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**McKean, Margaret**

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# school art -- some points to ponder

**MARGARET McKEAN**

**art department, johannesburg college of education**

IT IS A PARADOX that art education is viewed generally as a subject of little significance and the art period is seen as one of the most dispensable on the school time-table, whilst, on the other hand, viewed generally, creativity is regarded as a 'special gift' and the artist, a person with special talent, which makes him a revered body — if somewhat alien. Although educational policy is moving away from the mechanical note-taking, fact-remembering type of teaching to one in which empirical experience is cherished and the discoveries which the pupil makes for himself are seen as the most positive and significant activity, art, as a subject, seems to gain but scant ground. The basic premise in the 'discovering for himself' approach is the ability to see relationships and discover new ones. This surely is the crux of creativity.

> "The ability to relate and connect, sometimes in odd and yet in striking fashion, lies at the very heart of any use of the mind, no matter in what field or discipline."[1]

It is strange that this approach — the structuring of situations in the classroom in which this type of activity can take place — is taking place, and successfully, in many subjects, but generally speaking, art is not one of them. On the other hand art is the subject which is most quickly associated with the concept of creativity for it is the school subject which is furthest removed from being an interpretative one. The music pupil plays something written by someone else, the drama student puts his expression into becoming a character which was created by somebody else, the ballet dancer interprets through his body movements, but it is the pupil in the visual arts programme who makes something out of the information gathered by his perceptual systems — especially his visual system.

Why then does art as a subject appear to lack stature and direction. People do not seem to be convinced of its validity or significance and it would seem that the time has come to take stock and reassess its aims and its place in our educational structure.

This problem of the place and significance of art in the educational hierarchy is not an insular one. Kurt Rowland, writing in Britain states:

> "... the chief claims of art education to inclusion in the syllabus appear to be based on vague hopes that such a 'cultural' discipline may have a liberalising effect on certain latent qualities and lead to an unspecified enhancement of the personality. It is not surprising that school art, which seems to have such woolly aims has become a fringe subject and is thought to be less essential than 'recognised' subjects which are considered indispensable to vocational training."[2]

Aims formulated by our own educational authorities are as 'woolly' and generalised and have little specific relation to the subject. In a Study Guide on Art which formulates the T.E.D. policy regarding the subject, the following statement is made:

> "Art education conforms to the general aim of education viz. to guide the child towards responsibility and obedience to the religious and social norms."[3]

This statement could be discussed in the light of many of its implications, but it is relevant to point out here, in this context, that the one essential quality wihch art education nutures is not that of obedience to norms, but rather the ability to assess and question what exists and seems, and furthermore to make decisions continually, these decisions being continuously modified by new experience and perceptions. Art is the one area in which the pupil learns to be responsible for each decision he makes — he learns to commit himself each time he makes a mark, defines a shape or sets a series of colours in a relationship to each other.

A teacher faced with a further dispensation from his policy statement would rightfully be confused because of the lack of precise meaning in the statements made.

> "As far as art education is concerned, art rests on three pillars, a trinity: It must serve a purpose, it must be interpretative and it must be ennobling, in other words it must serve a purpose, it must be a means of expression and it must effect beauty."[4]

To draw up a programme of work that would satisfy these requirements and not impose alien standards and concepts on the pupils, and be sure that what was being done was satisfying the requirements of the statement would be extremely difficult, if possible. Beauty has as many interpretations as there are people, and whether the child concerns himself with what is beautiful is questionable. Significant, yes — but beautiful, no. The concept of 'ennobling' falls into the same category, and together with art having to be 'interpretative', or 'a means of expression', brings to mind one of the major problems standing in the way of art being as it were, loved for itself alone, and not for the peripheral content which it has. Kurt Rowland refers to it as a "cult of transliterating visual values"[5] which he expands on as follows:

> "Ideas which in the past had been understood through the senses were now presented in literary form. Moral and philosophical values completely replaced the visual ones in many cases. The proposition 'This is a picture of God, therefore it is a good picture' was close at hand."[6]

"This picture looks like a man, therefore it is a good picture", is unfortunately not close at hand, but very much with us. This is not to say that a picture which looks like a man is never a good picture. We have only to dip very briefly into the heritage of art which we have to prove this to be so — the main point is that the qualities which make a good picture are not those which make it a recognisable representation of something we know. Respectability and acceptance in the visual arts could be bought on condition that the frame of reference was a literary one — in much the same way that approbation will, unhappily, only too often be given to children when they submit to the misinformed adult demand that their art work should concern itself with copying, with as much accuracy as possible, what they see. The visual arts need not be interpretative in this way. They have their own vocabulary and dynamics and can communicate and express values which cannot be expressed in any other way, by appealing to the various senses in a manner which belongs to them.

