

## THE TRAINING OF THE ARTISTIC PERCEPTION IN YOUNG CHILDREN.

THERE is an old idea which still gains credence in many quarters that because a child cannot distinguish between good and bad in matters of art, the pictures and general decorations of his surroundings during the early years of life are of little importance. Indeed, in some houses the nursery is considered as a fitting refuge for many things which, by reason of their age, or it may be owing to a change of fashion, are no longer thought good enough for the drawing-room or the dining-room. "The children do not know the difference," it is said, "and will like these things just as much as better ones," and so there is an end of the matter. But does the matter end there? I venture to think that the trouble only begins.

Then there are other people who think that children should be brought up in the utmost plainness, and who consequently try to banish art altogether from their surroundings, as being a luxury with which they should have no concern, the only exception allowed being perhaps a few coloured pictures from the Christmas numbers hung on the nursery walls. But their efforts are in vain. They can no more banish art from the daily life of the child, or indeed of the nation, than they can themselves continue to exist without food. It is only the kind of art which can be controlled, and there indeed it is in their power to decide whether it shall be the false art or the true; if it shall elevate and stimulate the imagination, or be poverty-stricken in thought and ideal—one which shall enrich and sweeten all life which comes into contact with it, or which shall deaden and depress.

Art is so often thought of as belonging to the leisure part of life, and having no connection with the work-a-day world, that it may be well to show how this supposition is erroneous.

We hear a great deal nowadays about many useful arts, such as the art of teaching, or the art of cooking, and the word "art," when so used, always signifies the doing of these various processes, and implies the doing of them well, that is

[p 414]

to say, with skill. Now the exercise of skill always produces a feeling of pleasure in the doer. If an act is performed with pleasure, it will be better done than if it is only executed on compulsion or necessity. The doer will add little embellishments and improvements, and will lovingly spend more time over the work for the sake of his delight in it.

This idea of pleasure is an essential part of the meaning of the word "art." In fact "art" itself is the expression of pleasure—the delight of the worker in his work, and whoever feels this delight in doing is, in some degree, akin to the artist, be he labourer or mechanic. Is not this just that feeling which is so greatly lacking at the present day, when it is common to do work for what can be got out of it, rather than for what can be put into it?

There is no need to enquire of the worker whether he feels this pleasure or not. His work itself is its own witness, which will never deceive the understanding eye. Most people, however, have become so accustomed to the absence of this expression of pleasure in their surroundings that it never occurs to them that it might be present. Having been used to this absence all their lives they are quite unaware that things could be otherwise.

It is the same indoors and out. The sordid, unlovely streets of our towns are but the reflection of the lives of the people who live there. They have no opportunities for coming into touch with nature herself, and many of them hardly know that she exists. Even in the country

where she surrounds them on all sides, they take no heed of her beauty, and gain from her no refreshment, never having been taught to appreciate the enjoyment and pleasure which she is able to give. It is true that the delight in beautiful scenery is quite a late product of civilization, and was unknown a couple of centuries ago, but it is now part of the inheritance of the race which every child has a right to share.

There is no doubt that the surroundings of a people are an important factor in determining the national character, and different characteristics may often be traced to the influence of the physical features of a country on its inhabitants. But the people themselves may be, and probably are, quite unconscious of this influence, and make no allowance for it. Just in the same way the surroundings of the individual

[p 415]

child, especially during the first ten years of life, will have a lasting, indeed almost an ineradicable effect on his character. The child's nature is soft and plastic, and everything either animate or inanimate, with which he comes into contact, makes some impression on him for good or for evil.

This fact is realised with regard to the moral side of the character, and careful parents naturally seek to shield their children from influences which they consider would be hurtful, and surround them with examples it is desirable they should imitate. It is felt that a child is more likely to behave courteously and speak correctly if he associates with people who habitually are courteous and who speak properly, than if he rarely mixes with them. It is by imitation that he grows to be what he is, by doing he becomes. But when the æsthetic side of the character is taken into consideration quite other laws are supposed to hold sway. It seems to be generally thought that æsthetic appreciation, or the artistic perception of beauty, is a special gift vouchsafed only to favoured individuals, a faculty which comes by nature rather than by training, and it is therefore taken as a matter of course that many people should grow up apparently devoid of it. It is looked upon as their misfortune, not as the fault of their upbringing.

