

E. H. Gombrich, Art in education - 8: Some Trends and Experiments Abroad, The Listener, 22 September, 1939, pp.564-565 [Trapp no.1939.A1]

The father of all story-tellers, Herodotus, tells a delightful anecdote about a king of Egypt, Psammetich, who wanted to find out which of the human languages was the oldest and - so we may supplement him - the truest and most original one. He therefore devised a genuine psychological experiment - probably the earliest known. He ordered two new-born children to be brought up in absolute isolation, no one being allowed to speak in their presence, and that every sound they uttered should be brought to his notice. The device worked: one day they were observed stretching their little hands towards their nurses crying "Bekos, Bekos". No sooner had the king heard of this than he sent messengers all over the world enquiring in which language "Bekos" occurred. It turned out to be Phrygian and to mean "bread". And from that day the old dispute was settled, the Phrygians were honoured as the original race, since their language evidently sprang from nature itself.

Not too long ago the spirit of this experiment was revived on another level. When, at the threshold of this century, the marvels of child art revealed themselves to the eyes of its enthusiastic discoverers, they hailed it as the original and therefore true pictorial language of mankind. "Don't teach the child, let it teach you" was the advice of the great pioneers like Franz Cizek to the mortified teachers of the old school. "Education only tends to cripple the child's original power and sensibility."

The pedagogic results of these principles are today beyond discussion. Innumerable teachers all over the world have shared the happy experience that, given material to express itself and the right encouragement, the average child reveals an aesthetic sensibility which may take many a trained artist regret having ever grown up. But spontaneous child art has proved to have one implacable enemy: the child itself. Unmoved by our regrets it strides towards its fatal goal, the standards of grown-up people. Even if the teacher strains every nerve to keep aloof and not to interfere, the child proves stronger and drags from him the information it wants. An approving smile, an indifferent glance may suffice to lead the way and to upset the plans of the modern King Psammetich. The brilliant products of Cizek's own Viennese classes (fig 1) - seen after a generation has elapsed - in themselves amply prove this fact. No one would hesitate for a moment in "dating" them as correctly as any work of a grown-up artist. Tomorrow the same will undoubtedly be true of the works inspired and unconsciously directed by teachers of today. The principle of spontaneity, unequalled as a pedagogic hand-rule, implies a psychological illusion. Child art does not grow unrelated to the adult mind, it can never be detached from the standards and values of contemporary art.



Figure 1.

This fact does not in the least diminish the importance of the reformers and their programme. By directing our attention towards the working of the infant mind that taught us to see a child's drawing not as a feeble attempt to "represent" a visual reality but rather as a bold and simple expression of its knowledge about the world.

This approach determined the new curriculum of the primary schools in Vienna after the revolution of 1918. Drawing and picture-making were passionately encouraged as a means of self-expression, and the principle of non-interference was carried out as far as actual corrections were concerned. But only so far. Richard Rothe, whose method was widely adopted in this Vienna Schulreform had developed an ingenious method of teaching the child to draw by teaching it to think. He did not train the hand, as in the old free-hand drawing with its dull mechanical exercises, nor teach the eye like the naturalistic school, but the imagination, the power to visualise by means of understanding. If the child drew a man whose arms were merely stumps, Rothe would not correct it on paper but would ask the child: "How far would this poor man have to bend to put on his stockings?" - and he would bend to show the child how the real body functions. To counterbalance this intellectual training the official commentary to the curriculum advised the teacher to choose "unreal" or fantastic subjects from time to time like "sleeping trees" or "birds and butterflies which do not exist".

There is little doubt that Rothe's method is efficient. It helps to accelerate and to mould the child's evolution by removing obstacles without suddenly imposing adult standards. But no insight into the mechanism of the child's evolution can dispense with the necessity of clear values and a clear purpose. We should always keep in mind that not the teachers but the artists are the true discoverers of child art. It was unknown to former centuries not because those generations were blind to beauty but because to them art meant something inseparable from technical skill. Only when this concept lost its rigidity with the artists, when emphasis was laid on the furor and sincerity of expression rather than on formal accomplishments, the child together with the primitive had suddenly stepped into the limelight. We do not emphasise this historical connection in order to show the relativity of these values, but rather to account for the crisis with which art education is not threatened on the continent both in Russia and Germany.

In Russia art teaching is recognised as an important part of education and drawing from imagination is practised with great success. But it seems that even the drawing lesson is used in order to direct the child gently towards the objects and ideas which one wants to regard with interest. The frequent occurrence of tractors in children's drawings is hailed by a Soviet critic as a sound symptom of the child's sympathy with the ideals of constructive social work - unlike the bourgeois child whose drawings express a decadent escapism from reality. Modern art education is censured by a Russian teacher (G. Labounskaya) for what others may believe to be its greatest asset, for its "attempt to cultivate and to prolong the naïveté of perceptions."

