

DEVELOPING MINDS Representing experiences: ideas in search of forms

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Illustration 1. Peter, 7th grade. The giraffe with the shell nose.



Illustration 2. Seth, 7th grade. The battered face.

Young adolescents have a sense of humor. Peter, for example, made a careful drawing of a shell, then without warning searched out some paints and created a giraffe in a landscape — complete with the shell nose. "You see," he said, "when the giraffe runs and breathes heavy, the shell makes a snorting noise." (Illustration 1)

Young adolescents also have darker things on their minds. Illustration 2 is a drawing made by Seth, a classmate of Peter's. "It's a battered face," he announced. "It's great. You can do all sorts of stuff like that in art — make all the bumps and scars — real ugly."

The drawings shown here are thoughtful; both show seventh graders well in control of their medium. It is the subject matter that gives us pause, and which in some situations might well be found unacceptable. Yet, neither drawing was made to shock; both were offered as expressions of what these young adolescents had on their minds.

According to media clichés, early adolescence is a time of stress and strain. Though this is not always true, adolescence is a time when physical, emotional, and intellectual change leads to confusion. The sheer rapidity

of change is accompanied by a sense of incompetence. What is perceived by adults as provocative, anti-social, testing behavior is frequently no more than "hit or miss" attempts on the part of young people to seek out adequate means of organizing new and often disparate feelings and thoughts.

One cannot guarantee how adolescents will be from day to day, sometimes from minute to minute. High or low energy levels, fluctuating interests, passionate likes and dislikes, out-and-out rudeness combined with high-level charm, all demand to be dealt with. Implicit in such behavior, however, are important questions. Yet, questions about the self, about acceptance and affirmation, about rules, limits, and responsibilities have no ready answers for the young person.

Then there is the problem of art-making. How often have we observed young people embarking on the "greatest painting in the world," only to become dispirited within ten minutes and refuse to go on? How often have we heard "art is boring" and "you can't make me do it"? How many of us have remarked on the degree of inhibi-

tion exhibited in adolescent drawing and painting?

And then suddenly we encounter a young person who begs for extra art lessons in their own time; another who appears in school with a folder crammed with drawings completed at home; and yet another whose talent re-emerges like a phoenix from the ashes.

Their growth affects their art

The unpredictable behavior of young adolescents can be linked to their growth spurts, which are often unpredictable and uneven. Familiar hands become unfamiliar and cumbersome; well-known feet are suddenly tripped over; and once-narrow hips become curvacious or unwelcomingly heavy. Such physical changes affect motor coordination, and young people frequently feel they cannot trust their own bodies to perform in predictable ways.¹

Young adolescents often find they lack the necessary motor coordination to carry out fine detailed work, yet they strive for detail. They will pummel and poke a ball of clay with enjoyment and vigor, but reconstructing it with care and patience will lead to frustrations

when they try to join and balance it. Given paint, they will mush and swirl, but in attempting to create a thematic composition, they will complain about smudging and running.

The urge to act with pencil or brush in hand is often very intense for the young person. One underestimated phenomenon of an adolescent's art is doodling — a ready outlet for the need to act. We are all familiar with adolescent doodling, which, like the early mark-making activities of very young children, often flows indiscriminately across any surface — sometimes for the adolescent on newly painted walls! The doodling of younger children and adults cannot compare to the intensity, variety, and sheer inventiveness of much adolescent doodling.

Doodling may serve a real function for the adolescent and should be considered a graphic activity. For if we think of doodling as being pleasurable for young people (and it certainly seems to be), we might also think that it leads to new ways of learning about line. Indeed, doodling may be one spontaneous avenue for bringing about new learning. For instance, adolescents are often fearful of experimenting with new ways of using and combining lines when they make formal studio drawings. They feel that any variation on what they can already do will lead to a distortion of what they have in mind. Yet, by the same token, they need to acquire new understandings about how to make and use lines in drawing to accommodate their changing ideas and feelings. Thus, it may well be that doodling — in all its richness and variety — can be involved with bringing about necessary new learning without also being accompanied by fear of an inadequate or distorted end result.²

"They're making love"

The statement was made half in bravado, half in painful uncertainty, by a thirteen-year-old girl. It was made in response to her painting of two figures entwined.

