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Gardner: Artful Scribbles: The Significance of Children's Drawings

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Gardner: Artful Scribbles: The Significance of Children's Drawings

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At the beginning of his important and insightful book, Artful Scribbles, Howard Gardner presents us with some provocative works by children under the age of 7, bearing at least a superficial resemblance (in small black-and-white reproduction) to the work of twentieth-century artists such as Van Doesburg, Pollack, and Klee. The purpose of drawing these parallels is to introduce one of the three major tasks Gardner sets for himself—"toward understanding the meanings and import of children's drawings," that is, "the aesthetic status of the work he [the child] produces." In other words, the author explores the question "Is it art or is it something else?"

The question may be a matter of categories and of children knowing them. An artist friend of ours related this story of his young son's first experiences with art: The friend, it seemed, maintained a studio in a part of the house that was easily accessible to his son, who was free to come and go as he pleased and to explore the media and processes of art at will. At the time of his son's emergence into the educational milieu of nursery school and kindergarten, the friend was deeply involved in a style of painting best described as nonobjective, in which areas of color and shapes were paramount. His son would come home from school with the usual bounty of papers, filled with the same amorphous shapes and colors; and our friend began to become concerned at the lack of any propensity on the boy's part to draw the figure in the manner of his friends and classmates. Time and the example of his friends failed to bring forth, in the school drawings of the boy, the ubiquitous tadpole person or, indeed, any other semblance of a figural schema. When father and son came finally to a discussion of this perplexing state of affairs, the boy demonstrated that he could easily draw—a man, a house, a tree. Why then, the father puzzled, did the child not bring home paintings like those of his friends? The forthcoming answer should have been apparent. The kinds of things that the father was involved in—the color and the abstract forms—that was "art"; the other—the tadpole, the house, the tree, and the rest—that was "something else."

We find this analogy to be an important key to the entire premise of the book. We do not wish to dredge up, one more time, the thorny question of "what is art" but merely to establish, at the outset, the view that one person's "art" is another person's "something else." The addition, then, of a well-placed question mark to the title of Gardner's book forms the basis for argument with one of the most provocative issues raised by him—Artful Scribbles: Artful? Scribbles.

Gardner uses as a "framework against which to contemplate" this and other "riddles," "the normal trajectory of development, as achieved by most children in Western culture and quite possibly throughout the world." It is this framework we also wish to examine in order to review this important addition to the knowledge of children and their graphic productions.

The first task Gardner sets for himself in the pursuit of understanding children's art is to determine the reasons that it follows its characteristic developmental course. Those who have studied the course of that development have most often described a series of stages through which each child passes; each description neatly slices the whole loaf of graphic development into different stage segments. Luquet's (1927) slices included Intellectual Realism, where the drawing reflected more what was known than what was seen, and Visual Realism, where an attempt was made to approximate appearances in the phenomenal world. In his age-based system, Burt (1921) charted the path this way: (1) The scribble stage at age 2 or 3; (2) Line at age 4; (3) Descriptive Symbolism at age 5 to 6; (4) Realism at age 7 to 9 or 10; (5) Visual Realism age 10 to 11 or so; (6) Repression, where drawing shows regression or decline, at age 11 to 14; and (7) Artistic Revival at early adolescence, a stage Burt maintained most young people never reached. The systems of Rouma (1912), Lowenfeld (1947), Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, and Luca (1967) also follow the same general schema.

Gardner, however, avoids the trap of naming precise age-based stages and prefers to characterize development as a continuous process with advances made relative to those in other symbol systems; and whereas most students of children's art have taken into account only innate factors as they chart development, Gardner sensitively illustrates the rapid development of young children under the influence of the media—his son's Batman series and Steps to a Dollhouse, for example, two of the most insightful segments in the book. Curiously, however, Gardner, like Burt, sees the developmental route not as a steady upward climb but rather as a U-shaped curve. Burt locates his decline at puberty; Gardner locates his at middle childhood. For Gardner, the early scribbling period is followed by an artistic flowering, a period occurring during the preschool and early school years, in which children produce drawings and paintings of great intuitive expressiveness, spontaneity, and inventiveness. In middle childhood, however, this flowering goes into a marked decline, as the child persists in the quest for skills which will allow him/her to render drawings with the precision dictated by the culture. The U curves upward for only a few young people who, intent upon becoming artists, master the cultural conventions
and then go on to regain an “intentional” spontaneity, inventiveness, and expressiveness in place of their earlier intuitive efforts.

