



## Aesthetic Experience Interview

For an assignment for class, we had to interview an artist/ educator about their viewpoints on the topic of [Aesthetic Experience](#). I decided to choose [Jane Alden Stevens](#) to conduct my interview. Having her as an instructor changed my career as an artist. Janie has had many years of experience teaching and working as an artist; living and explaining [aesthetic experiences](#) with and without her students. When I had Janie as an instructor my sophomore and junior years of college, my work and my thoughts behind what I was doing changed drastically. Janie opened my eyes to the aesthetic world. She would ask me questions that would help me understand what my viewers were seeing, why I was photographing what I was, why I was doing it in the manner that I was, and why I chose to develop the images in the way that I was. By answering these questions I soon realized that I was creating my own style, and I was actually capable of creating an [aesthetic experience](#) for the viewer. Janie would make sure to articulate the way she read my work, and help me brainstorm on ways and techniques to push this aesthetic more when moving forward with my work.

Janie is one of the most intelligent people I know. She has knowledge about a lot of information of various topics, and has so many experiences as an educator and artist that her insight on such a topic like this one would be very interesting. I was not only interested to hear how she got to the point of where she is through teaching and living in aesthetic experiences, but also how she thinks it has affected her work as an artist. Even though Janie no longer teaches at the University of Cincinnati in the college of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning, she has been pursuing her career as an artist and photographer even more.

### The interview went as follows:

**KW:** How would you define [aesthetic experience](#) for yourself? To a "non art" individual? To one of your students? To a fellow artist?

**JAS:** To me, an [aesthetic experience](#) is one in which a number of things can happen to the "receiver/viewer". In broad strokes, he/she can respond emotionally or intellectually in some way to the experience. She/he can be moved to ask questions about what they are experiencing. He/she can feel enriched or enlightened in some way. She/he may or may not be able to articulate the sensations being experienced.

**KW:** You stated that you see an [aesthetic experience](#) as one that "in which a number of things can happen to the receiver/viewer". Do you think that an [aesthetic experience](#) that solely revolves around art and the art world, or can anyone have an [aesthetic experience](#)? Can it happen at a restaurant on a cool summer night when the individual is sharing a dinner and a glass of wine with a life long friend? I guess I'm just wondering if you see [aesthetic experience](#) as an experience in which it can only occur in certain circumstances.

**JAS:** I believe that an [aesthetic experience](#) can happen anywhere anytime. It is not something exclusive to art or the art world. Someone could have one while going for a walk, for instance. I also believe that an [aesthetic experience](#) can be had in response to things not made by human hands. Viewing a sunset, a waterfall, etc. could also provide the same.

**KW:** I agree with your statement that an [aesthetic experience](#) can happen anywhere anytime. Through the past two semesters we've been researching a lot into what is an [aesthetic experience](#), how they come about, how you realize when you are experiencing one, and how to teach it to your students. I've come to realize that most of the time it's an occurrence that you find yourself falling into, rather than setting it up for yourself; although, it can be an experience that you expect to have. I keep giving my peers an example of an [aesthetic experience](#) that I was expecting to have when I went to Italy and visited the Sistine Chapel. I was expecting to walk in and have my entire body and self as I am become consumed in the work that I was viewing. I did



indeed have an [aesthetic experience](#), but not the one that I was expecting to have. It very much changed simply by the environment that the work was in that I did not expect to walk into. I believe that environment can play a substantial role in an [aesthetic experience](#). Do you think that this is true?

**JAS:** Yes, totally. Your Sistine Chapel experience is a good example of that. My best example of that was when I was in Salzburg, Austria. It was a totally gloomy, rainy day and I was cold and wet and tired. I was walking down a narrow street in the inner city on my way back to my hotel when I decided to go into a church I happened to be passing. It was nothing special on the outside—in fact, it was so plain that I almost didn't recognize it as a church. But I went in because I simply wanted to sit down and rest for a while before going on. As I entered, it went from gloomy to bright light pouring in through long, slender gothic windows. At the exact moment that I entered, the opening chords of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor rang out unexpectedly, filling the church with glorious, heavenly sound. I was completely paralyzed with shock. I hadn't expected it to be so light inside, I hadn't known that music of any kind would be playing, I hadn't anticipated that I would suddenly be experiencing something so moving, so beautiful, so arresting. The combination of location, elements, my physical state and, yes, the unexpectedness of it all, led to one of the most profound [aesthetic experiences](#) of my life. And it wasn't about the church building, it wasn't about the music itself, it was an experience about how ALL of those things put together transported me to.... Somewhere else.

