

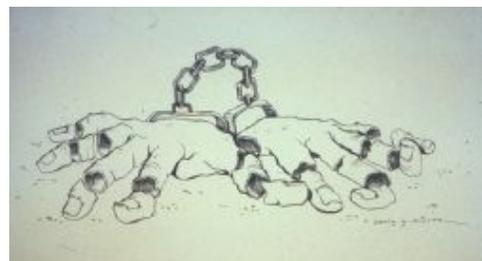
Deaf Art and Artists

Art and deafness share much in common. The visual reliance of both creates a unique way to communicate that is ideally suited to express themes like peace, silence, happiness, deprivation, belonging, and many others without using words at all. Over the years many deaf artists have discovered a way to capture the emotions of being deaf through artwork, combining their experiences with deafness and the mediums that exist in the visual arts. "In 1989 a group of Deaf artists and a Deaf art historian convened to discuss contemporary art by Deaf artists. Recognizing a growing body of work that explicitly explored Deaf culture and Deaf experience, the group issued a manifesto that proclaimed a new genre of art, articulated its defining features, and named it: De'VIA" (Rourke, 2019). De'VIA, or deaf view/image art is the genre many deaf artist paint within to create artwork with meaning to the deaf community and to show the hearing community a small piece of the feelings and experiences deaf individuals have (Durr, 2006). De'VIA represents the visual deaf lifestyle in art. Painters such as Chuck Baird have incorporated sign language into paintings and artists like Betty G. Miller have captured feelings of living in a deaf world through color and tone. These pieces can connect the deaf and hearing



worlds through the commonly shared medium of art. In Chuck Baird's painting, *Art No. 2*, it shows two hands signing art surrounded by the imagination and possibilities of that sign. Much of the hearing community views deafness in a negative light. Deaf artists have found that through paintings and artwork they can gift hearing people both a taste of what it is like to be deaf and a peek at the visual form of communication sign language brings as well as show the damaging emotions deaf people who are deprived of their natural communication and lifestyle experience.

An early artist who started painting in the De'VIA art style was Betty G. Miller (Durr, 2006). She created a famous painting named *Ameslan Prohibited*. In this painting there are two hands cuffed together, showing the feelings deaf people experienced when signing was prohibited (Jay, 2020). Miller portrayed the cruel feeling of loss and enslavement, the same feeling deaf people felt when signing, their only form of expression and communication, was taken from them, leaving them "broken and disabled" not by their deafness itself, but by the theft of their ability to communicate (Durr, 2006). The dark color scheme and stilted lines of the painting show the sadness and loneliness that was a direct result of this theft of communication. The scratches and shading communicate the feelings of oppression, captivity, and loss of identity. Miller used this painting to give the hearing community a sense of the same feelings of loss the deaf community experienced at that time. It offered perspective to people who were never forced to suffer through the same experiences while also showing viewers the importance of signing and deaf identity.



Another famous deaf artist, Chuck Baird, was born with substantial hearing loss and was raised up culturally deaf. Since his teenage years he was actively involved in painting and acting (Chuck Baird, 2020). He attended multiple deaf schools and was a set painter for the national theater of the deaf (Sidlauskas, 2013). Many of Chuck Baird's paintings involve hands signing words using American Sign Language. Most are full of color and the happy creativity and imagination that is characteristic of American Sign Language. In his painting, *Crocodile Dundee*, there is a crocodile looking at his reflection in the water, but rather than his reflection, there are hands signing "crocodile." In this painting, Baird connected both the signing and hearing worlds by incorporating sign language right into the painting



itself. He effectively communicated the visual lifestyle many deaf people lead. The happy tone that is expressed through the vivid colors, intricate patterns, and vibrant clarity of the painting convey the joy of signing and the imagination involved with it. Baird managed this tone despite the subject itself being an animal that many would normally fear. Many of Baird's paintings communicate the richness of being deaf rather than only the negative aspects which most people focus on. Through his artwork you can feel the joy the deaf community feels through signs and the cohesive community that signing offers.

Yet another artist who delved into the realm of De'VIA art was Ann Silver. Silver used her passion for art to create paintings that could educate everyone, regardless of their background or knowledge of the deaf community, about deafness. In a presentation she gave at the University of Columbia, Silver explained how difficult it was to break into the art world with deaf art. People told her it was not "marketable" (Chronicle, 2012). Determined to share her life, perspectives, and experiences with others, she remained persistent. She created many deaf art pieces that showcased the unity of the deaf community and the pride that is associated with being a part of a unique community of individuals who communicate visually. In her piece, *One Way Deaf Way*, it shows that in the hearing world most people believe there is only one right way. Whether that one way is cochlear implants, oralism, or speech therapy, Silver is showing that there is more than one right way of living life.



Through many different forms, deaf artists have shown small glimpses of the feelings of being deaf, both the good and the bad. Though not all artists who are deaf utilized this style, the ones who explored it have created an entire genre of art that connected the visual nature of painting with the visual aspects of deafness and American Sign Language. This art conveys time, experiences, and emotions in a unique way verbal communication cannot. The happiness and joy of signing is captured in De'VIA along with the sadness. This artwork offers a glimpse into the hearts of deaf painters and provides a connection to the deaf world.

Works Cited

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