THE CREATIVITY HANDBOOK

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THE CREATIVITY HANDBOOK

A Visual Arts Guide for Parents and Teachers

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To my daughter Alyssa and my son Eliot

PREFACE

Watching young children make art, one can only surmise that artmaking comes from a raw and primitive place in the human psyche. Visual language establishes itself with scribbling at about the age of 2, and it is through scribbling that we connect to the written word. The discovery, in 1980, of a Middle-Eastern art object thought to have predated Homo sapiens (250,000 years ago) implies that artmaking may have existed even in prehuman creatures. This finding not only gives credence to the universality and power of artmaking, it also establishes art as having evolutionary origins.

I have often wondered: if art is such a natural part of the human experience (and maybe the prehuman experience), then why, as we get older, does it seem foreign to so many of us? My book attempts to answer that question by describing what authentic art experience is for the child, how developmental changes influence creativity, and what the social and educational forces are that influence the child/adolescent.

In my years of teaching, I have been guided by two ideas that I acquired from my students: Young children instinctively tell the truth about the way they see the world, and they paint their experiences as they feel them. That is one of the reasons that children's art has always been a source of inspiration for visual artists. At various times in their careers, famous painters such as Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso were greatly influenced by children's art. Yet, in our schools and in the home, children's art is hardly cherished or nurtured enough. As children get older, many of them begin to disconnect from artmaking because they fail to receive adult support, and eventually, they lose interest. I believe that children's art gets stultified at an early age by rigid school systems, budget cuts, and ironically, well-meaning parents and teachers who unintentionally turn children away from their own authentic vision.

After working as an art educator and an art therapist for over 20 years, I have seen the way that making art can heal by tapping into the subconscious mind and creating transformational moments for children and adolescents. Through my work in diverse settings such as urban public schools, art museums, mental health centers, and art studios, I have had the opportunity to

learn a lot about the lives of my students and to interpret their personal experiences through their artistic creations. I have seen how children and adolescents can gain self-esteem and confidence when their artistic ideas and perceptions are acknowledged and validated by others. But, I have also worked with students who believe that they are unable to create art because parents and teachers have made them feel that they did not have the "skill." I believe that artmaking is much more than a skill and that the potential and the instinct to make art is in all of us. However, parents and teachers need to support that potential so that a context is established where the creative process can unfold and the child's artistic imagination can become fully realized.

The purpose of *The Creativity Handbook* is to demystify art for parents and teachers and to help them understand what the art experience is like for the child/adolescent. The book discusses visual art concepts in simple terms and presents art as a vehicle for educationally transformative experiences. The book also provides sample dialogues between adults and children for parents and teachers who wish to help children approach art projects creatively. The "I can't draw" syndrome is explained and stages of artistic development are discussed from scribbling to adolescent art. *The Creativity Handbook* also offers ideas and projects to help adults support the authentic vision of the child/adolescent throughout all the stages.

In addition, *The Creativity Handbook* presents teachers and educators with ideas for working with students who have unconventional learning styles or who might be considered "behavior problems." Hands-on projects presented in the book can either be modified to fit traditional classroom settings or can be a stimulus for educators to create their own version of art-related projects. By understanding how developmental changes are reflected in artmaking, teachers and educators can be more genuine in their interactions with children and adolescents.

At the core of this book is the belief that children are born artists and that artistic talent emerges from the interplay of proclivity, cultural enrichment, and nurturance. I believe that artmaking is an integral part of the human experience and that its proper role in the child's development is poorly understood. I hope that this book will raise consciousness and foster understanding about the nature of the art experience and that it will help adults find ways to keep the creative process alive at home and in the classroom, not only for their children, but also for themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Writing this book combines two of my greatest loves: art and children. Both have had a profound effect on my life. Besides having children of my own, I have worked with children and adolescents for all of my adult life. I feel very close to my *child-spirit* and much of my inspiration comes from the connection I have to that part of my being. As an artist, I view the universal childhood experience as a rich emotional resource for creative expression.

