Early Drawing Lessons.

BY L. GORE.

THE other day I heard someone debating the necessity of teaching drawing to a child who shewed no aptitude for it. "We cannot all be artists," was the conclusion of the argument. I quite agree that not many of us develop into artists, but at the same time I think that few of us have not wanted at some time to draw a plan, sketch a map, or make a diagram or perhaps a design.

Drawing is, moreover, a necessary part of the training for many careers such as the army or navy, engineering or science. So let us start with the idea that it is always useful, and often necessary, to be able to draw, and let us remember, moreover, that the child we are teaching may happen to be one of the few who do develop into real artists, and that our teaching, therefore, must be of the kind that does not cramp or hinder or vulgarize.

There are so many theories about the teaching of drawing. Our grandmothers used to spend hours over careful and meticulously finished flat copies of other people's work: it may have taught them to draw, but it was not art, and the same sort of training might have been furnished by map-drawing, and perhaps with more practical results.

Nowadays the swing of the pendulum carries us to a region where all is sacrificed to originality. If only our work is not servile to tradition, it may apparently be as ugly, grotesque and blatant as may be, and still be dignified by the name of art. I know one eminent artist who refused to allow his son to take any lessons in drawing or painting, so fearful was he that influence might kill originality. His principles seemed to be justified by results, it is true, and

yet I think it certain that in this case the results would have been the same whatever the course pursued, and that if a man is destined to be an artist, an artist he will be, in defiance of good or bad outside influence.

But while we may safely leave the little genius to develop along his own lines most of us are concerned with the ordinary child, who is going to find it useful someday to be able to draw, and whose powers of observation and criticism and appreciation of the beautiful are all awaiting development. Let us not make a fetish of originality, but let us beware lest our teaching should nip it in the bud,—somehow our course must be steered between these extremes.

For this reason, we must avoid a style, so-called, or a method; some art teachers produce a uniform style in all their pupils, and provide them with neat recipes for attaining such and such effects, or colours. The valuable knowledge that comes of oft-repeated experiments and failures, and the growing pains of personal development are swept away and sacrificed to cheap and easily attained effects. Far better is it to work on a broader basis, and to teach our children to draw in every imaginable way, and in any medium we can think of.

To begin with, never refuse pencil and paper when asked for, and when the tiny children make strange and aimless scribbles and inform you that they have drawn a dog or house, join in the game, and let them watch you draw a dog or a house, and then suggest that each of the party should draw something, and the others should guess what it is, honour resting with the artist whose subject is recognisable.

With older children we used to play a game of drawing historical scenes and passing them round for identification.

In P.U. Schools the children are encouraged to make illustrations from books read in their term's work, and I should like to put in a plea here for the use of the pencil as well as the brush in this department. I have yet to meet the child who can successfully paint figures and furniture and buildings with no previous outline. The result is invariably a pinkish blob for a face, a house with the stability of a blancmange, or a chair upon which no one in his right mind would care to sit. Brush drawing is invaluable, but does not cover all branches of drawing.
[p 652]

On the other hand, children of nine or ten years old will soon weary of pencil outlines of books or tea-cups or other objects set up before them, when one side of the cup cannot be induced to match the other, and the book, somehow, will stand up on end when it ought to be lying down. Symmetry and perspective must receive much attention and hard work later on, but I think they must not be practised to boredom by the very young. I remember, as a small child that drawn out lessons of this sort reduced me to a state of not being able to see what was right and what was wrong.

I think the right note was struck by Mr. Ablett when he insisted on memory work as the foundation of all things; half the battle of learning to draw lies in learning to see, and to remember what you see.

I have tried, with a class of children, aged nine or ten years, filling my pockets with odds and ends like scissors, button-hook, spoon, penholder and so on. First, I would ask the children to draw a pair of scissors from memory. They start off full of confidence, and it is amusing to watch their faces as they gradually realize how very little they know about a pair of scissors. At the end of five or ten minutes, the scissors are fished out of my pocket and passed round, and there are gasps and thrills as the real thing is compared with the somewhat curious drawing, and the artists begin to realize that the scissors they have drawn would not open, or would not shut, or have a screw missing. Then the scissors go back into my pocket, and are drawn again from memory, with much greater success, and the class is eager to know what else is in my pocket. We have kept this up for an hour and a half and left off with an appetite for more.

