David Burton

NAEA Distinguished Fellows Interview
July 22, 2024
Interviewer: Dustin Garnet
NAEA History and Historiography

DG (Dustin Garnet): Let's begin.

DB: (David Burton) My name is David Burton. I am a retired art educator. I taught for 40 years in the Department of Art Education at Virginia Commonwealth University, from 1977 until 2017.

DG: Let's begin with your early influences and personal background. Can you tell me a bit about your early experiences with art. Where did it all begin for you?

DB: I grew up in a very small town, Richfield Springs, in central New York State. It was basically a bedroom community surrounded by farms, forests and a lake. It was very idyllic, a Norman Rockwell town. Most of the art I did as a child was pencil drawing on lined paper. I don't recall having many crayons, except for the little Crayola 8 boxes. I do remember coveting my friend's box of 64 crayolas. I am sure my parents would have bought some, but I guess I didn't speak up. Color is an obsession with me now. I will buy almost any book on color. I didn't paint very much either as a child or teenager. I drew a lot of floorplans and build little houses out of wood scraps. I wanted to be an architect.

DB: The earliest art "lesson" that I can remember was when I was 4 or 5. My uncle showed me how to blend colors with crayons using circular motions, not back-and-forth zigzags. As far as formal training or art lessons from specialist art teachers, there as very little of that in my school. I was mostly self-taught. I have very distinct memories of teaching myself perspective and optical illusions, and things like that. I especially remember drawing projective shadows of objects floating in the air.

DB: Aunt Mae, my grandfather's third wife, and the only grandmother I knew (although not a blood relative) was an artist and all-around creative person. I remember being very impressed with her watercolors and oil paintings. I still have a China dessert plate she painted when she was a young woman. (China painting was a popular activity for young women in the 19th century.)

DB: When I was in elementary school, art was done by the classroom teacher, along with a dozen other subjects. We didn't have regular art classes although a specialist would come in about once a month to teach a special lesson like ceramics or printmaking. As in many small towns, my school was a central school. All the grades—K through 12—were in one building on Main Street. My mother was the elementary librarian. At that time, there were three teachers for each elementary grade. One teacher at each grade level emphasized math and science, another proffered language arts and history, and the third had a penchant for art and music. My mother made sure I was always with the teacher who did a lot of art and music.

DB: I remember Mrs. Young, my fifth grade teacher, in particular. She gave us a steady stream of seasonal craft projects and free drawing time. She was the teacher who organized a field trip to the first real museum I ever visited. It was the Munson Williams-Proctor Art Museum in Utica. I remember distinctly two vivid experiences from that trip. The first related to Thomas Cole's four enormous *Voyages of Life* paintings. In one of them, there is a Taj Mahal-type building embedded in a cumulus cloud formation. I didn't see it until one of my classmates pointed it out to me. And even then, I had to really look to see it.

DB: The other experience was with a tiny Arthur Dove painting (about 6" x 10") called, "Foghorns". There were three "flowers" of concentric, muted pastel colors in it. It struck me that this was exactly what foghorns would look like if you could see their sounds. I didn't actually *hear* the foghorns, but I understood cognitively what they would sound like. Dove has remained one of my favorite painters. Many years later I discovered synesthesia and became fascinated with it and its multisensory potential for art education. I am not an actual synesthete, but my college roommate is. I eventually was able to work synesthesia (metaphorically) into my doctoral dissertation. I guess that experience would qualify as "transformative art education". You never know when a watershed moment will become a lifelong stream…

DG: Who were the people who influenced you in high school or in college:

DB: I didn't take any art courses in high school. I was on an academic track. But I draw all the time. As I said, I was mostly self-taught. I attended Syracuse University. I really didn't have any idea what to major in. I took an art course for non-art majors during my freshman year and got an A in it. The professor was Sylvia Wycoff, who was a good friend of my neighbor back in Richfield Springs. My roommate suggested I major in art. My whole life has been a series of happy accidents, stumbling into fortuitous situations, backing into opportunities. I am an optimist, so I rarely say, "no", and then, it turns out, things usually turn out for the best. I am very lucky that way.

DB: The first year at Syracuse was a variety of humanities courses. This gave me time to decide on a major. I began Art Foundation as a sophomore. I had an instructor by the name of Larry Bakke, who was a tremendous influence on me. He introduced me to a pantheon of ideas about art and aesthetics. Big ideas!!! He just blew my mind and instilled in me the idea that art went way beyond pretty pictures. He was an inspiration to me because he challenged me intellectually. Even after 60 years, I still give money to Syracuse University in his name. Several years ago, his wife sent me one of his drawings which I cherish.

