

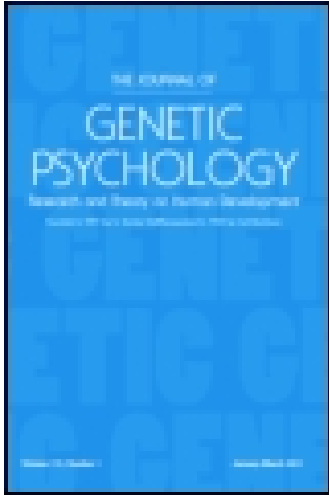
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The Art of Little Children

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THE ART OF LITTLE CHILDREN.

During the years 1892 and 1893 I worked over some thousands of children's drawings with a view to finding what we could learn of their modes of thinking and feeling through that form of expression. The results were embodied in a paper read before the Educational Congress in Chicago, and afterwards published in this journal¹. A year later my attention was called to a similar study made by Mr. Corrado Ricci in 1887². Mr. Ricci's study was confined to 1,250 papers; it covers both pictorial and plastic art, and it gives no quantitative results. He has also several wide digressions on color and on the historical bearings of his study. The part dealing with children's drawings, however, reaches conclusions so like my own that I feel greatly encouraged concerning the possibility of reaching some sound results by this method of study. At the same time, his study, made some five years before my own, lays me open to the charge of gross plagiarism.

Mrs. Louise Maitland has made the following slightly condensed translation of that part of Mr. Ricci's work dealing with drawings, and I am sure it will prove of interest to the readers of the PEDAGOGICAL SEMINARY.

EARL BARNES.

I.

One winter's day of the year 1882-83, returning from the Carthusian monastery at Bologna, I was driven by a downpour of rain to take refuge under the portico leading to Meloncello.

I had not known that under this arch was to be found a permanent exhibition, both literary and artistic, possessing little æsthetic merit perhaps, and hardly what could be considered chaste. The verses and drawings were all inspired by an extremely crude realism, compared with which certain sonnets of Marino and novels of Casti would figure as moral treatises. The works of the youngest artists, those occurring, naturally, lowest down on the wall, showed themselves least technical and logical; they were, nevertheless, characterized by greater decency, and the poetical effusions were notably diminished.

The sadness of the day, of the place, of my mind, quite out of unison with the brutal and obscene epigrams which abounded higher up on the wall, reconciled me to the art of the little ones and suggested to me the present study.

II.

I began by setting to work the little daughter of one of my friends, but soon found that in this manner the matter would pro-

¹See PEDAGOGICAL SEMINARY, Vol. II, p. 455.

²L'Arte dei Bambini. By Corrado Ricci, Bologna, 1887.

gress too slowly, for after five months' work, I had hardly secured over a hundred of these artistic documents. I therefore changed my tactics and had recourse to the elementary schools, thronged by all classes of children. The idea proved excellent. In less than a month, thanks to the aid of my friend Rafael Belluzzi and of the teachers, I was in a condition to bring my consideration to bear upon about a thousand drawings, male and female; nor did the collection stop at this point, for I received, thanks to Dr. Adolpho Venturi, a noted art critic, and inspector of the Estense Gallery, who obtained them from the schools of Modena and was kind enough to give them to me, another two hundred and fifty drawings.

With this amount of material, of whose authenticity I could have no doubt, I took heart of grace and set to work.

III.

The sacred Scriptures tell us that the eternal Father finished His work by the creation of man. With the creation of man, on the contrary, the children begin theirs. Generally up to the age of three years it seems that children do not know that black lead leaves traces on white paper, and it is the practice of the greater number who take a fancy to draw, to interlace on the paper a network of lines running in all directions, without displaying the least intention of representing anything. When first, therefore, such an intention shows itself, ninety-nine times out of a hundred they try to give expression to a man by means of a square or badly drawn circle and two vertical lines, standing for the head and the legs. This excessive reduction of a man is not confined solely to the youngest children, but is found frequently to be the case with those of six to eight years of age, among children giving no signs of lack of intelligence. It will become apparent from what follows that it is not difficult to understand why the little artists content themselves with such imperfect creations. This reason, if in its nature not deep, we shall still see presents a perfectly practical side.

