

Visual images in books, a neglected resource in children's aesthetic education

Bernard Schwartz and JoAnn Sommerfeld

Résumé: *Les auteurs estiment ici que nos écoles élémentaires entraînent les enfants à la pratique de l'art plutôt qu'à son appréciation esthétique. Or la plupart des élèves ne deviennent pas des artistes, mais bien des critiques et esthètes. Il serait donc approprié d'utiliser les albums illustrés, déjà abondants dans les salles de classe, comme bases pour l'apprentissage de l'appréciation esthétique.*

The artist is a perceiver who pays special attention to the points of view from which the world can be seen, and one who catches and records for the rest of us the most revealing perspective on things. James J. Gibson in *The visual arts today* Gyorgy Kepes, Editor.

The visual arts have long been viewed as unique among the subjects which comprise the school curriculum and have enjoyed a small but relatively secure place. They have had a valued part in the basic and general education of children and youth in Canadian and American schools. The problems facing today's schools are far more complex than a decade ago, especially for the elementary classroom teacher. Finding the time to teach art in a comprehensive and well-coordinated manner in an already over-crowded curriculum is difficult. And yet, if a child is to develop a life-long appreciation of the arts, the early years are critical. The position of the visual arts is rapidly becoming tenuous.

Visual arts education in schools has been dominated by a traditional over-emphasis on instruction in art production or creating art using the role model of the professional artist. Typically, students' imaginations, feelings and emotions are engaged through personal expression and creativity with a wide variety of art media and techniques – paint, clay, wire, papers, fibres, and so forth. During the 80's, however, a major reformation has taken place in art education. Leading curriculum theoreticians, researchers and developers have substantially broadened the scope of art curricula for children's visual aesthetic education from kindergarten to senior high school to include observing, reading, writing, discussing and reflecting about art along with their traditional making of art. This reconceptualization means that a high-quality school program should now derive concepts of art learning and content for art courses from the four interrelated visual arts disciplines; that is, from the work and methods of inquiry of professional scholars who also serve as models for

art curricula. That artist, as in the past, is now joined by the art historian, the art critic, and the aesthete (philosopher of art). These changes are being incorporated in many provincial and state art curriculum guides and in art teacher education programs in colleges and universities. This long-standing over-emphasis on the professional artist as the model for the basis of art programs has created an unfortunate imbalance in the visual aesthetic education of children so that the study of art, or what is commonly known as appreciation of art and design, has been neglected or is virtually non-existent in many school art programs. Well documented is the fact that many of our schools do not provide children with even the most rudimentary information about important works of art. The goal that visual literacy should be an equal partner along with verbal literacy or mathematical literacy in the education of children is what is intended in this curriculum transformation.

The major components of a quality visual art education program may be briefly outlined in the following. *Art production* provides students with opportunities to express their own ideas and feelings in a variety of two-and-three-dimensional art forms. Emphasis is upon the development of technical skills, problem-solving abilities, and personal creative, expressive and communicative capacities. *Art history* emphasizes historical and socio-cultural understanding. It provides students with knowledge about significant art, craft and design objects and about their creators, of past and present civilizations. The study of art history also considers how the visual arts have reflected, communicated, and possibly changed the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of people. *Art criticism* is intended to provide students with methods and content to make works of art more meaningful and satisfying by knowing how to look at art, what to look for, and how to discuss and write about art. Teachers use instructional strategies to involve their students in observing, describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating or judging art. Art criticism promotes sensory awareness, perceptual discrimination, and judgment. *Aesthetics*, as a branch of philosophy, engages students in philosophical inquiry and reasoning. This involves the study of the nature and significance of art, beauty and aesthetic experience. Students are helped to understand what motivates people to produce art, and how and why art is used and valued in society. Students are expected to gain an understanding and tolerance of alternative viewpoints about the merit of art. Students at each grade level are given the opportunity to become involved with each of these components at their own level of development.

Few children will ever become professional artists or designers but all will need to become aesthetically literate consumers of products and services of these professionals; all will need to participate in improving our visual world for a more humane personal and community environment.

