THE ART SCHOOL: ITS RELATION TO THE ARTS AND CRAFTS

BY

WALTER S. PERRY

The introduction of drawing into the public schools was a purely utilitarian movement; since it was urged that this subject should be taught in order to produce native designers. The work first prescribed was entirely conventional: borrowed from the English School, and consisting largely of the arrangement of flowers and leaves about a center, to illustrate the principle of radiation, or of the same elements in a border design to illustrate repetition.

When this kind of work had proven to be of little value, it was advocated that the children be taught to make working drawings. The plea met with decided opposition; the objectors holding that this plan would involve the teaching of orthographic projection, a subject much too difficult for children. And even when it was shown that orthographic projection might give way to a common sense method,—locating the top view above the front view, the right view at the right of the front view, etc.,—the point at issue was not decided for many years.

Over and over, the argument was used that this new “common sense” method should not be taught in the public schools, because it was not taught in the technical schools, and was not used in the shops. But the new system finally prevailed, and, when a few years ago, over eight hundred letters of inquiry were sent out, it was found that three-fourths of all the important technical schools, draughting rooms, and instructors of instrumental drawing had accepted the new method.

The study of working drawings was followed by that of “the appearance of objects.” Again, a long time was required to insure recognition of the fact that children could learn to draw the appearance of objects. It was difficult to introduce this work into the highest grades of the grammar schools, but now
it is taught in the primary schools. Naturally, at first, the aim in all this work was mechanical accuracy, which reacted in a desire for more freedom. Freedom abounded until it became license; and, in some of the exhibitions, it was difficult to decide which work was done by the primary children and which by the students of the higher grades. Later, children were taught to draw the many objects and nature-forms about them, and the drawing of the figure was introduced, together with the study of water color; until now, so many things are included that the real value of the whole subject is in danger of being lost, through a misconception of the fundamental principles of art education.

The subject of manual training is now generally recognized. There is scarcely a city in the United States that has not its manual training school. Its value is acknowledged, not only in manual training high schools, but in the higher grades of grammar schools, and enormous sums of money are being spent on buildings, equipment, and instruction. But when the matter was first agitated before the National Educational Association, it was difficult to secure an audience for a discussion of the subject. At that time, Dr. C. M. Woodward addressed only twelve individuals. The next year, at another meeting of the same association, Dr. Woodward introduced a speaker who said: "There is little use in giving this address, as there are so few interested." Dr. Woodward replied: "Go on! When I read a paper on the same subject, last year, there were but twelve present, and you have an audience of sixteen!"

Many superintendents opposed the idea of introducing manual training into public schools, and ridiculed it by saying: "Conceive of the absurdity of a teacher standing before a class and crying: 'Children, take your saws! One! Two! Three! Saw! Now, children, take your hammers! One! Two! Three! Hammer!'"
Gradually, as the subject received recognition, it was believed that manual training meant mere "doing" or working in the concrete, regardless of accuracy or of appreciation of good form and proportion. At the great exhibitions, held in Madison, Wisconsin, 1884, and in Chicago, 1887, there were displayed great numbers of things made by children illustrating manual training, as then taught in public schools. All this work illustrated child-activity, but there was very little quality in it. Then, the educators began to ask: "If we are to have manual training, what plan can be introduced into the grades below the high school, so that the work may be done better and with fewer tools?" This problem was answered by the introduction of the Sloyd System; but even this can no longer hold the place assigned to it, for it lacks individuality. Set exercises worked out by every child in the school, a few for one grade and a few more for another, are not what is now demanded. There must be something else engrafted on it, and that something is art, and in place of Sloyd must come the Arts and Crafts that can be carried out in thin wood, weaving, basketry, wood carving, bent iron, hammered metal, etc.

