

Teaching Art to Children

By | Jan 28, 2015

As a creative art teacher, Lekha has a good chance to gauge the personalities of her students through their drawings...

Asking children to draw what they liked in my first class drew a poor response. Most children drew cartoon characters from TV or comic books, others the hills and sunset. There was hardly a drawing from their surroundings. Were the things around them not of as much interest to them as the things on TV? Or is it that they do not connect drawing with their own experiences and their life? A bit of both, perhaps.

As with words or information, only those images that are part of their experience are meaningful to anyone, children included. So what images could I begin my classes with? These had to be images that were a part of their life and simple enough to attempt, interesting enough to spark their imagination, and to make them use their memory and observation skills.

I decided to start with the face. Surely faces were something they looked at every day – in the mirror, the house, in school, in magazines, on TV, in fact all around them. The face was only a frame, however, on which with a few strokes they could hang their own choices of detail – girl, boy, man or woman, spectacles, or long hair, a French beard or African curls, moustache, braids, or dangling earrings, The end results were astounding! According to each person's skill and choice an amazing and expressive variety of faces were produced.

The possibilities with the 'face' were again brought home to me when we drew face profiles the following year. In class when I draw on the board I start with a simplified shape such as an oval, triangle or a rectangle and then work out the legs, hands, wings and other details. The children follow me line by line. The background, the colours, adding more of the same figures, etc., is again left to them. With this style of teaching art even those not confident about their drawing attempt to draw. Now and then, I ask the children to draw something that they like.

For profiles, I had decided on a female and a male head facing each other, large faces so that there was room only for the neck and sometimes space to indicate the shoulder. I insist on the size of the face, bird, or whatever image we draw because often there is a tendency among children to draw small. The first face I drew was the woman's. Then the man's. While drawing the man's face, I accidentally drew the eyebrows slanting down, which gave the man a frowning expression. I thought I should take this 'happy accident' further and told the children that the man is a little angry. To continue the fiction I also drew the man with his mouth open as though talking and one hand in front of his face with the admonishing finger lifted. The response was again interesting. Even while I was drawing, the children came up with a variety of possible situations and conversation between the two. 'He is asking why dinner is not yet ready.' 'She said she had to go out to get some vegetables.' 'He is asking why she spends so much time on the phone.' 'She said her mother called and there was some problem.' A whole paragraph of conversation came pouring out.

The 'face' continued into another work. This time we drew face masks. The children were shown photographs of a variety of masks used in Indian theater and dance; Red Indian, Chinese, and European masks. They were also shown how they could evolve their own masks from leaves, clouds, flowers, geometric animal or bird shapes. They were then asked to sketch out two or more masks. I do this because the children are always more relaxed, inspired, and confident with their second and third images. This is also done to get them into a method of working; of putting down their ideas and then picking one to develop further.

Children of the fifth class transformed their mask drawing into mosaic work on cardboard with a great deal of patience and concentration. Referring to their coloured sketch, the children either tore or cut coloured glaze paper into small bits and stuck them on cardboard to make a mask. Sometimes they ran out of patience as this work needs precision. Sometimes they felt their mask was not coming out well and so didn't want to continue. Whether in colouring, drawing or with the craft work, I found that personally sitting with them, talking about what we are drawing and doing their work with them helps them get back to it with renewed interest.

I had the sixth and seventh class children develop their face masks with a variety of 'scrap' material. Straw, ice cream sticks, plastic spoons, toothpicks, old cotton, pieces of coloured and printed cloth, rope, cardboard, chocolate wrappings, biscuits packets, matchboxes, bubble wrap, pista shells, etc., on the base of a cardboard.



This was an interesting exercise because the children had to abandon the idea of a 'beautiful' face. The challenge was to respond to the material, see its possibilities and change the idea in the head or the sketch to suit the limited material. Some children came up with amazing faces textured with corrugated cardboard with a sack cloth rolled up as a nose and curtain ring earrings. Some stuck an upside down plastic spoon for eyes and braided sutli for hair. Though naturally many had beards made of coconut fiber and hair made of white cotton (more common choices), there were also some with very precisely stuck thread and coloured wool work.

I also observed on more than one occasion that children, especially boys who were restless when colouring or drawing, working with surprising concentration during craft work. Perhaps textures and the three dimensionality of the work suits their age\temperament \nature better?

Other than faces we also draw and colour a range of birds, animals, trees, vehicles, and occupations which we see around us. From their drawings I found that the cat remained more a cardboard cutout to most children. The dog or even the monkey was more familiar. The shopkeeper was also a subject of excitement with a lot of discussion and invention as to the name of the shop and the things he was selling. The pigeon, which lives on parapets and flies from balcony to balcony, also evoked observations. We drew some living things which have a strong presence not in the physical living space but in the sphere of our imagination and our stories, such as the peacock, the tiger, the elephant, and the horse.

