

ABOUT PAINTING AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ART

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Human speech surrounds the newborn child from its first day. It creates an atmosphere permeated with spirit into which the child "breathes himself." The child imitates, listens, absorbs and at the same time forms himself. Only through this can he become human and express his personal self through the word. Similarly, and in an equally important way, art -- the highest expression of the soul-spirit forces of mankind -- works on the developing child. In order for the child to develop his human capacities, an "artistic environment" is needed from the very earliest days of his life. First, the child takes in his environment; then he works upon it himself. Here it is especially important that the meeting with art which the educator offers is not only a gift, but also, at the same time, a calling forth of activity from the child. The cultivation of art awakens the hidden, creative, building activities and the soul-forces of the child. In this way each artistic activity calls forth a different perception through the senses.

In working with children of preschool age, it is necessary to create from the beginning an environment which takes into account the child's sensitivity to good artistic quality (colors, forms, wall decorations, sounds, toys, etc.) In this way a deeper effect is achieved with this age group than will be achieved through "art education" offered in a few spare hours.

It is clear that at this age the practical activities need some specific methods. Even the small child can find his way into a variety of artistic realms and work with them, but not with the purpose of getting specialized training. Certainly one does not want to begin preparing the child for a later profession such as musician, painter or sculptor. The possibilities for artistic activities for children include modeling with beeswax or clay, painting, movement games which carry a strong musical-rhythmic quality, and playing on simple string instruments such as children's harps or kanteles.

But the most important point to consider in these efforts is the following: In this early stage the child takes in everything with his total being (as an entity of body, soul and spirit.) What appears here in its embryonic form must appear at a later stage of development in one way or another. Along with this, one must realize that in the thinking or social realms, for example, there will appear capabilities but also deficiencies, and their connection with the early artistic activities is not easily seen. There exists in human life in addition to the abilities which develop in a linear, step-by-step progression, those abilities which appear in various developmental stages in a whole new way through metamorphosis.

In the following paragraphs, the example of painting is presented. For the reasons given above, this is an experience which should not be viewed as leading to a finished form, but rather it should be assessed as an experience which leads to abilities which can be transformed throughout the child's life.

Water Color Painting

Materials: Wooden boards, 50:35cm (about 20"x14"), painting paper, flat brushes about 24 mm (1") wide, artists' water color paints, small jars for the diluted colors, water jars, sponges and small jars for stirring the paints.

The children particularly love to help prepare the painting table. They are always interested in observing every job of the grown-ups and like to be active by helping with such activities. Now the tables must be covered with an oil cloth; the water jars must be filled and distributed. Next to every jar a sponge is laid on which the wet brushes can be dabbed. The colors will be diluted in small jars and smoothly stirred, then poured into the color jars, and these are then placed on the table. The painting paper (absorbent paper, not too thin) is dipped in a water tub and carefully smoothed (well- fastened) onto a previously moistened paint board. Now the painting can begin.

Understandably such a joint preparation with the children is only possible when the group has no more than 20-25 children. (In Waldorf kindergartens this is generally the rule.) It is especially helpful if one has not separated the children by age, but has rather combined them in mixed age groups (from 3-6 years). Then the different abilities of the children can be well satisfied by the different activities of the watercolor process. While the three and four year olds are fully satisfied when they can stir the colors and pour them into the glasses, the five and six year olds take on more tasks (for example, gathering together all the supplies which are needed for the preparation, cleaning the painting table, washing out and drying the glasses, and cleaning up.) The children notice the repeated sequence of events each time the group paints.

The Painting Experience

Without a previous call to order on the part of the grown-ups, which results in a consciousness of the activity, and without a presentation to the children or the introduction of a theme, the children dip their brush in the color and its flowing trace is followed along the paper. The limits of the three primary colors, red, yellow and blue, open to the children a color scale filled with nuances of unbelievable riches which they themselves can discover. Particularly for the four and five year olds there is a joy of discovery connected with this process. For when the single colors flow together in various places and mix, there appear the "between colors" such as green, violet or brown.

Alongside the color play on the paper, which the children frequently experience with words of wonder or joy, there is also the changing color of the water in which the brush is well washed which plays a great part in the painting. When the whole paper is painted and the colors glow and shine through the watery element, there enters into the child a moment of great satisfaction, which often flows over to the free play following the painting. The picture itself is no longer important to the child when it has been put on the rack to dry.

