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# *Art and Praxia*

## *Plastique and Technique in Young Children's Drawings*

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### **Content**

One more book on children's drawings ?  
Not really. This is a kind of interactive book.

Act 1: the *authors* provide scientific results from graphopraxic tests.  
Act 2: the *children* aged 4 to 7 then expose their free drawings in the gallery.  
Act 3: the *reader* compares them with relation to age and praxic ability, and eventually follows the child's individual production from theme to theme.

It clearly appears that the skilled child from the praxic point of view does not regularly show artistic talents. Objets d'art are sometimes made by very young and practically unskilled children. The reader becomes the judge.

The book aims at defining precocious art and provides a new key to reading children's drawings.

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## ***Summary***

Children's drawings have been studied as indicating intellectual development, expressing emotional life, revealing environmental experience, stressing problem-solving activities, but more rarely as showing the child's artistic talents.

There are two ways of considering objets d'art: analysing and just enjoying. The present book offers both, by showing two sets of constrained and free drawings by the same children.

The first part of the book presents a thorough experiment on the development of constructional praxia which are compared with apraxia, i.e. acquired disability through brain injury in adults.

The second part shows the free drawings' gallery from the same children who took part in the first experiment.

It clearly appears that the two skills, the constructional praxic ability and the free artistic expression, do not evolve in parallel. Very skilled children often are poor artists and the observer can find aesthetic drawings in young and praxically unskilled children. In other words, already in the 4 to 7 age bracket, the artisan does not make the artist.

However, the authors avoid any classification in art.

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## ***General discussion***

The relationship between praxic ability and art has been subject to much controversy. On the other hand, the question of whether we can speak of art regarding children's production has also invited itself to the debate.

As specialists in praxia and dyspraxia, also involved in the question of child development, we tried to better understand what kind of production we are dealing with, what definition of art can apply to the drawings we have collected and whether we can trace the birth of art on some occasion.

We think that we found an original procedure linking observation of very controlled praxic skills, on one hand, and free expression in drawing, on the other hand.

In part 1 of the book, we show the results of several experiments regarding children's and adult's capabilities in copying straight line segments and forms. These studies belong to neuropsychology and aim at showing what are the finest ingredients of the ability to manipulate the pencil in order to produce a particular shape. We have shown how this skill appears with age in young children. We have also shown how this apparently easy task can sometimes vanish after brain injury in adults.

These studies have been published in several scientific articles. Nevertheless, the question remains open of the relationships between praxia and artistic talents. Here, we are mere observers. But because we already know each child's praxic ability, we can propose a new grid for looking at children's drawings.

In part 2 of the book, we present the gallery of free drawings collected from the same children who passed the copying task. We categorise the drawings by themes, for example the drawing of a human person, of animals, of a house, and other objects familiar to the children. In each theme, we order the drawings by praxic ability score.

This is why we feel authorised to ask fundamental questions about children's art. These questions definitely leave the domain of manual ability, which is not trivial in itself when dealing with schoolchildren and clinically pathological cases. The questions regard human nature and human values. Artists and art critics certainly know better than us what art is and what it is not.

However our procedure permits us to compare the drawings with reference to praxia and to some extent with reference to age. We first know to what extent these two variables are linked. Chronological age influences production, this is clear. But age only explains half of the praxic ability variance in our sample. Moreover, as far as art is concerned, we demonstrate that neither age nor praxic ability can predict creativity in children's drawings.

The demonstration is an accumulation of evidence, from theme to theme. We do not need to judge. We present all productions from the experimental sample, and we invite the reader to observe that some drawings reveal a real creative act while the most part of them do not. We also invite him/her to observe that this art work imposes itself independently of the child's age and the child's praxic ability.

While preparing the book, our granddaughter, aged 2 years and 10 months involuntarily contributed to our questioning. We had her at the telephone and she was claiming that she made a beautiful drawing. We then asked her. "tell me, what is beautiful for you? What does beautiful mean?". After a silence, she replied: "But look, grandpa!".

Small children can sometimes have the answer. Do not categorise, do not classify, just look! Art speaks to the senses. Art speaks to the finest and most remote emotion you can live. In a world of quantity, rank, sanction and reward, just release your feelings and let yourself be invaded by intuition.