DB: I finally graduated in 1967 with a degree in painting and printmaking. As you know, such a degree does not prepare one for a life of luxury. In that respect, I had to seek an alternate path to feed myself, and that eventually led me to art education.

DB: I had a variety of different jobs after I graduated from Syracuse. I went to Philadelphia and attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts for one semester. I met the printmaker Will Barnett there. In January 1968, I went to New York. Barnett introduced me to Seymour Lipton, and I worked for him briefly. Lipton was a sculptor who had developed an ingenious constructive sculpture method using Monel sheet metal and German silver, a nickel-based alloy. My job was to braze the German silver over the Monel sheet metal to create a texture resembling cast bronze. Then Lipton and I fabricated the sheets into convoluted, three-dimensional sculpture. It's a fascinating process but I think it has been lost since Lipton's death.

DB: At that time, my day-job was as a social service caseworker for the New York Department of Social Services. I visited welfare recipients in their homes and interviewed them. My caseload was in the middle of Harlem. It was quite an eye-opener for a green kid who had grown up in an idyllic, Norman Rockwell community.

DB: Social Services downsized after six months, and I had to find another job. I thought it would be interesting to work for a museum, so I applied to the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum. The next day, the Metropolitan Museum called me in for an interview. Apparently, one of the guards had dropped dead of a heart attack. (I have gotten *three* jobs because someone suddenly dropped dead!) At that time, the Metropolitan had Picasso's *Guernica* on indefinite loan. The man interviewing me took me into the room where it hung. In retrospect, I know he wanted to see my reaction to being interviewed in front of one of the 20th centuries' greatest artistic masterpieces. Apparently, I did okay because I got the job. I was a night guard (midnight to 8AM) for a year. It was very interesting to peek behind the scenes of a major museum, to see exhibits as they developed.

DB: I eventually realized that I needed to do some serious reevaluation of my future. I decided to become an art teacher. I applied to New York University, Hunter College and Pratt Institute. I asked Seymour Lipton if he would write recommendations for me, and he kindly agreed. I got into all three schools. I later found out Lipton was a trustee of all three institutions. It pays to have influential friends! I decided to go to NYU.

DB: NYU was the right choice for me. I did almost all my coursework with Jerry Hausman and David Ecker, two major figures in art education. Jerry was a delightful, cherubic man who had been a major figure in art education since it was founded in 1947. He had been one of the first editors of the *NAEA Yearbooks* and *Studies in Art Education*. My undergraduate degree was in painting and printmaking; I did not have a background in art education. Jerry understood that and he became a mentor to me. He had a gentle, compassionate side; his perspective was on the student.

DB: David Ecker, on the other hand, was more philosophical and theoretical. He was very interested in aesthetics, as was I. His research was more analytical than Jerry's. He and

Elliot Eisner had co-edited *Readings in Art Education,* a major text at that time. He challenged me intellectually, as Larry Bakke had done at Syracuse. I was Ecker's graduate assistant in his aesthetics class for one semester. His approach to aesthetics was experiential, not historical.

DB: But I still didn't have any classroom experience and I hadn't student taught. I had stumbled on to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, and that hit the target with both Hausman and Ecker. They saw me as much more philosophical than I really was. David suggested I continue on and get a doctorate. (Times were different then.) Penn State was among the schools he suggested, and that is where I decided to go.

DB: Again, it was a fortunate choice. The other schools I considered were empirically oriented with experimental, statistical dissertation topics, things I was not at all prepared to undertake. At that time, Penn State was taking a much more humanistic, hermeneutic approach. It was a much softer, open-ended Zen approach. Remember, Victor Lowenfeld had founded the Art Education Department at Penn State, and Lowenfeld was, if anything, innovative, an educator who was thinking visual and haptic when everyone else was thinking materials and techniques. Lowenfeld had died in 1960 and there was an entirely new faculty but there was still that sense of Penn State as *avant-garde,* the *creative* thinkers. Research topics and directions were wide open. Indeed, the more innovative, the better. Right up my alley. The faculty was stellar: Ken Beittel, Bill Stewart, Alice Schwartz, Bill Bradley, John Marlowe, Rip Hoffa, Yar Comicky. Ken Beittel was my dissertation advisor, but it was Bill Stewart who really got me through.

DB: I graduated in 1973 with very few job prospects. In August, I received a call from the University of Texas at Arlington. Someone had died suddenly! (The second time a sudden death granted me a much-needed job.) I went to UTA and began teaching two weeks later. I was there two years. I stayed in the central Texas area for two more years and taught part-time in Dallas and Fort Worth. I had provisional certification because Texas required a course in Texas government (go figure!) in its certification requirements. I took a CLEP test to meet that requirement.