The great majority of children receive their formal visual art education during elementary school years when they are taught by their regular class-

room teachers. These teachers are expected to offer quality programs to children, yet they frequently are hampered by a limited knowledge and experience base in any of the art appreciation disciplines (i.e. art history, criticism and aesthetics). In actual practice it is most often the university art education faculty member of the brief pre-service art curriculum and instruction course who is left with the challenging task of synthesizing the four related arts disciplines into a comprehensive whole, and offering resourceful and imaginative suggestions for obtaining, devising, and using necessary teaching materials, thereby providing a basis for understanding what to teach and how to teach art.

Art is one of the few subjects in the curriculum which has not provided an abundant supply of quality instructional resources which are essential to the proper critical study of art – for responding to or appreciating art and developing visual aesthetic literacy. Such instructional resource would include large format colour reproductions, slides, filmstrips, films, radio and television programs, laser videodiscs, multi-media and interactive productions, and books and related published materials for both children and teachers. These need to be of high calibre as well as comprehensive, systematic, sequential, and detailed to enable teachers to teach art well. However, a variety of these resources is not generally available in a great many classrooms because of limited school budgets and also because school board officials, parents, and even teachers themselves continue to perceive that the only resources required for a sound art program are generous quantities of consumable materials which children use in creating their own art and craft works. We would be remiss if we did not add, too, that having children experience original works of art is an important part of their aesthetic education, although very few schools provide original works of art for this purpose. Art galleries and museums are incredibly rich resources for learning, yet few schools make regular use of the original works of art and other services here as part of their on-going art programs.

The problems are many; the solutions are complex. And dramatic improvements seem unlikely given present conditions. *We would like to propose, however, that one of the most promising resources, one that continues to remain largely underused and untapped in the visual aesthetic education of children, is the book collection in school libraries.* With language arts – reading, writing, speaking and listening – occupying such a prominent position in the elementary curriculum, many schools have commendable collections of books: high quality picture books, wordless books, illustrated books, reference books and other publications containing art, illustrations and photographs on almost every conceivable subject matter or theme of interest to children. In addition, there is a growing body of books for children pertaining to art and art-related topics by gifted artists and writers who provide independently or in combination visual images, sensory appeal and text that is meritorious for its informational or literary qualities. The forthcoming reference work by Hurtig

Publishers, for example, *The junior encyclopedia of Canada*, for children 8 to 15 years of age, will be a boon to art programs with its array of carefully selected, representative art works and well written, informative articles. Virtually any book containing high quality, well-reproduced visual images which appeal to the interest of children is an invaluable resource.

Research conducted by the authors and others has demonstrated that classroom teachers with limited art education background can be trained to use effective teaching strategies by relying on book images.

This research, conducted during the last year, used well-illustrated children's books as a teaching tool in the art class in order to meet many of the goals of the current elementary art curriculum. Books cited or recommended for their excellent illustrations were selected for use in the art class. Some of the factors which weighed in the selection process were:

1. Media: Books were sought displaying a variety of media and techniques which could be employed or adapted for the elementary art class.
2. Art Elements (line, shape, space, colour, texture): A representative selection was deemed desirable to foster continuity and growth in the generated art lessons.
3. Alberta Elementary Art Curriculum Guide: Research was conducted in and around Edmonton: thus, the current art curriculum was used as a parameter for selecting appropriate objectives and learning activities.
4. Availability of the Selected Children's Books: the books to be used for the art lessons had to be readily available in the school libraries.

Lessons were designed and written for use by the generalist elementary school teacher. Format for the lessons was similar: lesson focus or introduction, reading and discussing the book, guide discussion relating to the artwork in the book, art making, and finally, art judgment.

In many cases integrated learning was a natural part of the lesson development. It included listening, speaking, writing, movement activities, vocabulary development, and developing a sense of geography or history. The teachers who used the lessons found the children's books to be ideal in that they were available and transportable, the children related well to both story line and illustrations, but most importantly, the multiple images fostered discussion and the emphasis of the lesson could be reinforced by studying the many examples that the book offered.

Some excellent children's books (written and illustrated by Canadians) which were found to be highly suitable for the elementary art class will be discussed in the following sections. These are merely a few out of the many books

available which could be adapted for use in the elementary art class.

