

WHY BRUSHWORK SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN ALL KINDERGARTEN TIME-TABLES.

by Elizabeth C. Yeats

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It always seems to me that there is one obvious and all-embracing reason why we should give all the children in our schools some artistic training—namely, that England is admittedly behind other nations in artistic feeling. By making painting not an extra, but a necessary subject, we shall, in a large measure, help to awaken in the children a sense of beautiful form and colour, thereby lessening this defect in the English character.

Almost every child has a natural instinct for form and colour; but it is a great mistake to suppose that artistic feeling will develop without training. You must be taught to criticize and distinguish good from bad, or else the feeling will remain little more than a mere rudimentary instinct, such as makes no demand on the mind.

I have certainly seen this artistic feeling develop among the children in my own classes. Constantly a child who showed himself at first not so interested in the brushwork lessons as the other children, and who would say from time to time that he “had no taste for drawing” would, towards the end of the first term’s work, show his increasing interest, both by the improvement in his own work and by showing me designs in magazines, &c. He would also criticize and show intelligent appreciation of the work of the other members of the class, quickly learning to distinguish good work from bad.

My plea that every child should be given some art training during his school life is not in order to make him an artist either professional or amateur but merely to awaken his intelligence in matters artistic and is not this a desirable object to

set before all educational effort. A developed art instinct makes happier men and women as well as making them better able to contend in the manufacture of artistic products.

A child or a grown man or woman admiring Nature—clouds, mountains, trees, and flowers—is using his or her feeling for form and colour—a feeling which is specially developed by painting lessons. And here one cannot avoid expressing a certain jealousy of the time and importance given in schools to musical studies—I mean to piano playing. It, of course, affords a chance of social triumphs, and the little daughter who plays well, or even badly seems to achieve a great success and holds her head high, and the mother feels a glow of pride; but, as a method of mental stimulus, music lessons are not nearly so effective as lessons in painting, or even drawing. There is something in the nature and accompaniments of painting which makes it an effective stimulus to the child's mind, so that every child gives it his best attention.

Compare with the teaching of painting by means of brushwork the weariness and tedium of teaching the piano to a child who has little or no musical faculty. When this unhappy child grows up and is his own master, the music is most probably dropped altogether, musical training having almost no permanent result unless carried on to a very high pitch or where there is a great deal of talent; since it does not in any way help the observing faculties, which are everything in painting; whereas the child on the other hand who has been taught drawing and painting has developed a set of faculties that will never rust, because all about him is provocation to keep them awake and alert, since everything has form and colour. In other words, with the average child the time is better spent on painting; since the teaching can be of a kind to which he quickly responds, and the result is an awakening which endures.

Apart from the purely artistic side of painting, where will you find such a training for the observing faculties? The child who paints a flower has his attention called, by the act of painting, to the infinite varieties of the colour and form, as well as to the whole expression of the flower; besides which you will always find that any one who has worked much at drawing and painting has the power of visualizing

objects in a much more marked degree than a person who has no artistic training. Not only must the children study the form, but they study to remember it, as, for instance, in designing. This power of visualizing what they see and hear about, of forming vivid pictures in the mind, is of great use in their other school work—for example, in the stories and games of the Kindergarten, and later on in History and Literature lessons.

Besides all these big reasons why we should train the children's artistic sense, the drawing, and more especially, the painting, lesson gives us many opportunities of training the children in perseverance and neatness, and helps to develop self-reliance; since the lesson requires many more materials than any other lesson, and these materials the child must arrange for himself.

Before I leave this subject of the great importance that should be attached to the art training in our schools, I want you to think for a moment of the average English house—what miracles might not a developed sense of form and colour bring about? To a trained musical ear, badly played music is a torture, and the opposite a delight. To an artistic mind, with its sense of form and colour active, not the less dreadful are rooms furnished with ill-assorted furniture and a vulgar confusion of colours; and not less attractive and charming are rooms where every care is taken to produce an artistic unity, as regards form and colour.

The great difficulty in the teacher's way is that, whatever teaching is given in schools, it must of necessity, be collective teaching. Brushwork seems to me to come deservedly first in a choice of methods, because all young children delight in colour; but are not greatly interested in outline, and brushwork teaches drawing by means of colour; so why not teach the least interesting by means of the more attractive? Also brushwork is a splendid method for collective teaching. As a reaction against the old lifeless methods, painting from the flat &c., it has become deservedly popular; but there is one great danger—caused by the mistaken idea many people have, that any one, after a few lessons, can teach brushwork. This idea naturally results in the fact that the greater part of brushwork teaching in schools is bad. Brushwork is especially well suited to school needs. The method is rapid, the children being taught to economize time and effort by getting colour and form in the same stroke; a good deal can be done in an hour's lesson, and, with very young children, the lesson may be even shorter.

Beginning with a carefully drawn outline, next filling in this outline with colour, the method is so tedious that the flower droops and loses its position before the task is completed. With brushwork, at any rate until elaborate groups of flowers, &c., are attempted by advanced pupils, this difficulty does not arise, for a quick, characteristic sketch of the flower can be made in one lesson. The pupils are taught to work broadly, painting the flower in as few strokes as possible; the colour is kept vivid, pure, and simple; and the children early learn direct methods of working, for we hope that it is unnecessary to say that brushwork means working directly from the natural flower. The properly qualified brushwork teacher never allows the pupil to copy from the flat.

In children the analytical intellect is dormant, the imagination active. Brushwork is an adaptation to this state of things. It does not say: "Draw an outline," but: "Paint the flower." It teaches how, with a few strokes of the brush, to give at once the colour, form, and outline—in a word, what may be called the expression.

Ask a young child to draw the outline as a separate thing, and watch the result. His attention becomes listless and his efforts mechanical. Brushwork succeeds because it does not try to make children analytical or scientific or utilitarian observers, but just happy observers, looking about for what excites their imagination and their senses. Later on, when the children are ready for analysis, the teacher will have her chance with outline, &c. When teaching a baby to speak his language, you do not start with grammar. The best answer, after all, to all objectors to brushwork is our success. Go to any show of brushwork, and examine what the children do, and consider the age of the pupils, and ask yourself: Could children of such tender years be taught to draw so well on any other method?

Of course, the brushwork teacher is not against the teaching of outline as a separate thing if done at the proper time and season; only we contend that brushwork which includes outline is the best possible method of teaching little children, because they do not interest themselves in pencilled outlines. It is the ensemble of the flower, &c., which attracts them, and we take advantage of this spontaneous feeling, and teach them how to draw the flower in its ensemble, and we ask: Are we not justified by the results? Brushwork is sound both in theory and as practical system.

If you ask us: “Are we trying to make artists?” we answer: “We are trying to make neither artists, nor scientists, but happy beings, who will know how to go through the world with their eyes wide open.” If afterwards they develop a talent for painting and drawing, or for making botanical or other scientific observations, brushwork will have done something to help them.

It is interesting to note in this connexion the fact that the Japanese, who are a nation of artists, never use either pen or pencil, finding the brush more subtly responsive to their wishes, whether in writing or in painting.

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