There is a kind of joy that surges when comparing the children's creations. Just imagine for a moment the child's hand obeying his/her brain and either copying an internal model or exploring new ones. Look how trivial appears the mere copy of stereotypes and read in the less accessible forms the child's space conquest. Aesthetics is an additional mark on innovation.

What strikes us is the irregular distribution within the normal population of praxic abilities, on one hand, and of artistic talents, on the other hand. Our children's sample is relatively small, but thanks to the many drawings each child produced, we can compare the drawings between the children and between the themes for the same child. Comparison leads to the conclusion that it is vain to try to find art by considering the child's age. Also that it is vain to try to find art by taking the child's praxic ability into account.

We go on a journey where there is often dullness but most fortunately surprise. Wonder from the part of the observer is the best gate to art, for art does not exist apart. Its definition needs to include communication.

It is time to ask the core question, what kind of art do we find in children's drawings ?

## **What kind of art in children's drawings?**

Art flows from the child's hand without he/she knowing anything of art teaching neither of art history. And because

- 1.- young children draw spontaneously, exploring how to draw new shapes without training,
- 2.- because first children's drawings are idiosyncratic, it is following no schema influenced by peers,
- 3.- children's art nevertheless shows similarities with art work that is outside academy, we address the question of what it is thoroughly.

What we know is that many modern painters have borne much suffering in killing resemblance in their work. We know of some cubic painters who depressed and healed by painting factual sceneries. Today's art is therefore to struggle for departing from platitude.

It does not mean that drawers of all ages and of all levels cannot enjoy exercising and producing.

The beauty of art is for us the surpassing of oneself in the production. There is no easy way to art because there is a resistance to straightforward and automatic production.

We can observe in our collection of drawings those of children who already know and use the rubber. As psychologist, we never offer the child to use this instrument for we want to keep all the traces. But here, children freely correct their sketch. The to and fro motion of the rubbing hand reveals the child in-satisfaction and illustrates the dialog between the child's hand and brain which contains mental images. The doing and undoing last until the child obtains a certain fixed picture and 'passes the proofs'. If we have the opportunity to follow this process, we see the whole film of creation. Often the observer has only the last picture drawn.

We think that children's drawings speak for themselves since they deliver with the production the whole history of their creation. There is no accomplishment in children's drawings as it appears in the artist's work. There is only creation from nothing, from bareness of means, tricks and learned knowledge. This is precisely what we call 'plastique', the way of mastering the gesture for the idea of the shape.

Resemblance to the model does not matter. This should not be confused with intellectual realism, the completion of the drawing with all what the child knows. What matters to the child's eyes is the intention which reveals itself in the drawing. The child's drawing let us see the relationship between the lines and the drawer's ideas.

Of course, all the children's drawings are not art work. Our collection confirms this point. But some drawings shine and impose themselves to the observer's eyes because they reflect the child's truthfulness. The specificity with children's art lies in the imperfection of the production which contrasts with its readability and raw expressiveness.

Is art depending on the symbol that the drawing conveys? We think that it can be. But the best symbolism in children's drawings is that of the making and of innovating while forming the line. Symbols are dangerous criteria for evaluating art, we think, because they precisely

belong to a language and fit a catalogue. Symbols are a building material and can sometimes appear in some drawings, like the heart shape to express love to the addressee.

The veracity of the child is his/her feebleness, and the beauty of his/her acts lies in his/her creation with the tips of the fingers. The act of surpassing such a feebleness is a masterpiece.

The child's creation can bloom whatever the success of the stroke, the perfection of the shape. As Dubuffet puts it : "the one who does not know struggles to find and debates, the one who believes he knows sleeps with satisfaction" (our translation).

Art infers the idea of beauty. The child's drawing is beautiful when it is original. It is beautiful when it offers to us the unexpected occasion of sharing with the child his/her joy in life, his/her discoveries, his/her conquest and at the same time his/her hesitant processes.

Children's art is exhibitionism in the positive sense. It is the 'me' there, the direct pride that one has achieved to project in the trace the representative shape. For the production is intended to be shared, namely by the beloved persons, it is not only the space and picture that the child conquers but also his/her new mode of communication. This characteristic of children's art is reinforced by the naming and discussing the drawing in the dyad, in the family and with the nearest and dearest.

