

Art: Inspiring Civil Action

“What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes if he’s a painter, ears if he’s a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he’s a poet? Quite the contrary, he is...a political being constantly alert to the horrifying, passionate or pleasing events in the world, shaping himself completely in their image.”

-Pablo Picasso

“In the largest sense, every work of art is protest. ... A lullaby is a propaganda song and any three-year-old knows it. ... A hymn is a controversial song - sing one in the wrong church: you'll find out.”

-Pete Seeger

A song, a hasty sketch, or a script: Art in its varied and constantly evolving forms has served to shape the course of history. Artists have used their tools to portray a spectrum of both positive and negative human emotions, desires, and needs. And, in times of upheaval and change, artists from every corner of the world have used their unique talents to promote civic engagement.

Art has impacted politics and drawn attention to key issues. Art speaks, and its loud or whispered message is often profound and simple: "Look! Listen!" Consider the use of photography during the Vietnam War. These searing images “elicited strong emotional reactions that rippled through our divisive society,” prompting widespread protests after their publication. Photographer Nick Ut’s image of nine-year-old Kim Phuc fleeing down a road naked, burned, and terrified after a napalm attack has become part of the collective consciousness and is often attributed as a key element which helped change public opinion against the war.

Art's potential in shaping civic engagement is not limited to only visual styles. As noted by The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Music and singing played a critical role in inspiring, mobilizing, and giving voice to the civil rights movement.” Music was used to provide a sense of unity, determination, joy, and freedom, and songs such as “We Shall Overcome” and “This Little Light of Mine” have continued to resonate with generations of activists around the globe. The words, at times, were adapted to reflect current issues, but the messages delivered by these tunes are powerfully transcendent and timeless.

Last year, protests against systematic inequality in Chile produced an outpouring of street art, featuring elaborate graffiti of injured eyes, police brutality, and artistic messages hastily scrawled against policies. A local resident remarked that “I far prefer this painted and awakened Chile to a passive and quiet oasis.” With art covering streets and buildings, it was impossible not to see the political and moral issues raised by the public. Their colorful messages of protest were loud and clear.

Ultimately, artists shape both perceptions and action. Song, dance, sculpture, drama, painting, and photography can be intensely personal pursuits but when they are directed in the public arena, creative energy is a powerful force that can inspire action.

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Information gathered from R. Lawson's "Vietnam War Images- Photojournalism's Impact on Public Opinion," (rlawsonauthor.com), Sara Berger's "War Images: "Napalm Girl,"" (confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu), The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute's "Songs and the Civil Rights Movement," (kinginstitute.stanford.edu), Natalia Ramos Miranda's "Chile awakened': Graffiti across shattered city reflects protest intensity," (reuters.com), and Eli Anapur's "The Strong Relation Between Art and Politics," (widewalls.ch).