



Young in Art

a developmental look at child art

Introduction

As a result of the child study movement in the early 1900s, it is generally recognized that children progress through certain stages of development in their art making. Each stage may be identified by certain characteristics that show up repeatedly in their artwork. These stages have been linked to chronological age (particularly from 18 months to 6 years). However, a number of factors (both internal and external) affect a child's artistic development. Thus, to expect that a particular child at a certain age should be at a certain stage of development is inappropriate.

A number of theoretical models have been offered over the years to explain children's artistic development. While these models may vary (e.g., in the number of proposed stages), they all propose a similar pattern of development—one of progressing from scribbling to realistic representation. Other generalizations that may be made include:

- Socioeconomic factors seem to have little influence on the earliest stages. For example, all children begin drawing by scribbling. Moreover, girls and boys tend to draw alike at the early ages.
- Children's drawings typically show greater development than paintings because crayons, markers, and pencils are easier to control than paint and a brush.
- Considerable overlap exists between stages. Two stages may be represented in one work and a child may regress to a previous stage before advancing to the next stage.
- It is unlikely that a child will reach the later stages without adult support or instruction. In other words, development in art is not universal and is dependent on the environment in which a child grows up and is educated.

The following account suggests that there are four stages of children's artistic development: scribbling, pre-symbolism, symbolism, and realism. It is based on the popular view that the desired "end state" of this progression is graphical realism. However, this should not be taken to mean that the drawings that children typically do in earlier stages are inferior or less desirable to those accomplished in later stages. On the contrary, some of the more aesthetically pleasing works often are produced by children just beginning to discover the joys of mark making.

Art Begins with Scribbling

All young children take great pleasure in moving a crayon or pencil across a surface and leaving a mark. This form of mark making or “scribbling” represents children’s first self-initiated encounters with art.

Children typically begin scribbling around one-and-a-half years of age. Most observers of child art believe that children engage in scribbling not to draw a picture of something; rather they do so for the pure enjoyment of moving their arms and making marks on a surface. Recently, however, a few researchers have challenged this traditional view by showing that young children do occasionally experiment with representation even though their scribbles may not contain any recognizable forms. This new perspective suggests that children’s earliest mark-making activities may be more complex than previously thought.



Figure 1: Random scribble

Figure 2: Random Scribble



When children first start scribbling they usually don’t realize they can make the marks do what they want. They often scribble in a **random** fashion by swinging their arms back and forth across the drawing surface (fig. 1 & 2). The lines they make may actually go off the paper. They may even look away from the page as they work.

But, it doesn’t take long for children to recognize the relationship between their movements and the marks on the paper. As this discovery unfolds, children begin to **control** their scribbles by varying their motions and by repeating certain lines that give them particular pleasure. Longitudinal marks in one or more directions may result. Circular patterns and geometric shapes begin to appear as children’s perceptual and motor abilities increase (fig. 3). Lines are combined with shapes to form various patterns and designs. Letter-forms, especially those in the child’s name, may show up among the marks on the page (fig. 4).

It is unfortunate that the very word “scribble” has negative connotations for adults.

- **Viktor Lowenfeld**



Figure 3: Controlled scribble

As children gain control of the marks on the page, they start to **name** their scribbles and engage in imaginative play when drawing. A child may announce what he or she is going to draw before beginning or may look at the marks on the page afterwards and say, “This is mommy.” On another day, the child may look at the same drawing and say, “This is my dog.” To the adult, these drawings may be neither recognizable nor remarkably different from early scribbles done by the child. Yet, to the child making them, these seemingly unreadable marks now have meaning.

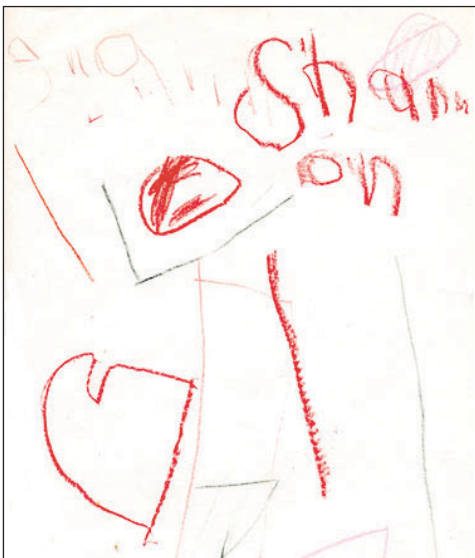


Figure 4: Controlled scribble

The Teacher’s and Parent’s Role

For most youngsters, scribbling is intrinsically rewarding in itself, and thus no special motivation is needed. Perhaps the best contribution that the teacher or parent can make is to offer children the proper materials and the encouragement to engage in scribbling.

