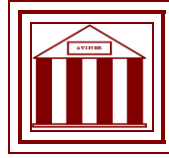


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
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**Connoisseurship, the Arts and
Leadership: Portrait of the Development
of the Artistic Discerning Eye**

**Fenwick W. English
Professor
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
USA**

**Lisa C. Ehrich
Associate Professor
Queensland University of Technology
Australia**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr
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**Connoisseurship, the Arts and Leadership:
Portrait of the Development of the Artistic Discerning Eye**

Fenwick W. English

Lisa C. Ehrich

Abstract

This paper is based on a larger study of connoisseurship in Australia and America that explored the processes in which both visual and performing artists engage when they create art. The purpose was to reimagine creative sources of leadership by using a fresh fount for understanding its emotional and intuitive aspects. The heart of connoisseurship is the development of the discerning eye. Our focus in this paper is on one of our participants, an Australian sculptor, and her journey towards developing a discerning eye. We begin the paper by referring to Eisner's (2002) four cognitive functions of the arts and these are inscription, editing, communicating and discovery. This framework is used to provide a way of understanding the creative process through which the sculptor creates art – from a piece's inception through to its completion. Here we also discuss the way the sculptor is able to make meaning of her work and how she uses the constraints of medium and framing in the production of a piece. The second framework is one that emerged from our larger empirical study where we identified eight broad themes that point to the way in which artists are able to develop what Eisner (2002) calls, "a discerning eye". These themes revealed that the development of a discerning eye is developmental and evolutionary; begins in childhood and shaped by the early environment; emerges from hard work and is influenced by factors of serendipity; is the result of personal efforts to attain competency; is the outcome of an artist's increasing differentiation in her/his work; is developed through feedback via public recognition; is developed by benchmarking; and is aware of the tension between tradition and innovation in art. In this paper we explore the sculptor's evolution as an artist by using these broad themes as signposts in painting a portrait of her creative life. In the paper we also include several photographs of her art (both commissioned and non-commissioned) as illustrations of her artistic journey towards developing a discerning eye. Finally, we end the paper with a conceptual linkage to leadership and how leaders also develop a discerning eye.

Keywords: Connoisseurship, Arts, Leadership, Portrait, Sculpture.

Acknowledgements: Our thanks to "Caitlin" for allowing us to tell her story and for permission to publish photographs of her work.

Introduction

This paper is based on a larger study of connoisseurship in Australia and America that explored the processes in which artists from a variety of backgrounds including the visual arts, dance, theatre, music, and writing, engage when they create art¹. The purpose of the study was to utilise insights from the tradition of the arts and artists' perspectives of their work as a way of expanding our concepts of educational leadership. This approach is based on one of the co-author's prior work on the epistemology of professional practice and the lack of any new insights to leadership practice in schools using traditional social science methods. Our position is if leadership can be construed as a type of performing art then we can appropriately study performance, artistry and emotions²³⁴.

Our work has followed the perspective of Eisner⁵ who for decades argued for an alternative way to think about education (and our position, educational leadership). The benefits of looking at our field through the lens of artistic creation and performance, enables the researchers to expand the study and understanding of educational leadership in context.

The focus of this paper is centred on one of the respondents who formed part of our larger empirical study of artists. She is an Australian sculptor (referred to here as Caitlin – pseudonym) and what is revealed here is an exploration and discussion of her personal journey towards developing the “discerning eye”, the concept that is central to Eisner's⁶ notion of connoisseurship. Two theoretical frameworks have provided a structure to explore and interpret her artistic journey. The first emerged from our empirical study where we identified eight broad themes that explain the way in which artists develop the discerning eye⁷. These themes emerged from two to three interviews we held with artists over a two year period in Australia and the US. In this paper, then, these eight broad themes are used to illuminate Caitlin's story and interpret her evolution as an artist.

The second framework comes from Eisner⁸ and is concerned with the four cognitive functions of the arts. These four functions are used as a way of interpreting the artistic process through which art is created. We use this

¹Ehrich, L.C. and English, F.W. (2013a). Towards connoisseurship in educational leadership: Following data in a three stage line of inquiry. In *Empirical Leadership Research: Letting the Data speak for themselves*. S. Eacott and R. Niesche, Eds, Untested Ideas Research Center, New York, 165-198

²Ibid.