My recollection of making art when I was a child is that time stood still. There was no need for words. I felt peaceful, almost hypnotized. I lost track of where I was and what was going on around me. There was something powerful, even secret, about it. It was my own experience, one that I couldn't (and didn't want to) share with anyone. At the age of 9, I learned that art could also be healing. By that age, I had developed a stutter which lasted for a few years. Mostly, I would stutter when I had to "perform" in front of people (like read out loud at school). Making art was very reassuring to me because it enabled me to express myself without having to speak. I continued using art as an emotional anchor throughout my adolescence. By that point, I had begun to view art as a dialogue with self, rather than a "skill."

Being a visual artist has provided me with a degree of critical distance from the world, but also with a strong sense of identity, wholeness, and well-being. The creative, intuitive part of myself has pulled me through periods of turmoil, taken me to exotic places (internal and external), kept me company, and allowed me to take chances.

I do not recall what age I was when I heard about *creativity*, but I remember thinking that the word sounded magical. Unfortunately, many school systems are set up in such a way that creativity becomes little more than an abstract concept. For most adults, visual art expression becomes an inaccessible, almost mythical activity that just a few "talented" people can do. This attitude gets passed down through the generations, either at home or at school, and eventually, children start to question the validity of their own image-making.

I wrote this book for caring adults who want to make art accessible to children and adolescents by supporting and validating young people's perceptions of life experiences through the media of the visual arts.

Today, many parents are concerned that their children are spending too much time with computers, video games, TV, and other screen activities. As schools cut back on programs in the arts, parents may feel the need to become more proactive in the creative life of their child. This book offers that opportunity by presenting parents with concrete ways to nurture their child's creativity. Also, educators who want to devise age-appropriate and developmentally relevant art projects as well as those who want to use art more effectively in special-needs programs will benefit from this book. Teachers who battle budget cuts and find themselves (with little or no art education) either teaching art or using it in the course curriculum will be able to use the book as a resource. Art therapists will also be able to use the book as a reference guide for designing art projects for children and adolescents with special problems.

My goal in writing the book will be realized if parents, teachers, special-needs educators, art therapists, and other adults concerned with creative education use its message and projects as an inspiration to help support the authentic vision of the child/adolescent.

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Since the genesis of this book comes from my deep connection to children, first I want to thank my own children, Alyssa and Eliot, for constantly teaching me to see the world from another perspective. My children were the initial inspiration behind this book because watching them create art and music, write stories, and invent their own ways of doing things added greatly to my fascination with children's creativity.

Next, I would like to thank all of the children and adolescents I taught over the years whose paintings, drawings, and sculptures laid the groundwork for this project. I also want to express my appreciation to my former students who have contributed artwork that appears in the book. They are: Julia Beatty, Leah Levin Beeferman, Walker West Brewer, Carter Doyle, Mel-Jordon Fein, Josh Hartley, Meradith Hoddinott, Matthew Isles, Sarah Jefferson, Emily Kawachi, Zachari Krikorian, Alyssa Krimsky, Eliot Krimsky, Lia Barnes Lenart, Anna Levenson, Eli Levin-Goldstein, Maggie Long, Meghan Mitchell, Annie Karem Oliver-Steinberg, Maria Orlic, Case Randall, Max Razdow, Sarah Reifman-Wheeler, Amanda Salisbury, Justin Sanders, and Garrett Sibinga.

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process. Finally, I want to thank my husband, Shelly, for his enduring love and support.

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Chapter 1
ART EXPERIENCE

WATCHING CHILDREN MAKE ART

For many of us who are convinced that we never knew how to draw and paint, or think we forgot how, it is an awesome experience to watch young children make art. By the time children reach age 2 or so, most of them are happily scribbling on any available surface in the house (frequently, the floor, the table, or the walls). Until the age of 7 or 8, most children continue confidently and enthusiastically painting and drawing, usually on more appropriate surfaces like paper or cardboard. Often a young child can be heard singing or talking to herself as she paints, lost in a world of rich and fanciful images. Sometimes she will tell elaborate stories about real things she has seen or experiences that have inspired the artwork. She will often delight adults with made up stories about anything, even drawings and paintings that consist of only scribbled lines, circles, blobs, or just a few drips of paint.

