

Biography of Oscar W. Neale

Oscar Neale was an educator for half a century. He came to Stevens Point Normal School in 1917 and was director of Rural Education until his retirement in 1944. He then ran and was elected to the Wisconsin State Senate for two, 4-year terms. Following his death at age 83, a dormitory on the UWSP campus was named for him. Oscar Neale taught the first picture study course in a public institution in Wisconsin and was an authority on picture interpretation.

Picture here: 1945 Yearbook dedicated to Neale

Mr. Neale's first three years of teaching were in rural schools in Nebraska. Art appreciation was one of Mr. Neale's principal interests. One day while county superintendent in Nebraska, he stopped at a school where the teacher was pasting from a women's magazine on the school's walls. "I realized then," he recalled, "that we were not paying enough attention to the artistic side of life for the children." Mr. Neale went and bought, on credit, a collection of pictures that he carried with him as he went about on visits to country schools. He carried a phonograph with him, playing music as he taught. That was the first time many of the people of rural Nebraska had ever seen a phonograph. Mr. Neale's collection grew to 200 pictures that he carried with him in two iron trunks that traveled with him all over the nation where he was called to give picture study interpretations.

Picture here: Oscar Winfred Neale (right) with his wife and two sons. Stevens Point, 1917

Picture here: One of Neale's picture study texts

Mr. Neale authored many articles and two widely used texts, Picture Study in the Grades, published in 1925, and World Famous Pictures, published in 1933. Both these texts remain in the UWSP Archives. Mr. Neale traveled to hundreds of high schools to speak to prospective college students and to give commencement addresses and other speeches. He had an outgoing personality and was a gifted and persuasive speaker. A former student recalled his teaching with enthusiasm, remarking that Neale's classroom was in the un-air conditioned upper floor of Old Main, but students flocked to his classes and were not distracted by the summer heat.

Mr. Neale is survived by two grandchildren: Jean Neale Stassel of Anchorage, Alaska and her brother Jim Neale of Georgia. Mrs. Stassel remembers her grandfather with great regard. She recalls his many years of Sunday school teaching where even the most active boys "would sit quietly, enraptured by his words." The descendants of Oscar Neale have donated \$1.9 million to UWSP to create the three largest scholarship programs offered here: the Oscar W. Neale Scholarship in Education, the Neale Alumni Honors

Scholarships for entering freshman, and the Robert and Ventura Neale Memorial Scholarship for continuing Neale Alumni scholarship recipients.

WHO WAS OSCAR W. NEALE?

Neale's background and experience obviously influenced his actions, choices of approach, and style, and help us understand the ecology of Picture Study. Study of this ecology raises questions about parts b, d, and e in Stankiewicz's formulation, but I want to picture the context of the movement, not belabor too many issues difficult to "prove."

Neale was never an artist or an art-specialist teacher. From 1917 to 1944, he was director of rural education at Stevens Point Normal School, which later became part of the University of Wisconsin system. After his death, one of the buildings at Stevens Point was named in his memory (Dowd, 1976). His interest in art probably began in 1896 at Doane Academy, a prep school associated with Denison University in Ohio. While at Doane, Neale elected to take drawing, an unusual step for a student following the classical course of study. He may have attended the public art appreciation courses given by faculty members from Shepherdson College, an institution affiliated with Denison 2.

Neale became a county school superintendent in Nebraska and later joined the faculty of a teacher training school in Kearney, Nebraska. His period of superintendency, in the Platte area, had quite an impact on the rest of his career. In later years, he liked to recall that he became acquainted there with Buffalo Bill and had discussed Rosa Bonheur with him (Neale, 1927).

More important, Neale came to feel that the arts were neglected in teacher education and children's education, and determined to do something about it. The incident that triggered this decision, Neale claimed, was the discovery of a young teacher in a one-room rural school covering the walls of her classroom with pictures clipped from the pages of a dressmaker's magazine. She had no source for attractive and aesthetically valuable education visual aids, nor standards for choosing such aids. Neale reacted very strongly to what he felt was a demeaning situation for the teacher and a lost educational experience for the students. Years later, he was reported as saying that this incident had shown him that there had been too much emphasis on the three R's, and he set about remedying this through a one-man crusade. He bought reproductions on credit then toured schools to give talks about these pictures. Incidentally, he also carted about a phonograph, thus becoming a kind of early arts educator (Neale Retires, 1944).