³Ehrich, L.C. and English, F.W. (2013b). Leadership as dance: A consideration of the applicability of the “mother” of all arts as the basis for establishing connoisseurship. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16(4), 454-481. DOI=<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.696282>

⁴English, F.W. (2008). *The art of educational leadership: Balancing performance and accountability*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

⁵Eisner, E. (2002). *The arts and the creation of the mind*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

⁶Eisner.

⁷Ehrich and English (2013a).

⁸Eisner.

framework to illuminate the way Caitlin creates a piece of art from its inception through to its completion. The paper concludes with some tentative linkages to leadership and how the insights gained from our research with artists might help us to explain and expand our notion of leadership development and preparation.

The Development of the Discerning Eye

As mentioned previously, our empirical study yielded 8 broad themes pertaining to how the artists in our sample developed the discerning eye¹. These themes are identified below:

1. The discerning eye can begin in early childhood and the early environment
2. The discerning eye is developmental, evolutionary and dependent on others
3. The discerning eye emerges from hard work and is influenced by factors of serendipity
4. The discerning eye is the result of personal efforts to attain competency
5. The discerning eye is an outcome of the respondents' increasing differentiation in his /her work
6. The discerning eye via feedback from the public helps to develop artistic capacity
7. The discerning eye is helped by the use of benchmarking
8. The discerning eye is aware of the tension that exists between tradition and innovation

Eisner's Four Cognitive Functions

Eisner² makes a cogent argument for the role of the arts in transforming our consciousness. He posits that the arts not only refine and heighten our senses but also enlarge the imagination. "The arts invite us to attend to the qualities of sound, sight, taste, and touch so that we experience them"³ and in this way, expand on our perception of things. The arts can also provide a space for the imagination to roam and where ideas can be tried out "in the mind's eye"⁴. Some historical examples include Hildegard of Bingen's visions⁵ and

¹Ehrich and English (2013a).

²Eisner.

³Ibid., 5.

⁴Ibid., 5.

⁵Hildegard of Bingen (2001). *Selected writings*. Translated and introduction by M. Atherton. Penguin, London.

Einstein's thought experiments¹. In addition, the arts perform four key cognitive functions (inscription, editing, communication and discovery) that are part of the inter-related processes of contextual representation. In other words, these cognitive processes enable a piece of art to take shape from an idea through a medium (or material) to its completion. Another historical example is Michelangelo's search for the appropriate marble which contained his mental vision. *Inscription*, then, refers to an idea or an image that is made concrete; *Editing* is a process of working and reworking an inscription so it achieves quality and/or precision; *Communication* involves sharing the art with others and seeking their feedback on the work; and *Discovery*, which may include an unplanned or unsuspected surprise, is a key intrinsic reward in the arts².

Introducing Caitlin as an Exemplar of the Criteria for the Discerning Eye

Caitlin is an Australian woman, aged in her 50s, who says that she has been involved indirectly with the arts for much of her life. Before she embarked upon a full-time career as a sculptor in 2012, she worked in the fashion industry and had a successful career as a fashion model working throughout Asia and Australia. After leaving fashion, she undertook the interior decoration of flats and houses as well as managing their overall renovation. Her previous position was a project manager and coordinator of Information Technology in the Australian public service.

The Discerning Eye Can Begin in Early Childhood and the Early Environment

Caitlin informed us that her fascination for sculpture began in childhood where she said she felt a deep affinity for this tactile art form. She said she was greatly influenced by her mother who fostered in her and her four siblings a deep love and appreciation for beauty in poetry, music and sculpture. There were a couple of pieces of sculpture in the family home that Caitlin remembers and was particularly drawn to as a child. Unlike some of the other artists in our study, Caitlin did not learn how to sculpt until she was in her 40s. She said she may have started learning it earlier than that but she was the main caregiver for her son and needed the full-time security of an ongoing job.

