Beyond Illustration: Information about Art in Children’s Picture Books

Ruth Straus Gainer

There are ordinary children’s books, and there are works of art for children. John Gardner notes this distinction in a recent book review and cites the drawings of Chris Van Allsburg as having “a beautiful simplicity of design, balance, texture and a subtle intelligence beyond the call of illustration.” While the striking graphic qualities of children’s books are widely recognized, little attention has been paid to the invitations these qualities offer for influencing children’s perceptions about art. Still less consideration has been given to the possibility of directing children to picture books for potential solutions to their self-defined problems in art.

Although we usually represent children as “original,” “creative,” always “fresh” in their observations, and ever “spontaneous and direct” in producing art gleefully, the facts of the classroom are often quite different. Drawing is difficult. It requires skills which are acquired gradually. It is accompanied by many problems which even naivety cannot escape. Chief among these are (1) translating private, mental images into public, concrete designs, and (2) rendering three dimensions in two. Social human beings of all ages make comparisons between their intentions and practices, their own work and that of others, their observations of the real world and their attempts at facsimiles. Perhaps because children today are less naive, more pressured to produce competitively, and more bombarded by sophisticated graphic designs, they register frustration in drawing much more prevalently than heretofore. The refrains, “I muffed up,” “I messed up,” “I goofed,” “Mine stinks,” “Do it for me,” “I can’t draw horses” (or faces, or people, or trucks), “I’m no good in art,” “I just can’t” are all too familiar to every teacher. If the crumpled papers are retrieved from the trash can, they are often pathetically blank. Still more evident than these despairing lamentations are the endlessly repeated clichés of rainbows, hearts, snoopies, and scalloped daisies, all indicating the same avoidance of challenge, the same tensions associated with lack of self-confidence. Building confidence is the art teacher’s, as well as the classroom teacher’s, most pressing problem.

Our problem is made difficult by the overwhelming explosion of sophisticated graphics in advertising and packaging, television, films, and magazines. But these media are here to stay and cannot be avoided. They should be confronted studiously. Children through their art must grapple with new sets of problems in new eras. This interaction is basic to...
the very nature of art. How have we as art teachers changed our methods to deal with this age of "high-powered" graphic communication? Traditional methods for coping with frustration have included:

a) gentle encouragement ("Of course you can, just try!")
b) referral to the picture file,
and/or
c) demonstration of a teacher-made "sample."

The first approach attempts to deny the struggle of the art process. It is distrusted by students who protest defeatedly or scoffingly. The second method usually provides photographs which help some but are habitually seen as the real things themselves and not as artistic solutions to problems of changing actuality into something else. The third approach generally yields thirty plus replicas of the teacher's model.

For years Kenneth Marantz has been alerting art teachers to new and beautiful children's picture books. However, few art rooms exhibit these books. But when the books are used systematically in the art program, many possibilities occur for connecting the child's world with the best in current graphic design. This approach can provide a "support system" for combatting the frustration so frequently expressed by children drawing. The method is a simple one. When children express problems, they are advised to get outside opinions, to consult specialists in the field. This is done by directing them to "look it up" in books. The teacher explains: "I understand that you are having difficult problems. It is very hard to draw a beautiful horse, especially since we don't have one here in school. Besides, showing the roundness of form, the motion of galloping, the texture of fur is not easy for anyone under any circumstances. Other people have faced these challenges, too. Perhaps we can learn from them. Let's look at some of the ways they have worked out solutions. You don't have to choose their ways, but you may get some ideas for figuring out your own way."

The teacher then suggests three or four picture books that include different representations of the problematic subject. The variety is important because students should see that there is more than one way to deal with a specific problem. Students are asked to make interpretations about their observations and how they may fit their immediate dilemmas. The teacher points out: "Look at the way Anno's line curves here and thickens there to suggest the horse's bulk. These lines suggest the force of rapid motion while these short, repeated lines make a pattern which gives texture. If you like Anno's horse, why don't you try..."
"The child's problem is thus made much easier. Instead of having to define vague images, the issue now becomes: 'How can I adapt this material in hand to my own work?'"
that representations of ideas don't have to mirror reality. Some favorite illustrations, such as those by Antonio Frasconi, are powerful abstractions. Student work in response to Frasconi becomes more daring in its divergence from minutiae in favor of bold simplification. Of course, students are not compelled to try Frasconi's methods, but turn to him by choice when their own efforts are thwarted by feelings of inadequacy. The specific options offered to students, their own observations of different, individual, yet valid treatments of subjects, and their increasing awareness that realism is not necessarily the preferred option all contribute to building self-confidence. Also important is the fact that students are searching out and choosing their own solutions in a self-reliant fashion. And instead of considering graphic design subliminally while choosing cereal or passing billboards, consideration of higher quality work becomes conscious and deliberate.

When I recently made a purchase at a children's book shop, an on-looker grumbled rather snobbishly, "Those illustrations were made more for adults than for children." Whatever did she mean, I wondered? For whom did Gustave Doré illustrate Don Quixote, or Rockwell Kent Canterbury Tales? Is their work inappropriate for children? The illustrations in my new book are beautiful.1 Certainly children should see them, learn to think about their aesthetic qualities, possibly learn from them and make them part of their lives, if they choose. In so doing they may become more discriminating in their aesthetic choices in many realms and at many ages. My own eagerness to share the unusual color combinations and expert draftsmanship of my acquisition with my students was matched by their enthusiasm to read the book and to draw trees and/or strawberries in new ways.

Feldman has stated: "What youngsters desire from books is experience." In his discussion of linguistic divinities from the act of aesthetic perception, he draws many parallels between verbal and visual literacy and compares visual conventions "like perspective, outline, modeling by light and dark and determination of importance by placement" to parts of speech. These conventions are the very areas that pose problems for children trying to use art as a language that will shape their ideas. When children use picture books as models of usage for their own art work, their grammar and syntax in structuring visual forms may improve greatly. This is essentially a conversational method of instruction where the dialogue is between the child's artistic efforts and aesthetic observations.

A short list of books which have been rich sources of information in our art studio at Whetstone Elementary School follows:
- Beisner, M. and Lurie, A. Fabulous Beasts, N.Y.
- Manniche, L. The Prince Who Knew His Fate, N.Y.: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Philomel, 1981.

Ruth Strauss Gainer teaches art at Whetstone Elementary School in Rockville, Maryland. She is co-author with Elaine Pear Cohen of Art: Another Language for Learning.

References