Gardner’s conception of development requires careful examination. First, what is the nature of the early artistic flowering? Since this “summit” is achieved at the end of the preschool period, it is a time when the work of the child is still highly, but by no means totally, influenced by innate factors. The child tends to use the simplest shapes possible; an innate sense of order and balance predictably allows him/her to create works in which the maximum amount of horizontal/vertical contrast is achieved; the combination of the availability of pots of paint and large brushes or 64 (or more) crayons in a box, to say nothing of the bright, easily manipulated magic marker and the child’s inclination for experimentation, produces wonderfully colorful works; children’s lack of motor control also contributes to their apparent expressivity, producing lines that often appear to be sensitive and eloquent but are, in reality, merely lines gone awry. Thus these early works, described by Gardner as “colorful, balanced, rhythmic” are certainly all of those things, but are also highly preconventional, and although charming and unconstrained, they are the most predictable (they never have, and never will have, the potential to bring about a new artistic style) and certainly no more or less inventive or expressive than the work of children at other ages. The young boy who was emulating his father’s mature efforts was intentionally working within a particular paradigm; but were these children, whose work Gardner cites, even aware of the paradigm? Again we come to the matter of categories. On a recent trip to Spain, every broken window, every graffitied wall, reminded us of the paintings of the Spanish artist Tapies. They were not art, even in the broadest sense, and yet they affected our sensibilities in the way that the artist’s work had done. Indeed, Tapies had shown us a way to look at the world. It may be that the early work of young children appears to us artlike and to convey, as Gardner would have it, “something of the range and the vitality associated with artistic mastery” merely because of its similarity to the work of abstract expressionists. These artists have shown us a way to look at children’s paintings. In another time and place when another, more realistic or more idiosyncratic art was valued, these early manifestations might be seen in a very different way. In short, Gardner’s “flowering” may be no flowering at all, or at best a mid-twentieth-century flowering.

And what of the middle childhood years, during which Gardner sees a decline in “artistic” or “aesthetic” quality in children’s work? There is evidence that as young people acquire more competence in some of the more abstract symbol systems—written language, numbers, maps, musical notation, and the like—there is less use of the graphic system. This reduction of graphic activity may even slow the rate of graphic growth. Nevertheless, when children are asked during middle childhood to produce works that require delineation skills, inventiveness, and ability to design, the data show that their mastery increases with age in this span (National Assessment Technical Report, 1978).

So how might we characterize Gardner’s view of development? When young children’s work bears a superficial resemblance to abstract expressionism, it is considered to have reached a seldom-again-to-be-achieved peak. When middle-childhood graphic work begins to appear tight, more controlled, and conventional, it is considered to be in decline. This is a curious and perhaps biased interpretation of the data. It may be that young people do actually lose something, some flavor in their work, but then again it may simply be the replacing of one flavor for another during the middle years—French vanilla for strawberry marshmallow.

Thus it seems possible that, in spite of the insights that Gardner provides into the developmental path, he might have misread the data or have been working from an incomplete sample of the graphic production of middle-year youngsters. Our own collection of thousands of story drawings from children of all ages shows little of the decline that Gardner cites.

In order to approach the subject of deviations in the characteristic course of development and to ask whether there is a shortcut to graphic development, Gardner looks at a long-standing controversy in children’s art—the role of copying in graphic development. Raising the issue of the two ends to which copying may be put—the first, as an end in itself; the second, as the use of bits and pieces culled from the images of others that become the material for one’s own inventions—Gardner neatly dispatches the question “to copy or not” and asks, “Is it possible to achieve artistic heights without [emphasis added] a program of copying... by pursuing a strikingly different route?” The search for an answer to this question leads Gardner to examine two extreme cases of seeming graphic “mastery” that appear to have been achieved without the copying or step-by-step building upon and altering of simple graphics characteristic of most children.