The Discerning Eye is Developmental, Evolutionary and Dependent on Others

Our larger study found that developing the discerning eye was developed through maturity, experience, and the presence of significant others who provided instruction and support along the way. The artists in our study referred to the passage of time that helped them grow and become better artists. Caitlin reflected that her work as an artist has certainly improved since she started and it continues to expand in different directions. In 2004, she

¹Norton, J.D. (2004). Chasing a beam of light: Einstein's most famous thought experiment (Feb, 2004), http://www.pitt.edu/~jdnorton/Goodies/Chasing_the_light/

²Eisner, 6-8.

commenced studies with a well-recognised sculptor in Brisbane, working mainly in ceramics. It was these early years that were instrumental for her to expand and hone her skills. In 2006 she developed the confidence to have some of her pieces cast in bronze. This was an important turning point. She said that bronze has since become an important medium that has added a richness and depth to her work.

Some of her early pieces (see Figures 1 and 2) that were cast in bronze are below:

Figure 1. *Reflection.*



Figure 2. *By the Sea.*



Another key turning point in Caitlin's development as an artist was exhibiting her work in galleries. She said making her first sale was a significant event and marked her arrival and acceptance as an artist. Since that time, Caitlin indicated that she continues to grow in confidence and her work has taken a different turn. Previously, she said she created pieces (portraits, figures, faces) she considered beautiful but now she explores work that is connected to bigger ideas. She said that over time, she has moved toward an evolving trajectory across a rich landscape of figurative and mythical icons. Within this setting, the beauty and yet vulnerability of the human form never ceases to inspire me. In my work, therefore, I seek to capture that vulnerability and fragility underlying what it means to be human.

As an illustration, she developed a contemporary series of figures that show different elements of the human condition. Two of these are below (See Figures 3 and 4)

Figure 3. *Reunion.*



Figure 4. *The Beloved.*



She says that her piece, "Reunion" celebrates the deep bonds that exist between sisters—the intangible spirituality that ties them whether they are

together or apart. Physical boundaries have no meaning in a unification as profound as this and here we see the three sisters united in a single coalescent form.

Like the other artists in the study, Caitlin referred to significant others with whom she has great relationships (friends, family and colleagues). In particular, she referred to a fellow sculptor, a very experienced and talented artist, who has been her mentor for several years. She said she continues to seek his feedback and advice regarding all matters to do with sculpture (from the business side of operating to the creative side).

The Discerning Eye Emerges from Hard Work and is Influenced by Factors of Serendipity

There would be very few biographies of artists around the world that would not speak about the dedication and toil that is invested into creating exemplary art. A good example is Lucien Freud, the British figurative artist, who painted every day of his life and was driven to constantly improve his work¹. Before Caitlin left her full-time public sector job to seek a life as a self-employed artist, she used every available moment such as evenings, holidays and weekends to sculpt.

The second part of this theme – factors of serendipity – refers to those by chance occurrences that lead to particular and unforeseen outcomes. Serendipity stems from an old name of Sri Lanka which is *Serendip* and the sanscrit *simhaladvipa*. It stands for fortunate happenstance or a pleasant surprise or making a discovery by accident. It was because of serendipity that Caitlin was able to receive her first commission.

This occurred through a conversation with her sister's colleague who said that he was interested in commissioning a piece of sculpture to commemorate his school's anniversary. After the chat with Caitlin and after viewing more of her work, he commissioned her to create a bust of a religious figure for his school's anniversary. Caitlin believed that it was this opportunity that enabled her to be successful in securing her second and very large commission of ten busts: nine Australian and one New Zealand winners of the Victoria Cross during the Gallipoli campaign. This commission took a year to complete.

The Discerning Eye is the Result of Personal Efforts to Attain Competency

The artists in our larger study referred to the considerable personal efforts and at times sacrifices they made to become better at their work. They recognised the importance of a good grounding in the basics and the techniques governing their work and how developing competence led to them developing confidence. Caitlin indicated that many years of learning her craft, thinking about her work, practising, and through trial and error, she has been able to improve considerably and become more competent. Another important source of attaining competency has been through discussions about art with a group of trusted artists and friends. It is through these exchanges and direct feedback on

¹Grieg, G. (2013). *Breakfast with Lucien: A portrait of an artist*. Jonathon Cape, London.

her work that she finds valuable since it enables her to re-evaluate her thinking about the work itself. Moreover, Caitlin indicated that reading about other artists' work and visiting galleries to view their work is another important way she learns about the artistic process.