In selecting appropriate art materials, it is important to provide scribblers with a medium that enables them to easily gain control of their marks. Tools such as crayons, non-toxic markers, ballpoint pens, and pencils work well. Watercolor paints, on the other hand, are difficult for young children to control and should be avoided. Tempera paint can be used provided it is a fairly thick consistency so that it doesn’t run down the page.

Color does not play a particularly important role in scribbling. The colors offered should be few in number and provide good contrast with the paper used. A dark crayon, marker, or pencil is recommended along with white or manila paper (12 by 18 inches). With tempera paint, provide a large fairly absorbent sheet of paper (18 by 24 inches) along with bristle brushes (one-half inch in width). Children can work on the floor or any other horizontal surface when scribbling.

Talking With Scribblers

When talking with the beginning scribbler, simply comment on the child’s movements when scribbling. For instance, notice how fast the child’s arm is moving or how big the child’s movements are. As the child gains control of scribbling, comment on the variety of movements and different marks the child has made. For instance, notice the number of circles the child has made or the “nice lines going around the page.”

As the child starts naming his or her scribbles, listen to the child’s comments and use the meanings offered by the child as a source for dialogue. For instance, if the child says, “This is daddy,” ask questions like “Is your daddy tall? Does he pick you up? Where do you go with your daddy?” If the child says, “I’m running,” ask questions like “Do you like to run on the playground?” or “Where are you running?” Encouraging the child to verbalize his or her thoughts, feelings and experiences independently shows the child that you value what he or she has done. This sort of thoughtful praise will help children to be enthusiastic and imaginative in their future art encounters.

Pre-Symbolism: The Figure Emerges

Around three to four years of age, children begin to combine the circle with one or more lines in order to represent a human figure. These figures typically start out looking like “tadpoles” (fig. 5) or “head-feet” symbols (fig. 6). It is not uncommon for children’s first representations of the figure to be highly unrealistic or to be missing a neck, body, arms, fingers, feet, or toes. Children may, in fact, draw two tadpole-like forms to show their mother and father without making visible distinctions between the two figures.

