Art in Schools

Katherine Louise Smith

There are few healthier indications of public progress than the efforts to increase the attractiveness of our public schools by filling them with good works of art. This work has been prosecuted in different ways in various towns and cities. Much has been done in this direction in England, and, in this country, interest has found fruit in exhibitions, notably those of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Brooklyn. In other cities and small towns considerable progress has been made. The surroundings of the daily life of American young people are so wholly inartistic, except in so far as fine art in literature appeals to them, that this new movement is a notable one. No more important work in introducing art into the general life of Americans has been undertaken, for it means bringing it directly before the children, many of whom are without artistic home influences.

Early in 1896 the Public School Art League and Art Students’ Association and Educational Workers of Boston began to agitate the necessity of artistic decoration for school houses. In pursuance of this idea they decorated rooms in that city, and also in Salem, Malden, Medford and Brookline. At about the same time, a similar movement was begun in New York by the Public Education Association. The chief aim of the committee appointed by the Association was to transform the barren and repellent school room into an attractive room which should cheer the eyes and spirits of teachers and pupils. One of the rooms in the boys’ grammar school was devoted to Mediæval and Renascence art, including reproductions of buildings, statues and paintings. One was given to literature, as illustrated by portraits and pictures of the dwellings of famous writers and of scenes which they have immortalized. One was hung with European views, varied by copies of famous monuments and pictures in noted galleries. Another with Asiatic and African scenes and works of art, while still another showed American scenery in pastoral and picturesque aspects including, of course, Niagara Falls and the Natural Bridge of Virginia. In each room an explanatory catalogue was hung. All this was done carefully and critically, for the very enthusiasm
Art in Schools

as to art in schools has in it an element of danger. Every community which attempts to accomplish anything in the way of art education in the schools must realize that comparatively few people know the difference between the true and the false in art. It is imperative that nothing should be hung on the wall of a public school without having been subjected to the highest art criticism of the community in which the school is situated. The confusion of the art objects in the houses of even refined people demonstrates how superficial our art education as a nation has been. It was to raise this art standard and to bring side by side the best subjects of eight or more of the greatest art producers of Europe and America, with a view to arousing interest in art decoration in schools and homes, that for a few years past a collection of pictures has been exhibited in a number of the larger cities of the Middle and Northwestern States. This collection consists of over two hundred carefully selected subjects of proper size and suitably framed, and on their first journey they took in a country reaching as far east as Springfield, Mass., and the State Library at Albany, N. Y. Later, to the framed pictures were added one thousand neatly mounted unframed pictures of the Berlin, Munich, Soule, Foster Bros., Elson, Solderholz and Detroit Protochrome Companies, and a selection of some four thousand subjects in unmounted cabinet and medium photographs to aid in selecting subjects. In several cities a representative selection of casts was added. This exhibit has been given under the patronage of school boards, art institutions and art societies, and the finances have been left wholly in the hands of the school boards and patrons. A series of talks by local artists added to the value of the exhibits. In this way it has been hoped that a new impulse will be given to art study and the decoration of the public schools, and that public taste for art will be elevated, for it must be borne in mind that it is better to have bare walls in a school room than poor pictures, and there can be no more disastrous form of education than a collection of pictures having no relation to one another, and no influence in the education of taste.

The good that can be done, however, must not blind us to the fact
Art in Schools

that we are dealing with elementary materials. The untrained
mind can hardly appreciate a picture with whose theme and art
it is unfamiliar. The object in the decoration is to increase an
interest in art and an appreciation of it, and we must not soar above
the comprehension of the children.

In a sense all subjects are suitable for school room decoration,
but that it is well to have limitations is shown in a memorandum
sent out with a list of photographs suggested for use in the schools
by the Regents of the State of New York. It is pointed out that
religious expression is to be guardedly used, because of the likeli-
hood of offense to persons of a different way of thinking; that the
nude in art is to be avoided, because, again, of the peculiar ideas of
some persons in this respect, and that subjects tending to dignify or
to ridicule particular doctrines are to be avoided. “If this is car-
ried out,” “it will be readily seen that the elimination of religious
legend makes it hard to choose pictures and the prohibition of the
nude bars almost any chance of showing sculpture rightly.”

Patriotic, historical, pictures of places, photographs of famous
people, architecture, prints, sculpture and plaster casts are certain-
ly admissible. The simplest range of subjects would appear to be
that of a patriotic nature. Christopher Columbus and the great
names in American history are familiar to all, and pictures of
Washington and Lincoln pave the way for more pretentious and
artistic attempts. It has even been suggested that such pictures
in the school rooms would foster the formation of patriotic an-
cestral organizations which are now in vogue. Next in elemen-
tary value are pictures of historic events. A picture of Lincoln
signing the Emancipation Proclamation appeals to all Americans,
educated or uneducated, and so, in a greater or less degree, do
illustrations of great events in the history of the world at large.
Questions can be asked about these pictures which the teacher will
feel called upon to explain.