It is quite true that comparatively few people will attain to æsthetic appreciation without assistance, but there are also few who would learn anything of arithmetic or geography unless they were specially taught these subjects. The gift of æsthetic appreciation is innate in every child just as much as the other ordinary faculties common to the human race, but unhappily it is generally either killed or starved for want of proper treatment by the time the child has reached his 'teens. Of all faculties it is, perhaps, the easiest to stifle, being dependent on these finer feelings and perceptions which are most readily blunted by unfavourable surroundings. The colour of the walls of the nursery, or the room in which the child lives, the kind of furniture and ornaments, his mother's or nurse's dress, the tone of voice in which they speak, his playthings, and all his daily surroundings, sink deep into his little soul from the first minute he begins to take notice of them, and even before that time. They make the standard to which he unconsciously refers everything.

[p 416]

If the forms he sees are good and well-chosen, the colours are pleasing and the sounds melodious, there is some chance that he will be able to appreciate and love these qualities as he grows older.

This fact cannot be insisted on too strongly. A child must have opportunities of becoming acquainted with those things which it is desirable he should like later in life, and the more important it is that he should like them, the earlier they should be brought within his ken. It is mere foolishness to surround him during his most impressionable years with one set of things, and then expect that later he will prefer those of quite another order. The formation of taste and the cultivation of faculties is a slow process, and once accomplished the work cannot be readily undone, so that common sense suggests that it would be well to aim from the very beginning at the goal it is hoped ultimately to reach. A great waste of effort is involved in taking a lower standard at first, because the roads to these two goals do not lie in the same direction, and in order to attain the higher standard later, steps will have to be retraced before the better road can be traversed. That is to say that work will have to be undone, habits unlearnt, and preferences re-adjusted before the new ideas can gain a place.

For instance, every endeavour should be made to allow children to become familiar with good examples of form and colour as expressed in their ordinary surroundings. These are two essential factors which it is impossible to banish from every-day life—we are obliged to make use of them whether we will or no. Whichever way we turn our eyes rest on some manifestation of these qualities. There is no more excuse for permitting vulgarity in form, colour or sound, than in language. It ought to be the object of all right-minded people to shield their children from contact with vulgarity of thought or speech in their home life at least, and it is equally important to prevent their becoming familiar with nothing but glaring ill-chosen colours and clumsy badly-proportioned forms. Admittedly it would be exceedingly difficult to obtain really good examples of form and colour in every department of household life. This is certainly the ideal to strive for, but in many cases, where means are small, this is practically impossible. It is, however, within the reach of everyone to

[p 417]

have a few really good, though not necessarily expensive, objects to serve as a standard. Simplicity above all things should reign in the nursery, even if it be not allowed in other parts of the house, and the fewer ornaments there the better.

It is astonishing how much can be done to create a general atmosphere with very simple means; and this atmosphere affects the child deeply, though he is quite unable to analyse it and discover the elements of which it is composed. Cheerful harmonious colour on walls and floor, suitable well-formed furniture, a few good pictures and examples of sculpture, one or two vases of good shape and colour, with flowers according to the season, will make a room stimulating to the imagination, and at the same time provide the child with a standard of taste which cannot fail to exert a lasting influence over him.

In the exercise of his numerous activities the child comes into contact with various forms of art, so that it may be well to deal with some of the most important in detail. They may be classed under the heads of pictures and sculpture, literature and music. In each branch of art the same principles apply, viz., that some examples of the best ought to be provided. It is by no means essential that a child should be able to completely understand the whole of the work; indeed it is better that he should not, for his experience and knowledge are so limited that anything completely within his comprehension must necessarily be poor and crude. Moreover it is a great delight to grow up into a poem or picture, seeing more in it year by year, and it is a mistake to debar him from this pleasure. Some part of the work should of course appeal to him:

it must be partly about something with which he is acquainted, that he may be attracted and interested in the first place; but after that, with perhaps a little assistance and careful direction to those points it is desirable that he should notice, he may be left to himself that the art may work out its own effect on him.