The head and the legs only? What more is wanted for seeing, eating and walking? And if the arms and the torso are lacking, so much the better, they will not have to work so much; this will not be unpleasant to the heart, and really the stomach does not matter. Children, however, are hardly actuated by the philosophy that would lead them to suppress the head in order to study less. Before a man becomes entire he must pass through many stages, and they are not prompted to jump at once from this primitive form to complete physical integrity. It is necessary to have patience and to make gradual concessions, for children progress little by little, from the head and the legs to an arm or a bust, but never, or only in the very rarest cases, to both at once. Only later are they driven to this deference to the demands that will suffice for the exigencies of the most modest inventory, and then they attach the arms indifferently to the head, the neck or the waist. The position is to them an entirely secondary affair; the important thing is that finally the man shall possess arms. But we must not imagine from this that they are at once in a condition to make the limbs obey the frequent and instinctive actions that are called for by the common needs of life. They cannot, for instance, ever carry the hand to the mouth, the nose, or any part of the head, nor can they touch the chest. This is accounted for by the absence of knees in the

legs, or elbows in the arms. But human activity very quickly demands the articulation of the legs and arms, and recognizing the urgent necessity, the little artists make plentiful concessions, sometimes too extravagantly, since they dispense with angles altogether, and conduct the hands and feet in the desired directions by means of generous curves. Through many devious paths, then, man passes in children's art before he can assume a legitimate form.

IV.

Once intact, however, this man no longer submits to the suppression of any part of himself, at least in the eyes of the young observer, and there arise very grave objections to any such course. If the man is shown on horseback, both his legs are visible; if in a boat, the whole of his body, as if seen through the transparent side of the boat, or as if, at any rate, they were seen both at the same time.

What, then, is the rule that guides the children in their art? On what do almost all their errors (not technical, of course, but logical) depend? Simply upon this: the child describes the man and things instead of rendering them artistically. They try to reproduce him in his literal completeness, and not according to the visual impression. They make, in short, just such a description in drawing as they would make in words.

They know that a man has two legs, and they draw him with both, even when they must reproduce the man in such a position as would conduce rightly to showing only one, or even none at all. There are a number of proofs to be found of this in the collection of drawings. With very few exceptions, all those who have made two or more men in a boat, have made them entire from head to foot, without remembering that the side of the boat hides a great part of the body. They reason, or perhaps they fail to reason, and say, "The man in the boat is there altogether, and if he is all there, why should we draw only half of him?"

And to what means do they have recourse to draw everything thus completely? Either they make the boat consist of a single curved line, leaving in this way the figures wholly discovered, or they draw the side of the boat transparent, as if it were of pure crystal, or, finally, they put the figure full length outside the boat, as if he had jumped out in order to be perceived by the artist.

In support of the laws thus established there are other proofs. An adult, even the least intelligent, looking at a man's profile, understands that a good third of the body remains hidden from view, and artistically he will suppress it. On this account, speaking in generalities, a large part of the arm, sometimes even all, and half of the face, or nearly, are not seen, and he will not express it. But the little ones generally follow their own law and say, "A man should stand as it pleases him, in profile or full face, and there is no reason for curtailing him; seen from just one side or the other, he will always be a man with two arms and two eyes."

In all the drawings I have collected, on looking at the profiles, I found, first, that they show almost always the two arms, attached at different heights to the middle of the breast, or hanging from the neck like the two ends of a scarf, or more frequently still, both drawn on the same side, one near the shoulder, the other at the waist. Secondly, that in drawing the profile, seventy times out of a hundred, they still keep the two eyes of the full face.

VI.

A man fortunately has only one nose and one mouth that can by any possibility be reasonably drawn in a simple profile, but the eyes cannot be shown unless one of them is put in the wrong place. We see here how strong are the laws already indicated. . . . Some of the children know very well that a man has two eyes, and, therefore, they ought to draw both; but they also remember that between the two eyes hangs only one nose, so what are they to do? Draw the face with its nose in profile, and put the two eyes full face. This occasions a moment of doubt, and they resolve out of it a second nose, that may be called the supernumerary nose of primitive logic, because it is entirely the most original product of the laws of integrity that dominate all infantile art.

Landscape comes also under the prescribed laws. The children draw the three sides of a house; they make it and its two flanks. And why draw three? Because they have not yet found the way, the cipher, rather, by which they can draw all four. "Thanks to heaven," say the children, "the house has four sides, and so all ought to be drawn." But we need not exaggerate their critical sense, and if their perspective is not yet quite perfect, they have to content themselves with showing only three.

