

The Power of Paint

How science is changing the way schools think about art

On most days, San Bernardino's Barton Elementary looks like most other California schools struggling to make ends meet: There are the familiar modular classrooms, concrete quads and windows covered by metal latticework — an unfortunate reality for children living in high-poverty communities across the nation. But this February day is special. Leaning against the taupe walls, striking images of children's faces, painted with the expertise and expression of true artists, peer back at the very students who painted them. Children talk excitedly about their creations. For most fifth graders at Barton, it's the first time they've painted a self-portrait — and they're loving every minute of it.

Meet the Artists

Barton Elementary, just a few miles from the Inland Regional Center, where the terrorist shooting in December shook the community and the nation, is one of 49 schools currently participating in [Turnaround Arts](#). Turnaround Arts, a combination public-private program organized by the [President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities](#), has a mission across 14 states and 27 districts to use arts education as a catalyst to improve the nation's bottom-performing five percent of schools.

Each school is assigned a high-profile artist, musician or entertainer — Kerry Washington, Chuck Close, Yo-Ya Ma and Jason Mraz to name a few — who, for the duration of the program, will work with students in an effort to inspire and drive creativity across disciplines. [Autumn de Forest](#), a 14-year-old painter from Las Vegas, who has been called a “prodigy” and “genius” by talk show hosts and journalists, is leading the day's art class. Miss de Forest (as Barton's students respectfully call her), is showing the kids how to paint images of themselves on canvas.



Autumn de Forest teaches Barton Elementary fifth graders that anyone can be an artist. Photography by Jen Siska

The day is made possible by [Park West Gallery](#), a Michigan-based art gallery and longtime supporter of arts education, which has donated the supplies the children are using to paint their portraits. “I’d just love to thank Turnaround Arts and the Park West Foundation for getting all the supplies and all the canvases and all the paint,” says Autumn. “Without that, we would not be able to have this happen and just to know that, I am so thankful and so honored to be able to do this.”

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ALBERT SCAGLIONE

Park West Gallery expects that its participation in programs such as the one in San Bernardino will further prove that art is more than an inherent social good, but a crucial, scientifically-substantiated boon to childhood development. Founded by CEO Albert Scaglione, a former NASA contractor who was also a professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, Park West Gallery is best known for its auctions, many of which take place on cruise ships around the world. The company currently operates on over 100 ships and conducts more than 5,000 auctions per year on board, as well as in Ritz Carlton hotels and other luxury properties.

Since the company’s inception, it has been Scaglione’s mission to democratize art and bring its appeal to the masses through public events, philanthropic initiatives and educational efforts. The company has hosted arts seminars in Detroit for decades, open to anyone interested in learning more about the art world. “Ninety percent of the people who come in will never buy anything and we’re fine with that,” says Scaglione. Unlike the rarefied world of many art galleries, Park West Gallery tries to get art in front of as many eyes as possible. “It’s a matter of art education in an entertaining way — a way that’s not stiff. It’s not boring. It becomes something you really enjoy,” he says.

Art, Meet Science

Recently, the scientific community has started backing up what Scaglione and other art lovers have long suspected. Dr. Eugene Beresin, M.D., M.A., a professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the executive director at [The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds](#), has been doing research for years that shows how art contributes to childhood cognitive development. “There’s been research to show that student’s exposure to theater and music is associated with academic engagement, and with academic aspirations with university enrollment,” says Beresin. “We also know that, in addition to academic achievement, that the arts — music, drama, narratives and graphic arts — are associated with building other skills and abilities such as personal identity, positive self-esteem, life satisfaction and giving kids a sense of meaning and purpose.”

Park West Gallery is committed to helping the arts through its [Park West Foundation](#), which has become the primary way the company gives back to the community. “We’re a facilitator, a funding source,” says Diane Pandolfi, the director of the Park West Foundation. “That makes us a springboard to allow good things to happen for so many different constituents.” Pandolfi cites initiatives like the foundation’s work with Autumn, support for the [National PTA](#), as well as a series of spotlight programs that provide access to the world of art through exhibitions of well-known artists. Scaglione adds that the Park West Foundation has become as important to him as the Gallery itself. “The idea that I could have this life where I still have the opportunity to work with the artists, educate, bring art to the public,” says Scaglione. “I’m thrilled about that.”



Barton's boys and girls concentrate to get every detail

correct. Photography by Jen Siska



Many of the children say they had never painted a self

portrait before. Photography by Jen Siska

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Back at Barton Elementary, Malissa Shriver, the executive director of [Turnaround Arts California](#), explains how arts education is integral to shaping young minds across academic subjects. "With the Obama administration's focus on brain research and the neuroscience that's coming out on cognition and memory, there's an opportunity to get another kind of data that's kind of incontrovertible," she says. Turnaround Arts co-chair Margo Lion, whose own career in theater has earned her 20 Tony Awards, four Olivier Awards and one Pulitzer Prize, says that, so far, the program's successes are supported with hard data. A [two-year study](#) of Turnaround Arts schools conducted by Booz Allen Hamilton showed a 22.5 percent increase in math scores and 12.6 percent improvement in reading for participants in the program. "There has also been a wonderful decrease in behavioral reports," says Lion. "I don't want to say that it's a panacea, but it really does make a fundamental change." For Scaglione and Pandolfi, these findings don't come as a surprise: The Park West Foundation operates on the assumption that art, math and science aren't exclusive disciplines, but necessary aspects that are part of holistic education. Scaglione believes that art facilitates "the work of being free to think about something never done before." While scientific justification for the arts is crucial for policy-makers tasked with divvying funds, a short conversation with any of Barton's fifth graders should be enough to convey the power of art education. "I just loved it," says Roberto, 10, standing in front of his portrait, which is splashed with brilliant streaks of blue and purple — what he calls "crazy colors." "Miss de Forest inspired me," he says.