It has often been remarked that if sex were not on the adolescent's mind, it

would never be far from it. Sometimes this interest and curiosity are openly revealed in paintings, drawings, and clay pieces of genitalia. Sometimes sex is linked to themes of romantic love, or more ominously to themes of death and drugs. In other instances, curiosity is more subtly revealed in paintings, drawings, and clay pieces of otherwise innocent objects such as candles, fires, birds, horses, ballet dancers, hands, shoes, and other clothing. All of these may act as visual metaphors for sexual feelings and experiences. We find a good example of such a visual metaphor in Illustration 3. At one level, the clay piece depicts hands caressing a rock with a bird perched on it. At another, less literal level, the sexual connotations of the piece are revealed in its marked sensuality.

It is important to realize that young people, for the most part, do not set out to shock when they depict sexual

themes. They are often asking a very direct question, through their art work, about the legitimacy of their sexual curiosity and the acceptability of their sexual feelings. At the same time, they are using the medium of art to organize their intensely-felt experiences of being in the world.

"Sometimes you wonder if you are six people"

A young person's physical growth is accompanied by profound psychological changes, especially in their sense of self. The so-called "identity conflict" is well documented by psychologists. We now understand that the major dilemma for the young person is to relinquish the self of childhood to begin the journey towards an adulthood that is uncertain.³ The ensuing conflict between their sense of past, present, and future selves leaves young people confused about who they are. In the words



Illustration 3. Girl, 8th grade. Hands caressing a rock.



of one thirteen-year-old, "You sometimes wonder if you are six people."

The experience of changing identity — of loss and conflict within the self — is directly reflected in the art young adolescents make. Not surprisingly, the art they produce echoes themes which have been presented to us time after time in the persons of Hamlet⁴, Romeo and Juliet⁵, Steven Daedalus⁶, F. Jasmine Adams⁷, and Arkady Dolgoruky.⁸ Thus, we see paintings, drawings, and clay pieces representing the journey, leaving home, adventures, romantic love, the struggle of the weak against the strong, the good against the bad, the triumph of life over death. A classic example of this last theme is found in Illustration 4, where a figure contemplating a skull emerges triumphant from the tides of time.

Related to the theme of life and death — of changed identity — is that of transformation. Such a theme reflects the changes that adolescents experience within themselves. David's drawing (Illustration 5) is a very fine example of this. Drawn in a sketch book at home, it shows an elaborate sun head atop a curvaceous female body swept along on a skate board. The movement of the whole is checked by the clinging tentacle of an octopus. Without being unduly psychoanalytic about the sources of the imagery, David's rich and imaginative drawing expresses the feeling of being swept along — of going somewhere, yet being held in check.

Another interest that reflects adolescents' shaky sense of identity is style. For many, this is reflected in the clothes they wear, often perceived by adults to be merely sloppy, or more seriously as creations of carefully-crafted outrage. Interest in style can also extend to ways of walking, talking, sitting and acting out in general — all of which represent in some way the adolescent's conception of being grown-up, macho, the star in his or her own orbit.

Illustration 4. Girl, 7th grade. Figure contemplating a skull, emerging from the sea.

