FORUM
Volume 57, Number 1, 2015
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2015.57.1.103

Marion Richardson: *Art and the Child*, a forgotten classic

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ABSTRACT Marion Richardson was a revolutionary art teacher and schools inspector. First published in 1948, her book *Art and the Child* is one of the most remarkable educational documents of the period between the first and second world wars. This article reviews Richardson's philosophy and practice of art and suggests its continuing significance for the teaching of art today.

Marion Richardson is no longer a familiar name in the literature of education. Educational fashions have changed and the work of Richardson and her colleagues, between the two world wars, is either ignored or misrepresented. If she is known at all, it is as the inventor of a method of teaching handwriting rather than as an innovative teacher of art. Yet, in his introduction to her book, *Art and the Child*, first published in 1948, shortly after her comparatively early death, no less celebrated a figure than Sir Kenneth Clark writes, in rhapsodic vein, about 'Marion Richardson's revolution':

> Artists had already become aware of the vivid and expressive painting which children could produce if allowed to work in their own ways. Still, it was Marion Richardson alone who recognised that this power of imaginative expression could be developed in almost every child as part of his education.

Art and the Child is a remarkable book. Part memoir and part testament, it tells the story of one extraordinary teacher's discovery of children's art and how to foster it. The story begins when the 16-year-old Marion Richardson is sent by her parents to the Birmingham School of Art to sit for the entrance examination, in the hope of winning a scholarship:

> How well I remember the crab's claw which was part of our test. As I drew it, the horrid thing seemed to be clutching me, and, though

> feeling obliged to do my very best, I hoped with all my heart that this best would not be good enough to win a scholar's place. I did not want to leave school, and had no interest in learning to draw. But, alas, the crab had caught me. The offer of four years training as a teacher could not be refused, and that autumn I became an art student.

For all her reluctance, Marion Richardson was a notably successful student. She tells us:

> But all through my training, generous and enlightened though much of it was, I was dimly aware of conflicts and questionings. My powers of representation steadily increased, but to what end? I took examinations and my scholarships were renewed; but I felt that I was far from understanding the meaning of art, and more and more doubtful of what I should have to give to the children whom I should have to teach; it could not be that the mere ability to copy crabs' claws, bathroom taps, umbrellas, ivy leaves, or even the casts from the antique to which these elementary things were the prelude, constituted art.

The first hint of a deeper understanding came shortly after her appointment as art mistress at Dudley Girls' High School, in the West Midlands. It was her first teaching post; she was only 19 years old. One day she decided to try giving the children a 'word picture' as the stimulus for painting:

> I asked them to shut their eyes while they listened to a description of a little local street, lit by the moon, as I had myself seen and painted it, a short while before. I was surprised and delighted with the results. No doubt the fact that I had seen the subject as a picture gave colour and point to my words and reduced them to what was artistically significant. From this moment the children's work had a new quality. Whereas before it had been little more than the reproduction of something photographed by the physical eye, it now had an original and inner quality. It haunted me. I could not forget it, and I felt instinctively that in the understanding of it I should find a solution of problems that had most perplexed me in the past.

Richardson continues:

> In these early days, I had to mark all the drawings, and my scale of values was upset. I found, almost against my will and for reasons I did not understand, that quite crude drawings which possessed this new quality seemed better than those that were relatively skilled. In a vague, dark way I began to see that this thing we had stumbled upon, as it were almost by chance, was art, not drawing; something as distinct and special and precious as love itself, and as natural. I could free it, but I could not teach it; and my whole purpose was

> now directed to this end, as I set out to learn with and from the children.

During her first summer holiday as a teacher, Marion's understanding was enriched by a chance visit to the Grafton Galleries in London:

> It was August and I was in London with my mother. We were on our way from a visit to Burlington House when we passed the Grafton Galleries, where the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition was being held. The day was hot, and through the open door I could see into the vestibule. It was hung with pictures which in some strange way were familiar and yet new to me. I had no choice but to go in.
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> Impertinent and fantastic though the idea may seem, I can only say that to me a common denominator was evident between the children's infinitely humble intimations of artistic experience and the mighty statements of these great modern masters. It was an odd experience and one that is almost impossible to put into words. In the happiest of the children's work I had learned to recognise a vital something; but with my limited knowledge of art I had not, up till then, been fully conscious of having seen it elsewhere. Now, for the first time, it blazed at me; and it seemed that I need never again mistake the sham for the real in art.

