

The art of the line

Van James

School Arts, April 1992

Waldorf Schools, also known as Rudolf Steiner Schools, are the second largest group of private schools in the world. Originating in Europe in 1919, there are now nearly one hundred Waldorf schools in North America.

One of the many unique aspects of the Waldorf School is the area of study called form drawing. Taught in grades one through five, form drawings show children that all forms in nature are derived from either straightness or roundness, and that drawing consist of either the straight line or the curved line and the combination of the two. Simple linear patterns are then practiced. As the children progress, these form drawings become more and more complex. The teacher invents his or her own designs for the children to try to copy exactly and, eventually, the children create their own forms.

"In the beginning God in His ineffable resolve chose straightness and roundness in order to endow the world with the signature of the Divine. Thus the All-wise originated the world of form, the total essence of which is encompassed in the contrasts of the straight and the rounded line."

~ Johannes Kepler (1517-1630)

The Wizard's Reflection

Another method used to teach form drawing is the symmetry exercise. The teacher draws a straight vertical line on the board. In order to engage the students' imaginations we could pretend the board is a magic mirror. Drawing an abstract form to the left of the "mirror" we designate the form as the Wizard. The Wizard looks in the mirror and sees his reflection. What will it look like? A child is asked to come up to the board and draw the reflection. After working with very simple exercises in grades one and two, by third and fourth grades the students can achieve more complex symmetry. Exercises like this develop a strong sense of balance, design, and proportion. Along the way, students learn to size up a situation and bring it to completion. What's more, students enjoy them immensely!

In the early grades, form drawing provides an artistic basis for writing. In the fifth grade, form drawing is transformed into freehand geometric drawing, and by the sixth grade, students graduate to geometric drawing with precision instruments.

Learning from History

An interesting aspect of form drawing is that it deals with the abstract line in a purely concrete way, similar to the development of visual arts in ancient cultures. Many of the forms the children discover come directly out of history, such as the Greek geometric period. By fourth grade the students can show such proficiency with the line that complicated braiding can be attempted. Form drawing in each grade can always parallel other subject matter taught in that grade, such as fractions in fourth grade.

Not Just Another Pretty Art Form

Although students can enjoy and be challenged by it, the practice of form drawing develops and disciplines hand/eye coordination. It trains the sense of composition, form, and symmetry which strengthens other areas in the students' education. It is particularly helpful in revealing possible learning differences and disabilities to the teacher such as cross-dominance. Continued form drawing taught by a qualified teacher can work as an aid in the correction of such disabilities.

Little awareness of form drawing exists outside the Waldorf School movement. For over seventy years, however, this artistic medium has proved itself in elementary school education throughout the world. Aside from the enjoyment of practice and its potential as therapy, form drawing, regularly exercised, develops "on the one hand more thoughtfulness in observations and on the other hand more intuition in thinking."¹

Form drawing is a wonderful tool for enlivening attention to detail and stimulating inner activity in the student, which is not only a renewal of ancient artistic tradition, but conforms to the reality and nature of the line. Form drawing is truly the art of the line.

Van James teaches art at the Honolulu Waldorf School, Honolulu, Hawaii

Bibliography

Form Drawing, Hans Niederhauser & Margaret Frohlich. New York: Rudolf Steiner School, 1979.

Creative Form Drawing, Rudolf Kutzli. England: Hawthorn Press, 1985.

"Form Drawing", Rosemary Gebert. *Child and Man*, Winter 1986.

A Modern Art of Education, Rudolf Steiner, 1966.

The Kingdom of Childhood, Rudolf Steiner, 1978.

¹ *Discussions With Teachers*, Rudolf Steiner. London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1966.