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## Children's Drawings<sup>[1]</sup>

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We used to teach children to copy from objects such as boxes and bottles, and sometimes flowers and twigs of trees. We did this because of a widespread belief that art was largely a matter of getting a likeness and that children must begin by observing and reproducing simple things and learn, step by step, to draw more difficult things. All the time we had in mind the work of grown-up artists as the goal at which the children were aiming.

We have changed our methods, partly because we no longer think of art as man's effort to imitate the appearance of the natural world, but rather man's effort to express his realization of an underlying harmony, and also because we have discovered that children have their own individual approach to art, and the beginnings of a technique of their own which are inseparable from their way of seeing and experiencing things. This discovery of children's art has been made possible by allowing children to be themselves in school and by turning the schools into places where children can live and work naturally and happily. Drawing is now not only one of the most beloved subjects in the timetable but also one through which a child grows and develops most surely. Every teacher knows how much freedom to paint means to the children's development, and many will have met with children whose work in other subjects has improved on account of a sense of success and happiness arrived at through art.

It is easy to understand that this freedom of expression is good and joyful for a child, but less easy to realize that these crude, strange pictures of his are little works of art and the authors little artists. Here we must distinguish. It would be foolish and sentimental to suppose that every painting the child produces, or even those that he most enjoys producing, is a work of art. He is, of course, capable of bad work as well as good, and capable of using drawing for non-artistic, as well as for artistic, ends. Some of his drawings will, for example, be no more than the release of a suppressed desire. The pretty fashion-plate ladies that girls draw and the racing motors and aeroplanes that boys draw are often mere 'wish-fulfilment' pictures. Such things may clamour to be drawn and should not be denied expression, but they are a form of 'self-expression' that is self-centred and unilluminated in a way that a work of art can never be.

Then there is drawing which is a record of natural appearances or a graphic summary of facts, which a child may need to use in such a lesson as nature study or geography. This kind of shorthand expression comes very easily to many children and is at times superior to verbal description. When a child uses it, however, he is working as a scientist and not as an artist. But when he draws as the children who produced the pictures on the pages following have drawn, then he is working as an artist and what he produces is a little work of art.

Are we, therefore, to conclude that art is natural? That man is born with the innate power to produce and to understand art, and that he loses it by living in a world where values are false and materialistic? The modern student of art history is inclined to take this view. He studies the art of children with the same seriousness and interest that he devotes to the art of any unspoiled and unselfconscious people. Now that the art of children has become widespread among us in the schools, there are many who look to it as one of the practical ways of re-educating adult sensibilities in an age that is lacking in artistic understanding and largely indifferent to tradition.

How, then, do the children work? In the early years at school, drawing and painting are completely spontaneous activities and the teacher does no more than produce the right opportunities and the right materials for the children. Materials are very important because, if good and appropriate, they are in themselves an invitation to paint. New ways and means of getting the very best (which is not the same as the most expensive) for the children's use, are always being sought. The little ones of three and four years soon make their own discoveries about chalks and paints and brushes, and real pictures and patterns begin to appear: 'My House,' 'My Daddy,' 'A Carpet with a Pattern' or 'Just Painting.' Free drawings such as these may all be equally unintelligible to a grown-up who has not learnt the language, but the intense interest and purposefulness with which the children themselves set about the work is something that all can understand and approve.

It is not possible here to trace in detail the subsequent stages by which the subject develops, nor the way in which the picture-making overflows into design and *vice versa*. The mainspring of the work continues to be the children's natural interest. They learn to paint by painting and by being in the company of watchful but *self-effacing* teachers.

We spoke earlier of the various non-artistic ways in which a child might use drawing. As he grows older these alternatives, all perfectly legitimate in their place, are likely to distract him more and more. The teacher should help the child to distinguish rightly and to develop his own art unimpaired. He succeeds best by appealing to the child's power of mental imagery and by training him to be faithful in recording this imagery rather than in trying to copy the appearance of the external world. This mind's eye 'seeing' is the child's natural approach to art. Later on, and in the light of his familiarity with this inner vision or perception, he will be more and more conscious of drawing upon the observations of his physical eye. But if the right mental attitude is by

this time assured, it will determine the character of the seeing and everything will then fall into place as part of a single and unified impression.

This brief account has entirely misled the reader if it has encouraged him to think that the teacher plays an unimportant part in a modern drawing lesson. If this were so, then the work of one school would be as good as the work of another. A visitor may not always be able to see just what the teacher is doing, but the fact remains, and it is one that we must accept with all its implications, that a change in the teacher means inevitably a change in the character of the children's work. It need hardly be said that a good teacher knows how to direct and inspire without imposing his own personality or his own style of painting on his pupils. The majority of teachers, being non-specialists, have no style of their own to impose, and this may, in the end, be just as well. These non-specialist teachers are doing fine work and are discovering through modern methods that their own interest in the subject is reborn.

Such a teacher begins to look at painting in a new way and to see pictures on railway stations, in the streets, in buses and trams, where before, perhaps, he saw only tired and tiresome people who got in the way. He may even begin to practise painting, thanks to the refresher courses which are now in such great demand. This new outlook reaches the children, and the drawing lesson becomes a delightful partnership between them and the teacher. Whenever they lack a subject of their own, or need the special discipline that working direction provides, he will share his experience and describe as a word-picture something that he has seen. 'The Figure of an Old Woman in the Corner Seat of a Tram,' 'Roofs and Chimneys Against the London Sky,' 'The Family Seated Round the Table for a Meal,' 'The Night Watchman in his Hut by the Roadside,' anything and everything is material to his awakened picture-seeing eye. And through this widening range of subject the children themselves (even those who have begun late and have never before dreamed of painting a picture) begin to see with fresh eyes and to find their own subjects in the real instead of the pretty-pretty world.

There is no more certain way of understanding painting than by trying to paint sincerely. In the light of their own struggle with the artist's problem the boys and girls begin to understand pictures, fine pictures of the kind that are now bought by schools. They begin to be able to choose between the real and the sham because their own work, to themselves unmistakably sincere or otherwise, is giving them the touchstone. But will this touchstone help them to understand other forms of art? Already there are signs that it will. Real understanding, which alone is worthy of being called good taste, is not to be looked for during school years, but the best hope of good taste becoming more general among us lies in the growth of a generation who, while yet young, have gained some internal standard by which to measure art, some glimpse of the relation of art to man's spiritual sense. On such a foundation the special training that is needed for the full appreciation of any particular branch of art, whether pottery, sculpture, embroidery, or architecture, will not be given in vain.

**Note**

[1] Reprinted from the London County Council's Annual Report, 1936, Vol. V, Education.



