

PEORIA

M A G A Z I N E

Imagining Our Future

The arts play an important role in developing the citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

by Rebecca Shulman Herz, Peoria PlayHouse Children's Museum



While tackling the challenging and serious work of art making, children gain the tools to imagine new ideas and give their ideas life.

This inaugural issue of Peoria Magazine is dedicated to the premise that “a thriving and healthy business community also has an active arts and culture scene.” This is a profoundly important statement. Peoria—and any ambitious and economically healthy city—needs arts and culture for a wide variety of reasons.

The arts make life better by bringing beauty and joy into our lives. The arts are a regional draw; museums, galleries, theaters, cultural centers, symphonies and other arts venues make a community more appealing to those who live there or are considering moving there. The arts bring people together as audiences and as makers. The arts also have a direct economic impact: purchases of museum, theater or symphony tickets are often accompanied by a meal out and the purchase of a gift or souvenirs to take home.

The arts also play an important role in developing the citizens and leaders of tomorrow. Arts engagement and education are key elements in giving children and adults alike the tools to imagine new ideas, and to create the new businesses and infrastructure needed for a strong, diverse local economy.

An Essential Skillset

I imagine the skeptics among us saying, “Really? Arts are lovely, but do they really give us the tools we need to ensure a strong city and a thriving economy?” Of course, the arts alone are not sufficient to achieve this goal. And art and art education is an umbrella that encompasses initiatives of varying effectiveness and quality. But can and do the arts impart critical skills to create a vibrant future? Yes, they do, in at least two ways.

First, through art making, we learn skills and habits of mind that are critical to the roles of maker, innovator or leader. The arts teach us to be creative and to solve problems, to understand new challenges as solvable, and to come up with innovative and individual solutions to these challenges. These are essential skills for any leader. The arts also teach perseverance, or what Angela Duckworth calls “grit,” which is developed by pursuing and practicing something one cares about deeply, in service of a larger purpose. Perseverance is one of the first things learned by a young artist practicing an instrument, learning how to draw, or developing as an actor.

Second, art teaches us to give life to new ideas, a critical endeavor for any entrepreneur. Art fosters the imagination—a key ingredient for invention, innovation and creating a better future. At its heart, art is the expression of new ideas. It is the way we imagine our future.



The Power of Imagination

Sometimes this imaginative role is explicit. For example, a group of French artists contributed postcards to the 1900 World's Fair that imagine, among other things, machines that can clean your floor for you and mechanical methods of farming. In his book *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams invented an electronic encyclopedia that could fit in your pocket. Recently, an environmental advocacy group in Texas challenged artists to imagine our environmental future. And these imaginative leaps have a real impact on the world: Simon Lake, who invented the modern submarine, was inspired by Jules Verne's book *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*; Martin Cooper of Motorola credited *Star Trek* communicators as his inspiration for the first mobile phone.

The power of imagination is not limited to the realm of science fiction: even artists who are not explicitly imagining the future are honing and using their imaginative skills. Chicago artist Mark Rakowitz has invented inflatable homes for the homeless; the artist Mel Chin invented a new currency to draw attention to lead poisoning; JK Rowling invented a wizarding world that now lives in the hearts and minds of millions.

The Next Generation

At Peoria PlayHouse Children's Museum, our job is to help children become explorers and creators of the world. We take this mission very seriously—indeed, one of the most critical needs in our city and society right now is to raise a generation of people who can make our city strong and our world a better place. While children learn to explore and create in lots of different ways, we are confident that art education is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal.

In our Open Art Studio program, we watch children and parents negotiating the tension between copying an existing model and creating something new. In our “Real Tools” Maker Space exhibit, we see children learning perseverance as they work to realize an idea, often returning again and again over months or even years. In our arts-based summer camps, we see inspiration at work as children look at art, begin to understand the choices artists make, and make their own choices and creations.

While tackling the challenging and serious work of art making, children gain the tools to imagine new ideas and give these ideas life. What better practice is there for creating the vibrant infrastructure, business models and community

of tomorrow? **PM**

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