In the case of pictures, first, good drawing and colouring should be exacted. There is no excuse or reason for allowing a child to be surrounded with figures that are badly drawn and coarsely coloured. It is far better to have only one or two good coloured pictures in the nursery than a number of poor ones, for the colour sense can be trained by other means,  
[p 418]

and will only be injured by being constantly allowed to see bad examples. The ordinary coloured supplements to the Christmas numbers of the illustrated papers certainly fall below the required standard, with very few exceptions. Not only are they frequently poor in colour and drawing, but the subjects are trivial and commonplace. Some examples of the work of old or modern masters should be chosen, such as the child angels of Carpaccio and well-known pictures of children like Sir Joshua Reynolds' "Age of Innocence."

The subjects should be cheerful in character: anything which is likely to depress or sadden ought to be excluded, for children are exceedingly sensitive to such influences. The habit of cheerfulness is a duty which each one owes to the community, and much may be done to lay the foundation of this habit by means of bright and cheerful surroundings. Many children are naturally inclined to be morbid and to take delight in gruesome details and eerie stories and pictures, but this is a trait of character which it is better not to encourage, but which should rather be prevented from developing, because the child's activities are centred upon more wholesome objects. Plenty of good pictures may be found in which there are no traces of this feeling.

As a rule children seem to prefer those subjects which relate to actions rather than to feelings—to doing rather than to being—which is not surprising, considering that their whole energy manifests itself in this manner. A picture of a man ploughing or of some boats sailing appeals to them more strongly than a purely passive subject like an emblematical figure.

Sculpture, also, ought to have a place, and though it is not common there is no lack of suitable subjects. Reproductions of some of the Tanagra figurines, reliefs by Donatello and Settignano, and animals by Barye, are all excellent for the purpose. It is easier to procure suitable examples of sculpture abroad than in England, there being far more general appreciation of such work on the continent. In Italy, Paris, and also in the United States, small plaster casts (which can be easily tinted ivory colour to take off the objectionable whiteness), and reproductions of Della Robbia reliefs can readily be obtained, and the latter make a most charming form of decoration.

[p 419]

It is particularly to train the sense and appreciation of form and proportion that sculpture ought to be included, for this is one of the senses which is most neglected in education. Colour attracts far more than form, and consequently appeals more strongly, and one objection urged against sculpture is that it is uncoloured. From this point of view, however, this is a distinct advantage, because there is nothing to distract the attention from the form itself.

Coloured pottery of good shapes also makes a delightful decoration, and it is not difficult now to obtain this at small cost. Far more regard might also be paid to the form of the ordinary furnishings—the jugs and basins, chairs and presses, which are used, so that where no examples of sculpture can be obtained a child's sense of form need not go untrained. I refrain from giving many examples, because individual taste ought not to be fettered, but should be allowed full play in such matters.

Another kind of pictorial art in which children are specially interested is the picture books. The supply has largely increased within the last ten or fifteen years, but the quality has by no means kept pace with the quantity, particularly in the case of the large coloured books intended for very little children. Here again there is no excuse for constantly putting before a child examples of crude colour and bad drawing and composition. It is quite possible to obtain good picture books, though not nearly so easy as to obtain bad ones, because, unfortunately, there is so little demand for the former. I enquired for some of Walter Crane's picture books for children in a large bookseller's shop not long ago, and on finding some of the copies soiled, was told that they had been in stock a long time and were hardly ever asked for.

I am not sure that all of Walter Crane's picture books, excellent as they are, are well adapted for young children up to about six years of age. In some of them there is too much detail, which becomes almost bewildering to little eyes. Randolph Caldecott's illustrations are better in this respect, because they are simple both in drawing and colour, and Kate Greenaway is also another example of really good work suitable for young children.

Up to about six, or sometimes seven years of age, the eye is not in a normal condition, and a child is consequently  
[p 420]

unable to look at fine details without putting an undue strain on this delicate organ. A printed page often presents great difficulties to him for this reason, and reading books may be most injurious. Boldness and simplicity are two qualities which should be demanded of all work intended for young children.

The original coloured illustrations to Kingsley's *Heroes* also deserve mention, as being specially good for rather older children, and I can well remember the delight with which we all regarded them. One of the new editions, with black and white illustration, is not to be compared to it as a children's book. Another favourite used to be Sir Noel Paton's pictures of the *Ancient Mariner*, which are of a large size and are drawn in pure outline. This book was only allowed to be seen on Sundays, and was consequently treated with great reverence. The pictures to Church's *Stories from Homer and Virgil*, in the style of Flaxman's designs, are also good of their kind.

