

# TEACHING ART IN A FRIENDS SCHOOL

BY MARY W. MCCLELLAND

I have had a very strong feeling that there is between Friend's beliefs and the arts a vital connection which is extremely difficult to put into words. For nearly 300 years Quakers distrusted art in any form as a distortion of "reality" by the emotions. Benjamin West had to steal the hairs from his cat's tail in order to make paint brushes. In a sense they were right in being wary. If one wanted to stay safely and surely true to "facts" as ordinarily perceived one should steer clear of the arts. They do lead one away from the obvious! On the other hand this very recognition can perhaps help to clear away some of the fog and enable one to see a deeper meaning in what is "really there."

Suppose one starts with the belief that there is that of God in every person. A child enters the art class: "What are we going to do today? Paint a picture? Paste black triangles on white paper? Fold, cut, or twist colored paper into odd shapes? Make a paper-mache mask or an otherworldly beast?" No matter what they do, no matter what the medium, the result astonishes us - the adults - looking at the crazy products the children have created. The children themselves are entranced. Where do these miraculous outpourings come from? In the variety of expression, in the surprises and the unexpected twists of the imagination, one is aware that something beyond our understanding flows through each individual child. There are often times when children are stuck. "I don't know what to paint," or "I can't do it." A list of suggestions can often help to trigger off an entirely new idea. But the harder and more important help is to get children to take their time, close their eyes perhaps and wait a moment, to listen, to let something come. In encouraging children to stop and listen quietly they can learn to keep open and aware. Insights and ideas flow more freely. Reaching out in the silence for the "beyond within" is the basis, the very stuff out of which art grows.

How about standards? How does one grow in competence? Is any product as good as any other? I quote now from the statement of

the aims and philosophy of the Cambridge Friends School: "As children develop an inner discipline, free from reliance on outer authority... they can be encouraged to become strong enough to be honest."



There is only one true way to grow, and that is to learn to *see* honestly. Many, many adults have never learned to see a picture honestly, although they may be able to talk very cleverly about it. They look to outer authority, get caught in fads or get stuck with a set of rules (which great artists are continually breaking anyway). All the real delight and fascination has been drained off because they are afraid to like something that might be considered bad taste.

When children say they have finished a painting or object, we encourage them to look again from a distance, upside down or sideways, squint at it, does it want something more? One little boy asked, "What do you mean?" A

hard question to answer in words, but after a bit he suddenly said, "I think I see," and took it back to work a little further. Even if he adds something which might seem to spoil it, he is on the right track, he genuinely cares and is involved honestly as far as he is able to see at the moment. Another boy asked, "Which of these animals is best?" Of course no animal is best in an absolute sense. There is a "best" only for times and places and persons. Even if one child's animal were judged "best" by a jury of critics, it would be completely irrelevant and unimportant as far as he or she is concerned. But the animals who are not cared for, who are slapped together and not looked at will not fare very well in the creator's eyes or the eyes of others.

Sometimes we discover a child completely absorbed and pleased with what appears to us as just a blob of a shape, or a child will spend minutes letting colors run slowly into each other, the result being mud. The absorption and identification with the color changes or the blobby object means he or she is momentarily connected with that "reality" behind the ordinary appearances of things. These experiences can be enhanced by asking if the child sees this or that, and by listening in turn to the amazing things he or she happens to see.

As the children grow older and see more, they see too much, or rather, to protect themselves against confusion, they see too little: they settle for the ordinary, everyday standards and objects that everyone accepts. They want to make a



dog that really looks like a dog. They are now much more self-critical and aware of what others might think. This in itself does not have to be a hard time for creative development. It is better to accept their feeling honestly rather than force them to make very free drawings because the teacher feels they should remain "open." If children are willing to accept all they see and to remain exposed to many different ways of putting what they see in concrete form, if they are willing to keep experimenting and to forget what others might think they can develop a real sensitivity, and ability to discriminate what is honest art from what is mere pretension or copying of other models. Honest art, like an honest life, can be down-to-earth (realistic) or up in the clouds (any other form). What is important is to keep the channels of the Divine within open, unobstructed by fear of being different or wrong.

No great artists just paint for self-expression. Rather they are aware and sensitive to what is beyond themselves; they are only the instrument through which God flows. Not all children become artists. The talent of making the hand do as the spirit leads is for relatively few. But the ability to *see* - to be aware and truly open, whether it be to African masks, to the color of pebbles, to sunlight coming through a cellar window, to the shape of dinosaur bones or to the face of someone hungry - is for anyone and everyone. It is not that there is a RIGHT way of seeing, but there is a *connected* way. The person in the act of looking is "turned on," illuminated the way a light bulb is turned on when it comes in contact with the electric current. The odd thing is that as we practice looking this way, as we "mind the light," as Quakers used to say, we grow in the capacity to see new and subtler shapes and designs and colors. We may start enjoying Maxfield Parrish which is fine if it is based on honest looking, but if we keep in contact we will probably grow beyond. Revelation is progressive in art as in life. In fact it is part of the same process. Looking in this way is a way we human beings learn to become a part of the complicated pattern called life, a way in which we can become aware of what is more than just ourselves.



*Mary McClelland helped found Cambridge Friends School and taught there from 1961 to 1971. Her own paintings and drawings have been exhibited in shows throughout the East Coast*