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Art appreciation, then and now

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JEREMY FLEMING (2)

Art appreciation, then and now

TO MANY FOLKS, the value of a Furman education is equivalent to their earning potential after receiving a diploma. For others, it's the school's reputation as a stepping stone to graduate school, the strong social connections we make while students, or the small classes that allow us to have meaningful relationships with teachers and mentors.

Whatever Furman means to you, you're likely to discover its worth in the unexpected moments of life, perhaps even decades after graduation, when academic accolades and how much money you make seem less important than the memories you shared and the knowledge you gained.

One crucial thing I learned as an undergraduate at Furman is how to look at art. While traveling with my family last summer, I observed crowds of tourists as they jockeyed for position in front of works by Michelangelo at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and da Vinci at the Louvre in Paris. Those scenes were scantily different from the camera-wielding throngs we encountered along the Place Vendome as fans waited outside Parisian hotels for glimpses of pop singers Lady Gaga and Shakira.

But art's far too complex for such superficial admiration. I learned this the hard way my senior year when I found one of my favorite professors, Olof Sorensen, removing one of my canvases from its frame. He was planning to paint over it in a class demonstration.

Never mind that I considered this work — which amounted to little more than photocopies of Andy

Warhol's face plastered to the surface with dabs of paint and adhesive letters — my *pièce de résistance*. I'd been careless to leave it on the floor of the painting studio, thus Sorensen deemed it disposable. Was it art? Yes! Was it good? No! Yes!? Huh? I realized my painting's 15 minutes were over, and we both laughed.



Art has never ranked among Furman's most populous majors, but for those of us who studied in the brand new Thomas Anderson Roe Art Building in the late 1980s, being art majors felt like being pioneers — in more than one sense of the word. We had freedom and experiences unlike any other group on campus.

If you took a painting class from Tom Flowers, the Japanese (now Asia) Garden on campus wasn't naturalistic enough for you. To conjure expressionistic mountains and trees, you traveled to vantage points

all over northern Greenville County with your tubes of Cerulean Blue and Indian Yellow. With Bob Chance, you got to rock and roll, get your hands dirty, and spin your pottery wheel to the sounds of your favorite mixtape.

Down the hall, Jinger Simkins-Stuntz separated the true photographers from the wannabes. In the days before Power Point, she welcomed the massive slide show that accompanied my 24-page research paper on Jean-Michel Basquiat. And before Kathy Strother taught art education at Furman, she taught me the elements of art — shape, line, color, texture, form, space and value — at Greenville's Wade Hampton High School.

As for Furman's value, I'm learning more about it every day. Last September, while in New York on a whirlwind 24-hour business trip, I made a side jaunt to the Museum of Modern Art to see the Willem de Kooning retrospective. There, in the brush strokes of this modernist master, flourishes of Flowers' fluid landscapes and Sorensen's polygonal day-glo paintings appeared like apparitions beneath the brightly colored canvases — reminders that the joys of art and creation have nothing to do with recognition and fame.

It's not what you see. It's how you see.

— KRISTI YORK WOOTEN

The author, a 1991 graduate, is a freelance writer and creative consultant in Atlanta. Her article "When the Wall Came Tumbling Down," about the fall of the Berlin Wall, appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of Furman. Visit www.kristiyorkwooten.com.