Rudolph Arnheim, in **Art and visual perception,** is concerned about this neglect of our senses.

> "Our experiences and ideas tend to be common but not deep, or deep but not common. We are neglecting the gift of comprehending things by what our senses tell us about them. Concept is split from percept, and thought moves among abstractions. Our eyes are being reduced to instruments by which to measure and identify — hence a dearth of ideas that can be expressed in images and an incapacity to discover meaning in what we see. Naturally we feel lost in the presence of objects thae make sense only to undiluted vision and we look for help to the more familiar medium of words."[7]

This is understandable as we live in a society which has been shaped very largely by words, and their values. Verbal articulation and expression, and the ability to be precise ". . . has become the touchstone of educational achievement."[8] We are not at home with, and tend not to take too seriously, anything that cannot be expressed in words, hence the need to ". . . look for help in the more familiar medium of words . . ." and thus render the object of our attention, be it a painting, sculpture or any other visual work, to a state in which we can cope with it. Marshall Mcluhan says of this condition

> "Literate man undergoes much separation of his imaginative, emotional and sense life, as Rousseau (and later the Romantic poets and philosophers) proclaimed long ago."[9]

and

> "Language does for intelligence what the wheel does for the feet and body. It enables them to move from thing to thing with greater ease and speed and ever less involvement. Language extends and amplifies man but it also divides his faculties. His collective consciousness or intuitive awareness is diminished by this technical extension of consciousness that is speech."[10]

Today we must reassess our reasons for teaching art, because the society and cultural environment of any particular time shape both the reasons and conviction with which they are held, and today we are concerned with problems that we have become aware of, which will not be solved by using approaches or philosophies or methods which were the product of another time and other problems. Our problems are many, but one of them is that our capacity to understand through our senses — and in the visual arts more specifically through the eye — has become crippled and uses language as a crutch to come to some sort of understanding. Has more ever been written about art and has art ever stated or screamed more boldly, or aggres-

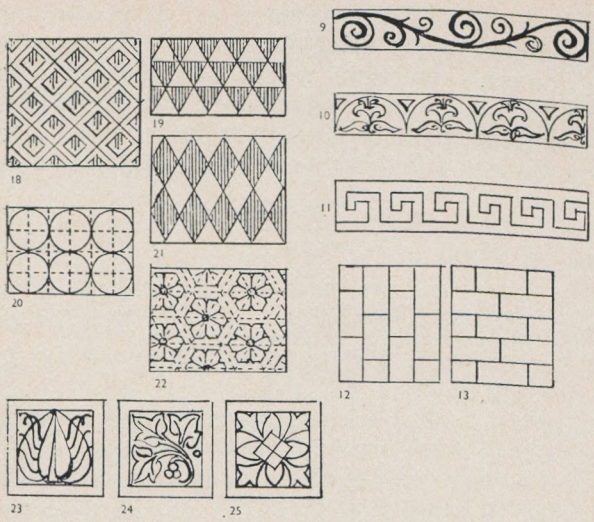

FIGURE 1.

"Elementary Art Teaching" by E. R. Taylor. 1890. From Gordon Sutton; "Artisan or Artist", Pergamon Press. p. 130.

sively, or desperately, that it wants to be seen in terms of its own values than now! Our concern as teachers should be with seeing the subject in terms of this condition, that is of its own values, and working out ways in which to handle it. In Britain art was introduced in the middle of the 19th century, to fulfil a very practical requirement. There was no though of teaching art to a pupil to

> "... stimulate his powers of observation ... and give him an opportunity for creative self expression",[11]

nor was the aim to encourage 'creativity' as we understand it, (if we understand it, for it is a much maligned word), but it was the offshoot of a renewed interest in craftmanship and industrial design.