A Lasting Change

As a result of its participation in Turnaround Arts, Barton Elementary is one of the rare “priority-designated” schools that has arts programs year-round, including music, theater and dance. “We are moving forward, raising the scores of students here,” says Barton Elementary School Principal Janice Gordon-Ellis. “Attendance has been great with the students, especially when they’re performing, because they know that they want to be here on time to perform with their peers, and the parent involvement has been even better. The arts are incorporated into all content areas. Our kids are really growing when it comes to language arts and math.”



The canvases, provided by Park West Foundation, are a rarity in public school art classes. Photography by Jen Siska

Early exposure to the arts, like the kids at Barton are receiving, can be a catalyst for years of creative thinking to follow. Successful artists often point to early exposure to art as the reason they were inspired to pursue their careers. [Romero Britto](#) is a world-renowned artist whose eye-popping pop-art paintings sell for tens of thousands of dollars. But growing up in Brazil, Britto had little in the way of traditional artistic instruction. “In a family with nine children, what I learned very early was to struggle and try to figure out [how to make art for] myself,” he says. Still, there was an artist in his hometown, Francisco Brennand, whose work he saw as an early motivation. “He did murals, did ceramics,” says Britto. “I loved to see that all over the city — he had art everywhere.”

Pandolfi, herself a former educational administrator, wants to create inspirational experiences like Britto’s for as many people as possible. “I always believed in developing the whole child in every area and providing them with rich experiences including fine and performing arts,” says Pandolfi. “Art goes to our core as human beings. The Park West Foundation is a supporter, a facilitator — I’m very blessed to be serving in this capacity.”

These days, Britto, who works with Park West Gallery, tries to give back to the community through his partnership with Park West Gallery-supported [Best Buddies](#) foundation and other philanthropic initiatives, so that others have the support systems he did not. “I still think that, in school, they should emphasize more arts and culture,” he says. “It does give a possibility [to] create something unique and new. And this goes for anything and everything — art and business, and so many other areas. [Art] makes you think, we can change, we can make it better. We can improve.” Though Britto recognizes the world’s problems and works hard to change them, he sees art as a way to maintain a positive view of humanity. “My art has been a great outlet for me to keep hopeful, inspired and motivated to have a better day,” he says.

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DIANE PANDOLFI

Another Park West Gallery featured artist, the Jamaican painter [Guy Harvey](#), has similar thoughts about the importance of arts education. Harvey is regarded as one of the world's preeminent marine wildlife artists, painting immersive undersea environments that he observes through his other career as a fish biologist and conservationist. Harvey partnered with Park West Gallery last year after being commissioned to paint the hull of the the [Norwegian Escape](#) cruise ship, which is adorned with a massive rendition of his trademark sailfish.

"The early influence of the parents was huge," says Harvey, noting that his mother and relatives are also artists. "I've lovingly developed my techniques and broadened the media I use to suit the work I do now, but I've also turned it into a profitable business. So my hobby became my profession." That familial link to art also rings true for Scaglione, who fell in love with it after taking a job at his cousin's art gallery in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, when he was just 16. "It was an epiphany," Scaglione says. "I liked the paintings. I liked the smell of paint. I liked meeting artists."

Harvey has credited his painting with informing the way he sees the world as a scientist, as well as drawing attention to the natural world that he fights to preserve through his [Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation](#), which receives support from Park West Foundation. This connection between art, cognitive function and narrative is just the sort of web that Beresin likes to highlight when discussing his psychiatric work. "Music, narrative, drama, and visual arts are an integral part of every culture on the planet," says Beresin. "The human brain has been wired essentially to use artistic endeavors to create meaning, to bring communities together, to tell stories."

Turnaround Arts is providing a medium for those stories to be told. Marissa, 10, says she had tried painting a self portrait before, "with crayons and markers, but it didn't come out too good." She plans to give the painting she made to her mom and dad for their anniversary. (Barton Elementary art teacher, Grace Schmidt, says that, due to lack of funding, she "hasn't worked with canvas in 23 years of teaching.") Autumn thinks that the canvases provided by Park West Foundation have a lot to do with the success of events like this one. "One of my favorite parts is when they say, 'Wow, I didn't know that you could spray paint on a painting. I didn't know that you could put your face on a canvas,'" says Autumn. "And it just makes me feel like I've shown them not only something new and something interesting, but I've introduced them into a whole other part of the world."

The Artists of Tomorrow

Like Britto and Harvey's, Autumn's own childhood — which she points out benefited from more privileged circumstances than Barton's fifth graders — allowed her a unique opportunity to shape the way she sees the world. Autumn first started painting at 5, when she saw her father staining some wood in the garage and "asked him if I could mess around. I wasn't interested in making a masterpiece. I was just having fun and expressing myself, and he turned around and he said it looked like a Rothko. I had no idea what a Rothko was back then, but he's one of my favorite artists now." Autumn also sees a connection between traditional schooling and the power of art. "If [students] can use art and painting as a mnemonic device for [learning], I think it's just fantastic," she says. (That, as a 14-year-old, she uses the term "mnemonic device" could be seen as evidence for the power of art in itself.) "They keep track on the schools and the grades, and they just skyrocket, whether it's arts or dancing or music."