The Discerning Eye is an Outcome of the Respondent's Increasing Differentiation in his/her Work

This theme concerns an artist's ability to be able to make finer grade judgements about their work on a continuum of development. It involves contextualising their work compared to what they did before and where they want to go in the future. This differentiation is complex and does not happen overnight. It comes from experience, maturity, and an openness and willingness to accept criticism. Caitlin indicated that with experience she has been able to differentiate her work more readily and to recognise her own growth as an artist. For instance, she said she is sometimes a little embarrassed when she looks at her earlier work and sees so many flaws, not only in technique but in form. Although she said she is rarely satisfied with her work even today, she said she feels she has grown as an artist and her current work is so much better than the work she produced five years ago.

The Discerning Eye via Feedback from the Public Helps to Develop Artistic Capacity

Although the artists in our larger sample had different types of audiences (i.e. gallery visitors, theatre and dance audience members, editors, and so on), all of them were united in the belief that feedback from these publics is essential for their growth. Caitlin provided two illustrations. The first was when she exhibited several pieces in an art fair. She recollected having an interesting conversation with an elderly woman who looked at one of her pieces and told Caitlin how much she liked it and what it was conveying to her. Caitlin said she was deeply moved that her art was able to make such an impression and this experience gave her a real boost of confidence. The second example was not as positive. At a gallery opening which Caitlin attended, she overheard a member of the public talk about a couple of her male figures. Of these pieces, the woman said, "the work is so sad ... I wouldn't want any of them at my place". Included below is one of these male figures (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. *The Poet Speaks*



The Discerning Eye is Helped by the Use of Benchmarking

This theme refers to where an artist's work might fit into the grander scheme of art and how it might be categorised or compared to others' work. All of the artists in the larger sample said they were involved in benchmarking (although they did not use this word) and this involved them asking questions about how their work was similar to or different from others? For instance, who were the artists or what were the movements that influenced their work? Caitlin was able to identify readily several artists whom she admired (both living and dead) and how she hoped that one day she would be as talented. Benchmarking also meant that Caitlin was aware of how her figurative art and portraiture are very different from much contemporary art such as installation art, performance art and large scale public art. It is these contemporary forms of art that have dominated the art scene for decades.

The Discerning Eye is Aware of the Tension that Exists Between Tradition and Innovation

In the creation of art, there is a discernable tension between tradition and innovation and artists work somewhere in between. The artists in our larger sample were very much aware of the history and tradition of their respective art forms. They had a grounding in different styles and techniques yet they endeavoured to create work that was new. This phenomenon has also been described in Harold Bloom's (1997) *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*¹ where an emerging poet attempts to carve out a space which is different from previous poets. Caitlin indicated that she saw all artists were faced with this tension. Consequently, she indicated that as she has become more experienced and confident, she has taken more risks in creating her own space and style. It is through risk taking that artists carve out a place for their work.

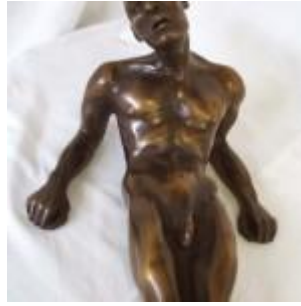
The Process of Creating Art

The next part of this paper uses the four functions of creating art to explore the way in which Caitlin talked about how she creates her work. According to Eisner² *inscription* refers to an idea that is the starting point for the creation of a piece of art. Caitlin said that sometimes she would have an idea in her mind and would think about it before she took action to make the idea concrete. She referred to personal experiences and things happening in her life that provided her with the impetus for new pieces. She reflected that the death of her father prompted her to create a small sculpture of a man dying in a hospital (see Figure 6) and the end of a relationship propelled her to create a series of pieces that reflected the human condition.

¹Bloom, H. (1997). *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. Oxford University Press, New York.

²Eisner.

Figure 6. *Endgame*



In more recent times, Caitlin has begun to receive commissions and now indicates that the initial idea for work emanates from others. A photograph of a recent commission of twin boys can be found in Figure 7.

Figure 7. *The Twins*



According to Eisner¹, *editing* is a key function of the creation of art. Caitlin reflected on her recent large commission of 10 busts that she worked tirelessly on for almost a year. She indicated that she continued to change them (rework them, refine them) up until the day they left for the foundry to be bronzed. Towards the end of the commission, she decided to redo two of the early ones she made because she felt they were not good enough. She said that during the year, she sought feedback on her work from trusted friends and fellow artists and their feedback was invaluable to her to make refinements. She also sought feedback from her client who commissioned her to do the work. He visited her in her studio on two occasions to view the busts. His feedback was essential before she took the final step of committing the work to be bronzed.

