

REPORT OF THE P.N.E.U. MEETING.

ART.

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The “drawing” that is taught to the average child at school scarcely comes under the heading of “Art”—but it is essentially an important educational subject, that is, one through which the mind (and in this case the eye also) is trained for its fullest use in after-life. In many cases it does provide a medium for self expression, which is where the “Art” comes in, but for the greater number the drawing lessons only teach children to see better and to remember what they see.

So the root idea of the modern teacher of drawing is to help the children to see, to remember and to express themselves; to see well, to remember intelligently what they see and eventually use it to express themselves either in pictures or in words.

To draw an object, however simple, that is a *solid* thing, requires three processes, observation, reflection or mental digestion and expression. We teachers do all we can to help the children to observe correctly and to reflect with understanding on what they have seen and we generally leave them more or less free to express it in their own individual ways, as long as it shows they *have* seen.

Now to observe, digest and express is a fundamental part of education and is not an “accomplishment” for the few, and this is why I think drawing should be properly taught from the moment a child starts learning anything until it leaves school. It is just as important for boys as for girls, in fact I think, more so, for so many men’s professions need such accurate observation and recording, and I know no subject that trains the eye to see and the eye memory to retain facts correctly, except drawing.

The first process is *to see*. I often give the children hints beforehand or demonstrations on the board, which I then rub out, as to the simplest and easiest ways of showing on paper what they have observed, but I never say a drawing is “wrong” because it is not done my way. I not only place the object before them, but point out to the class, before they start drawing, the general shape, anything to notice about shadow masses and specially the effect of perspective on shape. If they are painting in their nature note books, I ask them to look keenly at the exact shape of flower, leaf or bud *and its shadow side*, until they know in their heads what *shape* [p 237]

it is going to be on the paper so that they then paint it correctly and quickly without constant looking, in between their brush marks. As far as possible I do not touch the drawings. I show at the side or on the board how the thing should go if I cannot get them to see by words, and leave the correction of each one’s drawing to herself. This teaches the children more, but the results on the paper are not all so neat and correct as if I went round altering the drawings in class.

The second process is *to remember*. Drawing, especially in *lines*, is a very conventional act, so the observation made in order to express in drawing must include digestion and reflection, for an object seldom looks the shape it is. For instance it is only in an exactly end-on position that a cube looks as if its sides were square. Directly you see two sides it has an odd shape, the sides do not look equal, the angles not right angles; a round mug on a table appears

to have an oval opening, the table looks a long narrow thing with sharp and obtuse angles, even if it is square, and so on. This is the thing the teacher has constantly to point out, as children, specially small ones, are so apt to draw what they *know* about a thing and not what they see at the moment. It is quite a mental effort to make the facts that you see fit into and harmonise with the facts that you know, and that effort is even greater than that required in making your own, ideas conveyed to you in words.

As a matter of fact I seldom teach very small children, but I constantly see their drawings and I have come to the conclusion that up to 9 or 10 the average child when drawing “out of their heads” draws a symbol rather than a likeness of the object. They draw a quaint device that stands to them as “man” (the head being so important, constantly the largest part), a mass of scribbles with a trunk symbolises a “tree”; square blocks with triangles above mean “houses” and so on, and it does not bother them at all that these are not like the real things they see; they make their pictures out of them and are satisfied (as also are primitive peoples). It is only gradually that they come to wish to draw the objects exactly like what they see.

The *expression* comes last in actual doing, but is first in importance. It is to encourage the mental assimilation and give material to subsequent expression that I give an important place to memory drawing. Eye and hand co-operate more
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or less mechanically in drawing a thing that is in sight, but mental assimilation is necessary before anything can be well drawn from memory. I place a model before them, and then it is hidden while they draw. A second and sometimes a third scrutiny gives opportunity for seeing what they find they had not observed at first, and for the exercise of their critical faculties in comparing their drawing with the model. They thus gradually store up knowledge that they can use to express their own ideas or to record their visualizations of what they have read or had read to them. I usually make them draw, on the first lesson of a term, “something they saw in the holidays” or “someone doing something” that they have lately seen. They know this and I always hope it gives them an incentive to watch things with a more recording eye.