Is there something missing in children's art compared to adult's 'outsider' art ? The child as an artist hardly composes his drawing to cover a complete scene. The form is the conquest, and not yet the projective space. Young children draw how they would mould separate objects. The drawings' gallery that we present in part 2 clearly shows that children draw movement in space only when they are specifically asked for. This is the case in 'The Horse pulling a cart' demand, where action provides a much more exciting picture than in the 'with animals' instruction. Even in the 'Lady walking in the rain' space is absent, except sometimes a baseline, sometimes a puddle and very often rain drops that are drawn front-rank as objects.

Artistic paintings from adults show the consideration of the spatial array, even if perspective is not mastered, or voluntarily distorted. It is out of our intention to compare children's drawings with folk art or outsider art as intended production for decorating or for reaching art market. Nor to compare children's art with ethnographic art. But similarities between the child's naïve representation and other adult naïve art raises the question whether children's art is an art of origins.

## **Do children draw like palaeolithic painters ?**

This question was fashion during the evolutionist debate. Haeckel's recapitulation theory, 1866, (Ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis) stated that embryos of today's mammals develop the same way as more primitive animal forms during evolution. This was the ground for supposing that child nowadays' development goes through the same phases as humanity in its history. It would be for this reason that children's drawings resemble that of the palaeolithic painters. They are both made by human beings supposed to live their first stage of development. Therefore they resemble by their imperfection, absence of knowledge, and cannot but announce civilization.

It is clearly forgetting that cavern paintings were made by adults of whom we know little about their mature mental life. These adults belonged to a culture. Indeed their drawings were of simple making, often mere body traces (hands printed on the wall) and animal pictures, sometimes human interaction like hunting. But the presence of culture, of religion for example, is nevertheless clear in their work.

The surprising in the cavern drawings is to have been drawn from traces held in memory and often reproduced in the dark or semi-dark. Anyway, these men never introduced a mammoth as model in the cavern, as Kretschmer puts it in 1910 (see Jahoda, 1991). Imagine the Neanderthal man forming in his brain the figure of the imposing bison and, while in the cave, carving or painting the image with the beast's majesty and strength. These men drew undoubtedly with their emotions. They also drew for 'religious' reason. They drew not only because they were pleased to, but they also drew prayers, incantation, exorcism, thanksgivings, ex votos and so on, which are not clearly observed in young children's drawings but represent major incentives for classic academic art.

We received recent evidence that it is difficult for the rich nations corrupted by the art market to acknowledge and respect religious meaning in art. In the field of native American art, sacred Hopi masks have been sold by auction in Paris on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013, despite the indian's vehement protest and lost court appeal against the sale. These 'Kachinas' represent the ancestor's souls. They are not only nice for the white purchaser but also for the red indigenous population. These masks, whether old or new, bear spiritual values. The system's perversion wants that the more the object has spiritual values the more its price raises on the market. However this regrettable story testifies on the other hand that the highest human values are associated with art.

Therefore assimilating children's drawings to palaeolithic art is an illusion. Of course, artists from the two groups like to represent nature, natural forms and living creatures. They like to represent themselves or figures that symbolise some person, very often the most important person for them. This is no art stage. This is human concern, of any age.

And from the point of view of technique, both sorts of drawings show plastique, it is the conquest of the form that speaks. Symbolism is clearly present in both too, ' O- ' representing a lying person, and in children ' V ' a pair of scissors, for example (see Daniela, page 196).

Nevertheless, a closer look at their production reveals fundamental differences in their art. Adults have an experience of large space that small children only piecemeal discover. We have observed how small children tend to draw their motives separately. Only close interaction is easily represented by children. Some children bypass spatial difficulties through symbols, realising a hieroglyphic frieze (see the Cup on the Saucer by Roxane, page 175). Besides human figures and animals, the simplest natural details and the real objects are a challenge to draw for young children and they prefer close and handy subjects as models.

On the contrary, prehistoric artists widen their horizon and draw hunting scenes, for example. Their human figures are symbolic of fertility or of power.

To sum up, children's art and prehistoric art do show resemblance from the plastique point of view. In both cases, production is born in the drawer's hands as a result of a voluntary and directed activity. If art does not exist in children's drawing, prehistoric art does not exist either. Children would only draw trials and errors. Cavern men would have only

produced scratching and daubs. However, there are significant differences between the two of them.