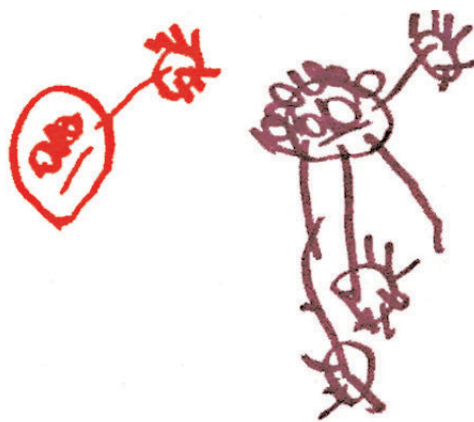


Figure 6: Head-feet symbols

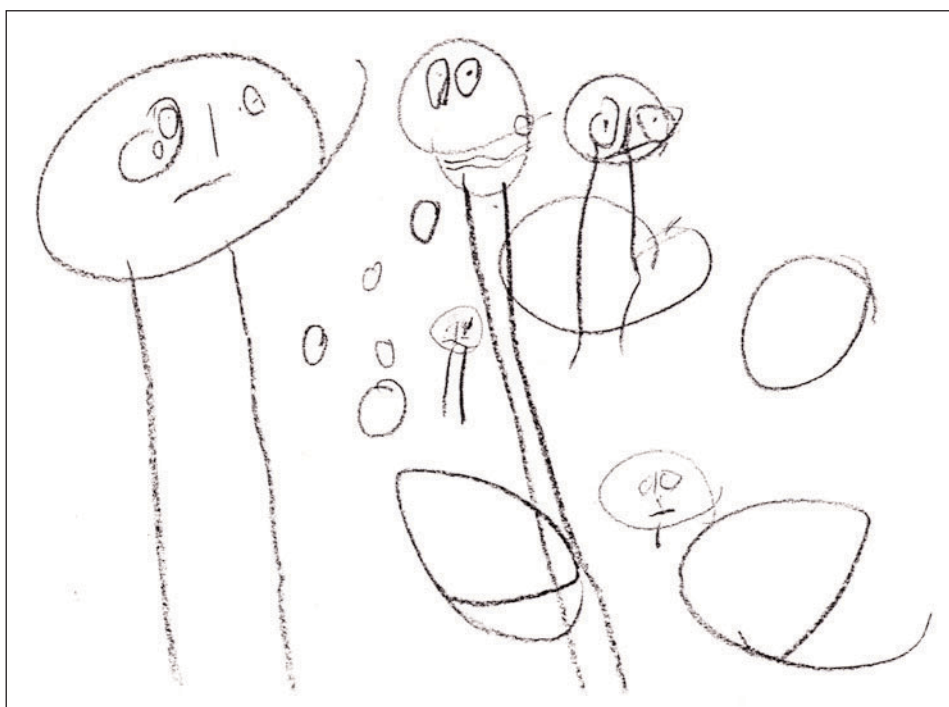


Figure 5: A family portrait consisting of several tadpole figures

Several theories have been proposed to explain the “tadpole” phenomenon and the reasons why young children tend to draw unrealistic or incomplete human forms. Some experts suggest that children omit bodily features because of a lack of knowledge about the different parts of the human body and how they are organized. Others argue that children don’t look at what they are drawing; instead, they look at the abstract shapes already in their repertoire and discover that these forms can be combined in various ways to symbolize objects in the world. Still others believe that children are simply being selective and drawing only those parts necessary to make their figures recognizable as human forms. It is important for teachers and parents to consider, from a diagnostic standpoint, that a child whom omits certain features when drawing a person may do so quite unintentionally; and, thus, caution should be exercised when interpreting a child’s drawing as a reflection of personality or intellectual growth.

From an educational standpoint, teachers should also consider that experiences designed to extend children's awareness of their own body parts often result in more complete representations of the figures they draw. For instance, children who depict figures without arms or hands might be given the opportunity to play catch with a ball and then to draw a picture of themselves "playing catch." Children will likely include arms and hands in their drawings since these parts are required to engage in this activity. Just asking children to draw such an experience is usually not enough. They need to become actively engaged in the activity being depicted in order to develop a personal awareness of the details involved.

Variations in the Figure

Children, four and five years of age, will experiment with various ways of drawing the figure and may depict the figure quite differently each time they draw. Sometimes, they create figures quite unique to the person or the experience being depicted. For instance, a four year-old boy depicted a person walking in figure 7. Notice that the child has drawn this person with greatly over exaggerated feet to symbolize walking. The four year-old who drew the picture of her family shown in figure 8 has added whiskers and long arms on her "daddy" to express the feeling of being picked up and hugged by her father. She has drawn her mother with a body and legs, but no arms; and has shown her brother and herself as two heads without bodies. Such drawings tend to describe more how children of this age think or feel about the things around them rather than what they actually see when they look.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that children who draw figures without bodies, arms or legs are certainly capable of identifying these parts when asked to do so, but the idea of creating a realistic likeness of a person has not yet occurred to them or occupied their interest (Winner, 1982). Such a concern doesn't typically show up until the age of seven or eight.

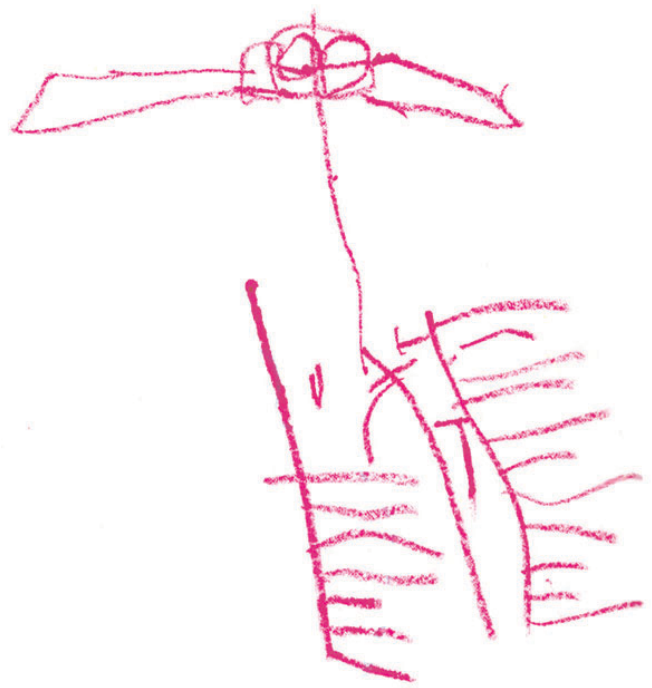


Figure 7: Walking figure

If the continued omission of parts in a child's drawing of figures proves disturbing, stimulate his consciousness of the omitted part through play and discussion.