As we watch children so gloriously lost in the world of creativity and imagination, we sadly realize that eventually, their rich inner-world will be challenged by adult aesthetic standards, and by cultural, developmental, and educational influences. Well-meaning parents and teachers often give feedback that causes children to question the way they represent the world in their paintings and drawings. At what point in their development do children start questioning their artistic ability? What eventually happens to the artist in them and ultimately, in all of us? Does the ability to make art ever really go away? What can we do as parents and educators to keep the creative spirit alive for our children so that they never disconnect from it? This chapter will

address these questions and explore some of the ways that children approach artmaking.

THE BEGINNING

Before we go any further, let's start at the beginning, even before a child puts down a mark on paper. Where does artmaking come from and how does it start? According to Viktor Lowenfeld and W. Lambert Brittain, art education pioneers and authors of *Creative and Mental Growth*, the foundation for artmaking begins as soon as the child starts reacting to the world through touching, listening, tasting, and crawling. Children continue to explore their environment through creative play, which eventually leads them into activities such as artmaking.

The very first marks that children make are usually in the form of a scribble. When children (between 18 months and 2 years) gain enough motor control to start scribbling, the experience of mark-making is a surprising and powerful one. In fact, it takes a while for children to realize that the marks being made on paper are actually coming from them.

Once scribblers have gained control over the marks they make, they can change the direction of their arm movements whenever they choose to. Straight, curved, and diagonal lines become repeated and varied. For the curious child, it is not too much of a leap to turn a circle into a face or a squiggle into a worm. When that begins to happen, the child moves from being an instinctive scribbler to a deliberate image-maker. Scribbling also leads the child into written language.

MAKING ART

Any group of random marks on paper can be considered an artistic expression, but what brings it to the level of *art* is an original and adventurous way of putting it all together. The act of artmaking comes out of a combination of conscious and subconscious processes. In order to draw an object, a child has to have a conscious, sensory experience of it. At the same time, the element of subconscious process, such as how the child feels about the subject matter of the drawing,

will be an important part of the artwork. For instance, a child who receives a new bicycle has direct knowledge about what the bike looks like. She has not only seen it many times, but she also knows what it feels like to ride it. She may think about it a lot and maybe she even dreams about it.

When she goes away from the bike, she can still picture what it looks like because she has a visual memory of it. She also knows what it's like to fall off the bike, to ride fast on a windy day, and to feel unsteady when the bike gets wobbly. The child may have a mixture of subliminal feelings about the bike, like: it's beautiful, it's exciting, it's big, it's grown-up, and sometimes it's scary. When she creates a drawing of her bike, conscious and subconscious processes will come together to form a work of art that merges developmental, cognitive, and emotional elements.

ART PROCESS

How does art get made? The answer lies in the process the artist goes through to make it happen. For the true artist, and the very young child, the product is secondary to the process. Whether a painting emerges out of an art session or not, the experience of creating is what is important, not the actual artwork itself.

Watching the way a preschooler paints is a good example of process-oriented artwork. When a 3- or 4-year-old child makes a painting, it is all about spontaneous experience. Lines are often expressed in quick, sweeping motions, colors are usually dripping and oozing into one another, and shapes may be bold and expressive. If the painting activity stops in a few minutes, it will probably end with an exciting artwork (or product). However, the child may be enjoying the art experience so much that she wants to continue working. If she paints on the same paper, the bold colors and shapes may disappear into a solid mass of brown and muddy goop. Adults who watch the process may be disappointed by the outcome, but the child will be just as happy with the brown blob as she would be with the bold shapes and bright colors. For her, it is not important what the painting looks like in the end. She just knows that she had fun making it.

VISUAL THINKING

In his book *Visual Thinking*, the psychologist Rudolf Arnheim said, "Thinking calls for images and images contain thought."[1] If that is true, then visual thinking is really about the way we perceive and think about the world. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us think about the objective universe in a fairly literal and pragmatic way. Children, on the other hand, see magic and mystery in almost everything they do and see. While adults may be oblivious to such nature-connected phenomena as a sunset turning the sky red, a full moon on a spooky night, or snow falling on a winter day, children will be fascinated, inspired, and curious.

Since young children have a natural inclination to interpret reality, they possess a much more open-ended view of the visual world than adults do. For children, the world looks any way they want it to. Young children's drawings are expressionistic because they are driven by subjective and emotional responses to what they see, feel, and experience. Later, their visual thinking changes as social, cultural, and developmental influences push them toward mastery and correctness.

