dignity and value of education depended on its truth.

Despite Plato’s position on Homer’s poetry, in some cases he seems to approve certain works of art whose form follows and is built on certain formal elements such as, symmetry, harmony and rhythm. Accord-
ingly, in the Republic, Plato said that only pure form develops the love for the beautiful; and the love of the beautiful is the love for the good. What he meant is that once the beautiful is recognized through its formal elements, then later, the good is also recognized. He then lists the formal elements and says that what the youth must pursue is:

Good speech, then, good accord, and good grace, and good rhythm wait upon a good disposition not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind . . . and there is surely much of these qualities in painting and in all similar craftsmanship . . . there is a coincidence of a beautiful disposition in the soul and corresponding and harmonious beauties of the same type in the bodily form . . .

Plato insisted on three requirements for a work of art: 1) what the object reproduced (omoiotes) is like, that is, how much alike it is to its counterpart in Reality; 2) whether its parts are proportional (symmetric), and 3) if the colors and shapes are correct (harmony) that is, they fit together.

According to Plato, proper education provided the foundation for human development. He drew a parallel between the soul and a plant that grows according to the soil and the climate that surrounds it. It is therefore through education that man develops the love for the beautiful and the good. Consequently, when a child grows in an environment of “true beauty and grace,” (formal elements), that is, good education, his/her sense of hearing and sight will be sensitive, able to recognize the good, and will be capable of solid reasoning.

In addition to grammar, dialectic, mathematics, philosophy and geometry, one of the most important requirements for Plato was the study of music which he discussed extensively in several of his books. Plato held that the harmonies (modes) of music, because they are formal, make people recognize the good. Music forms the soul. The soul was the center of man’s life. Man’s actions come from the soul and consist of rhythm and harmony. The educational importance of music was probably based on the fact that Greek theory of music finds its roots largely in the acoustical mathematics of the Pythagorean ratios. Thus, music, along with philosophy, cultivated the soul and sharpened the mind. Accordingly, Plato says:
... because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music, and so, feeling distance rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good ... 

In the *Republic*, Plato emphasized art’s important function in human life during the stages of education. It is the arts that possess the two elements — seeing and hearing — with which the soul can come into contact with the world. It is through these two elements that the soul acquires knowledge and becomes familiar with beauty. The function of the artist is to show us the beauty of the world through formal elements such as, harmony, rhythm and symmetry.

For in all products of art there is goodness or badness of rhythm or of harmony or of form — and right rhythm or right form is akin on the one hand to the reason, the rhythm and harmony, which is to be traced in the world as a whole, and akin on the other hand to what is right and rational in human character.

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle did not emphasize form (formal elements) and conceived it in a different way than did Plato. Formal elements such as harmony and rhythm are rational but they also are sources of pleasure. And while he agrees with Plato on art being an imitation (*mimesis* or *representation*), it reflects moral character and is the source of pleasure. For Aristotle it is the action, the result of the mental activity (the art work) that is important. He praises Polygnotus the painter, who “depicted men as nobler than they are ...” Hence, the imitation of good acts.

This then, is the real relationship between art, character and morality. Indeed, there was a time in Greece when art was a lofty, graceful ideal style that spoke directly to the educated person’s mind. Hence, education enables the soul to see the good and, as a result, character is affected by the realistic form of the surroundings. Examples include the *Charioteer of Delphi* whose formal elements reflect a lofty, idealistic style and an unsurpassed grandeur. He represents the ideal ethical youth of the beginning of the fifth century B.C. reflecting the balance of the beauty of mind and body. This and other sculptures of that time, such as, Polycleitus’ *Canon, Apollo* from the temple of Zeus’ pediment at Olympia, and the
Zeus of Artemision, are concrete examples that brought grace and dignity to the lives of Greek citizens. These masterpieces are representatives of what Plato said in the *Protagoras* about the standards of *eurhythmia*, *euarmostia*, *rhythm*, *concord*, and *symmetry* that are borrowed by the sculptor from the visible world, and allows him to influence the rest of the arts.

During that time, all arts affected one another and none could exist by itself. Even Sophocles’ “ideal of human character clearly betrays its sculptural origin.”28 The sculptors’ achievement of creating the ideal figure took the same path toward higher values, such as the ideal of humanity. Hence the Athenian mind was anthropocentric. Humanism was born, that is, the “intellectual search for, and interest in, the true nature of man.”29

By establishing a strong curriculum that combined a broad study of the humanities, math and geometry, the ancient Greeks were feeding the minds of the youth with reason and a love and curiosity for nature and the cosmos. At the same time, they were training youths’ bodies and preparing them for the Olympics. Thus a balance was achieved between the strengthening of the body and mind. The strengthening of the body is a good example of how education helps in the development of the individual. The education of the mind (shaping of soul) is parallel to the process of educating the body. “Knowledge sinks in the soul by being learned and the process is slow and continuous.”30 This of course defies today’s condensed, short terms with material that cannot possibly be absorbed by the students’ minds.

Human character is affected by artistic form. The educated person has the sense of what is beautiful and what is ugly. Reason will help recognize the beautiful because it is not influenced by the senses. Therefore reason is able to order a person’s thoughts. We must keep in mind that the educated man in Plato’s time, whether scientist or artist, had a solid, rich education as described above. Consequently, a person who had artistic talent was as solidly educated as the one we today call a “scholar.”

Obviously, today’s educated person’s abilities vary according to the institution he/she has attended. Presently, some Universities and colleges’ humanities requirements are minimal while the focus is on technology and business. The result is that the knowledge of graduates with this kind of ‘education,’ whether an artist or a scientist, is very limited. Philosophy, which at Plato’s time was the heart of the curriculum, consisted of logic, and critical thinking. Presently, in many of today’s institutions philosophy can be replaced by any other course.
Artists are in even worse condition for in most institutions they are not required to take art history courses beyond the introductory level. Many graduate without having any knowledge of the ancient arts or later periods, for example, the Renaissance, but have merely the talent to draw or paint. The result is literary ignorance which often leads to the production of ‘art works’ that may insult the public’s religion, customs and traditions.

I believe that Plato was correct when he insisted that both artistic content and form affect one another as well as the viewer and the listener. The aesthetic effect of a particular style, structure, and form in general is conditioned and interpreted by its intellectual or spiritual content. It is well known that it is “through artistic expression that the highest values acquire permanent significance, and the force which moves mankind.”31 Art’s power of influencing people is limitless for its influence is both immediate and universal. This, and only this, justifies Plato’s claim that “art is dangerous.” As Jaeger, many years ago, put it “... some artists deliberately ridicule every great and lofty theme, or show themselves indifferent in their choice of subject. Such consciously frivolous art has of course its ethical effect.”32

NOTES

1 This does not mean that there are no Universities offering a solid, strong, liberal arts education.
3 Ibid., p. 61.
4 Ibid., p.145.
6 In the Greek language, the word ‘man’ refers to human beings: Anthropos.
7 Politics VII, 1332b, 1-10.
9 Ibid.
10 Paideia, p. XVII.
11 *Politics*, VIII.5.30-33. Hence, the value of the study of liberal arts.

12 *Paideia*, p. XII.


16 *Paideia*, p. 280.


18 *Republic* III, 400d-c, 401a, 402d.

19 *Laws*, p. 669.

20 *Republic* VI, 491d.


27 Painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, music.

28 *Paideia*, p. 280.