- David Mendelowitz

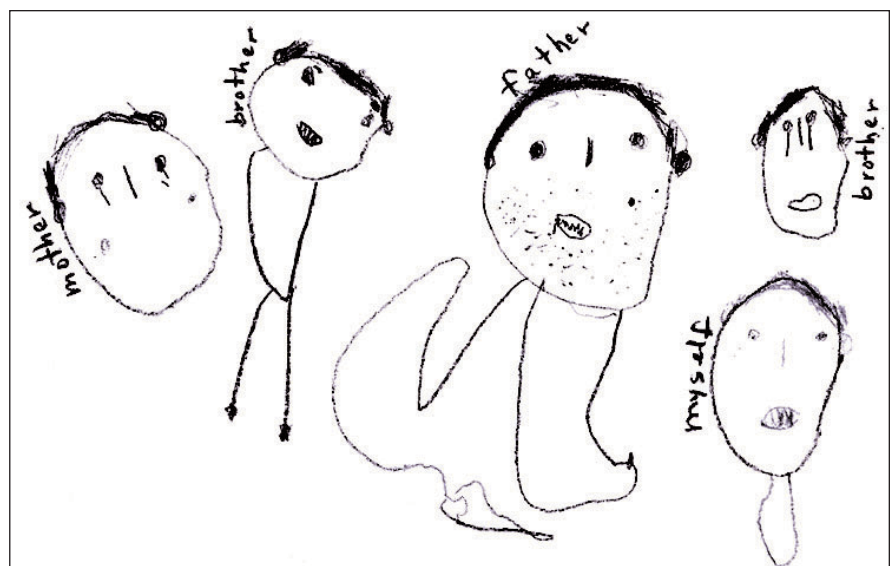


Figure 8: A family portrait



Figure 9: A self portrait

Art and Self-image

The sensitive self-portrait shown in Figure 9 was drawn by a four-and-a-half year old boy and is typical of the kind of drawings done by children at this stage. The head is drawn larger because of its importance to the child (it's where eating and talking goes on) and the subject of the drawing is the child himself. Through the act of drawing or painting, a child may explore several self-possibilities before arriving at a satisfying self-image. In this way, art plays a crucial role in the self-defining process.

When planning for drawing and painting activities, teachers should consider that four and five-year olds tend to be egocentric in nature; and, thus, motivational topics which enable these children to express something about their emerging concepts of self are particularly beneficial. Talking with the children about their personal experiences such as those associated with family, school, friends, and pets will often provide ideal starting points for their art encounters to begin. Topics that include "I" or "my" help the child to identify with the subject matter suggested. For instance, appropriate drawing and painting themes for children at this age include "I am going to school," "My family" and "I am playing with my friends."

The Young Child's Concept of Space

As young children become increasingly aware of the world around them, the many objects that make up their environment will begin to appear in their drawings. These objects are seldom drawn in relationship to one another in position or size. Nor are they organized on the page the way in which they are related spatially in the world. Instead, objects will typically appear to "float" on the page in the drawings and paintings done by children of preschool age (fig. 10). This type of spatial organization may appear to an adult as incorrect in that it doesn't follow the Western tradition of representing three-dimensional space by the use of linear perspective. Instead of considering this as a defect in children's artwork, one might appreciate their honesty in arranging the forms on the page and their capacity for creating balanced two-dimensional compositions (Winner, 1982). Besides, if one looks at the artwork of other cultures or that of many contemporary artists, it can readily be seen that there is no right or wrong way to portray space in a drawing (Lowenfeld, 1975).

At this age it is particularly important that any motivation or any subject matter be related directly to the child himself.

- Viktor Lowenfeld



Figure 10: I am playing on the playground.

The Age of Symbolism

By the age of five or six, most children have developed a repertoire of graphic equivalents or symbols for the things in their environment including a house, a tree, a person, and so on. These symbols are highly individualized since they result from children's conceptual understanding rather than observation of the world around them. For example, each child's symbol for a person will be quite different from any other child's as shown in Figures 11 and 12.

The symbols that children, five and six years old, draw for a person usually have a clearly differentiated head and trunk with arms and legs placed in the appropriate locations. Details such as clothing, hands, feet, fingers, nose, and teeth may also receive the attention of individual children. As previously mentioned, the omission of details in a child's drawing is no cause for immediate concern. The child may simply neglect to include a certain feature due to its lack of importance in the activity being drawn.

When a normal child makes a connection between image and idea, assigning meaning to a drawn shape, the shape becomes a symbol.