Plenty of good illustrated story books in black and white may now be obtained, though it is by no means certain that the style of drawing adopted in many of them is such as to appeal strongly to children.

After the pictures naturally come the stories which they illustrate, and here it would be difficult to improve upon the nursery classics. Fairy stories are enjoyed by children of all ages, but it seems to me that the modern ones do not ring so true as those of my childhood. Grimm's *Household Stories* and Hans Andersen's *Tales* even now have a flavour which is not to be found in the *Blue Fairy Book* and others of its kind. It may be that I can no longer regard these stories

through a child's eye, and that to the children of to-day they are as satisfying as the older ones were to us, but that point I leave uncertain.

Mrs. Ewing's books, Mrs. Molesworth's earlier stories, and Geo. MacDonald's children's tales all occur as being books we could ill afford to have foregone in our family, and Lewis Carroll's writings also should not be omitted.

Mythology, too, ought to have a place, as there seems to be no time to study it at school now; it is crowded out with other subjects, but that child is poor indeed who grows up knowing nothing of Hercules or Jason, Ulysses or Athena.

[p 421]

Kingsley's *Heroes*, Church's *Stories from Homer and Virgil*, which have been already mentioned, Butcher and Lang's translation of the *Odyssey*, *Heroes of Asgard* (for the northern mythology), and for young children, the *Tanglewood Tales*, are all good books on this subject.

With regard to the poetry usually taught to young children they may learn to enjoy something besides the exact meaning of the words. At their impressionable age they are peculiarly sensitive to rhythm, the flow of language, and the sound of the words employed, so that it is not difficult to imbue them with something of the peculiar feeling of a poem even if they have only very indistinct notions of its meaning. It is so apt to be forgotten that all forms of art are based on the emotions, so that they should appeal primarily to the feelings, not to the intellect. The poems chosen should be simple in character, and must of course be about a subject of which a child has some knowledge, but in the case of children up to the age of seven or eight years it is not necessary to explain the meaning of every single word in the piece. So long as the child understands enough to interest him, he may be left to grow up into the rest, and realise its full meaning gradually as he becomes older. Children of all ages are taught hymns much of which they cannot possibly understand, but this is not considered to outweigh the good derived from them.

I will quote two short pieces to show the difference between what may be called a prosaic kind of verse, which is generally considered to be well adapted to children, and that kind which really is poetical. The first is one of those time-honoured pieces which has been learnt by many generations of children, and is consequently enshrined in the heart of the nation, so that it seems heretical to venture to criticise it at all. Yet it does not contain a single poetical idea, nor does the language rise above the commonplace, and the metre is at times faulty. But a child of three can understand every word of it!

I must not be understood here to imply that children should never learn any poetry but that of the first order. As in other matters it is of course impossible to keep always on the highest level, and there are many pieces, like the nursery rhymes for instance, which have much to commend them.

[p 422]

Edward Lear's *Nonsense Verses* are also a great source of delight, and the original illustrations to these were exceedingly good.

In one of his essays Matthew Arnold speaks of the great need of having a touchstone by which to test different kinds of poetry in order to be sure of their true worth, and he gives short examples of various kinds which may be easily learnt and then compared with the piece in question when there is any doubt as to its rank. The same idea should be carried out in education, and opportunities of becoming familiar with the best should be given to every child

so that he may be able later to intuitively rate things at their true worth, and not mistake gilt for gold.

About music I speak with some diffidence, as I cannot claim to have made any study of it; but here the principle would seem to be to train the ear to appreciate and enjoy delicate and beautiful melodies and rhythms. Intervals and melodies in music may be commonplace and vulgar in the same way as form, colour and language may have these attributes, and in the ordinary pantomime and music hall song these qualities abound. This kind of song should therefore be debarred. I heard of a mother a little time since who was immensely proud because her small boy of three could sing "Oh, listen to the band!" all through. It seemed to me a great pity that the same time and trouble had not been expended in his learning one of the simple tuneful melodies out of the *Baby's Opera* or the *Baby's Bouquet*. The old nursery songs have stood the test of generations, and when these are combined with charming decorations as in these volumes, it would be difficult to imagine a more pleasing instruction book.