The visit to the Grafton Galleries had a profound effect on Richardson's teaching:

> The discovery that my teaching could fire and free something which would otherwise be fortuitous gave new purpose and inspiration to my next term's work ... I knew that the children did their best work when painting from a mental image ... but some were unable to select from a shifting, kaleidoscopic inward store. I was myself a natural visualiser and found that the children were interested in descriptions of my own imagery; that as I talked something passed between us, and that whatever possessed for me the genuine picture quality had a sort of incandescence which I could communicate.
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> I must not give the impression that the children's subjects were never self-chosen or seen at first hand. What I hoped for, and I know in part achieved, was to give the children complete confidence in their inner vision as the seeing eye, so that it would come to colour and control their whole habit of looking. They would then see pictures everywhere; in poor, plain places as well as lovely ones; in fried fish and other little shops, market stalls, chimney stacks, watchmen's huts; eating houses, slag heaps, cinder banks, canal barges, pit mounds, waste grounds.
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> We used to set out on what we called a beauty hunt to some such spot, looked at a thousand times before but never seen at all. We

> came home only when each for herself had found in it the rhyming shapes of a song.

After some six years of teaching in Dudley, years of increasing confidence in her understanding of her pupils' art, Richardson felt the need for a change and was interviewed for a post in London:

> With tremendous care I chose the examples of children's work that the Selection Committee had asked to see, and although I hardly expected to succeed myself, I did not dream that the very best of our pupils' work would meet with disapproval. Alas it did. I shall never forget how the same little picture that had been so full of meaning and interest for me seemed merely incompetent and crude when passed from one member to another of that alarming Committee. I wanted to run away and hide.

It was the defining moment in Richardson's career. The misery of that morning was followed by 'an afternoon that changed everything for me'. She had planned to visit an exhibition of children's drawings at the Omega Workshops and there she found:

> wonderful work by the children of artists, mostly very well-known artists. How eagerly I looked at everything and with what breathless interest I listened, for I had no choice but to listen, to the conversation between the only two people who were there besides myself. The woman was an Inspector of Schools, for she told us so several times, and the man, so courtly, so patient and so clear, was Roger Fry.
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> The Inspector found nothing but faults of drawing in the children's work, just as my critics had wanted to correct everything I could show. We were moving around the Exhibition, and were standing now in front of a very curious drawing in which the child had contrived to show both the inside and the outside of a house. How would the pedagogue have put that right? For to change one thing would have meant changing all. It was a child's conception; the child had something to draw, and, without a trace of self-consciousness, the idea had just overflowed on to the paper. Of course it was incorrect, but it was an embryo work of art; and to be shocked by it was as stupid as to be shocked by the child herself.
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> Roger Fry had nothing but contempt for the drawing ordinarily taught in schools. It destroyed a child's faith in his own art and offered a sterile skill in its place. Art teachers were dreadful people, and wasn't I one of them? But the little drawings under my arm were burning a hole in the wrappings. Were they fundamentally different from those in the Exhibition? These were all by young and surely very brilliant children. The Dudley drawings were by ordinary children of all ages. My courage ebbed and flowed. At one

> moment I was determined to show them, the next to disappear. This unique opportunity was not, however, to be lost. The Inspector left, and, reading my thoughts, Roger Fry came and spoke to me. His surprise and pleasure at seeing the drawings, especially those by the older girls, was unmistakeable. He must include them in his Exhibition; for they had, he declared, the same forthright simplicity and freshness of vision that was characteristic of younger children's art, and he wished to show that it was possible to retain these precious qualities beyond the early stages. And so it was that I left my parcel behind and, walking on air, went home without it.

There are two other, independent accounts of this momentous encounter. Virginia Woolf, in her biography of Roger Fry, writes about the shows put on at the Omega Workshops in 1917, despite the air raids and the frosts.