Communication refers to transferring the work from a private to a public forum so it can be understood by others². It is in this linkage that communication is related to editing or feedback from others. Every time Caitlin exhibits her work in a gallery, or for a competition, or for clients who commissioned her work, she is communicating the work itself. As an example, her first commissioned work was unveiled at a ceremony in 2013 attended by all members of the school community who were present for the celebration.

¹Eisner.

²Eisner.

When Caitlin's ten busts of the Victoria Cross Winners from Gallipoli are unveiled, her work will be located to a wider public consciousness.

Finally, discovery refers to the element of surprise¹ which is often not part of the original conception. Surprises are tacit, not planned but implicit in the work. They are the non-material reward for the artist beyond compensation. Caitlin talked about this great reward which is unexpected but vital for her happiness and her inner recognition of the worth of her work. Multiple outcomes constitute a powerful internal motivator for continued growth and development.

Conceptual Link to Leadership and How Leaders Develop a Discerning Eye

The work epitomized in this paper ultimately connects to the focus of our research which is how leaders, especially educational leaders, become connoisseurs. We begin with a quote from an American artist, Robert Henri (2007) who said,

I have no sympathy with the belief that art is the restricted province of those who paint, sculpt, make music and verse. I hope we will come to an understanding that the material used is only incidental, that there is an artist in every man² [sic].

The conceptual bridge from our sculptor, Caitlin, to an educational leader is not as difficult therefore as one might initially assume. What sculpting or any person recognized for his/her work in an artistic medium is as Henri³ observed, *the work itself*. It is in the joy of the work, the drive to attain competence and skill and the struggle of the process that propels a person to attain a sense of confidence in his/her abilities and his/her judgment. That process involves what a kind of anatomy of consciousness entails with coming to understand increasing levels of complexity and the growth of self embedded in *the work*, an investiture called by Csikszentmihalyi⁴ as *flow*.

Flow enhances competence because it leaves a person "feeling more capable, more skilled"⁵. According to Csikszentmihalyi, *flow* involves two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration. Differentiation involves coming to recognize one's uniqueness. Integration involves a union with others. These apparently opposite tendencies are reconciled in *flow* and embedded in the work itself⁶. The process of integration is linked to what has

¹Ibid.

²Henri, R. (2007). *The art spirit*. Basic Books, New York, 223-224.

³Ibid.

⁴Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper and Row, New York

⁵Csikszentmihalyi, 41

⁶Ibid.

been called “a community of practice” in the role of connoisseurship based on the concept of “tacit knowledge”¹.

In our work with educational leaders², we found patterns which had led to higher forms of consciousness and enhanced understandings of the process of leading. Robert, a primary school principal in Australia, embodied this aspect when he spoke about how as a school leader he had to be able to engage in every conversation with confidence from small issues and decisions to large issues involving where the school was going in the future. In this way, he made discerning decisions for the whole school community.

To Robert, leading involved establishing the circumstancing for the faculty and staff. That involved considering that every question sits in a context in a view of where the school is going, the vision, the values and beliefs. He remarked that when a question is posed, it was knowing that some things cannot be compromised. The school must have a compass to sort through competing demands and pressures and to respond in a way that preserves the whole of its actions to arrive at mutually defined goals.

Robert’s uniqueness was sharply delineated when he remarked, “I’m the one accountable person here, but I’m not a cowboy cut-out. I’m looking for as many different solutions as possible. It helps that one becomes more fine grained and respectful of the people who have gone before us.”

We see with Robert and his evolution towards the development of the discerning eye, the application of differentiation of himself and the linkage to a professional community in connecting to others. We see with Robert joy in the work itself as he was able to compare his earlier levels of consciousness with his later one at the time he was interviewed.

The parallels between the world of artistic practice and the world of educational leadership *as a form of artistic practice* continues to be for us a fresh and promising elucidation of understanding how educational leaders develop *the discerning eye*.

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¹Orr, S. (2010). We kind of try to merge our own experience with the objectivity of the criteria: The role of connoisseurship and tacit practice in undergraduate fine art assessment. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 9(1), 5-19

²Ehrich and English, 2013a

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