The first case he describes is that of the astounding young British child, Nadia; the other, the cave painters of Lascaux. Nadia, although autistic, or perhaps because of her autism, was producing fluent copies of the illustrations in her picture books by the age of 3 1/2. Her drawings contain such an expressive fluidity of line and incredible detail of foreshortening, overlap, and figure orientation that it seems as if the heights of “representational grandeur” reached by this 3-year-old child may be attained by few adults.

It seems to Gardner that both Nadia and the cave painters arrived at mastery in one giant step—by merely copying what was in their mind’s eye. Here we think that Gardner, in an attempt to be provocative, ignores some of the most pertinent aspects of Nadia’s production. It appears that Nadia was able to hold images in her
mind's eye with such clarity that she was able to "trace around" those images with a line here and a line there until she arrived at a sort of Xerox machine or camerlike accuracy. Amazing, yes, but sad, too, because it seems that Nadia was little able to form standard graphic programs or routines, or basic conceptions of the parts of the images she drew. In one sense, she did not appear to develop from her earliest drawings (Arnhem 1980); and yet if one looks closely at the remarkable drawings, there is evidence that there was a development of sorts in the pattern of the normally drawing child, evidence that Gardner either ignores or overlooks. The first drawing of a horse we are shown was drawn by Nadia at 3½. The horse has almond-shaped eyes. By the age of 5 or so, Nadia's horses, humans, roosters, pelicans, and lions all contain a curious oversized Pop eye consisting of a heavy dot surrounded by a large circle. This seems not to be a product of Nadia's Xerox-like mental facility, but a typical child's schema. It is only here that we begin to see the vast gulf between Nadia's Xerox-like capacities (for copying what she had seen in books) and her ability to form a graphic concept of a simple eye. The same manifestation is evident in the formation of the pea-sized head found in her drawings, both formed by the most basic of graphic configurations—the circle. From this circle stem the normal child's inventive and creative abilities; in Nadia these abilities were minimal at best. Her Xerox-like copying capabilities were not mastery at all; there was no shortcut to graphic development, merely a dead end.

And what of Gardner's assertion that cave painters copied from their mind's eye as Nadia did? Perhaps it is not "tantamount to heresy," as Gardner himself fears the idea will be viewed, but merely another instance of his blindness to the evidence to be found in the cave paintings. It is not difficult to find in these paintings manifestations of the copying of highly conventional schemata as well as of innately derived features, such as the use of simple forms to achieve graphic ends, the horizontal/vertical orientation of lines and shapes, the exaggeration of parts, and so on. Only the eyes, the pea heads, and a few geometric shapes in some of Nadia's drawings were thus innately derived. It seems clear to us that the cave painters achieved their mastery in quite ordinary developmental ways, and in ways quite different from most of Nadia's configurations. There seems no general shortcut to a useful graphic mastery. Gardner himself recognizes this as he illustrates the way in which gifted individuals move rapidly through developmental stages.

Perhaps it is in these case studies and in answering the question of the "precise relation between the child's drawing and other aspects of his mental, social, and emotional development" that the greatest strength of the volume lies. Gardner's descriptions of individual children are keen and penetrating and, we might even say, exciting. Designated "interludes," these studies provide a perceptive narrative account of the various ways in which art contributes to the lives of children who choose the graphic symbolic mode. (There is one important note that we must add concerning the quality of the illustrations throughout the book. In a book whose entire premise depends upon visual and aesthetic qualities, it is disappointing, even frustrating, that it is not possible to assess the virtue of its illustrations because the publisher has used inappropriate paper and reproduction processes.) Not only does Gardner understand the necessity of considering the child's graphic development as it relates to other symbol systems (play, language, and music, for example), but he also continues to view that development throughout childhood and adolescence, in contrast to those who would cease inquiry when the child reaches the age of 6 or 7. In addition, contrary to the position of psychologists and others who have viewed drawing as a window on the contents of children's minds, as a key to their intellectual growth or as a means of understanding cognitive development, Gardner, in the interest of artistic development, sets himself quite another cognitive task. Our concern will be to judge how well he determines the artistic or aesthetic status of children's graphic productions, the third major task Gardner undertakes.

