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ART AND THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

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It is not true that artists are born, not made, and that if one does not have the talent, one might just as well be a non-starter. If this were so, the world today would be that much poorer for the natural artist is a rarity. The vast treasure house of world art shows little that is the effort of that special breed of "born" artists.

The prehistoric drawings in caves were probably doodles during idle moments in between hunts, or, as universally accepted, were ritualistic incantations to ensure success in the hunt. The monolithic sculptures scattered the world over and the artifacts found in tombs of bygone eras were the work of artisans and skilled craftsmen who were sensitive to the tools and materials of their trade. With few exceptions, old and modern masters in painting owed their skill more to training and dedicated study than to inherited talent. Religious or secular, magical or purely utilitarian, the works they created bridged the gap of time and culture to communicate with their viewers because the artist in them spoke a common language understood by all.

Everyone has the potential for artistic growth. Whether the "artist" in the person can be released will depend largely on his environment, the encouragement he gets, the support given and the opportunities available for creative activity.

At a tender age the child plays with simple drawing materials and colours to satisfy his instinct for self-gratification. The first mark he makes on paper is a meaningless scribble over which he has no control. He enjoys the arm movements the activity provides. Later as he gains in motor control over his strokes he is able to make the marks he wants. He can make them long or short, jagged or curved.

One day while doodling he starts to tell a story of his doodles although there is nothing that remotely resembles anything that he is talking about. The child has arrived at a very important stage of his artistic development. He is relating his thinking to the marks he makes on paper. There is hand and eye co-ordination and for the first time he is consciously engaged in drawing.

It is at this crucial stage that many a well-intentioned parent has stunted the child's artistic growth by imposing an adult viewpoint and standard on the child's work. The very last thing a child needs is to be told that the animal he has just drawn does not look like what it is supposed to represent, or that there is something very wrong with the house in his picture. Demonstrating how these can be corrected will only serve to inhibit the child further and shake his confidence in his own effort. The adult who keeps a child fascinated with his quick sketches will end up with requests for more pictures because he can do it so much better and the child is only too willing to abdicate his own creative power.

The adult can best help the child by trying to understand the intention behind the child's creation. He can do this by keeping a close watch on the child as he paints, models or constructs. He comes in when interest slackens or when the child seeks help to draw an animal. However strong the inclination do not be too hasty to oblige. Instead, the adult should try to help the child clarify his own ideas about the subject by questioning him along this line (e.g. drawing a cat): "Is the cat a big or small animal? Is it bigger than a dog? Is it heavy? Can you carry it in your arms? How does it feel to hold a cat? Is it a fierce animal? Would you like to touch it? What sound does it make? Do you like to keep a cat? Why?" The objective of these questions is to help the child build up a mental picture of a cat based on his own experience, knowledge and sensitivity. It is the child's cat that has to be drawn out from the child, not an adult version imposed on him. At all times the child should be left to do things his own way and not be forced into an adult mould. The adult's acceptance and respect for what the child creates is a very strong motivating force.

What the adult needs to bear in mind is that the child does not reproduce what he sees. He paints what he knows or feels. He uses art to explore the world around him. He formulates his own symbols to represent visual reality and he often mixes fantasy with facts. Each time he draws an object, he brings his total experience and association with the object to bear on it. The value of this art experience is in the process of doing rather than the final product. The child does not consciously strive to finish a piece of work according to adult standards. He is through with it when he has had a complete experience and he moves on to something else. It is fundamental that the child be given ample opportunity and time to explore and express his own ideas and feelings.

A technique is best taught when the child feels the need for it. If taught before he is ready, technique has no meaning for the child. In the same way that the child learns to walk, slowly mastering each step in the process, so should technique be imparted. Early technical skills would include demonstrations on how to hold a brush firmly, how to wash it before dipping it from one colour into another, how to get rid of excess colours and colour mixing. It is only during adolescence that techniques can profitably be taught because, as the child becomes more mature, his need for a greater variety and complexity of expression grows.

As the young child grows he becomes more critical toward his own work. He loses his innocence of vision and with it the spontaneity that characterized his earlier efforts. Parents and teachers of young children should bear this in mind and strive to retain as much of the child's original art concept as it is within their power to do so. Their role is simple enough – to encourage the child to be actively involved in what he is doing and to feel its importance without any adult interference or imposition. Early childhood is the period for the formation of a child's character and it is vital that his self-confidence should not be shaken or undermined. The art programme, if properly implemented, can determine whether the child will live in frustration and inhibition or learn to adapt the full freedom offered him for adjustment in the society he lives.

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