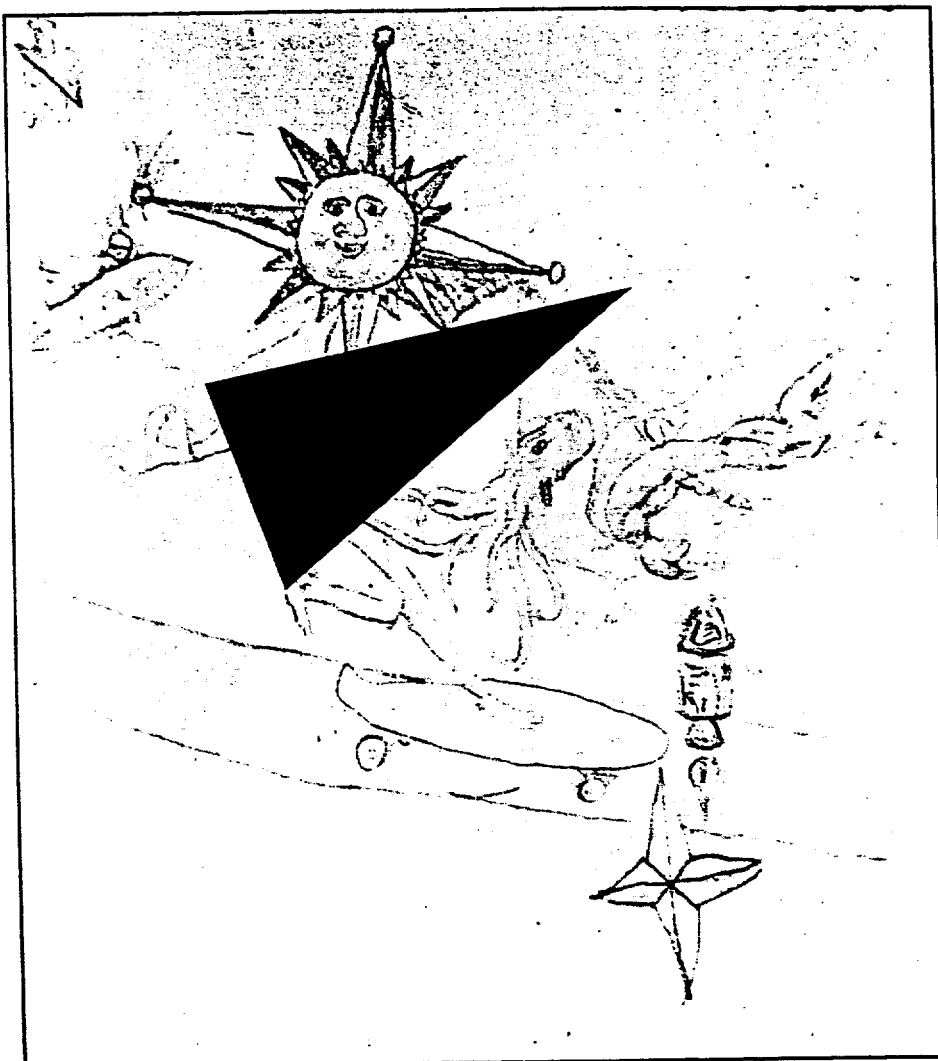


Illustration 5. David, 7th grade. Transformations, movement and inhibition.

Interest in style also extends to the art young people make and appreciate. They will often adopt modes of painting and drawing based on the styles of the media or fine art. In particular, they are interested in surrealism and realism, and they find non-representational works very hard to deal with. Confronted with a Picasso, DeKooning, or even a Van Gogh, young people will typically respond that "it looks like kid's stuff," or they will say that the artists have distorted their subject matter for malevolent purposes.

"How do I know what I know is right?"

The mental processes of an adolescent take place in the context of change. Psychologists Piaget and Inhelder point out that the period of adolescence marks a transitional stage between concrete and formal operational thinking.⁹ In other words, young people's thinking becomes less tied to the world of concrete fact, and more involved with the ability to test hypotheses, contemplate future possibilities, and construct contrary-to-fact arguments. However, change in thinking capacities is often slow and leaves the

adolescent unsure about the validity of their thought processes — unable to organize what they think. As expressed above by the thirteen-year-old, adolescents often ponder the question, "How do I know what I know is right?"

One major change from childhood to adolescent thinking involves the ability to consider ideas, events, and objects from more than one vantage point. In other words, young people are increasingly able to contemplate problems, questions, issues, and ideas in which many factors operate.¹⁰ For instance, they see many alternatives to parental or teacher directives and are loath to accept adult stipulations without question. They demand to know where adults stand and why, and they are all-too-ready to debate virtues of adult alternatives over those chosen by themselves — even when unsure about the validity of their own positions.

The emergence of the ability to consider multiple vantage points has a profound effect on the art young adolescents make. As we have already seen, they often paint and draw themes of power, aggression, relationships, etc. Such themes are returned to time

and again — explored from many perspectives through the use of different materials. Indeed, the comic strip allows endless permutations of one event to be viewed from different perspectives. Perhaps one of the virtues of the comic strip style is that it allows for the representation of a sequence of events that includes many actions and viewpoints.¹¹ For the adolescent, this particular style has an added advantage: ideas can be set down without the need to synthesize them within one frame of reference.

Yet, not all adolescents attempt, or wish to make, comic strip representations. However, in almost all of their paintings, drawings, and clay pieces, they struggle to find ways of organizing the many views of the world they now imagine. For instance, young people are well aware that an object has a front, sides and back. Yet, they find it extremely difficult to represent multiple faces of objects as they appear from the perspective of one single vantage point. They have problems angling and curving their lines on the flat surface of paper in order to achieve the effects of recession or projection — going back or standing out.¹² In their efforts to organize many views within one frame of reference, young people are not so much begging to be taught technical tricks of the trade, such as perspective. Rather, they are struggling to understand how they can connect what they know about three-dimensional qualities of objects in the real world, with what they know about lines on a flat surface.

