

PICTURE STUDY.

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“FORTUNATE is he who at an early age knows what art is.” Such were the inspired words of Goethe, who saw that true knowledge of Art can only be obtained through long study of so difficult a subject.

In most schools of to-day the artistic training of children is given a secondary place as not being of utilitarian value. Art should play an important part in a school curriculum, for it is just one more opening upon life, one more interest for the child, and food upon which his young imagination can grow.

The Parents' Union has for its motto: “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life.” Everything which surrounds us brings with it an atmosphere, either inspiring or uninspiring. We all take our share in creating an atmosphere by our words and our actions, and it rests with us whose calling it is to educate the young, unconsciously to help to create an atmosphere in which the mind can grow, an atmosphere which shall only be for the child's well-being. Such an atmosphere may be brought through high Art, that is to say Art which has a great idea underlying it, for, as we are told: “Art is great only in proportion to the greatness of the idea that it expresses.” Given this thought we must see that nothing but the best shall surround children. The question now arises, “Can children appreciate this Art?” Experience shows that if children are given only good pictures from the first they will appreciate them just as much as those brightly-coloured sentimental ones which only harm the child's æsthetic sense and give him the taste for what is vulgar and sensational.

A book entitled “Thoughts on Art,” by Philip Hamerton, shows how Art does influence the mind and character. “There is a difference between minds which are artistic and minds which

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are not, so strong and decided, that nobody can question the influence of Art upon character. Not that Art always influences in the same way; various itself, it produces varied effects. But it always alters our habitual estimates of things and men; it alters our way of valuing things. What the artistic spirit values is often very humble and poor to eyes that cannot read it. It can see majesty and dignity in many a poor labourer; it can detect meanness under the mantle of an emperor; it can recognize grandeur in a narrow house and pettiness in the palace of a thousand chambers.”

Children always accommodate themselves to what is put in their way. If we seek only to amuse children by showing them pretty pictures, we are teaching them to appreciate this kind of picture. Art which is only pretty and amusing is always a degraded kind of Art, which does no good to the mind in the way of refinement or elevation. “Great Art,” we are told, “has either no subject or a sublime subject; it has very rarely an obtrusive subject of a character to take away attention from itself.”

If children come to appreciate the vulgar in Art it can only be the result of the kind of Art to which they become habituated. “Children have Art in them.” This we must believe, or we shall never find it and we shall take no interest in developing it along the right lines.

When a child looks at a picture, it is the colouring that first draws his attention, and if his

interest is aroused in the picture he takes in a wonderful amount of detail. It will be noticed that certain pictures appeal to a child more than others. Which are these pictures? Well, if we take the trouble to consider, we shall find that it is just those pictures which he is able to understand that attract him.

In early years one can best learn to appreciate the value of colour and the beauty of composition from nature and this will be of infinite value and help in later years. As Pope tells us: "I believe it is no wrong observation that persons of genius and those who are capable of Art are always most fond of Nature, as such are chiefly sensible that art consists in the imitation and study of Nature." Or in Hogarth's words: "True painting can only be learned in one school and that is kept by Nature." From early contact with Nature comes the sense of beauty. I quote some words of Dr. Carpenter's showing what is the outcome of early [p 463]

contact with Nature: "The æsthetic sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, of the harmonious, seems in its most elementary form to connect itself immediately with the Perceptions which arise out of contact of our minds with external Nature." And in Dr. Morell's words: "All those who have shown a remarkable appreciation of form and beauty date their first impressions from a period lying far behind the existence of definite ideas or verbal instruction." All these quotations show how very important it is to train the child in early years to notice and rejoice in the beautiful, so that in later life he may not only have greater chances of success but a larger, fuller, happier life. One who having this wide view of life will take interest in all things that are of consequence and will be an interesting companion to others.

So much for the very early training. We now come to serious work which should be begun when the child reaches the age of six. Lessons should be regular. Small children enjoy these lessons immensely and find no end of interest in their pictures, which they feel are their very own. One artist should be taken at a time and about six reproductions of his work studied in one term. Experience shows that something definite remains in a child's mind after his studies. It is impossible to estimate the influence that a certain artist has upon a child, or how much he is enriched by looking at one of his pictures. One thing we know, that the gain is more than we can tell. It is not necessary that the pictures be coloured. Children are quite content with form and feeling. Later, when visiting Art Galleries, they will rejoice to see the coloured originals of the pictures they have been studying.

Picture study may be taught in a number of different ways, but one thing is absolutely necessary. The teacher must throw her whole self into the lesson, otherwise enthusiasm and interest are lost by the children and the lesson can be of no real value, for a lesson is not given unless it is taken by the children [sic]. Only one picture must be shown at a time. The teacher should put herself in the background and draw from the children all their observations. Great care should be taken that the teacher does not force her own knowledge on the children.

We will now consider how such a lesson is given. At the beginning of a term a new painter has to be introduced. Naturally the children want to know something about the man, when and where he lived, and a short story of his life. This the pupils will remember and it will add a greater interest to the pictures. Now

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we take one picture and begin to study it. Let us, for example, take one of last term's pictures, "The Dream of St. Ursula," by Carpaccio. This is a picture which always appeals to children.

There is so much detail in it. But in such a picture as this it is as well to come as quickly as possible to the salient point. Children will no doubt find plenty to tell of the detail of the picture. There is a maiden in bed, her little slippers are beside the bed where also lies her little dog. Her little crown lies on a table at the end of the bed. The door is ajar for an angel has just come in and he is holding a palm in his hand. Yes, but why is he there and what is he doing? This is the point of the picture. At this point, or before beginning to study the picture, to interest the children and to help them to understand the production, it would be well to tell the story of St. Ursula, since Carpaccio painted his pictures as illustrations of this beautiful story. The children will be enthralled as they listen to the story of this brave maiden who went out with a band of other maidens to suffer martyrdom for the sake of the unconverted at Rome. Having thus given an idea as to what the picture represents, the questions from the children will be endless, especially if it is little ones to whom the lesson is being given, for they are certainly more enquiring than older ones and are quite devoid of self-consciousness. Care must be taken that too much is not explained to the children. We must leave a great deal to their very vivid imaginations.

After having thus studied the picture for about a quarter of an hour, turn it over and ask the pupils to describe from memory what they remember of the picture. Here again discourage a detailed account. At the end of the lesson the children like to draw in charcoal what they remember best. It is a great encouragement if the teacher herself is able to draw a rough reproduction at the same time. In Forms III. and IV. the pupils like to make a careful copy of the picture before doing a memory sketch.