An inexpert eye can see in both types of drawings only primitive forms, unreal correspondence between model and copy, imperfect finish, in brief a lot of lapses. This should however not hide the power of expression in the hands of the humble, the strength of symbols, the harmony in the curve, and the projection of human value.

## **Do children draw Art Brut?**

Lausanne is the authors' hometown. It also claims to be the capital of Art Brut, because Jean Dubuffet bequeathed his outstanding collection to the city. So 'art brut' will be understood in his own terms, the kind of art that is stranger to cultural art.

Young children slowly emerge from their physiological awkwardness. Just look at their drawings! We are definitely not in the art academy. Just like Art Brut artists, they have not had any art lessons yet. Like them they feel free to draw whatever they desire, since what counts is the pleasure. If culture is order, it also is the watchword, for Michaux the anti-conformist adept at artificial paradises.

We tried to observe children before their 'conditioning' as drawers. Already, however, we observe what would please Dubuffet and Michaux: the ravages of language, of the sure notion, of the fixed grammar, of the model-to-copy fit, of the stereotype (see the schema of the cat in 'Animals' tables).

In the ideal child's *plastique*, there should be no enunciation, as few words possible, only action, awareness, realisation, raw thought and images. Plastique is not a language but a tongue, just as there exists a mother tongue that we know naturally without dictionary. Because forms are born each time anew in the child's brain.

When shaping with a sole line, which is much more supple and more plastique than bricks (preformed shapes), the form becomes living and the hand's movements mimic movements in the represented object. If the child draws a bird, it flies before being 'bird', before receiving its golden label for the museum. If it is 'mum', it is flesh and skin before the madonna, which will come later with a certain academism.

Modern artists go into ecstasies over the simple, the modest, the hidden intimate. This is where we find the art of the 'uneducated'. For example in music, one is stirred when listening to the bare melody, which issues from the simplest instrument, a reed with holes in it. There is a certain magic in returning to the purest source.

This is the very reason why many early 20<sup>th</sup> century artists kept their own paintings made when they were kids, cheered and were inspired by children's drawings.

In part 2 of this book, we presented all the drawings made by 62 children during our experimental session. We did not pick the drawings and did not rule out any of them. This was precisely aimed at observing the simplest drawing, the purest sketch, the 'prime art', if it happens. We would prefer the term of 'last art', an expression chosen to disambiguate 'primitive art' and to promote avant-garde culture. Last art, because each child's drawing is always the 'last issue', the 'state-of-the-art'.

But in order to compare technique with plastique, we did exactly what Dubuffet, the Art Brut founder, did not want. We arranged the drawings in ascending order of praxic ability. Thanks to objective criteria, in this case the capabilities of perfectly copying oriented lines and forms, and without any preconceived idea about art, we ordered the creations according to a very critical scale. We did as if we would administer art, one of Art Brut's nightmares. If children's art is mere technique, then the drawings would be ordered on the same scale, the most interesting from the artistic point of view ranked at the top of the praxic abilities.

But look! It does not work. Children's artistic creations are scattered on the praxic scale and the unexpected arises, some prime sketches speak to us better than the fulfilled drawings. On the other hand, stereotypes soon appear with age and praxia and they are the opposite of what is searched for.

Art Brut wants to get rid of 'exceptional beauty'. It looks for veracity and genuineness. It precisely finds this in the modest child's draughtsmanship. It finds art in the adventure of the destitute who elevates him/herself by creating.

In this sense, children's drawings attract Art Brut actors and show some resemblance with Art Brut exposed work. Art Brut draughtsmen indeed are untrained artists. Their drawings inspired naïve art among the accomplished painters. There are now academies for naïve art, which, one might admit, is falsification. However, huge differences separate the two productions from the point of view of intention and mode of action.

Art Brut painters have worked on their own, in a secret and somehow autistic atmosphere. Their work was intended to be for themselves, as release of their pain, isolation and sometimes mental suffering. Producing art was a therapeutic undertaking.

By the amplitude of their work, one amazing characteristic, they attest perseverance which sometimes reaches pathological perseveration. The artist's personal history tells us of long lasting physical or psychological confinement.

