

ACES (Articles, Columns, & Essays)

Seven Pillars of Wisdom in the Arts

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Editor's Note: The following article is reprinted from NewsMax, an online news service for whom ISPE Mentor Alexandra York writes a monthly column on art and culture. The original article can be accessed at <https://www.newsmax.com/alexandrayork/the-arts/2022/11/01/id/1094333/>.



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When we think of the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, we may think of the Bible's Book of Proverbs or we may think of T. E. Lawrence's biographical account of his experiences during the Arab Revolt of 1916–18. But let us now explore how

seven different arts can bring us wisdom in ways often missed or misunderstood.

First, what is a pillar? In its literal architectural meaning, a pillar is a tall vertical structure of

stone, wood, or metal used as a support for a building. Metaphorically, it is often used to describe a person who demonstrates reliability: “She was a pillar of maternal strength for all the orphans left abandoned after the siege.” So, a pillar in both of its denotations and connotations is a means of support for something else of greater value that relies on it for stability.

Traditionally, the fine arts have been considered to be five: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and literature. But even though dance cannot exist without music (even if heard “in the head”) and poetry is a form of literature—making these two art forms subcategories—they have wise lessons of their own to offer, so it may be worthwhile to include them when considering the idea as expressed through the arts, thus achieving the alluring phrase “seven pillars of wisdom.”

If we think of the arts this way—as pillars—we can identify how the fine arts can support life-enhancing beauty, virtuous values, and productive personal character development as all necessary for a life of wisdom.

Beauty in art expresses a perfection of physical form that brings sensory pleasure: to the eye in painting and sculpture (which includes touch), to the ear in music, to the mind in literature, to the mind and ear in poetry, to the mind and the whole body in both architecture and dance—the mind, of course, is not a sensory organ, but the act of imagination activates the other senses.

Leon Battista Alberti (1480) put it best: “I shall define beauty to be a harmony of all the parts, in whatsoever subject it appears, fitted together with such proportion and connection that nothing could be added, diminished or altered but for the worst.”

Beauty in art (as in nature) provides sensory pleasure that nourishes our wellbeing and harmony with the external world.

Virtuous values in art refers to the content—the intrinsic meaning—that the art expresses and which nourishes harmonious well-being with our inner selves.

Character development rises from appreciation of beauty and achievement of virtuous values, both of which nourish our personal identity.

Subject matter in the visual arts provides a door to contemplation and/or confirmation of the values expressed by the subject(s) because we see ideational values made manifest in (beautifully rendered) physical form.

Musical content offers a psychosomatic emotional experience via thematic melody, rhythm, and volume joining together to provide a cathartic value affirmation of whole-real-life living that encompasses feelings of (for example) joy, sorrow, triumph, and defeat so we can experience these powerful emotions in a structured, concrete way that with the final homecoming tonic chord we feel a blessed “Amen” to life and all that it offers.

Dance provides not only all of the psychosomatic values in music but also the grace and kinetic agility of our physical bodies in motion, a soaring affirmation of the beauty of the temple of our souls.

Architecture can set a stage for our “rightness” with the world.

A properly proportioned and gloriously arranged artificial structure becomes a small version of a benevolent universe and gives us a sense of compatibility with all of nature made compact and perfect, surrounding us in one humanly created environment.

Literature (including theater and film drama)—perhaps the highest of all arts—does all of the above via the imagination, inviting us into value-laden worlds of ideas, experiences, other

“people,” other places, other challenges, other achievements, other possibilities ... This list goes on as far as ... well, as far as the imagination can go on.

Poetry distills the values of literature into a codified form that captures added values expressed in the music of meter and rhyme.

It’s incomparable in impact for expressing values compressed into tight expressions of important moments, places, and life-experiences that play out over time in literature.

Character development?

By experiencing all of the arts in toto, we not only experience and learn of life in visual still-life, emotional sound, physical motion, evocative environment, massive intellectual imagining, and fitted compressions of emphasis, but we also are invited to explore ideas and values that give us definitive spaces and places to select and create our own self-created personhood—who we shall be and ... in the end, who we are.

Introduction to and immersion into all of the (seven!) fine arts gives us the opportunity to “try out” different values in safe environments of stimulating thought and a variety of

experimentation, thereby encouraging—if we are smart as well as sensitive—individual worth that belongs uniquely to us alone and remains unrepeatable by any other.

Via these various methods, each expressing aspects of real-life living through a different avenue of aesthetic approach, the arts provide beautiful and thought-evoking (or provoking) experiences that can seductively invite us into new and different experimentations of thought or passionately affirm the values that define who we already have become; thus, an ongoing growth of maturity, understanding, and knowledge—wisdom—is achieved by interacting with them.

These seven beautiful arts—visual depictions by drawing/painting and sculpture, music playing, dancing, shelter building, tale-telling by story or rhyme—all value-laden in one way or another have existed as long as these same signs of humanly creative pastimes and life-nourishing concerns themselves have existed.

As such, they become the seven artistic pillars that have established reliable supports of value enrichment and advancement—wisdom—for all humanity as men, women, and children have progressed throughout the ages of time.



About the author: Alexandra York is an internationally published author and founding president of the American Renaissance for the Twenty-first Century (ART), a New-York-City-based nonprofit educational arts and culture foundation. She has written for many publications, including *Reader’s Digest* and *The New York Times*. She is the author of *Crosspoints: A Novel of Choice*. Her most recent book is *Soul Celebrations and Spiritual Snacks*. For more on Alexandra York, visit <https://www.newsmax.com/Insiders/AlexandraYork/id-329/>. 