I generally advocate teaching the tiniest children with objects that in their detail show their final shape, a brush, a feather, etc., because to generalise is a mature operation and only comes with practice. Details are things that most children see or notice at once; general proportions and large masses of light and shade are some of the last things to be grasped and are the two things that the teacher has to give most help in. Then one proceeds to give simple solid objects, apples, leaves, baskets of simple shape can be shown and the shapes of the shadow parts pointed out. These and other things of irregular shape are fairly easy for little fingers, because, for instance, an apple can look like an apple even if not correctly enough drawn to be exactly like the apple in sight, and at this early stage it is very important to the children to find that they can make drawings that really look like solid things. After these come objects, simple but of regular shape, like books, cocoa-tins, bowls, etc. I practically never use “models.” It is more interesting to be asked to draw a cocoa-tin and a fat book than a white cylinder on a cube and the lesson learnt is the same. A good lesson is learnt by a thin round biscuit and a ball being put up beside each other, the biscuit on edge, sharp light from the side, and the fact pointed out that though the outline is the same, the *shadows* on object and table show how different the shape really is. I cannot emphasize too much how important it is to point out shadows and get them drawn even in the simplest objects, such as a twig and with

the smallest children, for they are essential to the true portrayal of form.

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I teach them to draw their own fingers, hands and feet, the proportion of heads and faces; and then of the whole figure, generally using playmates as models. Throughout, the study of the human figure is largely done by “snapshots,” i.e., memory drawing, so the model has only to give a few minutes at two or three different moments. Memory drawing not only gives them knowledge of the figure in their heads, but helps the recognition and remembrance of big proportions, as the eye is not bothered by looking at details when the drawing is being made.

Then come more intricate objects such as tables, bookcases and the perspective they involve. Through all these stages I use brushwork where it is suitable—that is drawing with a brush in masses of colour and the observation of important shadows and their resultant change of apparent colour.

Thereafter the objects drawn become more complicated and combined and the older ones make a more detailed study of the face and figure and the change that varying positions make in apparent proportions.

It is good to encourage children to draw something in between the lessons, where possible.

I often give them a subject, but do not mind if they do not keep to it, but do instead something they specially want to draw; for instance one girl chose week by week a fairy story she was writing and illustrating for a little brother; some of the elder girls in one school have made decorations for their classrooms. I give them a few words of criticism and advice each time and find they soon begin to apply in these drawings what they have learned in class. Some who do not do good work in class will show up much better stuff when left to choose their own subject.

I also train their memories with snapshots of other things than figures; simple things such as toys and ornaments, flowers and so on, seen once and then drawn. I also make them feel things—a top, a chestnut, a pair of nutcrackers, inside an opaque bag or give small pieces of apple, bread, cheese—to taste; onion, fish, mint, lavender to smell (without seeing) and tell them to draw what it makes them think of. Out of sight I make noises, pour out water, brush my sleeve, dance, etc. and they draw what they think has made the noise. I have had

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played for me Sir Roger de Coverley, Good King Wenceslas and other tunes with associations and other unnamed tunes for them to imagine scenes to, and have had very interesting results. This sort of thing stimulates their imaginations and makes them visualise from their stored observations things they have not *seen*, but apprehended through another sense. In the summer, if possible, I like to take the older ones out of doors to sketch, to learn the effect of distance on colour and tone and to practise the simplifying of masses of detail into shapes of vibrating colour on their paper. Also out of doors it is easier to get space for them to see for themselves the truth of the perspective rules they have been learning. The tops of telegraph poles so much more obviously go down away from you than the top of a book case for instance, and one can send three or four girls to stand in a line at different distances and the rest can observe the varying sizes and specially the fact that on level ground you practically never see the feet of anyone above the heads of the rest however far off.