"Why is it that things are never perfect?"

Yet another important feature of adolescent thinking involves the ability to construct ideals. For example, they will conceive of ideal families, beliefs and societies only to find their own parents, beliefs, and society left wanting. These ideals, as many observers have pointed out, are mainly intellectual contracts. When pressed to justify their ideals, young people often have little conception of how they might bring these

ideals about. In fact, they sometimes have little interest in working towards the fulfillment of their ideals. For instance, young adolescents frequently argue about the desirability of a clean environment. Yet, they can be the worst offenders in polluting their own immediate environment. The fact that ideals can be conceived leads adolescents to believe that they can be effortlessly realized without sacrifice.

In constructing ideals and then comparing them with reality, young people become intensely critical, both of their own failings and those of others. Young people will often compare their own efforts to an ideal mode of representation — such as realism, only to find their work seriously wanting. So, too, they will criticize the paintings and drawings of mature artists, and they will see flaws in the work of their classmates. As many teachers know, a critique of an adolescent's paintings and drawings can be the signal for an eruption of personal passions directed first towards the work, and second towards its maker.

The emergence of the critical capacity of adolescents is, in part, made possible by the emergence of an ability to introspect. For the first time, the products of their own thinking and feeling are objects of contemplation. In other words, they become able to evaluate the products of their own minds from the perspective of others. Able to view themselves from the outside as well as from the inside, so to speak, makes young people increasingly self-conscious and uncertain about their thoughts and feelings. They are too aware of the discrepancy between what they desire to be and what they are.

One consequence of their new ability to introspect is that many young people become secretive about their thoughts and feelings — unwilling to express them out loud or to even allow them to appear in their art work. In contrast, the same ability to introspect may lead other adolescents to express their thoughts and feelings as they come, no matter how outrageous they may be. They do not intend to shock; rather

they are trying to elicit confirmation either of the validity or impropriety of what they think.

What the schools can do

While many art educators have suggested that artistic capacities fall into decline during the years of late childhood and early adolescence, there are strong reasons to believe that this is not so. If we consider that young people's ideas, thoughts, opinions and curiosities change rapidly during this period, we should also recognize that their ability to deal with what they think and feel lags temporarily. Adolescence is a period of growth in which new ideas are in search of new forms to accommodate them. Thus, the lack of expressiveness — the stilted and angular qualities evident in much adolescent work — may be no more than a temporary phase in which they are struggling to organize what they think and feel. If their art work lacks the freshness of childhood, this makes it no less art, nor does it mean that the young people are not learning.

Perhaps the greatest dilemma for adolescents in the art studio is their overwhelming sense of lost competence. The richness of their ideas and the intense feelings which accompany them combine with ideals of how to create representations. Lacking the skills to manipulate materials to their satisfaction, young people often become inhibited by what they perceive as their own shortcomings. If their hands cannot manipulate the fine details they have in mind, they become frustrated.

We need to remember that the changes of adolescence are played out against immense changes in the social fabric of the world in which they live. Technological invention has changed the appearance of the environment as it has changed the nature of knowledge. Sexual and social roles of men and women have changed, causing a revision of the traditional rights and responsibilities associated with independence and autonomy. All of this means that young people have fewer consistent blueprints to guide them.



Illustration 6. Girl, 7th grade. Shoe drawing and explorations.

Social change has also been reflected in the art of the culture—in the proliferation of style, subject matter, and modes of representation. Just as young people attempt to “try out” adulthood by imitating adult behavior, so too they attempt to learn by modeling adult art. Thus, the adolescent’s search for competence takes place against a backdrop of transitory styles, and the struggle to pin down the real is played out in a world of multiple realities.

