

ART AND HANDCRAFT IN THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN.

BY P. E. HANSON

WE English are considered, as a nation, inartistic, lacking in appreciation and execution of works of art. We pride ourselves on it. We are a practical people and artistic tendencies are the peculiarities of the foreigner, a thing to be viewed with suspicion; so much so that the very phrase "artistic temperament" has come to mean by a curious analogy a compound of the unpractical and vague, two qualities peculiarly unfitted to our age and race. We have, indeed our artists, our picture galleries and museums, and we are vastly proud of them; but are they not rather prized as valuable property than for their intrinsic worth.

This outlook on things artistic has its direct influence on the art work in our schools; Art as a subject is not taken seriously; it tends too often to become an accomplishment, a means of amusement or an exercise in technique; consequently in the upper forms in our schools and colleges it is the first thing to be dropped. Now we claim for art the same place as music, language and science in the curriculum, not only as a means of expression but as a means of developing the sense of the beautiful inherent in every child, in every nation, in every age; and perhaps most needed in these days of materialism when artificiality and display jostle side by side in our big cities with sordid ugliness and vulgarity.

Let us enquire further into the ideals of our art education; what we are aiming at; how these ideals can be carried out practically; and what have been the causes of failure in the past.

Past Methods. Freehand, so-called, and model drawing by means of pencil and stump were the beginning and end of our art education for many years; these with a view to teaching the laws of design on the one hand, perspective and light and

[p 216] shade on the other, with a certain amount of technical skill and accuracy in "lining in."

How easy, in view of modern methods, to recall with a smile the hour and a half drawing lesson with the elaborate South Kensington copy by our side; with what patience did we mark points and guiding lines! With what labour did we reproduce the curve and meander of the symmetrical other side! With what diligence did we ply our blackened indiarubber on the worn-out page! Till, with relief, the copy passed muster, and we were allowed to sharpen our pencils and start "lining in!"

Again the model drawing, with its orthodox group of cone, cube and cylinder in varying attitudes on an oblong board; the directions as to "vanishing lines," "picture plane," and imaginary horizon line, rules learnt by heart without observation or reason, constituting the second drawing lesson in the week. Looking back we can see that a great deal of this was either "busy work" or mechanical labour which demanded little of the child and less of the teacher.

Let us pass on to the change which to-day is being brought about in our art education methods.

Present Methods. Mr. McKinder, in a lecture given recently to the Training College Association, spoke of the necessity from time to time of looking at each subject in the curriculum as a whole, with a view to its goal.

Let us look at our art teaching in this way and see what we are aiming at, where we are making for:—

First: *The cultivation of the sense of the beautiful* by direct teaching from nature.

Secondly: *The practical application of this* by means of the various forms of handcraft. It is to Nature we look for instruction in beauty and fitness of design, composition and construction. Nature teaches us in three mediums, and we use all three in paint, clay, pencil, etc.

Our "*Nature Study*" is every year becoming more and more the direct study of life, with its adaptation to surroundings; our modern *geography* methods follow in similar lines; out-of-door work is no longer the fad of the few, but the goal to which both are making; and educational art work must go side by side with these. Not "Nature's semblance but itself" must be the theme.

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How can you give a better understanding of the beauty of colour than from the rich glories of ranunculus, delphinium or hollyhock; of the laws of design than by study of the delicate wings of the butterfly, the curious and wonderful construction of the goldfish, or the spirals of a ram's horn! How teach the laws of perspective more simply and truly than by the open stretch of land and sky, with its foreground and background, the distant objects and those close to. So Nature in all her varied forms of life becomes our copy in the place of conventional cards of ornament and artificial models.

There is much feeling in a vague way after beauty amongst children in their early years which often gets stifled for lack of an outlet, for want of expression, cultivation and understanding. It is this beauty-sense which must be developed if our art teaching is to be vital and sincere.

Before I pass on to the practical side of our art and craft work, I would like to put in a plea for the greater use of our picture galleries as a means of artistic education. One cannot help being struck by the aimless wanderings and futile remarks made by the majority of people, seemingly educated and well to do, that one sees at picture galleries; and if we ask ourselves the reason, the answer is not far to seek.

Pictures, to be appreciated, demand not only an artistic sense, but also a literary, historical and even geographical understanding; a good arrangement and a catalogue may help, but it cannot do all. I venture to state that it is not sufficient for the ordinary man to see a Botticelli, a Rubens, or a Millet, to appreciate, but that the true realization of the beauty in each comes from a certain knowledge of place, time, and association. It is in the light of early Italian religious fervour, of the voluptuous opulence of French Court life in the 17th century, of the earnest simple toil of the peasant in the open field of the 19th, that we learn to know and see truly the works of these artists.

Let us teach our children how to look, and what to look for. Let them become familiar with the legends pictured, with the artists, when they lived and where, that they may have in future years some foundation on which to build, some means of forming their individual taste in matters artistic.

Now as to the practical application of art to handcraft [sic]

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The psychological importance of handwork I need hardly dwell upon, so much has been said of late years on this subject. Let me, however, quote the words of two of our greatest living educationalists.

In speaking of the handcraft at the Chicago University Experimental School, Professor Dewey says that it is “an occupation which involves observation, planning and reflection, *the interplay of ideas and their embodiment in action.*”

Dr. Montessori in her chapter on Motor-sense Training for young children attributes to this, “*in after life the adaptation of man to his surroundings.*”

Consider these words with regard to what I have already said with regard to our art and craft education. The ideas of proportion, construction and design learnt from Nature, will be worked out practically in the handcraft, and the fitness of the things made to the use for which they are intended will bring out to the fullest the skill, the foresight and execution of the worker.

Whatever the form of handwork, toy-making, weaving, basketry, clay-work, needlework, wood-work, all are the embodiment in one form or another, in mediums of greater or less difficulty, of the idea behind; and in this lies their educational value.

A few weeks ago, after an arduous day's work listening to students' lessons on many and varied themes, I visited last of all a school in a very poor district of Edmonton. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and every class was engaged in some form of handwork, the dull atmosphere of school discipline and routine was lying heavy on my mind, and the feeling of the unreality of it all uppermost; what bearing had all these subjects on life outside the school-walls? What lasting effect did it all leave on these little cramped, desk-stiffened figures,—when I found myself in a class of boys of twelve and thirteen years of age, who were doing wood-work. My ears were greeted with a rhythmic tap tapping of hammer and nail, the swish of sawing wood, the whizzle of plane. All were absorbed and eager, questions asked which really bore upon some matter of importance; the air was electric with force of brain put into action by use of hand and eye, tool and wood. Here, indeed, was an answer to my doubts, here [p 219]

the significance of educational handwork, here the “interplay of ideas and their embodiment in action.”

To conclude, I would ask one question.

If the value of handcraft in school life has been proved to be so great educationally, might not the homelife give more opportunities for it? Much might be done in this way if direction and stimulus were given in the right direction. I would advocate in every home as in every up-to-date school an Art and Craft Room for the use of boys and girls—a room with wooden floor, a large table, a blackboard, a good supply of paper, wood, cane and raffia, clay, tools, and paints; a workshop which will prove not only a source of real educational value, but of absorbing interest and enjoyment to every child.