
U.S. Democratic Experimentalism with the Arts: Jane Addams, Albert C. Barnes, & Rollins/Black Mountain College

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Abstract

For early U.S. thinkers like Emerson and Whitman, practices of creative making and engaging had ethico-political dimensions that were inseparable from their aesthetic dimension. Whether one's craft was writing, woodworking, farming, painting, or poetry, they thought the experiential and experimental nature of such engagement could generate "fully awake" citizens and a robust participatory U.S. democracy. Through such practices individuals could shape/author themselves; could critically question and re-work received wisdom, apply it anew to different problems and circumstances; and could fight pressures to succumb to some "anaesthetized," alienated, or dogmatic status quo. Classical American pragmatist John Dewey further developed this theme in essays like "The Lost Individual" and his book *Art as Experience*.^[i]

Currently in the U.S., hotly contested debates rage over U.S. higher education. Though many argue for prioritizing "useful" S.T.E.M. fields (science, technology, engineering, math) and ever-narrower technical or vocational training designed to turn out good workers, the centuries-old pragmatist theme of *art praxis* in the service of democracy is still alive and well—both as practice and as an emerging theoretical framework. The core pragmatist insight that interweaving aesthetics, politics, and persons can enrich democratic engagement seems, today, more pressing to explore than ever.

This paper thus traces three "sites" of 20th-century U.S. pragmatist democratic experimentalism in the arts, and suggests that they mark **an emerging U.S. pragmatist democratic aesthetics**. Each site is an experiential and experimental "micro-lab" where the arts or practices of creative making were enlisted to further some greater democratic aim at work. The first experimental micro-lab is the work of Jane Addams at Chicago's Hull-House (1889-1960's), an exemplar of the U.S. settlement movement aims of democratization of both the country and its waves of immigrants. In this context, Addams enlisted both crafts and high arts practices (both making and interpretation as forms of engagement) in the service of the democratic mission of Hull-House. The second experimental micro-lab considered is the Philadelphia Argyrol factory (1902) of Albert Barnes, precursor of the eventual Barnes Foundation (created in 1922, opened 1925) and museum that now stands in Philadelphia and houses one of the most extensive and valuable collections of modern art in the U.S. The last micro-lab is the evolution of the "pragmatic liberal arts" as a distinctly American educational model. I trace the trajectory of U.S. liberal arts colleges (using Rollins college as an exemplar, home to the 1931 Dewey-led Curriculum Conference and repeated ones over the years) and even more experimental colleges that developed as offshoots (Black Mountain

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College, 1933-57 as an exemplar).

Through the arts, these micro-labs incubated pragmatist educational theories/practices; pragmatist theories of a shared democratic social ethic (notably, a recent focus of scholarship on Jane Addams, cosmopolitanism, and moral imagination); aesthetic engagement as an antidote to often-alienating industrial work, or strategies for breaking down art/life/work divides; and a distinctly U.S. pluralistic approach to aesthetic engagement and judgments. In conclusion, I suggest that considering the three together offers useful lessons for current higher education debates about the value of the liberal arts itself as a democratizing force, in both national and transnational contexts.

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Dewey, John, "The Lost Individual" in *Individualism Old and New*, Prometheus Books, 1930.
Art As Experience, New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934.

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