I think you will see that up to a certain point, with this method of teaching, drawing is nothing to do with talent, but can be done with observation, intelligence and application, by seeing, remembering and recording, and is a fundamentally educational subject.

Thus far is concerned with the training of the powers of sight, memory and expression, the “technical” part of the education by drawing, but there is another field of usefulness in the lessons more difficult to describe, which is the training of taste and appreciation of style which goes hand in hand all through the lessons with the other part. Naturally those who draw best do not have to spend so much time on the actual observation and drawing and to them I can give more instruction in style, as to how best to put down their mental images, and the less gifted learn a good deal from seeing the progress of the better ones.

I try in all my criticisms of both drawings and ideas, in the objects I give them to notice and so on, to place before them the highest ideal possible of what is true art and good taste, in their drawing, in clothes and furniture, and the objects with which they should surround themselves. Some children seem to be born with an appreciation for good line and good colour and some have no idea, but most can be taught. Bright

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colours always appeal to the young, and rightly; there is nothing in brightness that is bad art. More children have an eye for colour, I think, than have an apprehension of what is good in line and form. The fact that a child can draw well does not always mean it has good taste. And here I would like to say a few words about some of the toys and illustrated books that are given to children. I am constantly surprising my pupils by telling them that I think that much overdone object, called, I think, “Kewpy,” is vulgar, bad art. *It is*—so also are pink velvet Bonzos and many others like these. Deliberate caricatures of humans and animals done by a mind not trained to beauty always turn out vulgar. Simplifications or even lack of proportion caused by limitations of material, if done by one who knows his job is often an added beauty as long as it keeps the essential meaning of the toy. I am far from advocating that all toys should be exact reproductions of real things; they may well be only symbolic but should keep the rules of beauty and simplicity. The same fault is to be seen in a good many book illustrations and also in some the exaggerated ugliness of giants, dwarfs and ghouls, etc., are a danger to the taste of the rising generation. Teachers of all sorts can help a great deal by choosing good things when they have the opportunity and by gently deprecating bad taste whenever they see it.

Their surroundings matter a great deal in the training of children’s taste. If possible the classrooms should be decorated and furnished as simply as possible—and, what there is, in good taste. The desks, etc., being strong and suitable to their use would be in good taste, but there are walls and pictures, vases and curtains to be considered.

At one school I know there is a “Challenge” picture which goes term by term into the room, which, during the previous term has been kept most carefully and tastefully decorated and most tidy and clean. A list of the winning classes goes with the picture. I suggest that this idea could well be introduced elsewhere. If a class is really keen to have its room the best, surely this keenness could be made to have an effect on the actual room as apart from the temporary decoration with flowers, etc. If the walls are covered with an ugly paper, or are dirty, many willing hands and a pailful of distemper and borrowed brushes could alter that. Bad pictures could be changed or at least banished. There are so many good repro

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ductions now in magazines and papers that one might even be found to fit the frame of a banished bogey. But it is better to have a few good things pinned up than bad ones in frames. Could not the pictures used in “picture talk” be shared out to the classes at the end of term?

Vases in bad taste could be supplanted by plain jam pots, with a coat of (oil) paint in a colour to harmonize or contrast with the distemper chosen—or even also decorated with a pattern designed by one of the class (and approved by its head), either stencilled on or painted in clean definite brush marks.

A good many schoolrooms doubtless, do not have curtains, but if they have, and they are faded or ugly, could not some of the class spend a Saturday dyeing and ironing them? If each brought one dye-dip enough would be got together without much expense to anyone. The colour to harmonize or contrast well with walls being decided in council.

I have a good many old numbers of the *Studio Magazine* and will willingly give the plates out of them to any P.N.E.U. school which asks for one, for a “Challenge” picture, as long as they last.