While it is true that young people want to learn from adult models, they are seeking more than a mere emulation. The aim of much adolescent art-making is not so much to create art objects *per se*, but rather to create and organize experience in a form which not only *looks* coherent but *feels* coherent. In *Art for Preadolescents*, Angiola Churchill tackles this problem head-on, providing many wise insights and suggestions. She shows how teachers might help young people become sensitively aware of the art around them. She shows how they can select and assimilate from the adult world the

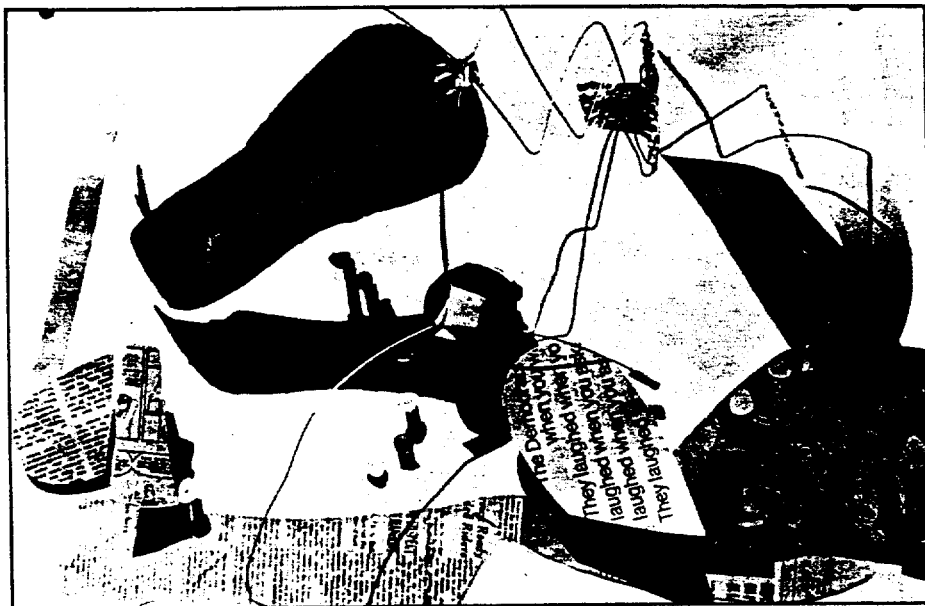


Illustration 7. Girl, 7th grade. Final shoe piece in three dimensions.

knowledge they need to create their own art.¹³

The issue of competence is tackled in another excellent and wise book. In *Investigating Art: A Practical Guide for Young People*, Moy Keightly addresses the critical need of young adolescents to re-explore the language of art—to learn anew the possibilities inherent in line, shape, form, texture, and color. She envisions this new learning as coming about not from formal exercises, but from carefully-controlled exploratory activities.

In one lesson, for example, the teacher asks her students to draw their shoes. She begins by spending some time in dialogue about the relationship of the shoe to its wearer, and then asks the students to think carefully about the line qualities needed in order to represent the particular character of their own shoe.

After this simple drawing lesson, she presents the idea of using line qualities without representing the entire shoe. Can students capture certain qualities of “shoeness” without having to draw a conventional shoe? Can the repre-

sentation of one single quality stand for an idea about the shoe? In addition, would the selection of one or another quality of the shoe demand the use and combination of particular types of lines to distinguish the qualities?

The result of motivating students in this manner is shown in Illustration 6. This young artist represented her shoe, then made six attempts to extract and draw different qualities of “shoeness.” In delight of her own efforts, the girl said to her teacher, “You know, once you get the idea, you feel as if you could go on and on. There really are lots of things you can discover this way.”

Finally the teacher asks each student to choose one of their exploratory drawings to develop in a new material of their choice. She spends some time discussing how the exploratory drawing is different from the original drawing, and in turn how an exploratory drawing might need to change again in the light of using new material. How far the students were able to develop on their ideas of “shoeness” is revealed in Illustration 7. Here, we see the drawings of Illustration 6 further developed

in a three-dimensional medium. Not only is the girl delighted with her product, but she is able to understand the logic behind the steps she has taken to achieve her piece. She is able, as well, to perceive how the quality of "shoeness" is preserved across changes in her medium. Above all, she understands how she moved from a literal depiction of a shoe to the creation of a representation that was truly the product of her own imagination.

Art-making for the young adolescent, as it is for children of all ages, is a means of selecting, ordering, organizing and shaping experiences. Not all young people will become artists — some have more natural ability than others. Yet all young people share the need to exercise their minds — to put together what they think with how they feel. It requires no special talent for the adolescent to think about new ways of using and controlling materials — to put new knowledge to the service of their ideas, ingenuities, and curiosities.

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