As adults, the way that we perceive the world has to do with how open we are to new concepts and new ideas. Sometimes, in order to break out of rigid patterns of thinking about things, we need to take our blinders off and begin to *un-see* (or restructure the way we are used to seeing). When we question the "obvious" by thinking in new ways about ordinary experiences, we are connecting to the way young children think and how they see the world.

THE IMAGINATIVE CHILD ARTIST

We have all heard the expression, "In every artist there is a child and in every child there is an artist." This is especially true when the child is between the ages of about 4–7 years old. The artwork that comes after the scribbling stage is often the most innovative work that children produce in their entire lifetime. Somewhere before or around

1. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p.254.

the time that most children enter school, their artistic creativity seems to be highly evolved. Children's early representational attempts are filled with spontaneous, uninhibited, and whimsical images. These drawings are especially moving because the feeling behind them is not only one of excitement and wonder, but also one of complete openness and honesty. Young children are not trying to get anything right or impress anyone. Their drawings reflect their authentic experience, devoid of social norms about how things should be represented.

In looking at a tree, the child may notice its shape, the texture of the bark, the branches, or the leaves. But, she may also have a strong emotional connection to the symbol of a tree. If so, she will project those big feelings onto her visualization. She might have played in a neighbor's tree house or seen a movie about children who were protected by a tree in a snow storm. Perhaps she heard a story about a talking tree, a tree that turned into a monster, or a tree that sprouted gigantic blue flowers. When a 5-year-old child creates an image of a tree, she draws it the way it feels to her and she lets her imagination guide her.

When the child draws mommy and daddy larger than a house, it is because mommy and daddy are so important to her that they *feel* larger than life. With creative abandon that many adult artists yearn to emulate, children at this age will draw a primary shape, and in a matter of seconds, turn it into a polka-dot house, a flying car, a fantastic insect, or a scary monster. A person can "swim" in the sky, be taller than the tallest tree, or fit inside a sunflower. During this wondrous stage and beyond, adults should encourage the child to continue using her imagination and to think of it as a wellspring of ideas that she can always tap into.

The emotional references that young children have, and the fact that they approach the world in an uninhibited and original way, is part of what makes up the dynamic of their artwork. Conventional adult standards of aesthetics and "right" and "wrong" ways of thinking about image-making can only have a negative impact on the raw energy behind children's art. Adults should not be too literal-minded when reacting to the artwork of the imaginative child. It is best to ask a child to talk about her drawings before projecting adult ideas or comments.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE CHILD AND THE ADULT ARTIST

In his book *Art, Mind and Brain,* developmental psychologist Howard Gardner explores the connections between young children and adult artists. "While mature artists have much better developed skills, far more control of their gifts, and superior abilities to experiment systematically and to choose deliberately among alternatives, much in their processes of creation is reminiscent of children."[2] Gardner notes that the child and the adult artist both explore and mix various art media, both experiment with color, both create symbols that relate to their own expressive need, and both allow play and spontaneity to become an important part of the process. Moreover, both the adult artist and the child transcend conventional boundaries about how things should look, what an artist is supposed to do, or what visual expression should mean. Both are making art because they have a strong need for self-expression. One important difference between the two might be that most adult artists are self-aware and reflective about some aspects of their process, whereas children are not.

Many artists have been fascinated by the spontaneity and vitality behind children's art. In his book *The Innocent Eye,* Jonathan Fineberg chronicles famous artists who not only found inspiration in children's art but also used it as source material for their own work. Among them were Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, and Pablo Picasso. When Paul Klee discovered his childhood drawings one day at his home in Switzerland, he considered it to be one of the most important events of his life. In fact, these drawings became the impetus for some of his later paintings, many of which were considered to be masterpieces. Kandinsky and Münter also collected children's art and used it to search for a visual language that connected to the pure vision of the child. Picasso, on the other hand, was more interested in how children made art than in the products they created. He made careful observations of children at play and became intrigued by their appropriation of objects. (Children who see an opened umbrella may use it in fantasy play as a house.) The concept of appropriation is illustrated in Picasso's sculptures from the early 1950s, where children's toys and other objects are playfully and symbolically used.

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2. Howard Gardner, *Art, Mind and Brain.* New York: Basic Books, 1982, p.102.