

The Questions Parents Ask

(Answered by Herbert Read)

1. At what age should children start to draw?

As soon as they can hold a pencil—which is usually at two and a-half years old.

2. Do children first show a feeling for line, or composition, or colour?

The stages are (1) scribble, at first aimless, gradually becoming purposive, age two to four; (2) line, used with visual control, from about the age of four; (3) composition, the placing of two or more objects within a given space, from about five. A feeling for colour seems to be present from the very beginning of the child's artistic activity.

3. Do children start by drawing things they have seen or things they have imagined?

This is difficult to answer in simple language; I would rather say that children begin by drawing things they have felt; certainly in their early years visual impressions play almost no part in their drawings, and descriptive realism is rare before the age of seven or eight.

4. What types of subject do children of various ages most frequently choose?

It varies according to sex, age, environment, and also temperament. Taking the medium age of nine, one might say that boys draw most frequently vehicles of various sorts, houses, human beings and landscapes, in that order; whereas girls tend to draw human beings, flowers, houses, animals, in that order. But it is too difficult to generalise.

5. Do all children have some feeling for art?

In my opinion, yes, unless they are suffering from a repression of this natural medium of communication. It is no more natural for a child not to draw than it is for a child not to speak: both are forms of dumbness.

6. What materials should you give your children for drawing and painting?

An unlimited supply of coloured pencils, or crayons and decent paper. From the age of five, most children can use a brush and poster paints. Water-colour is too difficult a medium for young children.

7. Should parents suggest subjects for children to draw, and give them things to copy?

By all means suggest subjects, but never give them things to copy until they begin to show a desire to draw from nature, which will not be before the age of nine or 10.

8. If your child is particularly interested in painting, and seems talented, should you expect him to be an artist when grown-up?

I expect every child to become an artist of some sort, whether it is an engineer, a weaver, or a bank clerk, and some may become professional painters. But in the present economic system it is a poor sort of profession, and to encourage a child to take it up may be to condemn that child to a life of penury and despair. It is better to express artistic sensibility in some vocation which is securely geared into the prevailing economic system. Even exceptional geniuses such as Michelangelo have done this—as an architect and interior decorator.

9. At what age do most children lose their interest in painting?

Under the existing educational system when they get caught in the treadmill of examinations. A change in the child's reaction to experience does take place, between the ages of 10 and 11, but it is not necessarily accompanied by a withering of the aesthetic sensibility.

10. Should children be shown the work of established artists? If so, what types of artists?

Yes; all types. But it should not be made too much of. The main thing is to create a decent, if only a neutral, environment. Beautiful buildings, good furniture, light and harmony are worth more than a gallery of old—or modern—masters. The purpose of art in education is not to train a few children to be painters or appreciators of pictures, but to ensure that all children become complete human beings.

DRAWINGS BY CHILDREN

Are They Really Good?

THERE is an exhibition of paintings now touring New Zealand which is attracting large crowds of noisy and excited visitors. The artists are children, ranging in age from three to 17, and the visitors for the most part, are children, too.

The exhibition was arranged by the British Council, and has already been to the United States, Canada, and Australia. Wherever it has been shown, people have been excited by it, and artists themselves have probably had their eyes opened a good deal by what they have seen.

Among the works of the very young—say from three to five—you will find the amusing scrawls that any imaginative child might do without being taught any tricks. Stars and the sun become personified with grotesque limbs, and "Mother" or "Motor Car" or "Play-time" are all there in the manner of painting which knows no national boundaries.

Then among the sixes and sevens you laugh at "Policeman Holding Up Traffic," "Father Christmas," and especially the uproarious drawing of two people "Posing for a Photograph." From the nines on, you begin to realise that the children are on equal terms, regardless of age. There are mature paintings by the young and paintings by older children done in the style of the infants. The range of subjects begins to widen—from religion to crime, landscape to munitions factory, the Black Country to the jungle; and it is interesting to note from Herbert Read's introduction in the catalogue that "the few war pictures in the exhibition come from schools in areas comparatively remote from the war, and their realism is imaginative rather than documentary."

The Education Department has added to the exhibition a dozen or so paintings from New Zealand children, and some handcraft. We reproduce one of the New Zealand paintings (Giraffes) on the opposite page, along with a selection of those from Britain.

A RECENT issue of "London Calling" contained an article by Herbert Read, the English poet and art critic, in which he spoke of these pictures in particular and of children's art in general, along the lines of his recent book "Education Through Art." Here are some passages from this article:

EVERYWHERE these exhibitions have met with an enthusiastic reception. Perhaps that is because they represent a welcome change from the normal type of war exhibition; but judging from the numerous Press criticisms which have reached Great Britain, it was rather the intrinsic value of the exhibits that moved the foreign visitor to such enthusiasm. Out of a war-distracted world, these drawings seemed to come like emblems of peace and sanity: they

expressed, not the ideology of the warring nations, but something universal, international and creative.

Children, before they acquire the intellectual notions and social prejudices of their parents and teachers, are very much the same the whole world over. In art, they speak the same language. . . . Freed from the influence of their elders, children would readily constitute a world-wide republic.

That, I think, is the message these exhibitions are carrying to other countries, and people are asking the question why, if the children of the world are united, the parents of the world should be so desperately at war. It seems to point to some fundamental defect in all the educational systems of the world.

This lesson has not been obvious before, because it is only recently that a few pioneers have been able to effect a revolution in the teaching of art in a few of our schools; and it is from these few schools that the drawings exhibited abroad have been selected. But such schools are not necessarily what people call "crank" schools. Thanks to the genius and fervour of Marion Richardson, who for some years has been Inspector of Art on the London County Council, many elementary schools have reformed the teaching of art, and they have contributed generously to the British Council exhibitions. But so have famous public schools such as Eton and Charterhouse; and in between these extremes, several private and secondary schools have contributed their share.

Artistic Impulse in Every Child

While "progressive" schools may be more productive, and deserve every credit for their consistent pursuit of these new ideals, success is not confined to them. The artistic impulse exists in every child: It is independent of heredity and environment, though these are factors which may help or hinder its outlet. The art of children is like the language of children. It is a method of communication, in which the individual first babbles and only gradually learns skill—the skill to enunciate clearly and use words constructively.

It is a language which for hundreds of years has been not merely neglected, but ruthlessly suppressed by a logical and grammatical bias in education—a bias in favour of reasoning and memory; faculties which, however valuable, should not have been allowed to supersede feeling, intuition and imagination.

Too often, alas, a child's art receives only indifference or ridicule. Nothing is more crushing to the infant spirit than a parent's or teacher's contempt for its first creative efforts of expression. That is a crime which disgraces the whole of our intellectualist civilisation and which, in my opinion, is the root cause of our social disintegration. We sow the seeds of disunity in the nursery and the classroom with our superior adult conceit. We divide the sensibility and intelligence of our children, create split-men (schizophrenics, as the psychologists call them) and then discover that we have no social unity.