Alfred Scott Gatty's *Songs for Children* should also be mentioned, and there are doubtless other more modern songs that are equally good.

Toys also have a great influence in forming a child's taste, and these also should surely be chosen to make for refinement of feelings and the training of the imagination. I was greatly pained one Christmas when looking for a present for a small nephew to see a doll dressed in man's clothes, which, when wound up, tottered and rolled about like a drunken man, and the shopman assured me that he had sold large

[p 423]

numbers of them [sic] It is sad to believe that many people of the class who can afford to buy such a toy can be so lost to all sense of rightness and decency as to see anything amusing in it, and still more that they should be willing to allow their children to look upon it as a desirable thing to imitate, a result which would undoubtedly follow.

Children possess so many toys nowadays, that there is no incentive for them to make their own, and the well-to-do child labours under a great disadvantage accordingly, and loses a most valuable training. But frequently when a child brings home the little paper mats and other things he has made in the kindergarten, they are spoken of and treated as if they were really valuable works. No one recognises better than myself the value they have for the child, and the delight he feels in them, but it is only deceiving him, and falsifying his standard of taste, to allow him to think they rank with really good works. There is no need to hurt his little feelings in the matter, but it is a great mistake to allow him to decorate the nursery walls promiscuously with such productions. A special corner on the walls may be given him for that purpose, in the same way as he has his own garden, but beyond that his work should not stray.

There is no necessity to confine a child's artistic education to those particular branches which have been mentioned. The wider it is the better, and the more forms of art with which he comes into contact the more likely is his æsthetic appreciation to be quickened and his delight in the beautiful to be increased and strengthened. The child who is taken at times to hear the service in the parish church, for instance, can hardly fail to be impressed with a sense of awe and reverence; the dignity and solemnity of the occasion, the influence of beautiful music and fine architecture, all combine to take him out of his ordinary self. Visits to picture galleries and museums may also be taken after the children reach a reasonable age, but no attempt should be made to look at too much—a few objects carefully chosen and studied will

have a more lasting effect than a large number cursorily observed. By these means also can be learnt how wide is the field of art—that it is not confined to pictures and statues, but may enter into the use of metals, glass, jewellery, ivory, enamels, porcelain, carpets, hangings, furniture, housebuilding, indeed almost everything used in our daily life.

[p 424]

It may be asked what is the good of all this artistic education? We have done without it very well hitherto, so why should it become necessary now? But have we done very well without it? Is the life of the nation so full of joy and sunshine that there is no need for amendment? Are our large cities, or even our small ones, so beautiful and healthy that they cannot be improved? Indeed, to take it on its lowest side, artistic education, or the training of the taste, has a distinct utilitarian worth, which is by no means to be despised by the nation at large. A commercial value attaches to the taste that can manufacture beautiful materials and objects which command higher prices than those made by other nations because they are more pleasing in form and design. The manufacturer supplies those things which he thinks likely to sell, so that it rests with the public to demand those which are really beautiful, and then they will be supplied.

Another, and to my mind a more potent reason for training the taste in artistic matters, even in young children, is that it so largely increases their resources, and helps them to take pleasure in many things which otherwise would have no interest for them. Some forms of amusement and recreation are necessary for all, and those who have never had any opportunity of learning to care about the good forms will naturally take to those which lie nearest to them, and which are probably showy and vulgar, if not more or less vicious. They will frequent the music hall and the card room, and leave the picture gallery and the first-rate theatre unvisited. There are surely not so many forms of innocent enjoyment for young people that we can afford to neglect any which open the door to many of the purest pleasures known to the race, pleasures which make for “sweetness and light” and unselfishness. For, in its true form, æsthetic emotion has nothing to do with the desire for possession. It loves rather to share, and the delight in a beautiful picture or a fine sunset is enhanced if others can join in the pleasure it gives, while unshared it is robbed of a great part of its joy.

#### Errata

*The Training of the Artistic Perception in Young Children*, which appeared in the June number, was by Miss Hermione Unwin.

The two pieces quoted, page 421, were—

(a) “*Mary had a little lamb*,”

(b) “*Up the Airy Mountain*,” etc. *The Fairies*, by William Allingham.