A report drawn up by Kay-Shuttleworth in 1840, and motivating the teaching of drawing in schools, reads as follows:

> "The art of design has been little cultivated among the workmen of England ... In all manufactures of which taste is a principal element, our neighbours the French, are greatly our superiors, solely, we believe, because the eye and the hand of all classes are practised from a very early age in the arts of design. In the elementary schools of Paris, the proficiency of the young pupils in drawing is very remarkable ..."[12]

Thus the approach to the subject was one which produced a syllabus which was geared to exercise the pupils and make them technically proficient and skilful, but in terms that

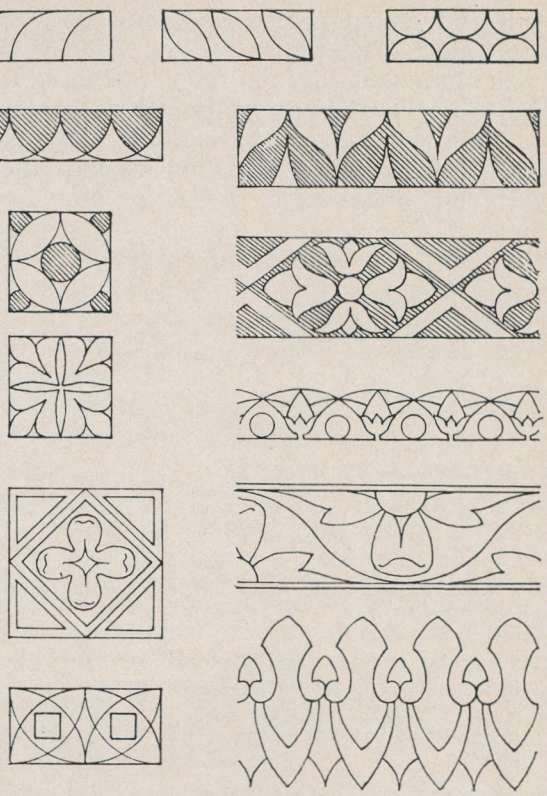

FIGURE 2.

T.E.D. Syllabus for Art and Crafts, Grade I — Std. 5, 1961.

had no relationship to the natural inclinations of the child. Infants were given exercises in accurate measurement, and taught to copy line directions. The repeat design, which fulfilled the requirements for decorating pottery, brought with it a whole system of stylised and formulised drawing methods, which we have with us still today, although it is very difficult to rationalise them into any scheme concerned with visual education (Figs. 1 and 2). They extended their influence from decorative work to whole systems for drawing people, trees, and so on, which certainly discourage any personal observation on the part of the pupil. We are surely concerned with teaching pupils to look and in that looking to see, not just to recognise, and in that seeing to become involved on various levels, and with other senses as well as the visual — the haptic, the tactile, the oral, the auditory.

The development of skill will be a concomitant, but when it becomes an end in itself the activity loses its significance as part of a

visual education programme, and becomes mechanical. The nature of the activity becomes formulated by the requirements of the skill to be developed and the whole process has little relevance to the subject art, or, to use a more fitting designation, visual education. This becomes a matter of emphasis. Pupils will be given a stencil of a bird, or taught to make one using circles, so as to have a fitting subject with which to learn to do, let us say, seed-mosaic. The pupils have been denied a personal confrontation with the subject, a bird. It is during this initial consideration of the subject matter that the pupil should be extended in terms of his awareness — awareness of shape, texture, pattern, colour tone and so on. He should have the opportunity to learn to see, feel, explore and relate to the subject he is going to use, and then select and express what is significant to him.

> "Only by encouraging the child to draw directly from nature can he really develop the careful, sensitive observation which can be a basis for a creative intepretation of the world around and about him."[13]

Stevini, in **Art and Education,** writes:

> "Art education is also concerned with enriching visual perception, with forming concepts that are not based on word patterns, with imagination and imaginative problem-solving, with communica tion . . ."[14]

If we could clarify our reasons for teaching art as concrete, relevant and fundamental concepts teachers would be provided with a framework in terms of which they could give purpose, validity structure and continuity to their visual education projects and programme.

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## THE FUTURE OF A COLLEGE

(Continued from page 14)

courses for this purpose, but a future development must be part-time courses for serving teachers. The correspondence courses provided by the Department are excellent in conception but not really loved if we judge by criticism voiced by teachers to their teachers' associations.

There must also be much more organized experimentation and research. The Johannesburg College of Education has already done a fair amount into such topics as teaching practice and evaluation, but there are many other directions where research is necessary; the high rate of drop-out is one. And with the increasing emphasis on remedial work, there is pressing need for a clinic attached to the college, not to mention the problems of special education.

The future of the college must be greater than the past. It has its own ethos. It has its traditions of freedom and initiative, of making use of all available talents, not least of those of students who have had recognition long before the universities thought of it. But if we are to go ahead under present conditions, there must be real autonomy in the university sense. Colleges are not irresponsible; they do not have to be tied down by regulation from a central authority any more than universities are. Nor must they be moated keeps housing a body of students cut off from life. However, their best future — JCE's future at any rate — must lie in the university.