Neale became a speaker on the tent Chautauqua circuit. A newspaper clipping of 1927 described his two decades on the Chautauqua platforms and continued; "Today Mr. Neale's 200 reproductions are still intact, enclosed in two iron trunks that have traveled with him all over the nation where he has been

called to give picture study interpretations. Iron stands and racks are part of his equipment and the entire display can be erected and made ready for use in an hour's time." The article describes something of the structure and content of these presentations; "The exhibit starts with masterpieces for the little folk, the children who are taught to correlate them with their studies in music, history, geography and literature. Another group is for high school age and still another division appeals to the adult age, in relation to music and song."

Neale seems to have been an outgoing personality and a persuasive speaker. A former student recalled his teaching with enthusiasm, remarking that Neale's classroom was in the un-air-conditioned upper floor of a Stevens Point building, but students flocked to his classes and were not distracted by the summer heat during his presentations. Neale's postretirement career as a Wisconsin state senator also suggests that he could attract and hold an audience.

NEALE'S STATEMENT ABOUT ART AND PICTURE STUDY

The actual statements Neale made about art works in his classes and public lectures are difficult to determine, though something about them can be imagined by examining his publications. Neale's Preface to *Picture Study in the Grades* (1927) included this declaration: "Picture Study in the Grades aims primarily to develop in the children of our schools an appreciation and so that their ideas may be influenced by the patriotism, the piety and the beauty which the great artists of different ages have given the world" (n.p.). In the same preface, Neale quoted G. Stanley Hall's discussion of Picture Study:

Teachers do not realize how much important, not only for children but for everyone who has special artistic training, the subject matter of a picture is than its execution, style, or technique. The good picture from an educational standpoint of view is either like a sermon teaching a great moral truth or like a poem, idealizing some important aspect of life. It must palpitate with human interest (Neale, 1927, n.p.).

Hall held a position of esteem in the early years of the century somewhat similar to that of Jean Piaget or Howard Gardner of Harvard's Project Zoo at the present. He had articulated that latest and most convincing theories about children's intellectual and psychological development. Although Neale did not list a citation for the Hall quotations, it was from the last in a four-part series of articles, "The Ministry of Pictures," in *The Perry Magazine* of 1900 (pp. 387-388). The title Hall chose indicated his belief about the role of art.

In Neale's *World Famous Pictures* (1933) the religiosity suggested by Hall's title was modified by Neale toward a more general moral or ethical attitude. This can be seen in Neale's comments about a painting by Gerrit Bencker entitled *Men are Square*. The reproduction shows a noble workman, muscular arms folded, looking forthrightly at the viewer. The painting could easily pass as

an example of roughly contemporary Stalinist socialist realism. According to Neale:

The artist Bencker has chosen the American City working man as the subject for his picture "Men are Square." The laboring man forms a great bulk of our citizenry. Forty percent of our wage earners depend upon our industries for a living. The great thought which the painter has expressed is the dignity of labor. He has presented a working man, a familiar everyday sight, but portrayed with a grandeur and power that suggests thought far beyond the commonplace. (1933, p. 296)

As was often the practice in Picture Study texts, Neale included a literary quotation in his commentary: "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates and men decay" (p. 298).

Apparently Neale felt compelled to bear further witness to his awareness of the relationship of this idealization of workers and the Depression, in an astonishing statement for a Republican: "Another implication...is that big business today is forcing the profit motive. Who will dare question the whole notion of unbounded private profits?" (p. 298).