**KW:** You also stated, "She/he may or may not be able to articulate the sensations being experienced", do you think an individual can undergo an [aesthetic experience](#) without even realizing it until after the fact?

**JAS:** Yes, I believe that this is the case. The term "[aesthetic experience](#)" is a human construct. As such, unless you have had learned about what that phrase means, you could have an [aesthetic experience](#) without really knowing that you are having one.

**KW:** Does [aesthetic experience](#) relate to your photographs? If so, how do you make it work? Why do you choose to have your viewers experience in the format that they do?

**JAS:** When making art, I never set out to consciously provide an [aesthetic experience](#) for my viewer. I see it more as something that might or might not occur. If I do my work well, then it will happen for some viewers. While I think of viewer response when making the work and sometimes try to see things through their eyes, it would be impossible for me to make my work if I made the viewer my primary concern. My main goal is to express the idea I am working towards in a way that satisfies me.

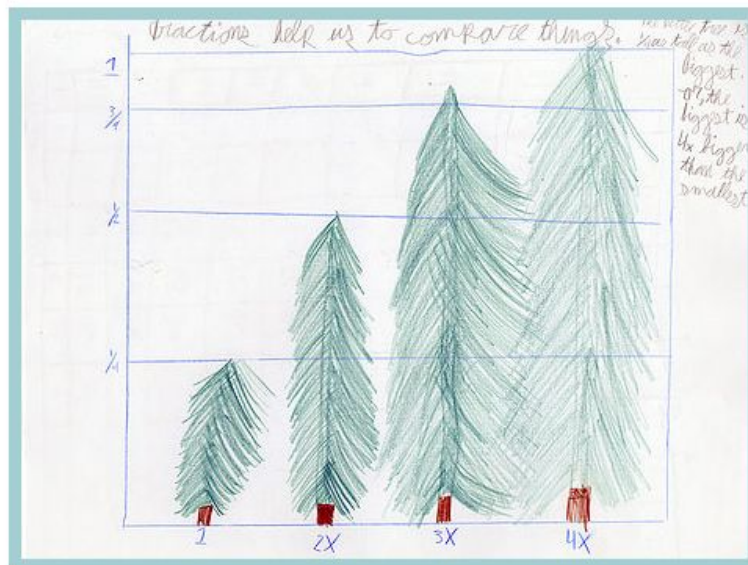
**KW:** Do you believe [aesthetic experience](#) has a role in society today? How do you see yourself contributing to this idea? How can we (collectively as artists) make this happen?

**JAS:** Yes, I believe the [aesthetic experience](#) has a role in society today, because I see it as something that encourages people to think more deeply about and to questions what they are seeing and experiencing. Anytime that people are asked to push themselves in terms of what they believe, see, or think, I am all for it.

**KW:** I, also, agree that it is something in society today, but I don't believe that it is something that is as commonly spoken about as it should be. I know if I go up and hold a conversation with various people about [aesthetic experience](#) they wouldn't have a clue what I was talking about. How do you think we could change that and move forward with it in society?

**JAS:** Through an integrated education at all levels, starting in pre-school. I'm not talking about formal courses, necessarily. But if all schools would offer an approach to learning in which subject matter weren't taught in isolated knowledge silos, it would go a long way towards having discussions about things like [aesthetic experience](#) and point out their value to the human condition. For instance, science could be taught in such a way that students were required to draw pictures of the principles they were learning, in addition to taking notes. A discussion could then occur about how the visuals enhanced their learning of the concepts, and what about the visuals encouraged that learning. There is only one school that I know of that truly does this at all levels, from pre-K through 12th grade, and that is the Waldorf School system.





Waldorf students spend in-class time doing these drawings, all the while discussing with the teacher the concepts being learned. So they are learning both aurally, verbally and visually, as well as through repetition, all at the same time. At the end of the subject block, they hand-bind their drawings to become a subject notebook.

Another example is how Waldorf Schools use movement to reinforce math and group learning. They have a class each year in a type of dance called Eurhythmy. Each class forms their own group that has to perform increasingly complex geometric patterns that morph from one to the other in a continuous flow, all the while using balls, rods, etc. that they pass or throw to each other. The patterns are the ones they are learning about in math or science that year. This approach also fosters collaboration and teamwork, and all grade levels perform their dances for the community twice a year.

I don't mean to use the Waldorf approach as the end-all-be-all of what an education should be, but it is one of the few approaches I know of that really does a great job at integrating [aesthetic experience](#) into all levels and subjects of learning.