Portraits of authors, such as Longfellow, Holmes, etc., form an-
other important class and an extended list may be chosen in this
field. Photographs of familiar places may be supplemented by
pictures of notable places the world over. Art is especially suited
Art in Schools

to history and pupils should connect the cities with art galleries. Geography can be made of living interest in the hands of a teacher interested in the subject. As long as twenty years ago this branch was taught in the Worcester, Mass., Normal School by means of lantern slides. The principal of one of the grammar schools in the same place has been doing a similar work for ten years. For example, he has a series of pictures which he has taken, showing the various points of interest in Concord, Mass. These pictures are shown and the connection of the place with the Revolution and the town’s distinguished residents are mentioned and talked about. Interest is thus excited and an endeavor has been made to introduce this method of teaching into other schools. In No II of Papers from the Physical Geography Laboratory of Harvard University is a list of geographical lantern slides, prepared for use in the Cambridge public schools by Professor William M. Davis of Harvard University, who has of late years been much interested in this method of instruction.

These topics may be open to the objection of not being strictly artistic, but they accustom the child to seeing pictures and talking of them; beside being of an educational value. With sculpture we have a subject that can be illustrated both in photographs and in actual form by casts. That these last are less common than photographs gives them a special interest. If extensive decorations are desired in a Greek room, there could be photographs of the Acropolis with casts of Hermes and the Venus of Milo. The bas-reliefs of Luca della Robbia and of Donatello would be appropriate to a room devoted to art of the Renascence and the endless series of the Virgin and Child, of angels and cherubs could decorate another room. A legend of twenty words or so can be painted on a card and the result is a frame within which all that is needed would be told of an important work of art. What child is not delighted with pictures? The children should become as familiar with the master pieces of painting as they do the gems of poetry. Photographs can, when means are limited, be sent from room to room in the school to accompany talks on artists and their work, and teachers can plan courses of study. With so many text books
Art in Schools

there need be no hesitation where to begin. To Mr. Farrar's "Art Topics" can be added "History of Painting," by J. C. Van Dyke; "Handbooks of Painting," by Kugler, and Mrs. Jamieson's and Mrs. Clement's works.

In selecting photographs not alone the original merit of the painting, but also the fitness of the photograph must be considered. The photographs must be attractive and impressive. Realizing this, the New York State Board of Regents have distributed carbon prints, that the dealing of the artist with the subject can be pointed out to beginners, and the Public School Art League of Wrocester, Mass., has lately purchased objects to be used in decorating the school room walls. It is one of the first conditions in all these movements that the work of art shall be as far as possible perfect.

These movements are not confined to the East. The West also is doing good work and Chicago and other cities are interested in this same line. For several years past a collection has been taken in the Minneapolis schools for what is known as the "Piano and Picture Fund." Pupils are asked to contribute whatever they may desire, and the money so received is used for paying rent on the pianos and for the purchase of pictures. In our city for the past year this fund has amounted to two thousand five hundred dollars. It is also the custom in some places for eighth grade and high school scholars about to leave a building to present a memorial, which is usually in the form of a picture. In the efforts to provide suitable pictures much assistance has been rendered in different communities by the Public Libraries. A short time ago, an exhibition of mounted pictures, designed chiefly for school room purposes, was displayed at the Denver Public Library. It was held during the annual session of the state teachers' association, and its purpose was to show what can be done with material that costs but little and is easy to get towards decorating walls.

The Boston Public Library is also showing a marked interest in the cause of education and is using its great resources and powerful influence effectively in these lines. A portfolio of half-tone reproductions from paintings and sculpture and gelatine prints is issued monthly to teachers for use in the schoolroom; the portfolios
Art in Schools

being so arranged that they may be used as easels to show the pictures from the teacher’s desk. This and many other libraries have collections on exhibition to be viewed by pupils and teachers whenever a particular topic is being studied. There are other phases of artistic decoration fully as suitable for schoolroom decoration as photographs. Cheap bits of pottery, especially Japanese, are available for the purpose. Italian and French photographs are cheap, and illustrated books can be taken apart and the plates framed. Full page illustrations of our leading illustrated magazines, colored supplements from our art journals, colored cartoons and book posters can be utilized when money is scarce, and a comparatively large collection made at a very little cost. Exhibitions have been given in our large cities to show what excellent decorations can be obtained from such magazines as Harper’s, Scribner’s, The Century, Ladies’ Home Companion, Art Amateur, Art Interchange, Puck, Life, etc.

One finds everywhere to-day the craving for the beautiful. In years gone by not only was no attention paid to it, but the school house itself was devoid of beauty. Later, costly and sanitary, but cheerless buildings were erected. While pictures may help to embody higher ideas, we should go further and erect attractive school houses. The entrance should be made inviting and within ceiling, walls and floor, should be treated to make a perfect whole. In this way, a first source of beauty would be found in the building itself and the photographs, casts and other decorative features would have a suitable and appropriate setting.