The five and a half and six year old children come to the experience differently. Already before they dip the brush into the first color, they often have an image of a definite color which they wish to use or of an object such as a tree, a castle or a rainbow which they would like to paint. The combination of liquid color and damp paper does not allow one to paint solid outlines, which is all to the good for the further development of the fantasy forces. It often occurs that the children add a new color to the already started form, calling forth a new sense-association in their fantasy. While they are painting or when they are finished, these children will gladly tell the grown-ups or another child something about their picture -- which color they especially like or what content they discover in the painted picture.

Even for the three year olds painting in this manner is a joyful experience. It is most important that one does not expect them to master the individual techniques such as, for example, washing the brush before they place it in a new color. It is also not possible for them to guide the brush in a directed manner. Often they move their brushes enthusiastically or timidly back and forth on the paper, and one perceives that for them the movement and the trace of color is the most important aspect of painting. Mostly the three year olds are satisfied with one color such as red, and they are only finished with painting when the glass of color is empty. When they get another color as well they do not add it by placing it next to the first color on the paper, but rather they paint over the first color. It is the same with a third color. The result is then a dark, undifferentiated surface, and the three glasses of color can no longer be distinguished one from the other regarding the color of their contents. If one begins with a single color and gradually increases the number of colors, then these children learn after a short time to paint laying one color next to another rather than painting over the colors.

The three year old children are mostly very still while painting and they are busily engaged with it, especially when each has his own paint jars to use. The four and five year old children happily share with one another, in a more or less impulsive way, when something special develops on their paper. Among the five and six year old children, the quiet, industrious mood again prevails and indeed in a thoughtful, careful manner. Occasionally while they are painting they will have exchanges with other children of their age regarding the colors or content of their paintings.

Learning to Paint Through Imitation

The pre-school child best learns to paint as he learns every other skill -- through imitation of the adult. Therefore it is most advantageous for the child to watch the mother, kindergarten teacher or older sibling paint. He grasps it in the way described as appropriate for his age if no instruction is connected with it. Either he wants to paint right away while the adult is painting (the three year old) or he wants to paint by himself at another time (the five and six year old.) All of the technical tasks closely connected with painting, such as setting up and cleaning up the materials, will also become familiar through imitation of the adult. All the reservations about the amount of work involved are dissolved through the helpful activity of the children.

If the adult is careful that each time he dips into a new color, he first washes the brush in the water jar and wipes it on the sponge, then the child will follow this sequence more and more in the same way. For every healthy child has a strong inclination to go along with or imitate in fantasy play every deed or movement he sees in his environment. Therefore certain deeds of the adults work themselves much deeper into the young child than do words of explanation which call for the child's understanding.

With the beginning of the school years, this free fantasy-filled approach to color is replaced by a more directed experience of painting led by the teacher's words. This implies that the assignment of the teacher is presented with fantasy-filled words and usually in connection with what is occurring in the lessons of that time. The development of painting will progress through definite steps, and the results will be viewed by everyone.

Metamorphosis in Later Stages of Life

When an adult in a conversation carefully brings forth his arguments, experiencing the different responses of his partner and at the same time allowing himself to be influenced by these responses, then he owes this capacity in part to his experiences as a young child with color and brush, which were his unconscious teachers.

What the adult knows as logic is always the inner result of a purposeful sequence of steps which the small child was able to take in from his environment through imitation. The inner order in the sequence of the steps of painting insures a "useful" result. In adult thinking, the careful connection of individual steps leads to a sure conclusion.

One who at an early age has learned to pay attention to the strength or delicacy of color and to gradations in applying it, will later find it easier to apply the same soul capacities in social situations, for example in self-assertion and in acquiescence.

Painting includes processes such as being careful, paying attention, waiting, following the course of the work, experiencing the laws of color mixing, and applying color in varying strengths. All of these activities give ever-renewed stimulus to the gradually awakening soul of the child, helping him to grasp his physical body and make his sense organization and his limbs ever more responsive.

Naturally, the child is not conscious of this. He does not reflect on what he is doing, but lives intensively in the activities. In this way he has experiences at deep levels which can wait there to be grasped by him consciously in later stages of life and to find expression in an ability to lead his own life. These effects reveal the true human justification for artistic endeavors in the pre-school. Art is not an aesthetic add-on to "real life," but as an exercise of continual striving, can become the foundation of a truly human mastery of life.