I know P.N.E.U. children are taught to know good pictures by great artists, but I do not take that side of the question. Still I do sometimes wonder whether they are always *fully* told why the pictures are great. Perhaps sometimes the literary side gets more attention than the artistic. The picture talk should be done, if possible, by someone who has studied painting as apart from the study of pictures, because it is not only the idea that makes it a great picture, but the way the subject is conceived, that is, the spirit in which it was painted, the composition—that is the big masses and lines—the colour and also the handling of the paint. Of course, in the small reproductions the children generally study the beauties of the handling of the paint, the quality and the colour, can only be faintly guessed at, so it is all the more important to point these things out when they do get a chance to see the real pictures.

I will tell you something that happened to me. Just after I had left my art school I went to Prag and the Consul there showed me a small painting he had picked up, being attracted by the colour and general lines and asked me whether I thought it of value, or by a good artist. I had seen few

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great pictures then, but did know something about paint, and could at once tell him that his picture could not be valuable or painted by a great artist, for though the idea, the colour and general lines and masses were top-hole, the handling of the paint and management of detail were bad—amateurish in fact, but I thought it might be a copy of a good picture. On my way home I went through Berlin, and there, in the Public Gallery, was the original—a large picture with the colour and general arrangement of the little one, but the *technique* exquisite—a great picture by a great artist. In this connection the names of Mauve, Maris, Israels and Claude Monet occur to me. Their subjects are usually nothing very special in themselves and if painted in a commonplace way might be only sentimental, but it is the supreme sincerity with which they have been seen and the consummate technique with which they have been painted that make them great.

At one school where I teach they paint the general masses of light and shade from memory after studying the picture, which is an excellent way of impressing the picture and its value on their minds. That, or making simple pencil lines of the general arrangement of the picture is what should be attempted—not a detailed drawing, nor even of one part of it, for the

child cannot get all the detail of a large picture into its small drawing and gets hopelessly out of proportion in trying to do so. The details are unessential and the children are less likely to remember the general arrangement without the effort of memory given by trying to draw, than the details which naturally appeal to them.

I would like to add a few words about the “taste” of our Democracy. I think many people believe the English have no taste and no what is called “peasant art,” but I think where our fellow-countrymen show bad taste it is generally where their taste has been vitiated by cheap, bad, machine-made things, largely imported from other countries, and so generally in towns. The real country folk mostly show good taste in furniture and carvings, utensils and buildings, where they have choice or make them for themselves. If you look for them you can quite often see workmen with belts embroidered in good patterns and they choose good colours for neck-handkerchiefs and shirts. Look at a gang of navvies, what an harmonious group it generally is!

And then the coster folk, the

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barge folk and the caravan folk spend their energies and feeling for colour on their belongings, constantly in very good taste. I have seen a set of water cans and jugs on a barge painted all over with conventional flowers as beautiful in their way as the old Persian patterns.

Also I have never met people more appreciative of things like beautiful skies, views, etc., than among the so-called “uneducated.”

I would like to say, however, that most children do need help in seeing what is beautiful and that any who has to do with them should not be shy in pointing it out to them. They do not easily notice and appreciate such things as the added beauty to some even quite sordid scenes of sunlight and cast shadows; reflected glow of evening sky and so on; still more do they need help to appreciate the beauty of towns and work, movement and expression. The beauty of towns is inexhaustible if looked for. To mention just a few instances. The rhythmic movements of the road-menders, the rush and the curving, billowing smoke of the passing train; the deep blue of the sky and majestic looming of buildings at dusk just when the lamps are lit; the lamps, the red rear lights of vehicles and the shop fronts reflected down wet pavements; the gorgeous colours of the piled-up riches of the fruit shops; the lights on signals and railway stations; the masses of the arches; the wonderful curves of the mazing lines kept bright with use; the grandeur of groves of great factory chimneys and the iridescent beauties in the mud from dripping motor oil like fairy flowers and forests; and all the glorious effects of mist and water, ships, wharves and bridges on our beautiful rivers.

And so to sum up, the aims of the true teacher should be to help the child to see, to remember and to express itself, to train eye and hand, to recognise and cultivate the very best ideals of good art and good taste—thus giving the child the best chance of seeing, remembering and expressing, that is, of making an intimate part of its life, something of the wealth of beauty that is within the reach of all.