- Al Hurwitz & Michael Day

Figure 11: A family portrait

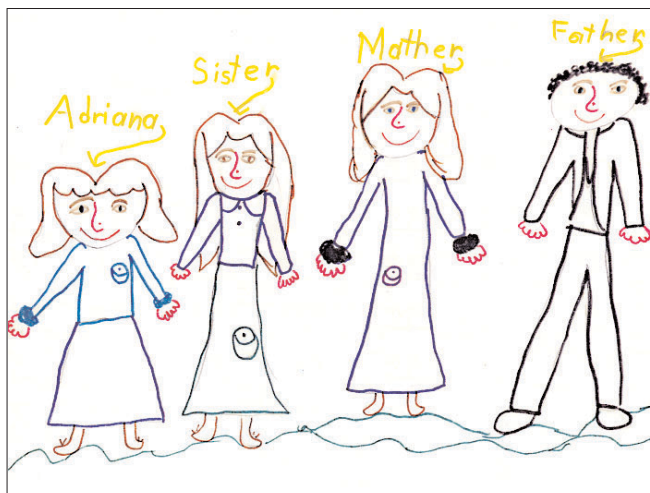


Figure 12: A family portrait

Once a child has established a definite symbol (or **schema**) for a person, it will be repeated again and again without much variation unless a particular experience causes the child to modify the concepts involved (fig. 13). For instance, a child may exaggerate, change or embellish certain parts of a "person" symbol in order to reveal something unique or special about a particular person or activity being depicted. Also, experiences that stimulate children's awareness of the various actions and functions of the human figure will often lead to changes in the way they symbolize a person and to greater flexibility in their future depictions of people. For instance, children at this age especially enjoy and benefit from motivational topics involving sports and story-telling activities.

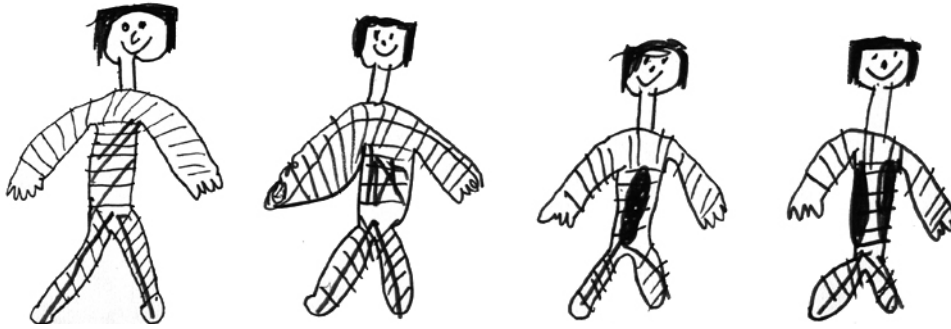


Figure 13: A figure schema

The Introduction of the Baseline

One of the more noticeable changes that occur in the drawings of children around the age of five or six involves the introduction of the **baseline** to organize objects in space (Fig. 14). No longer do objects appear to float all over the page as seen in children's earlier attempts at representation. Children are now aware of relationships between the objects that they create and they recognize that these objects have a definite place on the ground.

Initially, children will line up people, houses and trees along the bottom edge of the paper. They soon realize, however, that a line drawn across the paper can serve as a ground, a floor or any base upon which people and objects rest. Later on, **multiple baselines** may be drawn with objects lined up on each of them (fig. 15). The inclusion of two or more baselines in a drawing sometimes occurs when a child wishes to portray distance in his or her drawing. This graphic solution to representing three-dimensional space can also be found in adult art from many cultures and times.

As children's understanding of the world becomes more complex they feel the need to represent spatial relationships more authentically. Accordingly, the baseline eventually disappears in the drawings of older children and the space below the baseline takes on the meaning of a **ground plane** (fig. 21).



