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The Decorated School: past potency and present patronage

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ABSTRACT The Decorated School is an interdisciplinary research network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The article situates current academic and wider community engagement concerning the purpose and significance of art as part of the school building and grounds in an historical context. It goes on to discuss emerging patterns of concealment and exposure of school murals in the past and their recovery in the present. Finally, it is suggested that contemporary interest and revaluing such art is welcome but that belief in the educational power of art as part of the built environment has nevertheless waned.

> The design, decoration and equipment of our places of education cannot be regarded as anything less than of first-rate importance – as equally important, indeed, as the teacher. There is no order of precedence – competent teachers and beautiful buildings are of equal importance and equally indispensable ... We shall not bring about any improvement in standards of taste by lectures and preachings; habitation is the golden method. Buildings that are well-designed and equipped and beautifully decorated will exercise their potent, but unspoken, influence on those who use them from day to day. This is true education. (Henry Morris, quoted in T. Jeffs [1999] *Henry Morris.: village colleges, community education and the ideal order*, p. 58. Ticknall: Educational Heretics Press)

The Decorated School (AHRC funded) research network is an interdisciplinary project which is recording evidence of artworks that were installed as part of the fabric of school buildings, usually soon after their opening, as well as sculptures attached to the outer walls of buildings or situated in the school grounds. It brings experts in the history of art and architecture together with experts in the history of educational ideas and practices to explore the subject from different points of view. It also has an international wing addressing these same questions with scholars in Canada, France and the USA. We are recording evidence of murals, reliefs, stained glass, wall tiles, decorated floors, textiles and

sculptures initially in English and Scottish primary and secondary schools built during the 20th century. In our research we have identified three distinct periods of heightened activity and thus a commitment to this public art as part of the educational process. The three periods are the opening years of the last century, the 1930s, and the 1950s. Formal partners in the research network include the Henry Moore Institute, English Heritage and the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland. Informal partners include large numbers of teachers, parents and family members of artists who have been drawn to the project as part of their efforts to revalue the significant pieces of art in their schools. The network has held workshops in schools that contain often neglected art installations and thus public engagement has been exceptionally high and there has been global interest as is evidenced by the audience that has accessed the network's internet blog www.thedecoratedschool.blogspot.com. The BBC and the *Times Educational Supplement* have both carried features about murals in schools identified by the network and the subject of local campaigns.

In the range of examples extant and lost, the project has been able to identify the impact of a strongly held belief, no longer held to be true, that pupils should ideally be nourished by an environment that itself educated. Influential figures in this respect were Henry Morris, Herbert Read, Alec Clegg, and Robin Tanner who were at the height of their powers during the 1930s–60s. They in turn influenced a generation of artists, teachers and architects some of whom were wedded to this belief which informed their practice. However, we are not only tracing the histories of the objects and artists' relationship with educators and architects, but also the response over time to these by teachers, pupils and the wider community. This is ongoing research with an international dimension that addresses contemporary questions about the relationship between art and education more generally and here there is space only to deal with a small part of the picture. What follows is a discussion that focuses on examples from the 1950s, a high moment in the belief in the significance of art as part of the built environment and some questions are raised about shifting definitions of value.

1950s Modernism and the School Environment

The post-war years in Britain when many hundreds of new school buildings were opened, some with objects of art installed, was a time when government wanted to signal through the built environment the nation's investment in the young. This was despite severe restrictions on the public purse and an atmosphere of austerity. Modernism in art and design was a means of displaying confidence in the future and of recognising the potential rewards of investing in education. Following the lead of Henry Morris, educationalists such as Stuart Mason in Leicestershire, John Newsom in Hertfordshire and Alec Clegg in the West Riding of Yorkshire ensured that new school buildings should become a canvas for the arts. The child and young person, it was believed, should expect

to find in schools some of the best examples of modernism in painting, textiles and sculpture. The artist in the child, it was believed, would be stimulated by this proximity over time ensuring their inherent creativity came to flourish. Ironically, by the 1960s this belief had altered somewhat towards an emphasis on the importance of good classroom display. Teachers were trained to reclaim walls and reception areas for spaces where objects used for making art or appreciating design might be displayed and increasingly where pupils work could be celebrated. Thus in many instances, existing murals were covered over so that walls might be reclaimed for other purposes. At a time of increasing critical media attention on the profession, some head teachers decided that a fresh reputation might be achieved or strengthened if certain features such as decades-old mural art were removed. This would encourage a belief in changed practices and outcomes – as one teacher has asserted, 'schools exist on the projection of images'. By the late 1970s, the ways that schools projected their image to parents was being discussed within educational research. Rutter's influential study of secondary education, *Fifteen Hundred Hours* (1977), found what it declared was a relationship between the display of pupils' work and academic outcome.