**KW:** Your discussion about Waldorf schools is so interesting! We have talked a lot about Waldorf schools not only being one of the fundamental resources to introducing and explaining [aesthetic experience](#), but it is also a good example of holistic education. Waldorf schools seem to have a hold on to a great ideology of hands on learning and experimentation with their students. Your description of the performance of Eurhythmy was really interesting. It is one aspect of Waldorf schools that I have not had heard about before. With as great as Waldorf schools are, there is a great separation between Waldorf schools and the rest of society. I believe a lot of this has to do with the high tuition rates that these schools usually hold.

**JAS:** What's interesting about that is that Waldorf school tuition is actually much less than that of most private schools! But nonetheless, any tuition is still tuition. Another reason why there is this separation has to do with the fact that Waldorf doesn't, in my experience, do a very good job at explaining its approach and philosophy to people who don't already value a lot of what it values. So it ends up preaching to the choir and thus not expanding its customer base.

**KW:** By finding a way to integrate aesthetic experience into the educational system like Waldorf schools would be a great start into truly integrating it into society. After holding this conversation and thinking about it though, I'm battling about whether or not I believe this is a good thing. As you have stated, "If it were truly integrated into everything we learn and how we learn, then we wouldn't be having conversations about its value because it would simply be an understood part of the basis of our lives", and I find that this could be troubling. If we don't invest in something and have conversations about it as we are about [aesthetic experience](#) do we lose it completely?

**JAS:** That's a very good question. I think that constant conversations about it are an absolute necessity, even if we all were raised up in this manner. Something to do with "you don't know what you've got til it's gone".... Discussing it will keep us aware of its



value.

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**KW:** Do you think there's a happy medium between introducing [aesthetic experience](#) to our students in a way that they might not even realize, rather than actually "teaching" them about it, which could in return allow them to lose its value?

**JAS:** I'd like to think that there is a happy medium somewhere, but human beings are messy and I don't know what the solution to that would be!

**KW:** Have you seen [aesthetic experience](#) progress in society already in your lifetime?

**JAS:** Not really. Unfortunately, anything that has to do with [aesthetic experience](#) is generally seen as an add-on, i.e. something that's nice to have, but not really something that is necessary or fundamental to the human experience. The trick is to introduce it to kids as young as possible and then follow through at every age level until adulthood. If it were truly integrated into everything we learn and how we learn, then we wouldn't be having conversations about its value because it would simply be an understood part of the basis for our lives.

**KW:** How can we make individuals have these [aesthetic experiences](#) and stop and think about what they are seeing, experiencing, and doing in their lives?

**JAS:** [Education, education, education](#). That can happen in so many forms- through writing (articles in newspapers, magazines, blogs, etc.), through discussion (in settings both formal- i.e. classrooms, and informal- i.e. with friends and family), through programs, etc.

**KW:** After discussing Waldorf's schools integration of aesthetic experience into their curriculum, I believe its important to discuss how do you teach someone about [aesthetic experience](#)?

**JAS:** By introducing them to things that ask them to question what they are experiencing. Be it music, writing, art or other types of endeavors, exposing people to things that ask them to broaden their perspective, or to at least question their current perspective, is something that can reap great results. It also helps to have someone to help guide that process, be it through a teacher, docent, friend, family, etc.

**KW:** Thinking back, I believe that you are the one who introduced to me [aesthetic experience](#), even though I may have not realized it at the time. I don't think that I had experienced an [aesthetic experience](#) while in your class, but you opened my eyes up into its existence. Your patience and attention to such fine details, and the conversation that would be had about our work allowed me to see that I could truly create a "life changing" experience for my viewers. I didn't realize what it was I was thinking and learning about until we started having this conversation about [aesthetic experience](#) in my art education classes. It just opened my eyes to all of the experiences that I could look back on that lead to my realization about it.

**JAS:** REALLY???!!! Wow- I find that hard to believe, but this points out how important the concept of lifelong learning is! It's like building blocks- one piece of knowledge builds on and enhances another. It also points out that we often don't know what we know, and only when another puzzle piece falls in place do we become aware of it.

**KW:** Do you have any techniques or experiences that you have found to be beneficial in your teaching that you would like to pass on?

**JAS:** If I were to help another person become aware of their [aesthetic experiences](#), I would start by asking them questions about what they are seeing/hearing/reading, etc. Examples might be: When you look at that, what are you experiencing/thinking/feeling? Does it make you ask questions? What do you think you are responding to- the color, the shape, the form, the setting, the smells, the sounds, etc.? Does it make you think of/remind you of something else? If so, how did you make that connection?

**KW:** Well, Janie, I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about this topic. I believe that we had a great discussion about how [aesthetic experience](#) is living in our world today, and how it can progress from here. I appreciate you taking the time to answer all of my questions.