Figure 14: A typical baseline drawing



Figure 15: The use of two baselines to arrange things in space

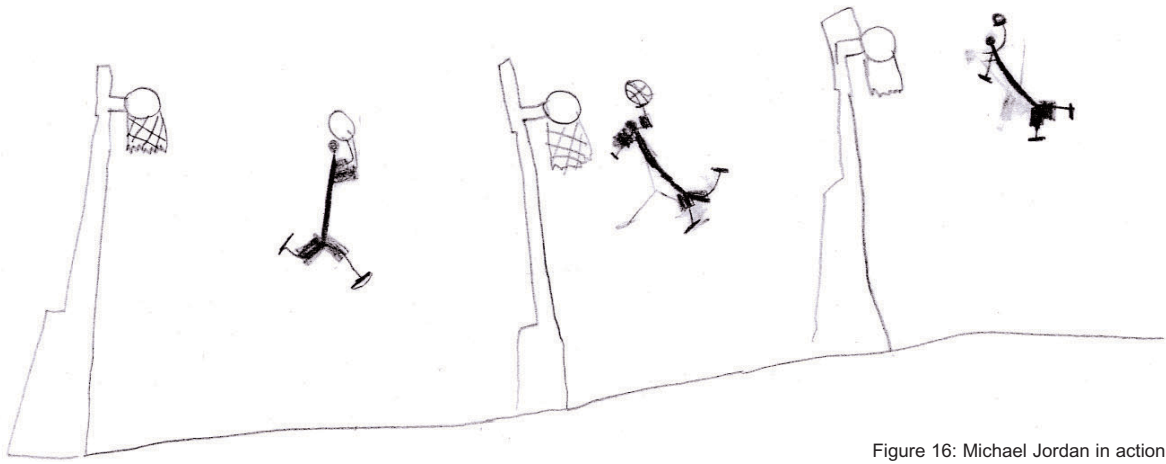


Figure 16: Michael Jordan in action

Special Visual Effects

In addition to the invention of the base line, children come up with a number of other ingenious ways to depict space in their drawings. One of these involves showing events that occur over time within one drawing or a sequence of drawings (Fig.16). These **space-and-time representations**, as they are called (Lowenfeld, 1975), result from children's growing concern for telling stories and for showing action in their artwork. Interest in creating visual narratives usually starts around the age of five and then grows stronger as children get older (Wilson & Wilson, 1982).

Another special type of drawing that children begin making around the age of five or six is the **X-ray drawing** in which an object appears transparent or has a "cutaway" provided so that one can see inside (fig. 17). Typically, this type of drawing is done whenever the inside of something is of greater importance than the outside. For instance, children will often use the X-ray technique to show the inside of their houses, their school, or their family car. Figure 18 shows an insightful X-ray representation by a five-year-old boy of his family and mother whom was pregnant at the time. Note the inclusion of the umbilical cord connecting the baby with its mother. This is an excellent illustration of how children use their active knowledge of a subject when drawing a picture of it.



Figure 17: A look inside a mole hole



Figure 18: A family portrait showing an expectant mother

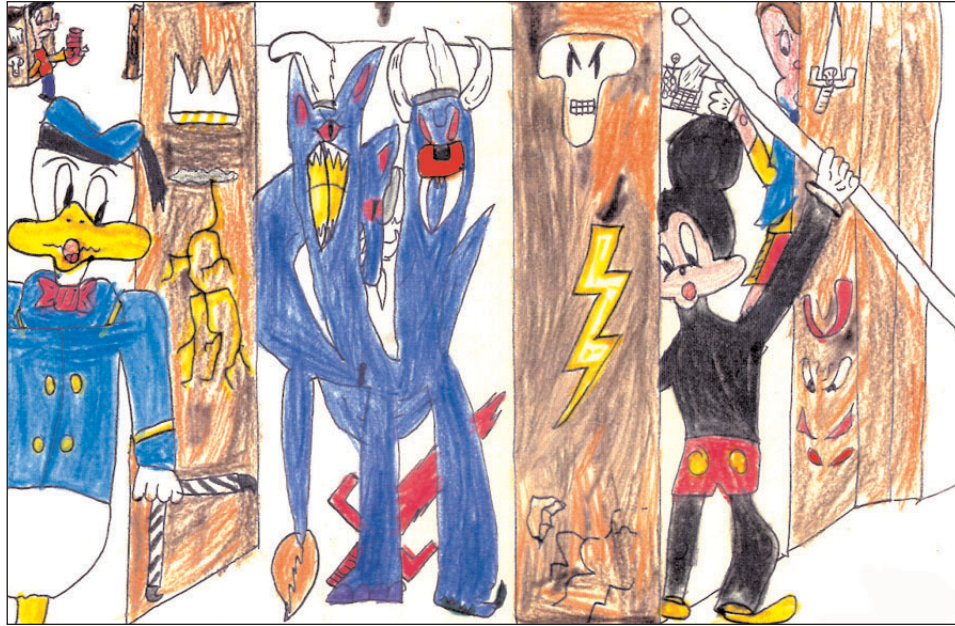


Figure 19: A nine-year old drew this action scene pitting several Disney characters with creatures of his own invention

Children's Art and Cultural Images

With all the visual materials available to American children today in the form of photographs, book illustrations, comics, television, movies, video games, and web sites, it seems only natural that they will borrow from these cultural sources in creating their own artwork (Wilson & Wilson, 1982). Children as young as four may include culturally-derived imagery in their drawings, but the influence of the popular media is most noticeable among older children. Indeed, one will find a number of aspiring comic-book artists in a typical fifth-grade classroom as well as other children with a keen interest in drawing sports heroes, rock stars, fashion figures, airplanes, space vehicles, and sports cars.

While many children simply copy their favorite super heroes and comic-book characters, some also invent their own characters and narrative plots (fig. 19). In doing so, these children frequently turn to television, movies and comic books for their models. They draw figures that run, leap and fly across several frames; zoom-in for a close-up of their heroine; and show perspective and dimensionality in ways that children a generation ago couldn't do. Rather than discourage such creative activity, teachers and parents should take full advantage of children's fascination with popular culture and use it to develop their drawing abilities beyond the most basic level.