On the contrary, young children draw with joy. Their drawings are their show and they need a public in order to produce them. They draw by love for themselves and love for their close parents and caregivers. Their joy of creation competes with their joy of sharing. In brief, the drawing is made in jubilation.

Children draw as they play, for the pleasure of discovery, for giving life to their subject and for inviting them to their play. They draw quickly and for a short time. They draw in a flash and they enjoy presenting one human figure or one animal or one object and then stop or start another one. To draw a full scenery comes later. Seldom do they multiplecopy their drawings, even if some trained forms come all over again.

Thus, again, we are facing a pure illusion. Only some stage in the plastique makes Children's and Art Brut resemble one another. Children's art is in no way Art Brut because the time, the space, the intention and the circumstances of its production fundamentally depart from that of Art Brut artists.

## **Are children's drawings art ?**

Our essay aims at showing how art emerges from the child's handwork. Indeed, there is a continuum of progress from the mastery of the first gestures to the realisation of a beautiful



drawing. Verworn pointed out already in 1907 that children's drawings reflect the child's progressive motor development.

To sum up, the child's route to art passes through the following stages.

#### 1.- motility

This is the possibility of moving all the arm-wrist-fingers' segments. The differentiation of fine movements reaches the phalanges only after years of central nervous system maturation and through training.

#### 2.- praxia

They represent the sensory-motor, namely visual-motor, and the motor-motor, motor-tonus coordination.

#### 3.- technique

This shows itself in the repetitive way of building with blocks or of using line drawing. Technique provides the child with a recognisable style of drawing.

#### 4.- plastique

Plastique can be considered as the first step in art. It represents the making of shape by assembling forms or by curving the line.

#### 5.- aesthetics

Art is on its way, with a certain research of the best expression with the simplest cues, with accuracy, with a sense of proportions, with contrasts, shade and colours. Aesthetics is also sometimes reached by profusion of well organised subjects or details, somehow like Art Brut. Aesthetics speaks to the senses. Artist's and observer's intuitions are in the foreground and leave reason far behind.

#### 6.- art

It is the end of the route with an exceptional non-reproducible outcome. It's always a discovery, a unique production which stands out by its general harmony, speaks from and to emotions, and inspires the sense of beauty.

Our art gallery clearly shows that the collection of work covers the entire route. We can easily recognise in the drawings the child's hand awkwardness. Moreover, we note that many children's drawings do not reach the stage of art. But we do not want to decide which drawing reaches art and which does not.

It is enough for our purposes, if we can show that art is no technique in the youngest drawer. Praxia and plastique, as we have defined them, do not coincide during the child's development between 4 and 7 years of age.

Beyond sensitivity for what children are and do, we cannot but note the discrepancy between art and manual skill. Neither expression nor creation can be measured by the accuracy of strokes. The two parts of this book provide the evidence of this.

It was a worthwhile endeavour, in our opinion, to study young children. We can already see in their drawings the social influence and repetitive copy that leads to stereotypes. School culture is organised as school is : it provides moulds for shapes. We think that this community experience gives the child good instruments for learning but limits his/her creativity.

We think that the omnipotence of the verb during the primary school years will hide the child's artistic talents for a long time. Schoolchildren will have to wait for the reshaped young person who will rediscover plastic arts as an expression of him/herself and as a new means of communication.

In preschool years, children's drawings represent what is going on in the present moment, the phenomenon as it flows from the child's hand. Idea and production are isomorphic. The child recognises his/her own idea in the trace that emanates from fine praxia. The appearance of the world is driven from the child's body instead of striking the child's senses from the exterior. 'Le monde est fait de l'étoffe même du corps' says the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty.

Thus drawing represents an inversion of directions, the centrifugal force for the human being, to whom everything was always offered. The child's art is of corporal beauty, something like a body art. Movement appears in the shape not only from the artist's plastique but also from the part of the subject drawn. The young child's drawings should always be read through its dynamics and kinetics (Viviani et al., 1991).

We asked the reader to decide if the presented drawings reflect an art that corresponds to the hierarchy of age and of constructional praxia.

If yes, we have mere artisans in our children's sample.

If no, we have the opportunity to find some young artists among them.

The reader is the judge.

Through our very procedure of presenting children's drawings, we give evidence, we think, that the artisan does not make the artist.