DB: About the time I got certified in Texas and was ready to apply for jobs in their public schools to get some real educational experience, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University died of a heart attack. (The third sudden death!) A friend of mine from Penn State, Al Schantz, was on the VCU faculty and contacted me. I interviewed and got the job. And as they say, the rest is history. I was at VCU for 40 years. I retired in 2017.

DB: Obviously I enjoy the college life. I was in undergraduate and graduate school for eleven years. I taught a variety of studio courses and art education courses at the University of Texas at Arlington. I have taught just about everything in the VCU Art Education syllabus, and developed a several courses at VCU, as well.

DB: When I arrived at VCU, the Art Foundation Program was taught by faculty drawn from all the other visual arts department. For twenty or so years, I taught two sections of a freshman Art Foundation course called *Communication Vehicles,* which emphasized an aesthetic and perceptual approach to art, the underlying ideas about how art works, along with art education courses. Eventually, Art Foundation hired its own faculty, and I came back to Art Education fulltime. I took over a course called *Art and Perceptual Communication*, which extended the ideas of *Communication Vehicles* into a lecture course about the psychology of art and advertising, color, and perception, with splashes of aesthetics and semiotics thrown in. I taught that for twenty years, in addition to a variety of undergraduate method courses, teaching practica, and student teacher supervision. I also taught the full range of graduate courses. All in all, I have had a delightful and multifaceted career.

DG: Tell me about your research.

DB: One of the advantages of teaching at the university level is the opportunity, indeed, the expectation, to do research, that is, to follow one's own interests and instincts no matter how idiosyncratic they might be. In that, I revel and excel. I have a wide variety of interests, and I have made the most of those opportunities throughout my career to pursue them.

DB: When I began my career, I didn't know what I wanted to do in research. Then I realized nobody else did either. Art teachers tend to be isolated in their own artrooms. In many cases, especially in elementary schools, they are the only art teacher in the school with no one to talk to or compare notes. In secondary schools, there may be several art teachers in an art department but as specialists they are often outside from the academic mainstream. I realized this isolation extends into every facet of art education throughout the country. At that time (and even now), we don't know how many art teachers there actually are or how they teach. There is no set curriculum, as in academic subjects. Each art teacher more or less creates their own art curriculum, often based on personal preferences, not a coherent curricular theory. This is both the curse and blessing of art education.

DB: So, my first forays into research were demographic in nature. I did several national surveys trying to get an overview of the actual circumstances and conditions of art education as a whole, the range and variety of what was taught, how it was taught, by whom and to whom. Several of my surveys were funded by NAEA and NAEF. What I found was both predictable and revealing. Most of all, each survey suggested other surveys and other demographic niches and trajectories.

DG: What did you find?

DB: The most startling revelation for me was about exhibiting student art. In one of my first national surveys, I found that almost all art teachers (over 90%) at all levels regularly exhibit their students' artwork. In many cases, their principal expected them to "decorate" the school. The corollary to this exhibition requisite (again over 90%) was that in most cases the art teachers did most, if not all, of the work of preparing the artwork for exhibition, mounting the display (with signage), and dismantling it every few weeks. It was an exhausting job usually done as an afterschool chore that drained the art teacher's time, resources, and energy. To me, this violated the "prime directive" of education: Anything the students can do, they should do themselves. This begs the question: How can the art teacher get students to mount their own exhibitions?

DG: An interesting question…

DB: Over the next several years, I sought out and interviewed art teachers who, in fact, do teach their students to mount their own exhibitions. There are quite a few. It turns out, exhibition concepts and skills can be taught, and students are generally enthusiastic to tackle this new side of art. What I learned eventually resulted in a book, *Exhibiting Student Art,* published in 2006 by Teachers College Press. This topic, exhibiting student art, has continued to be a major theme, a *force majeur,* throughout my career. I have published many articles and chapters about it, and I have presented on it at many, many state and national conferences. Each year, when I go to the NAEA national convention, I meet a couple new people who have read my book and tell me how it has influenced them to teach their students to exhibit their art. That is very gratifying to me. I guess it shows *Exhibiting Student Art* has some "legs".

DG: What else?

DB: Another outcome of my demographic research is I learned the value of surveys and how to do them. In1999, I attended a session at the NAEA convention in Washington DC where Mary Crovo presented the results of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) national survey of art education. Crovo ended her speech with the tantalizing invitation that grants for the secondary analysis of the NAEP data were available. At the end of the session, only three of us, Read Diket, Bob Sabol, and myself remained. We vowed to submit a proposal to do three interrelated secondary analyses. We submitted the proposal, and it the grant came through. Thus began a close collaboration and friendship among the three of us that has lasted over 25 years. The secondary analyses we did, and a second one a few years larer, eventually led to our receiving the Manuel Barkan Award for Research, and to some degree, contributed to Bob Sabol and I receiving the Elliot Eisner Lifetime Achievement Award.