On examining the landscape one very often sees through the walls the men ascending the stairs, or the sexton who rings the bell can be seen through the walls of the bell tower. This is also the case with the people who fill the cars. All, in short, that the children know, or, to put it better, think they know, is there, must be seen, notwithstanding any obstacles, natural or artificial. Does any one object that often they simply draw a house, a tower, or a church, without figures? True, but in such a case they have no intention of drawing anything but a house, a tower or a church. If to one of them it occurs to suggest the use of either of those buildings, this is done by the addition of a man who passes through a room, of a cook who prepares dinner, and these they designate by symbols, as I have myself found at least a hundred times. That no child from among so many will make the objection (which all adults would make) that this man and this cook who are in the house, could not possibly be seen from the outside, is just because, given that this man and this cook are or should be in the house, according to the logic of the children, they should also be visible. . . .

XI.

The children's art presents another characteristic side, and upon this alone I could write a volume, which would be neither useless nor uninteresting, but in connection with the present work it needs only a brief mention. I speak of the details which in all their minuteness impress the infant mind more than the sublime. No one can have observed oftener than I, in San Petronio of Bologna, that never a child entering the church raises his head impressed by the grandeur of the arches and the vaulting, which are capable even of compelling the admiration of the conscripts and the peasantry.

That which interests the children is the minute, the particular, is, for example, a shepherd with a basket of eggs, a priest who passes with an extinguisher, an old woman with a brazier, or a beggar in a scarlet cloak. And though they make so much of these little things "that the foot goes slowly and the eye wanders," the

church in its majesty neither repels nor attracts them. In the houses they will oftener forget to put the windows than the chimneys, these latter always in great numbers, and smoking abundantly. That vivid and fantastic pennant of smoke ascending from the roofs, what a great impression it has made on the little artists, if they cannot keep themselves from putting it even on the churches and the bell towers.

And what shall I say of the pipe and the stove-pipe hat?

The pipe is the supreme ideal of a child, the glowing emblem of the final conquest. Later on, the boy will consider that to appear as a man, fine clothes and the love of a woman are essential, but at first the idea of a man lies for him in the pipe, and if he has secretly obtained one, even if he does not actually bring the contraband article in immediate contact with his lips, he blows at the smoke from the outside with an air of ineffable superiority and disdain. The pipe puts in an appearance in almost all his drawings, even the most primitive. You look at a man made only of a head and legs, his arms and his body are wanting, but what does it matter if he is fortunate enough to possess a pipe?—and these cavaliers in the saddle, these gentlemen who enjoy the sea breezes in a boat, each has his own pipe.

The top-hat is not less fortunate, and it also glorifies the head of the primitive man.

I do not speak of the other details, such as the hundreds of flags that fly from the ships, the steamers puffing in the race, the trees, the houses, the campaniles of the cavaliers or pedestrians; nor will I speak of the musket or the sword put at the side of some man, and mitigating to some extent the grandeur of the stove-pipe hat or the colossal dimensions of the pipe. From all of this we comprehend that every child draws that which most interests him, or that for which he most wishes. A child will put in vases and bunches of flowers, as well as muffs, fans and umbrellas, all the elegant paraphernalia, in fact, of a woman's attire. The ladies whom they draw always answer to the requirements of fashion. They answer less well to even the most modest inventory of human proportions. A child will draw the two arms on the same side of the body, but he will not omit anything pertaining to the most perfect dandyism.

XII.

Besides these peculiarities prompted by facts or by the constant and predominating desire felt by the child, are to be noticed sometimes, also, the peculiarities suggested by some special fact or instantaneous impression. Some children see a horse fall in the street; if they are made to draw on the same day, eighty times out of a hundred they will draw a falling horse. Among the sketches I possess, some are to be found all dotted over with marks; they were made on a snowy day. . . .

XX.

For those who are interested in my study, I must make one final observation. The examples have proved that children at first do not artistically represent an object, but describe it according as the memory of it is more or less complete, and suggests to them while drawing the different parts of the object. Art, as art, is to them unknown. Those draw least badly and learn quickest the true

integrity of things who have the best memories, but when representation is no longer solely a product of memory alone, as with children, but the result of independent forces, such as the æsthetic sense, good taste, the perfection and delicacy of the sense of sight, the lightness of the hand, and in general the technical practice, the best artists do not always prove to be those who have the best memories. I have, in fact, proved from observation of children of most schools, that those who have made the best drawings, save with one or two exceptions, are the best among the scholars, and are those who most satisfactorily think and record, and are in a condition to produce a fuller inventory of the things learned by them, as they have learned their lesson. Later on, however, those who will reveal themselves to be strong and original artists may very well be those who in school cut the poorest figure.