Removal or Concealment

This shift of emphasis in the training of the British teaching profession helps to explain one significant finding of the network: the removal or concealment of school murals during the 1970s. These acts, carried out in the main by head teachers, arguably reflect changes in the perceived value of art as educator, especially as a permanent feature of the school building. Precise details of the removal of art are more often than not lost from public memory but in several identified examples we have found evidence of straightforward concealment usually by some simple means such as a curtain, plasterboard or wall paint. Additionally we have found evidence of children being prevented from being in close proximity to what otherwise would seem to be child-friendly sculptures placed in school grounds, possibly following health and safety legislation affecting schools that was introduced in 1974. How the concealment of painted walls or ceilings was carried out is an important question for art historians and curators but for educational historians, more significant questions are when, why, and by whom such actions were taken. From the point of view of school pupils, we also need to find out how they experienced the presence of art as part of the school building and immediate environment as well as the act of concealment which usually occurred abruptly and without consultation.

Involving contemporary pupils in our research workshops has enabled us to discover some evidence that children have indeed used large murals in school corridors and halls to make up their own stories and to realise detail incrementally over time. Pupils who had attended Templewood Primary School in Hertfordshire commented on the murals by Pat Tew that had been covered over for decades but were revealed once again under a new regime during their

time at the school. Their reflections indicate that they used the murals in their everyday encounters far more than teachers had realised. One ex-pupil reflected,

> They are something that's always there and a constant reminder about what the school represents. As I've grown up, the murals have kind of grown up with me ...

Another explained,

> Each time you look at them you find out something new about them and you realise, oh, I didn't see that before.

They recalled how often the murals stimulated conversation, all this hidden to adult eyes.

Through the research network activities, we have been able to begin to access the views of pupils today but accessing memories from past pupils, especially about their feelings on the removal of art many decades ago that they had grown accustomed to, is less straightforward. By means of social networking sites, we have been able to fill in some gaps in our knowledge about why and how murals were concealed in the past.

Yewlands (originally, Yew Lane), a secondary modern school in the north of Sheffield was built in the early 1950s and opened in 1953. There, a mural entitled Adam Naming the Animals, was painted directly on to the wall immediately outside of the school hall. The architect responsible for the design of the school was the leading modernist figure Basil Spence and he was responsible for inviting the artist Barbara Jones to produce the work shortly after the school opened. During the 1970s, at a time when schools for this age group were changing rapidly as a result of the introduction of comprehensive reorganisation, an incoming head teacher decided that the school needed a new look.

One ex-pupil explained,

> It was ... the new headmaster at the time, that decided he wanted the mural covering. He had this done immediately he joined the school, to the dismay of a lot of the kids at the school at the time. He also had carpet laid down outside his office, along the corridor from the main door, plus the steps. I often heard kids make disparaging comments about him doing all this. He didn't seem to make improvements elsewhere in the school to match; neither did he stay at Yewlands very long.

Another recalled the bewilderment experienced on realising the mural had been concealed

> I was at the school from about 1970 until I left after the fifth year ... I seem to remember people, adults too I think, being kind of proud of the mural. I know I liked seeing a big picture around and enjoyed artwork. I felt it was 'hiding' the content of the work which I thought was silly and I know some of the kids missed seeing it. ...

> We just arrived one day and it was covered by top-to-bottom heavy curtains and the floors from there to his office, carpeted. We were all surprised and I remember lots of comment about his having done this and covered up 'our' painting.