In attempting to accomplish the task, he works within Nelson Goodman's aesthetic theory. Goodman holds that the question "What is art?" is inappropriate, the more appropriate question being "When is art?" Goodman's answer is that when a work contains "symptoms of the aesthetic" such as (1) repleteness—a knowing exploration of the qualities of the medium, in drawing, for example, the thinness and thickness of lines and shading, and (2) expressiveness—the use of the medium to produce qualities such as happiness, sadness, power, liveliness, and anger—then the conditions for when are at least on the way to being met. Gardner presents studies (Carothers and Gardner 1979) that report that first grade children, given partially completed drawings said to contain repleteness, were unable to reproduce the qualities of repleteness and expressiveness in the drawings, while sixth graders could quite easily. Gardner avoids the error of saying that since sixth graders can produce these features they are capable of creating art. He does imply, however, that they are probably more capable of it than young children are since they can at least reproduce the "symptoms." And he does use this experimental evidence to call into doubt the assumption that the young child is an artist—a curious and contradictory state of affairs since Gardner implies that the child's artistic peak occurs years earlier.

Does this mean, paradoxically, that those children whose work is most highly prized for its seeming "aesthetic qualities" are the very ones least capable of willfully producing it? Or is it that Gardner, in adopting Goodman's notions of the aesthetic, in order to avoid the pitfalls of adopting the popular notion that more realism equals a higher degree of artistry, merely falls into another, equally seductive trap?
Perhaps a more useful approach might have been to adopt the view (Weitz 1966) that it is not possible to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for art; that it is possible only to look at paradigms or ‘good’ cases that are conventionally considered to be art. Thus there are all types of art—high art or fine art, folk art, popular art, comic strip art, tribal art, children’s art. Following this line of reasoning, then, it is possible that children’s art is, indeed, art, but art of a kind that is quite different from other classes of art.

From this position, it would be possible to observe the child’s shift from the paradigm of children’s art to that of fine art, comic book art, or some other type of art. Gardner, in fact, presents the work of two teenage brothers, the younger of whom works within the fine-art paradigm. The boys’ parents were artists and provided the rare fine-art model, as had our friend in the opening account. The older brother worked within the comic strip paradigm—one that many children in our culture model easily and readily. It seems that Gardner has asked too simple a question regarding the aesthetic and artistic status of children’s art. It would seem more appropriate to apply the ideas of expressiveness and repetitiveness to spontaneous work, work that follows one of several paradigms in the fine- and popular-arts areas. Then the question could be asked: When do children become fine artists or comic strip artists? The answer, it would seem, is not just when they are able to reproduce the expressivity and repetitiveness of those art forms but when they also employ the themes, subject matter, symbols, and compositional conventions of the given paradigm. Children’s art is children’s art; the question is when does it become some other kind of art?

Gardner is at his best when he speaks from the strength of his interactionist position of artistic development, as he does in the final chapter, where he criticizes those who would provide simple, one-dimensional explanations of development. Notably he singles out for analysis Schafer-Simmern, who supposed that artistic development or unfolding is a matter of passage through a number of preordained evolutionary stages, and Suzi Gablik, who sees general cultural artistic development in terms of mankind’s acquisition of new and hitherto unavailable cognitive competencies. “Gablik sees a parallel between what normal children do and the periods of ‘childhood’ in our culture.” Although Gardner concedes the value and importance of some of the insights from these positions, he proceeds to point out their inadequacies as tools for the explanation of artistic development. Certainly the route to an adequate theory of artistic development has been shown to be an arduous one; it may even be that the necessity for a deep grounding in both psychology and art may put the end beyond the reach of a single individual. This is where, we believe, Gardner’s work becomes problematic, where his psychological acumen outweighs his aesthetic perception. Nevertheless his work points the way to a much fuller explanation than has been previously posited.

If Gardner has meant *Artful Scribbles* to be provocative, it is certainly that, but brilliant and significant as well. It makes a substantial contribution to the still sparse but growing body of literature on children’s graphic and artistic development.

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