How the mouse got brown teeth, and *How the birch tree got its stripes* (Cree stories for children). Illustrated by George Littlechild. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1988.

Young children are fascinated with colour – fanciful, imaginative or realistic. Littlechild uses a magnificent palette of jewel-like pinks, purples, turquoises, and blues for the illustrations in these two books. The skies and the walls of the houses are decorated with patterns, colours and shapes.



Fig. 1

In the primary classroom the children could be introduced to colour, the colour wheel, and the various names of colours prior to reading and discussing the books. Following that, the teacher could turn the discussion to the colours which Littlechild used for the illustrations. The discussion should encourage the children to examine the artworks and to help them discover how the subject matter and art elements are related. Students can be motivated to do this by a series of open-ended questions.

In the next part of the lesson the students could illustrate and write their own myths. They would be encouraged to think carefully about the colours they selected. The choice of media might well be oil pastel: the colours are jewel-like, there is a fair variety of colours available and it is easy for children to fill in large areas of colour with oil pastels, a task which is difficult to do with pencil crayon, wax crayon or felt marker.

Harrison, T. *Children of the Yukon*, Montreal: Tundra, 1977; Service, R. *The cremation of Sam McGee*. Illustrated by T. Harrison. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1986.

The elements of line and colour are outstanding in Harrison's paintings. Harrison uses bold and colourful lines to break simple shapes into three-dimensional surfaces. The colours are brilliant, showing full range of shades and tints of one or more colours. For example, often the skies are divided into bands of varying shades and tints of blue or purple, and often the sun punctures the surface, giving reference to six or seven shades of orange. Most children are fascinated with the dazzling array of colour used by Harrison and often wonder "why?". For those who have lived in the north, the answer seems obvious: those are the colours that are seen in the night sky; those are simplified and stylized shapes which are evident in the Arctic, land of harsh shadows; and furthermore, those are the shapes found in the art of the Inuit.

Harrison's paintings are excellent examples for children to study when exploring the science of colour mixing. Painting is a natural activity to accompany this exploration. The generalist teacher would do well to use Harrison's books to complement the study of colour, initiated by the Littlechild books.

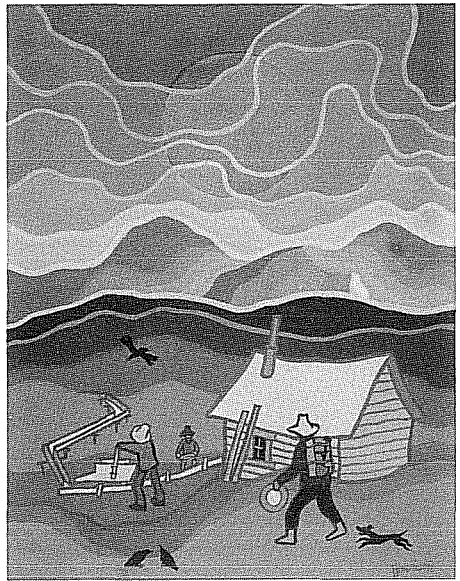


Fig. 2

Often teachers expect all things produced in the art classes to be final art products. We would caution that the student needs time to explore and to understand art media, and that assignments and time must be given which allow the student to fulfill this need. An initial lesson, in which the students explore how to change and alter colours in tempera paint, could be followed by one in which they could be encouraged to paint a landscape or design using the techniques employed by Harrison.

Kurelek, W. *A prairie boy's winter*. Montreal: Tundra, 1973.

Children, as they mature, long to draw realistically. Often, when they find

that their drawing skills are inadequate to express their ideas, frustration drives them to abandon drawing altogether. To draw the human figure in a variety of positions is often held up as a benchmark of realism. Kurelek painted hundreds of art works during his brief life, and many of his works depict people engaged in the routines of daily life. Kurelek's paintings are characterized by basic realism: sometimes figures are stylized, exaggerated, or simplified, and sometimes they are used as religious symbols.