A German art teacher (P.K. Sommer) attacks the modern methods with far greater violence. The similarity of its products to what is now officially called "degenerate art" makes him denounce the whole approach as something near to high treason. "This kind of art led away from nature and therefore from the love towards the Home, away from God and away from the people and the belief in its resurrection. Products of such an education are a danger to the new state". It was perhaps this feeling which partly caused the new authorities to cancel the highly developed handicraft lesson in the primary schools after the occupation in Austria.

Beyond these political struggles for the soul of the child there remains what one may call the inherent paradox of art education; how can something so essentially spontaneous as aesthetic experience be made the subject of teaching which cannot renounce preconceived standards and values? There can be little doubt that the second aim of art education, the appreciation of art, is in still more open conflict with the original ideal of spontaneity and non-interference. This may account for the fact that the teaching of art appreciation has made little progress on the continent. It was left more or less to the discretion of the individual teacher of history or drawing to mention as much or as little of the artistic heritage as he chose. And this in spite of the fact that as early as the nineties Germany possessed a power prophet of art education - Alfred Lichtwark. It was Lichtwark's aim to free the work of art from the icy isolation of the museum. He did not connect it up with the period of its growth by giving a general "back ground", thus degrading the work of art to a mere illustration of cultural history: on the contrary, he put the individual work before the children and tried to make them find out its purpose, what type of man might have ordered it, what might have been the artist's aim and how it came into the collection in question. An arch-enemy of all purely formalistic talk, he insisted that the pupils should look, but look in a matter of fact manner and only gradually and by implication approach the appreciation of purely formal values. Preferring originals to reproductions, and even humbler examples of the children's native town - Hamburg - to the splendour of great names, he attempted to make the connection between the art of the past and their own life even more real. The records of Lichtwark's classes still make stimulating reading. By concentrating on one particular work and its actual conditions of growth he succeeded in avoiding the pitfalls of other similar attempts: the shallow descriptive slogans which interpose themselves like a mist between the eye and the work of art.

We cannot leave the subject without at least touching upon a strong movement developing on the other side of the Atlantic, where so much is done to make children art-conscious. There the museums do their best to attract children - especially on Saturday mornings - and to make them feel at home and at ease. In some schools, however, the principle of appreciation has been extended far beyond the realm of what is found in collections only. The child's actual environment, all kinds of everyday things are made the subject of discussion. The pupil is trained to appeal to the aesthetic judgement even when only a choice of cloth or cutlery comes into question. It is the education of the perfect customer. Much as can be said for this training it may also imply some dangers which should not be overlooked: the danger of standardisation, of suppressing individuality

rather than developing it. After all, these designs are governed by changing fashions rather than artistic standards and what seems perfect in 1939 may look hopelessly dated in 1941. This American approach partly depends on an optimistic belief in the infallibility of present taste which is apt to startle a sceptical European. This scepticism is aroused especially by the tests which have been devised to test the child's aesthetic sensibility by letting it mark the best of three simple patterns or designs. The reader may try his luck with the test in Fig. 2, * which has actually been used in U.S.A. schools. Personally I do not feel quite up to it. What I discern in the lamps, No. 3, for instance, is a sequence of style and period rather than an absolute quality. Or let us take No. 4, the mushrooms. None of them has anything to do with art, but could not a satisfactory setting be imagined for any of them? Perhaps one would fit better into a rigid and reticent winter-landscape, the other into an autumn piece of Chinese mood? In spite of all similar attempts, which go back as far as William Hogarth's Analysis of Beauty (whose "Line of Beauty" appears like a warning signal in test No. 1), formal elements without an emotional context are simply meaningless. Even the crooked line in No.1 may acquire supreme beauty when it express a storm of emotion. This school of thought seems in danger repeating the errors of the early free-hand drawing lesson which believed that the logically simple is also the aesthetically most obvious and which therefore started with practising "straight lines".

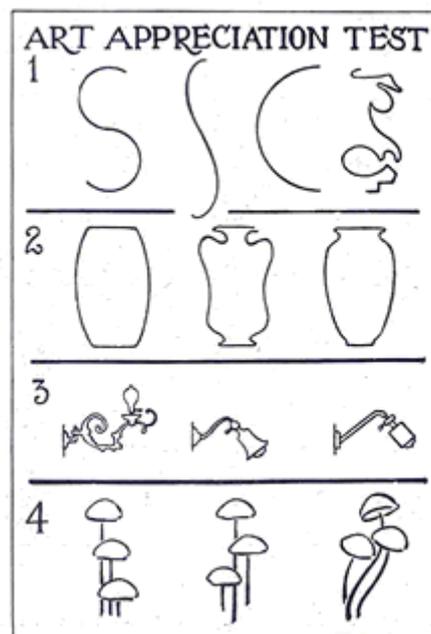


Figure 2.

No, let the child acquaint itself not with lifeless patterns but with works and forms which it can love. The simple suggestion in an American book (by A. Pope) of introducing framed pictures into school libraries which the child may borrow and exchange like a book may be a far more natural and more hopeful way. And before all : in speaking of appreciation Schopenhauer's challenging advice should not be quite forgotten : "A work of art must be treated like a prince. It must speak to you first".