As to the teaching of art in American art schools, just criticism can be made on the methods of the past, as well as on those prevailing at the present time in some of our institutions. Students were formally taught to draw from casts, week after week, and year after year. Do I overstate the matter? Not long ago, I asked the manager of a well-known art school the question: "What do your students do the first year?" "They draw from elementary casts only," was the reply. "And the second year?" I inquired. "They draw from the antique," was the answer. "What do they have the third year?" They go into the life classes and draw from life for two years," was the response. I hold that it is not honest to take time and tuition from a student, and
give him nothing in return but cast drawing and life
drawing. That is not art education. There is much else
to be recognized in the development of art appreciation
and expression. Then too, there is a fatigue-point which
is reached by students in three or four hours. Students
cannot go on with one kind of work, hour after hour, day
after day, with profit to themselves. They should be
given in the afternoon, work supplementary to that which
is pursued during the morning session, and in the variety
of work they will find stimulus, as well as creative devel-
opment. I do not mean that the work should be super-
ficial, but that one subject should be complementary to
another. There should be taught in every art school from
the first week of the session,—no matter how elementary
the work,—the subjects of design and composition. Com-
position should go hand in hand with other work. The
old idea that we must teach the student to draw before he
can originate, means to teach him to draw and never to
originate. The student reaches that point of perfection in
technique which enables him to express technique but not
originality. A student should early be led to believe that
he can originate, and he will create. The subject of com-
position introduced into the general art course should be
fundamental to all other kinds of work. The principles of
composition that should be taught are fundamental to all
art: to architecture, to sculpture, to painting and to all
divisions of applied art.

Students in the art schools of
past years were obliged to adhere to the old formula of
"cast drawing, antique, and life," through a series of
years; making painstaking copies of casts and then draw-
ing laboriously from the human figure, without any means
of developing the creative faculty, or of expressing indi-
viduality. The art school to-day must recognize the
practical, as well as the technical side of art education;
aiming to provide as an outlet for the many forms of art
that engross the attention of students, work in the direc-
tion of the Arts and Crafts. While a few students, hav-
ing marked ability and opportunity for making art a life
study, may continue in the life and illustration classes,
the great majority of art students of average talent and
limited means of support must seek employment early
in their career. Provision must be made for this class of
students. It is not enough that students shall know
how to produce creative designs on paper. They should
also be able to apply them to the objects for which they
are made. The knowledge that comes through practical
application is of the utmost importance for the vitaliza-
tion of the design and in acting as a stimulus to the cre-
tive impulse. It is a lack of this knowledge that makes
so many of the designs made by students in the schools
of this country and abroad unpractical, and oftentimes
valueless, whether they are regarded from the aesthetic or
the economic point of view. As soon as a student is
taught the nature and function of the material or object
to be decorated or wrought, he will learn to beautify it
in a manner that shall be simple, dignified and individual.
In other words, students should be taught fitness and
adaptation to purpose. Things should possess an interest-
ing personality and be so adapted to purpose that they
will wear well.

As has been shown, in the early
days of the manual training movement in this country,
children in the public schools were allowed to do almost
any and every form of handwork, regardless of the tools
used and of the quality of results. To bring about more
systematic and skilled work, and to meet the demand for
the introduction of the subject of manual training in the
public schools at a minimum expense and with the use of
few tools, the Sloyd Method became the prevailing sys-
tem. This system, while producing good technical results
in a limited field, is, as it has been taught, lacking in
originality and artistic value. With the advent of the Arts
and Crafts movement, has come the demand for work in
manual training that shall be directly related to, and based upon, art instruction; that shall give greater variety of work; and that shall call forth the creative efforts of the children.

But originality in all these things does not mean novelty. A design is not good because it is odd. To call anything good because it is odd or unfamiliar, may betray ignorance. While direct imitation always leads to degeneration, teachers should absorb the best of things already done and produce new growth. New things are not created by sweeping away the old. New things come by growth. There is something good in everything that has been at any time worth the doing. The germ should be preserved and developed. To divide oneself from the past is to attempt to expect to produce the flower and the fruit by cutting away the root.

The Art School of the future must teach not only a pictorial art, but an applied art. Drawing in the public schools must be genuine art education, and manual training in the public schools must have a vital connection with true art principles and illustrate a fitting adaptation of art to material.