> One show was of children's drawings. He (Roger Fry) had met Marion Richardson, a school mistress in the Black Country. 'She'd been up to town,' he says, 'to try and get a post in London and brought her class drawings. She'd been refused without a word, and I didn't wonder when I saw what she'd been at ... She has invented methods of making children put down their own visualisations – drawing with the eyes shut &. I assure you they're simply marvellous. Many of them are a kind of cross between early miniatures and Seurat but all are absolutely individual and original. Everyone who's seen them is amazed; ( ) John was in and said quite truly it makes one feel horribly jealous.'

Roger Fry's own account comes in an essay entitled 'Children's Drawing', which he wrote in response to the exhibition, later in the year:

> During the exhibition a series of drawings done by the girls at Dudley High School was brought to me by the mistress, Miss M. Richardson. These seemed to me to be extraordinarily similar to medieval miniatures. Miss Richardson has discovered a method of stimulating the individual perceptions and inventiveness of her pupils without ever imposing on them any artistic formula. The result is that her pupils, who criticize and discuss each other's work, have gradually developed a style of their own somewhat in the way in which some small Italian towns in the 15th century developed a common characteristic manner. Miss Richardson's chief effort seems to be to train the children's power of fixing mental images and trusting to them implicitly so that their drawings are almost literal renderings of inner visions ... As yet hardly anything has been done in the directions explored by Miss Richardson, but the quantity and quality of the inventive design revealed in this one school is so surprising that I cannot doubt that if children were stimulated to create instead of being inhibited by instruction we should no longer

> need to complain as we do today of the want of creative imagination.

The encounter between Marion Richardson and Roger Fry is a visionary moment in the history of education. The creative imagination of children is set alongside the masterpieces of modernism and placed at the very centre of the process of education. Children's drawings and paintings are recognised and valued as their earliest works of art. As Richardson acknowledges, her acquaintance with Fry 'changed everything':

> Not only did Roger Fry find time to see and discuss the children's drawings but he opened up for me all sorts of opportunities that could not otherwise have come my way. Perhaps the most thrilling of all was permission to see the Russian Ballet, at rehearsals behind the scenes, in the heyday of Diaghilev. We had already made a series of drawings from my description of the ballets *Children's Tales* and *The Midnight Sun.* Roger Fry had been specially pleased with them and wanted to add to my material. I saw Picasso himself rehearsing *Parade* and *The Three-Cornered Hat* and wrestling with the dressmakers, poor souls, who were trying to interpret his designs. I saw wonderful people – Nijinsky, Woizkowsky, Matisse, Lifar, Lopokova, Sokolova, Karsavina, Tchernicheva, and all the other stars; and of course Diaghilev – sitting about in the stalls, or waiting in the wings. I saw the wardrobes – with what exquisite care these were kept – the dressing-rooms, properties, and stage settings. Such a tale I had to tell after each visit that I wonder we ever got to work at all.

Reassured and inspired by Fry, Richardson sums up her teaching at Dudley, where she remained for six more years, with studied confidence:

> The freedom and happiness of the atmosphere there had made it possible for the children to develop an art which was essentially their own, but which was none the less the result of their partnership with me. I was indeed charged with exerting too strong a personal influence and with imposing something of my own which produced a family likeness in the children's work. But for my part I found each child's work so individually characteristic that when I looked at the painting, I saw the child herself. There was in the work as a whole a manner so unmistakable as to mark it as a little local school of painting. I welcomed it ... We were members of a community with its own strong customs and conventions and the drawings were in the Dudley dialect, traditional, intimate, indigenous to the soil, and mysteriously revealing.

The 39 plates included at the end of the book support Richardson's interpretation. For the most part they reflect a common style but it is a style that is given a distinctively personal emphasis from child to child, while, occasionally, one or another child gives expression to an unexpectedly diverse vision.

The fateful meeting between Richardson and Fry is described in the third chapter of *Art and the Child.* Later chapters follow Richardson's subsequent progress, first to London where she lived for a while with Margery and Roger Fry, working in a variety of schools, both public and private; then to the London Day Training College, as part-time tutor; and finally, in 1930, to the London County Council as Inspector of Art, where she spent the rest of her life. Looking back over her later career as a deeply sympathetic schools inspector, she asks herself, 'How was it that the work went forward?', and answers with enviable assurance, 'the times were ripe, the teachers' minds were ready, chiefly because of the growing respect for the individuality of the child. In art this respect is a necessity; for unless a child is expressing his own vision he is expressing nothing at all'.