Neale's earlier book, *Picture Studies in the Grades*, is more often cited than *World-Famous Pictures*. The earlier book dealt with 47 artists and had 63 reproductions, all printed in half-tone on a pale yellow background. The pages of the book are about 5" x 8½" "and the picture areas smaller. *The Angelus* (a favorite Picture Study choice) is reproduced in a 4½" x 3 5/8" size. This can be compared to a typical reproduction in the Perry Picture series with a sepia tone picture area of 2¾" x 2". Neale listed each picture's representational content and a few biographical details about the artist. Several discussion questions to be used while studying the pictures were given. There were a few suggestions for language arts projects and questions that would motivate discussion or essay writing rather than studio art activity or aesthetic analysis. The later *World-Famous Pictures*, in contrast, did have some suggestions for studio activities.

Eisner and Ecker (1966) stated that Picture Study "was directed to issues that present-day art educators would be inclined to call extraneous to concerns of art" (p. 6). If they meant by this that formal values (composition, color, etc.) were not considered, such a statement is not entirely true. In approximately fourteen instances in *Picture Study in the Grades*, Neale did not always exclude features. Moreover, Picture Study writers as a whole did not always exclude features considered important to a formalist theory of art or to the art education concerns associated with Arthur Wesley Dow, an art educator highly regarded in the 1920's.

Al Hurwitz and Stanley Madeja (1977) disparagingly pointed out Picture Study's emphasis on French genre paintings. At least twelve artists whose work

could be so labeled were included in *Picture Study of the Grades*. There was nothing included before Raphael and no artist considered who, in 1927, could have been termed “modern.” A comparable text, *Masterpieces in Art*, by William Casey (1926), also included twelve genre painters. In Casey’s book Millet was represented by four reproductions. When this is compared to one Michelangelo (a surprisingly un-fig leafed *David*) and no artist before Donatello, a certain imbalance is evident. John Singer Sargent, who died in 1925, could then be considered almost contemporary and was represented in Casey’s book.

Some of the limitations of Neale’s fellow Picture Study writers are astonishing. For example, in 1923 the director of drawing for the New York City public schools stated, in a manual for teachers, “The ancient Egyptians, over 4000 years ago, were, as far as known, the first to practice painting” (Collins, p. 15). Belle Boas (1924), who taught in New York City in a school associated with Columbia’s Teachers College, listed (but did not include reproductions as examples) a far more wide-ranging and comprehensive group of artists than did Neale or most other Picture Study texts. The New York City director of drawing aside, authors of Picture Study texts may have been constrained less by lack of knowledge than by lack of choices in reproductions available and economic restrictions, a problem not unknown to art appreciation or art history text writers today.

THE FRAMEWORK OF TIME AND PLACE FOR NEALE’S WORK

Having outlined Neale’s career and discussed the nature of his writing, I now want to explain the relationship between Neale’s environment and his approach to Picture Study. I use the word “environment” to refer to both time and place. “Time” refers to Neale’s Picture Study activities, a little after 1900 through the 1930s. Place refers mainly to the American rural Middle West, even though his texts were distributed all about the century.

Neale’s education included the time at the prep school related to Denison University. In the 1890s, Denison was a small, Baptist-sponsored college. It was from there that William Rainey Harper moved on to direct the Chautauqua Institute and then to serve as president of the University of Chicago. Harper was an educational enthusiast who believed that masses of people can engorge vast amounts of learning (Gould, 1961). I believe that Neale, besides being exposed to visual art, picked up the idea that cultural concerns could be vividly presented to a public that, in turn, would be infected by enthusiasm and would respond positively. Of course, an assertion that Neale chose to be enthusiastic must be made with acknowledgement that there is evident he was attracted to public persuasion and advocacy and had plenty of energy.

Although the Chautauqua Institute of Harper and the tent Chautauqua of Neale have to be differentiated (Gould, 1961), both aimed at a combination of entertainment and adult education. Both presented cultural events or

performances and informative lectures dealing with cultural or social concerns. The Chautauqua Institute was founded by a Protestant denomination that, like others in America, had some evangelical strands. Neale on the tent Chautauqua circuit shared platforms with William Jennings Bryan and the famous evangelist Billie Sunday. Neale sometimes substituted as a preacher which suggests the possibility that he could, perhaps did, adopt a rather evangelical style for his art discussions.