Gnagy, Jon (1906?-1981) Encyclopedia Article

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Jon Gnagy was a man who taught himself how to draw and then taught millions of youngsters how to follow in his footsteps, thanks to the then-new medium of television. With his checkered shirt and vandyke beard, Gnagy was one of the fixtures of 1950s television, demonstrating simplified techniques of line and shade to children, many of whom were drawing along in front of their television sets at home with the aid of one of Gnagy's *Learn to Draw* workbooks. Although criticized in some esoteric art circles, Gnagy defended his methods, which enabled him to remain popular on the tube from the beginning of the 1950s until the middle of the decade. In the years since, other telegenic art instructors have found similar success by patterning their shows after the man who introduced a generation of baby-boomers to the world of do-it-yourself art.

The Kansas-born Gnagy taught himself how to create art while recovering from a childhood illness. The skill later helped him earn a living as everything from a sign-painter to an advertising art director. He started teaching his techniques—based on Cezanne's fundamentals, he claimed, using the basic tools of cube, ball, and cone—on experimental video outlets in 1946. CBS started featuring Gnagy nationally in 1950 on 15 minute shows known variously as *Draw with Me, You Are an Artist,* and *Jon Gnagy Learn to Draw.* Though criticized for oversimplification and for promoting imitation rather than creativity, Gnagy felt that his methods were appropriate for his medium and his audience. There was no quarrel from the many youngsters who faithfully watched his shows and had their parents buy his instruction kits throughout the early 1950s. After leaving television, Gnagy continued to lecture on his favorite subject. He died in 1981 at age 74.

Further Reading:

Grossman, Gary H. *Saturday Morning TV.* New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1981.