However, for all her emphasis on the child's autonomy, Richardson is anxious to avoid the error of discounting the significance of teaching, and eager to rethink the relationship of vision to technique:

> There is a fatal misconception of the modern method, which allows a child to think that anything will do. The teacher he needs most, and honours most, is one who both knows and cares how he is working and will accept no second-best artistic effort from him ... While it is impossible for any adult to teach a technique that matches childlike vision, children nevertheless need teaching if they are to feel their powers of expression keeping pace with the growth of their ideas, and so retain their interest in the subject.

This is a theme that Richardson returns to again and again as she sets out her radical agenda. Technique is important, and needs to be taught, but skill is subservient to purpose and purpose belongs to the children and their vision. It is a theme which Kenneth Clark picks up in his introduction to the book. He says of Richardson that:

> she was wonderfully skilful in making the children take an interest in the materials and craft of painting. What could be more ingenious, for example, than to take away all their paints and tell them to contrive materials of their own, so that after an experiment with beetroot juice and curry powder they might take fresh delight in the beauties of rose madder and burnt sienna? The element of delight runs through all her teaching, and is in the greatest possible contrast to the drabness of the average art school. She realised that skill is born of delight – to draw something which you do not love is to lose half your skill.

When the Second World War began Richardson was put in charge of children from London County Council schools who were evacuated to Oxfordshire, but her health deteriorated and in 1942 she was obliged to retire. It was only then that she set herself to write what she calls 'this brief record in gratitude to those who worked with me, and to the children who, in learning, taught as well'.

'How shall I say 'Goodbye?', she concludes her book,

> Over and over again my story returns to the fact that children visualise naturally. They bring this precious gift, perhaps the subtlest and most delicate part of their spiritual endowment, and offer it to us whenever we teach art. Without it we should indeed by helpless; for the truth is that art cannot be taught, but in sympathy it can be shared. I see pictures. Will you show me how to paint them? It is this that they are saying. It is as though they knew that these mental images may die, like empty day-dreams, or live as joyful expression. No flower can more sweetly unfold or more sadly shrivel. With infinite care, then, and humility, we shall set about our task of art teaching. Shall we rehearse some of our tenets? Before everything else, let us preserve and indeed increase the children's love of painting and enjoyment of their lessons.
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> Let us remember that there are two chief opportunities. We have to train the mind's eye to see steadily and in terms of shape. An image seen in a flash may sometimes be so bright that it can be recalled and painted without question, just as a thought may sometimes find the very words it wants. But generally we can do much to help in clarifying and recapturing the vision, and by leading the child up to a place from which he can watch it.
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> Then the painter's technique must be taught. The happiest thing is when the means, the manner of expression, are born with the idea; but a child must be aware of the rich possibilities of the means. Let us teach him to discover all he can about materials, and make the very handling of them an interest and a delight. And what is the use of it all? I cannot find an answer to this, nor need we try. But the good of it? Yes. Anyone who will give children the spiritual freedom in which to paint will find in it a thing to be esteemed for its own sake, a thing that is outside and above all would-be workaday worthwhileness. The child artist is disinterested, serene and fulfilled.

Marion Richardson died on 12 November 1946, just one day after writing the book's dedication. Dr P.B. Ballard, writing her obituary in the *Times Educational Supplement*, asks:

> What are the principles and methods for which Miss Richardson stood? She herself has set them forth in a book which it is hoped to publish in the near future. Suffice it is to say that they are revolutionary in the sense that they reverse the procedure of Edwardian and Victorian days ... In fact I have no hesitation in saying that as a teacher of arts and crafts, Miss Richardson was a genius.

Art and the Child was written more than half a century ago. Its revolutionary potential has yet to be realised. The battles which Marion Richardson fought have had to be fought anew, decade after decade. But radical teachers can continue to draw inspiration from her remarkable story, if only from its four guiding principles: that all children are artists; that childhood vision can be freed but cannot be taught, though it can be shared and fostered; that teaching means both exchanging knowledge and skill with children, and learning with and from them; and that skill is born of delight. There could be no better agenda for the present generation.

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