DB: My other research interests have been historical. Again, I have come across interesting characters in the history of art education whose lives need to be explored and recorded. My first historical exploration was Sara Joyner, who was the first state supervisor of art education in Virginia, and the first vice-president of NAEA. Joyner was a force of nature who did much to advance art education for *all* Virginia students, white and black, when Virginia education was segregated. The original biographical work was done by Pearl Quick as her masters thesis at VCU. Later, Pearl and I collaborated to elaborate Joyner's incredible story more.

DB: While researching Sara Joyner, I stumbled across a reference to an article by Ernest Ziegfeld, *Human Values in a Democracy,* in the *1953 NAEA 3rd Yearbook*. (Ernest was Edwin Ziegfeld's brother. Edwin was the first president of NAEA in 1947. During the first decade of its existence, NAEA published *Yearbooks*, which was a surprise to me. In 1959, the *Yearbooks* ceased, and *Studies in Art Education* began). I became interested in the NAEA *Yearbooks* as a lost archive, and after several years I was able to collect all of them. They are a deep wellspring into the original ideas and ideals upon which NAEA was founded. Recently, NAEA agreed to digitize them and make them available to all on the NAEA website. They are a wonderful and insightful resource into our professional dawn. Everyone interested in the history of art education and NAEA should read them.

DG: How about the NAEA 75th Anniversary Update?

DB: In 2022 NAEA celebrated its 75th anniversary. NAEA wanted to document its history over three-quarters of a century. John Michael had produced a 50th anniversary NAEA history in 1997, so the 75th anniversary only needed to cover the 25 years from 1998 to 2022. Read Diket and I were tapped to co-edit the new update. Read orchestrated this project; I played second fiddle. Together with over 30 contributors, Read and I produced a very complex and monumental update.

DG: What else have you done?

DB: My most recent historical research involves the Father of Pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce was the consummate Renaissance man—a mathematician, logician, philosopher, author, and scientist—considered by many to be the most outstanding American philosopher of the 19th century, if not the all-time greatest American philosopher. Late in his career, he developed a semiotic theory of signs which I believe holds great promise for art education. Curiously, Peirce never held a permanent academic position in any university. His career, spanning three decades, involved geodetic and astronomical research for the U. S. Coast Survey. (The USCS produced navigational maps for the United States.) However, Peirce was a "visual thinker" who expressed himself through a variety of doodles, diagrams, caricatures, and sketches, a feature generally overlooked by philosophical scholars. I am interested in exploring this dimension of his personality and how it influenced his thinking and his Pragmatic philosophy. Seymour Simmons and I recently completed a book chapter about this.

DG: Now that you're retired, what are you doing?

DB: Even though I am retired, I continue to remain active professionally. I still attend our state (VAEA) and national (NAEA) conventions each year. At both conventions, I coordinate mentoring sessions sponsored by our state and national Distinguished Fellows, respectively. I also continue my research into Charles Peirce and his semiotic theory of signs. This year I have co-authored two book chapters to be published in 2026. Ryan Patton and I co-authored a chapter on digital exhibitions for teenagers, and, as I mentioned, Seymour Simmons and I wrote a chapter on the influence of Charles Peirce's career with the US Coastal Survey on his semiotic theory of signs. I find writing exciting, especially when I get to work with such stimulating minds as Ryan and Seymour.

DB: When I was at VCU, the time I had to devote to making art was limited by my teaching, service and research duties. I did some art but a lot of it was prepping for studio classes. Now that I am retired, I have more time to make art. Now, I do more painting and paper sculpture. I also do quite a bit of ceramics and ceramic sculpture.

DG: Looking back over your career, what are the things that you have learned and would like to pass on to future teachers?

DB: Over the years, my interest has shifted from the content of art education—materials and techniques, elements and principles--more to the psychology of students and teachers, what goes on in their minds when they make art and learn to create. Our aim as art teachers is to create the best possible conditions where students feel secure and supported enough to want to make art. I believe it is very difficult to make art if you feel insecure or not self-confident. The social-emotional climate is not neutral; it has to be cultivated in positive and supportive ways. If we can develop a student's sense of self-esteem and self-confidence, making art becomes an expression of that, not just the still life they are looking at.

DG: Have you been involved in shaping art education curriculum at the state or national level?