The Crisis of Realism

By the age of nine or ten, many children exhibit greater visual awareness of the things around them. As a result, they become increasingly conscious of details and proportion in what they are drawing. They typically include body parts such as lips, fingernails, hairstyles, and joints in their drawings of people. They also show more interest than before in drawing people in action poses and in costumes.



Figure 20: A portrait of a classmate by a twelve-year-old.

This new concern for making their pictures look “right” in terms of detail and proportion leads to a crisis for many older children. In trying to draw realistically, children’s efforts often fall short of their expectations and they quickly become disappointed. Some search for adult-like skills by copying illustrations in books and magazines. More often, however, children become increasingly critical of their graphic abilities and begin to show a reluctance to engage in drawing activities as they grow older. Given the increased emphasis on “realism” among children during their preadolescent years, art instruction that focuses on visual description and observational techniques can be particularly beneficial at this age. Indeed, most children are quite capable of attaining the realistic quality they so desire in their artwork (fig. 20). But, only if they receive the proper instruction that enables them to develop the competencies required to do so.

The Representation of Three-Dimensional Space

While young children become engrossed in the meanings and actions of subjects as they draw them, older children tend to be more concerned with whether their pictures resemble what it is they are drawing. This interest in visual description typically emerges around the age of eight or nine as children begin to adopt their culture's conventions for representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface (Winner, 1982). No longer are objects placed side by side on a baseline as seen in younger children's drawings. Now children attempt to arrange the things they draw in relation to one another on the page with a **ground plane** (fig. 21). In doing so, they begin to show how the position of a viewer influences the image drawn. They begin to draw objects that overlap one another and that diminish in size. They also begin to use diagonals to show perspective, or the recession of planes in space (fig. 22).

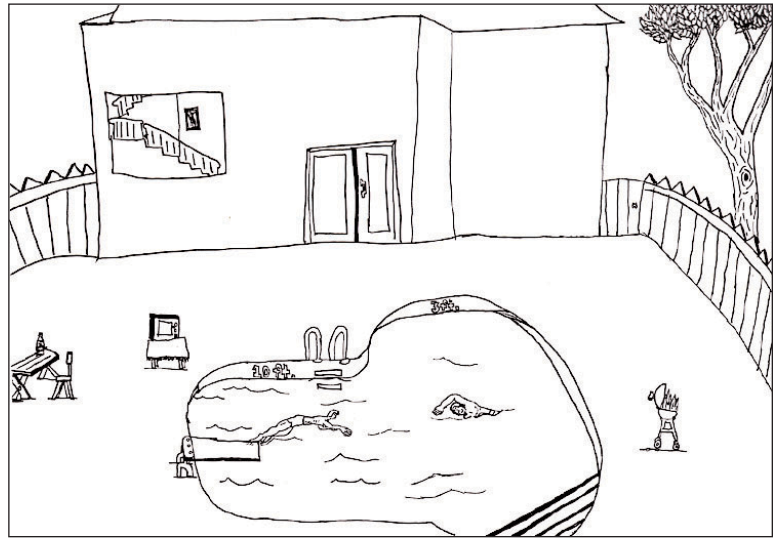


Figure 21: Backyard drawing by a ten-year-old using a ground plane

The closer the child approaches adolescence, the more he loses the strong subjective relationship to the world of symbols.

- Viktor Lowenfeld

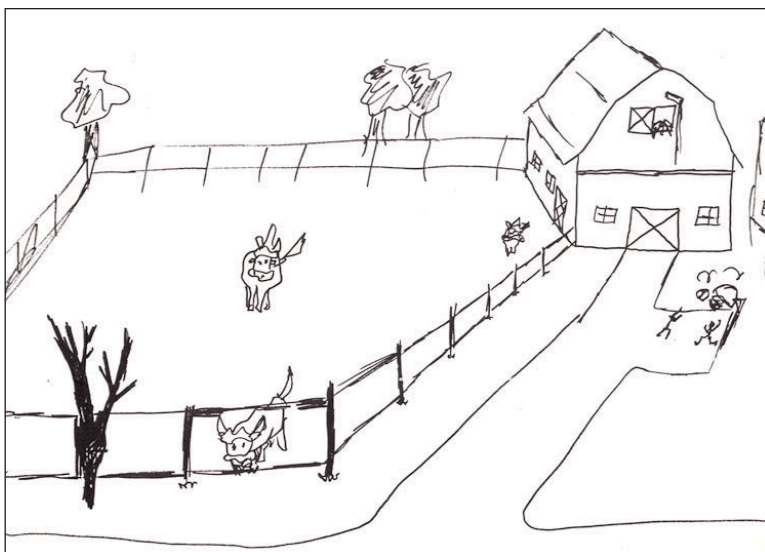


Figure 22: Barnyard drawing by a twelve-year-old who used perspective, overlap, and diminishing size to show depth

As children's readiness and interest in showing depth in their pictures becomes apparent, having them study the ways in which various adult artists use overlap, diminishing size and linear perspective within their works might be helpful. But, children need to understand that the use of these pictorial devices is only one way of organizing space and that many artists today have abandoned such conventions in favor of developing more personal and expressive ways of seeing and making art.