Commentaries such as these are rare but the research demonstrates that there is a task to be done in uncovering the views of pupils past and present about the significance of such permanent art objects in their everyday experience of school buildings. Such comments also point to the significance of head teachers using decoration (or the removal of decoration) in an attempt to enhance the image and ethos of a school.[1]

Rediscovery, Restoration and Renewal

Neglected, removed or concealed over time by teachers who found their presence unhelpful or meaningless, too costly to upkeep or just in the way, many works by significant artists were lost to public view due to altered priorities in the material and visual features of schooling. By the last decade of the 20th century, teachers generally were being advised on the importance of conveying a visual message to visitors principally by means of the display of children's work. This was especially the case in secondary schools where this had been less of a tradition. It is interesting to note how the visual projection of schools began to be conveyed in terms of 'ethos' which from this time is a word that becomes increasingly used in educational discourse. It was increasingly asserted that the impressions conveyed to visitors by the visual impact of the entrance, reception area and corridors of a school were important. They should convey a projection of the 'ethos' of the school.

This sentiment and associated practice may explain the demise of the school mural. In addition, improved school ethos has from this time been projected in material terms: pupils dressed in uniforms, and public spaces within schools projecting a professional atmosphere. Such attention to materialities could only be strengthened by the increased emphasis on parental choice within a climate of market forces permitted in the first decades of the 21st century.

Partly as the result of our efforts and certainly of interest to the research network, during the time that the network has been active (2010–12), several schools have begun to campaign for the restoration of murals that had been neglected or lost to public view. At Templewood Primary School in Hertfordshire, a parent led campaign and interest from The Decorated School combined to raise enough funds for the Pat Tew murals to be restored, an achievement that was celebrated in October 2011. At St Crispin's School in Wokingham, two out of three 'seasons' murals by Fred Millett have been restored, this time in an initiative jointly led by the head of school governors and the head teacher. At Wardie school in Edinburgh, a mural by Robert Herriot Westwater, Alice in Wonderland, completed in 1931, had been neglected for decades and as a direct result of our interest, the school

community has had the mural restored. At Greenside Primary School in London, designed by Ernö Goldfinger in 1952, a mural by the artist Gordon Cullen had been covered for decades by a simple curtain. Parents and teachers have coordinated a successful and popular campaign to recognise the significance of the art and are raising funds for its restoration.

The process of past concealment and more recent exposure so evident in our research raises a number of interesting questions that we are only beginning to address here. How has the belief that the young child is influenced profoundly yet unconsciously through their close proximity to art altered over time and why? How and when did the view of the child as artist, so strongly articulated by educational leaders in the post war period, change with regard to the belief that external stimuli of art as part of the school building was necessary for the nurturing of that part of the child's personality? What sense did children make of the removal, concealment or destruction of art objects that had become a feature of their everyday worlds and what can such knowledge tell us about how children respond to the aesthetics of the built environment of school in general? These questions are all starting points for a research agenda but at this stage we can make the following observations.

The present return to valuing The Decorated School, as evidenced in renewed interest in murals, sculptures and reliefs that might have been concealed for decades, is accompanied by a curiosity to search out the stories of the installations, especially their origins. Thus, the biographies, especially the later fame of artists are prominent in the rationale and justification for restoration. Pupils are now encouraged to know about the artists and to celebrate the significance of the art pieces that make their school 'special'. In the past, when the artists first installed their works, this was not a consideration. The precise origin of the works was academic: what was deemed important was the influence they would quietly wield on the lives of generations of children, their teachers and parents: an effect that Henry Morris called 'the golden method' of education. Whether or not this actually occurred to any extent is difficult to know since, to our knowledge, no research has been carried out to investigate how children have responded to the long term presence of such features in their schools. But certainly, the notion that what experts have determined as high or high quality art might operate on children's personalities, civilising them in the process has become seriously questioned in a culture that has democratised art's production and consumption. The monetary value of these works of art is now a necessary part of the rationale that justifies their preservation and their significance as part of the general educational experience is not held to any great extent.

Today, the recovery of The Decorated School sits comfortably with a political agenda that requires schools to ever more distinguish themselves as special in a climate that emphasises parental choice and the marketisation of public schooling. This is completely counter to the notion of a universal entitlement to the highest quality of cultural experience for all that was held to

be vital for the education of the young that characterised the political climate when The Decorated School was first conceptualised and developed.

Note

[1] The full story of the Barbara Jones mural at Yewlands school is found in Burke, C. (2011) Education through Art: the school mural as extended architecture, in S. Braster, I. Grosvenor & Maria del Mar del Pozo Andres (Eds) *The Black Box of Schooling: a cultural history of the classroom.* London: Peter Lang.

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