A prairie boy's winter portrays the young William in a variety of activities ranging from throwing snowballs to playing "Fox and geese". It can be used in the art class to help the children understand the human body. This book, in combination with a mannequin, a jointed model of the body, or with students assuming a variety of positions, can be used effectively to heighten the awareness of how artists portray people in action. Younger children may be encouraged to pay particular attention to the position of body parts when drawing themselves as they engage in a favourite winter activity. Older students may begin by making gesture drawings which can subsequently be translated into wire sculptures.

Toye, W. *The loon's necklace*. Illustrated by Elizabeth Cleaver. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977.

The loon's necklace is another Indian myth which children love to hear. Cleaver makes excellent use of line and shape when using block printing techniques for her illustrations. The story contrasts an able young boy with his blind and despondent father. Cleaver's figures eloquently express despair, pain, anger, and, finally, joy, enabling children to understand how the lines of the figure and face express emotion.

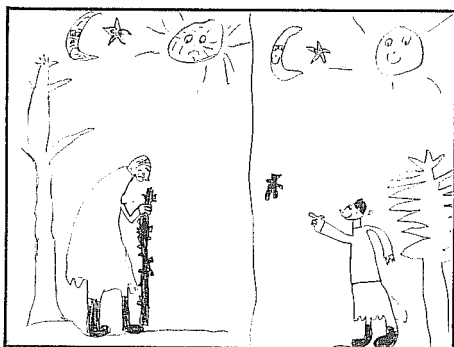


Fig. 3

In the research sessions, grade one children were very successful in making two drawings based on a model walking around the classroom. First the model looked sad, used a cane to assist her painful gait and wore a shawl to cover her stooped shoulders. Then the model walked erectly, was lively and happy. The students were able to portray these differences in their drawings of the two figures. Subsequent drawings showed heightened sensitivity to portraying the human figure in a variety of activities.

Reid, Barbara. *Playing with plasticene*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1988; *The new baby calf*. Illustrations by Barbara Reid. Scholastic-TAB, 1984.

Plasticene has traditionally been used to create free-standing sculptures of snakes, snowmen and other simply-shaped items. Barbara Reid takes plasticene to previously undreamed of dimensions when using it as an illustrative medium. *The new baby calf* is illustrated by using plasticene to create pictures: plasticene is flattened, textured and pressed into place on masonite or cardboard. Colours which previously were found only in a 64 colour crayon box resurface in plasticene. Reid shares ideas on how plasticene can be used in her resource book *Playing with plasticene*. The beauty of the medium can be realized by studying the illustrations for *The new baby calf*.

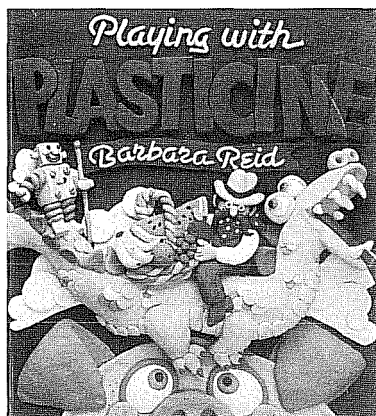


Fig. 4

For the art class, the teacher could combine studies in colour, shape and texture with a study of Reid's techniques. Discussion and analysis of the suitability of the medium for illustrative purposes would challenge the students to think of plasticene in a non-traditional mode. Children across the spectrum of the elementary grades can analyze how particular textures were achieved. They can experiment to create the effects of wood, straw, fur, or hair; they can be challenged to make a variety of colours by mixing only a few basic ones. After discussing the story and the illustrations for the new calf, children could be directed to create their own plasticene pictures or sculpture. They could continue by working with other modelling materials.

The above are but a few examples of how the art class and the art curriculum can be enriched by using readily available materials from the school library shelves. If information about the authors and illustrators is available it should be shared with the students to broaden their knowledge and appreciation of art and literature. Children should be encouraged to analyze the artwork in books as well as their own and their classmates' work. By making informed judgments based on observation, discussion, analysis, and interpretation, children not only increase their understanding and appreciation of art but are able to increase their own repertoire of art skills. By the use of books designed for children and available to children, a substantial art program can become a more viable and achievable goal.

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