An occasional drawing-lesson with india-rubbers prohibited is most valuable. If you know you may not rub out, you look much more carefully before you start to draw, moreover your sense of vision is not gradually deadened by a many times drawn and inperfectly [sic] rubbed out line, and holes rubbed in the paper, and dints left by a too heavily held pencil. Instead of rubbing out I should let the children draw the object a second time, when they have carefully discovered the faults in the first drawing, and a third time
[p 653]
or more until at last a drawing can be passed as pretty good: they will love to see in how few attempts they can achieve a pass.

Of the same value as these india-rubberless drawings are those done straight off in pen and ink, and, of course, brush-drawings. In brush drawing, the simple stroke or sweep of the brush must produce the line or shape required with no previous guiding line or outline. It requires considerable accuracy of eye and control of hand and affords magnificent training in judgment. It is essentially suited to flower-painting and Nature Note-book work.

Brush-drawing can be more easily demonstrated than talked about. Half the secret of success lies in the position in which the brush is held. In painting a flower-stalk, for instance, the brush should be held parallel to the direction of the stalk; if you hold the brush across the line of direction, you will get one beautiful edge to your stalk, and the other edge will be jagged and uneven, and the stalk all widths. The same principle applies to the painting of leaf or petal,—keep the brush lengthwise along the direction of the stroke. This means practice in painting with the hand, wrist and arm in any position, hence the valuable training in flexibility and free movement which is afforded by brush-drawing.

As regards the difficulty of flat washes,—it is a good practice to make circles, squares, triangles and oblongs on a page, and to colour each one in fairly wet, pale, uniform tints. We once enjoyed ourselves painting a bunch of coloured balloons on the end of a string. We made the balloons, I frankly confess it, by drawing round pennies. We had to make twenty or thirty of them, time was precious, and the object of the lesson lay in the painting not the drawing. So the pennies were useful. Perhaps one balloon might be half hidden behind another, and we paid attention to making the whole group shapely and artistic and varied. Then we painted. Each circle had to be filled very neatly and not allowed to run into the next, and judgment had to be brought into play in the choice of colours, which had both to harmonize and to balance well in the whole scheme. That was where originality came in. Of course before we finished we simply had to draw the little boy at the other end of the string.

[p 654]

For a lesson in light and shade, it is a good plan to let the children draw a simple object which is standing in rather strong and well defined light and shade; then draw in outline the shapes of the few very darkest shadows on the object and on the ground, and paint them in a neutral gray, or better still, if the shadows are few and very telling, fill them in in Indian ink. Then, when the drawing is dry, the colour can be put on right over light and shadows in fairly wet and very flat washes. The result is effective, and the lesson affords good training in observation of form.

I have often noticed that small children observe small things and detail, and are incapable of large drawings or broad effects. Moreover they are apt to hold their pencils very tight and very short, and to put their noses to the page. I should encourage a loosely held, fairly long pencil, a light line, and a habit of frequently sitting right back, or walking a few steps back to see how the drawing looks. But I think the power to draw on a large scale need not be forced as it usually comes naturally a little later. Meanwhile a niggling habit can be corrected by allowing chalk drawings to be made on the blackboard, and brush drawings with white paint on brown paper, and charcoal work on tinted or white paper.

I think that variety of work, and the enjoyment of it, are the two most essential factors of success in dealing with the younger children, and then the necessary drudgery involved in the study of perspective, and greater accuracy of drawing, and finer gradations of shade, tone and form will come later with the increasing determination to presevere [sic] in what has already proved to be a delightful pursuit.

I should like to conclude with two “dont’s” and one “do.”

Don’t abstain from teaching drawing for fear of killing originality.

Don’t limit yourself to one method, or you assuredly will kill originality, but do teach with all possible variety of method and medium, so that the ordinary child acquires facility, and the possible artist may discover his own means of expression.