The bird and animal drawings were also interesting because of what the children came up with for the background. For instance, the monkey was drawn on the trees swinging from a branch, on the terrace knocking aside a flower pot and running with its loot of bananas, on the rooftop, on the road and so on... Sometimes, however, the background remained clichéd – the ideal green meadows below perfectly triangular unreal hills, occasionally with the flowing river and the sun with its halo of shooting rays either coming up or going down.

Recently, I was a little surprised to find an epidemic use of this 'beautiful' setting even for a goat and a horse. Perhaps these animals are too distant for the children and they connect to them more as animals in ideal scenes in books or movies. I suppose this sunset scene is strong in them because of the numerous 'beautiful' paintings they have seen, or is it from fairy tale illustrations or perhaps cartoons or movies where during important moments the characters are dramatically silhouetted against the golden sun?

Few children drew from their own memories – there were the *baraat* horses with bridegrooms on top, goats were seen in a truck, or tied up to be milked, buffaloes were drawn near rubbish heaps.

Of all the different activities that I have tried in my classes, the most interesting are the ones that we did with used envelopes. It was very interesting to see the number of ways in which we could reuse the envelopes. The idea was to get children to look at the possibilities of objects especially discarded ones. It was amazing to see the everyday card envelopes transformed into various objects – *the ferocious tiger, the deadpan panther, or the smirking cat*. It is also wonderful to see how by their second year of working with bits and pieces of coloured paper, children begin using paper more carefully and come back to me with bits and pieces that are 'extra'.

The children of class five used the slightly larger greeting card envelopes to make the hand puppet elephant with trunks and ears in a variety of colours and personalities to match. They then gave a name, voice, and character to their puppets. They also used large envelopes with the plastic windows to make montage of buildings, houses, apartments, or shops, cutting out photographs of people, cars, televisions, mobiles, cakes, etc., from old magazines or leaflets.

Class four engaged with the creation of hand puppets which were various kinds of cats including leopards, lions, black panthers, and the domestic cats. The boys mostly went for the ferocious cats and the girls for domestic cats which verged on the cute. I discourage drawing cartoon eyes or features as I feel it is good to resist the strong influence of Hollywood or Japanese cartoons and have children use other ways of drawing the eyes, body, etc. Cartoon characters often seem removed from reality. Once you let children draw animals, humans, or birds cartoon style, they stop looking at the lines, or the colours, or the image freshly. The only desire then is to transform the animal as much as possible into the popular cartoon.

The children of class four also used envelopes with plastic windows to make a large train with many compartments. This had two children working on one envelope which became a single compartment. They made passengers, patterns on wheels and designs on the compartment, placing people on top of the train and in many ways jazzing up the train according to their taste. It was interesting to see the different sizes of passengers take shape behind the plastic window. One child even had a man running along the train and it was amazing to see the boy, normally a little impatient draw out the hands and feet carefully.

The third class children made snake hand puppets out of rectangle envelopes and had a good time cutting and tearing to create patterns on the snakes' backs.

I try my best to insist on a certain level of 'finish' depending on each child's capabilities. I think it is nice to push the frontiers of their perseverance bit by bit. I find that though children are sometimes very tired of their own work they are quite ready to help their classmate with similar work. Perhaps it is the old magical or sociable energy which comes from working together. Therefore, in craft classes there is a bit more of talking with each other. Recently, this observation was reinforced when this very restless and impatient boy come to me and offered to help a classmate who was starting late.

The act of drawing helps the child focus his/her attention on the image that he/she is drawing. In this process, as the child begins to think and observe, images become part of his/her life. I often find children come running to me to share their excitement of what they have seen, a squirrel sitting up holding something, a camel by the roadside, or parrots on a branch just the way they drew in the class. Thus, this crucial mode of expression through art can play a significant role in the process of child development.

The way I teach art is also in tune with the philosophy of the school. Competitiveness is discouraged. All children's drawings are put up on the display board. Independent thinking and 'originality' is given importance, but the emphasis is on the idea of working together and on everyone getting their due space. It is difficult to say that there is a single efficient way of teaching. Thus, I continue to read about other schools and explore other creative possibilities. However, the freedom to work in these ways is due to the school's active support as well as the feedback and ideas of the teachers at Vidyaranya.



Lekha Narayanan has been painting from a very early age. It has been her passion and focus all her life. She studied and graduated in the fine arts. Although she taught English literature for a small period in her life (having graduated in English Literature as well), she realized her heart was in helping others find expression through art. She has been teaching art and craft in Vidyaranya - Hyderabad for over two years now.

This article, first appeared in Teacher Plus, September 2013 and is a part of the Teacher's Day Special issue.

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