DB: Yes, actually, quite a bit. At the state level, each year, the State Supervisor for Art Education, Cherry Gardner, held week-long curriculum reviews during the summer. She would call in about 30 art teachers from all three levels to examine, review, and update the Virginia Guidelines for Art Education. (The Guidelines had to be thoroughly reviewed every five years.) The art teachers were different every year. Several of the section leaders, myself included, came back year after year to shepherd the sections. Nominally, these reviews were about the Guidelines but, really, they gave the art teachers an in-depth look at the Guidelines, their structure and mechanics, that is, how to use them to their (the teachers) best advantage. They shared what their colleagues were doing and reflected on art education curriculum in general. It was an intense professional development experience for everyone. The framework was the Guidelines but all the input came from the art teachers.

DB: At the national level, I served on both NAEA Research Commissions as the Task Force Leader for Demographics, and as a reviewer for the NAEA Standards for Art Teacher Preparation. The most recent Standards included a new section on presentation. This followed the format used by the other subject areas. But *presentation* begged the question of exhibition, and I found many of the ideas from *Exhibiting Student Art* somehow crept in there. Whether my book had any influence is not important. The fact that exhibiting student art is now a major section of the Standards is.

DG: Tell me about Legends and Legacies.

DB: Another project I began with the Virginia VAEA Distinguished Fellows is our *Legends and Legacies* initiative. As you know, the real history of art education is embedded in the careers of the thousands of art teachers who have devoted their lives to art education. It is an oral history, indeed an oral heritage, that is unfortunately lost as they retire. The Distinguished Fellows interview senior art teachers and art educators who have had outstanding careers in art education. Then we put the interviews on the VAEA website where other art teachers, and particularly, young people who are planning or preparing for a career in art education can read them and discover what is really possible in a lifelong career in art education. These interviews are spectacular! They are amazing! Right now, we have about 25 interviews. I would like to get it up to at least 50. Can you imagine if we had 50 biographical interviews of art teachers and art educators from all 50 states? That would be 2500 documented careers! What an oral history! It would ground our field in the real world of art education, what art teachers do every day over the course of three or four decades. I think this is an important project. I am very proud of it. Best of all, the NAEA History and Historiography Interest Group has made this their own initiative so I am hoping the idea will spread to other states.

DG: When did you start getting involved with NAEA?

DB: I've been going to NAEA conventions since 1973. San Diego was my first. It was amazing. I have attended all of them since, except Phoenix in 1992, and I have presented at most of them. For the last 10 years I have been coordinating the NAEA Distinguished Fellows Mentoring Sessions.

DG: What do you see as your most meaningful contribution to the field of art education?

DB: Well, I would say (and I think every art teacher would agree with me) that the students I've taught and helped to prepare to be art teachers in their own right are my greatest and longest lasting contribution to art education. They are the heart and soul of art education, and nothing surpasses them.

DB: Beyond them, I think I have traversed the full spectrum of art education—in research and in professional service. The thing about research at the university level is that it compels you to reflect on what you are actually saying and doing. That is to say, I had to think about the big picture while I was working out the details. I had to consider the underlying philosophy while I was tinkering with the practice. I had to think about the aesthetics as well as the brushstrokes. I got to bring together both the yin and the yang at every step along the way. That would have been very difficult to do at the school level. I have been able to keep up a steady stream of research in several different areas, including demographics, exhibiting student art, secondary analysis with the NAEP data, and historical research. I am particularly proud of my book, *Exhibiting Student Art*. It is one of the few books on that topic in art education, and the only book that focuses on both the theory and practice of getting students, not the teacher, to exhibit their own art. As far as service, I have been involved at the state and national in all sorts of roles and projects, too many to enumerate.

DG: In your view, how is the field of art education changing?

DB: I think the biggest change on the horizon is artificial intelligence (AI). I think it will overtake and supplant traditional teaching and brick-and-mortar schools in the next 10 to 20 years. Even now, there are avatars that look so human most people don't know they are talking with a digital deception. It's only a matter of time before human teachers are replaced with AI avatars. Each student will have their own teacher-avatar or avatars. Then, of course, there will be no reason for schools. All students will need is a laptop which they already have. At that point, the question of making actual art—paintings and sculptures—will likely turn the corner into virtual art. That is happening already. It's progress, but it's scary progress, and I think rather sad as well. On the other hand, art education may offer salvation. It may be one of the few subjects left that is hands-on, with vestiges of *human* imagination, inspiration, expression, and creativity hidden within it. Let's hope so. For my own part, I make art almost every day and I will continue to do so as long as I can.

DG: Thank you.

DB. Thank you.