Visual Metaphor and Expressive Imagery

Many older children continue to draw and paint symbolically in spite of the increased concern for realism in their artwork. Indeed, children's emerging capacity for abstract thought enables them to begin conceiving of images as visual metaphors. When children draw or paint metaphorically, they are using images to suggest an idea or emotion beyond the specific object depicted (fig. 23). For instance, older children are able to recognize that a picture of an isolated tree suggests loneliness and despair, or that a stag overlooking a range of mountains suggests nobility. The ability to use images metaphorically, depends on being able to entertain two levels of symbolization at once. The artist must decide which object best represents the concept or emotion and which lines, shapes, and colors best represent the object (Smith, 1983).



Figure 23: A nine-year-old uses visual metaphor to express certain feelings for his sister

Older children are just beginning to discover the possibilities of visual metaphor and that images can convey meanings beyond the object depicted. In order to deepen this understanding and prevent children's concern for realism from dampening their creative spirit, the teacher should introduce themes that deal with the expression of certain emotions or concepts through visual metaphor. For instance, children might be asked to imagine themselves as an animal or an inanimate object and to represent themselves as such in a drawing or painting.

Summary

When one charts the graphic development of children as they progress from pre-school to the upper elementary school grades, at least four distinct stages or shifts can be observed. First, children begin to scribble at about one or two years of age. Second, representational shapes and figures emerge around the age of three or four. Third, children develop and use graphic symbols for representing the things they encounter in their environment. Lastly, around the age of nine or ten, children strive toward optical realism in their drawings. It is important to note that these changes don't occur abruptly; rather, they are often marked by small sub-stages or points in which children may exhibit characteristics of two stages in one drawing.

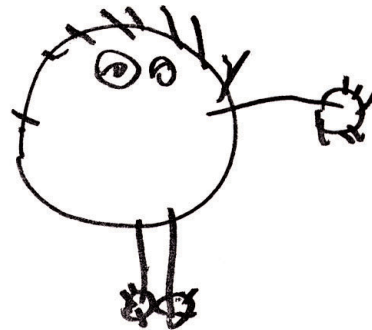
Of course, what children seem to do naturally and what they are capable of doing are entirely different matters. It is likely that teachers will find that students within their classrooms are at varied points in their graphic development since some have had abundant prior experiences with art, whereas others, may have had limited creative opportunities. Thus, teachers should avoid the temptation to place children at a particular stage simply because of their age or grade level.

Of greater concern to teachers and parents should be the lost of expressiveness and originality which seems to occur in children's drawings as they grow older. If one uses "realism" as a criterion for judging the work of children, then they seem to improve with age and experience. But, the drawings of upper-elementary school children typically appear more conventional and rigid; and, therefore, less striking to the adult eye than those of preschool children. Teachers and parents should also be concerned with the lost of interest in drawing activities among students in the upper-elementary grades. Indeed, many older children become so critical of their work that they simply stop drawing all together. How might adults prevent such declines from occurring? While there are no easy answers to this question, the following suggestions offer a few possibilities.

First, expose children in the upper elementary grades to various artists whom exhibit both realistic and imaginative approaches to drawing. Encourage them to see that drawings are not meant to be photographs and that the act of drawing enables them to show their own special way of seeing the world.

Second, provide older children with opportunities to engage in both descriptive and imaginative approaches to drawing. Show that you value the diversity of approaches and the variety of ideas that children exhibit in their work.

Third, make the development of drawing abilities a priority in your classroom and home. Provide children with opportunities to draw often and give them the assistance and the encouragement they require.



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Related Web Sites

Childhoods Past: Children's art of the twentieth century

www.nga.gov.au/Derham/default.htm

An exceptional on-line collection of children's artwork from the National Gallery of Australia.

Defining Child Art

www.deakin.edu.au/education/visarts/child_art.htm

An essay on child art illustrated with Quicktime images.

Web Archive of Children's Art

childart.indstate.edu

An extensive database containing digitally copied artwork made by children, sponsored by Indiana State University.

Drawing Development in Children Timeline

www.learningdesign.com/Portfolio/DrawDev/kiddrawing.html

An illustrated timeline of children's artistic development.