

Visual learning in the community school

# Art is all about looking: drawing and detail

Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf



The series *Visual learning in the community school* tells some of the many stories of partnerships that have increased school children's access to creative learning opportunities in 2003 and 2004. Oral language, visual literacies and strategic thinking were the focus of the research on which this series of booklets is based. The on-going study results from the collaboration of Creative Partnerships and scholars Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf, supported through Stanford University and Brown University.

## Visual learning in the community school Art is all about looking: drawing and detail

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*Visual learning in the community school*

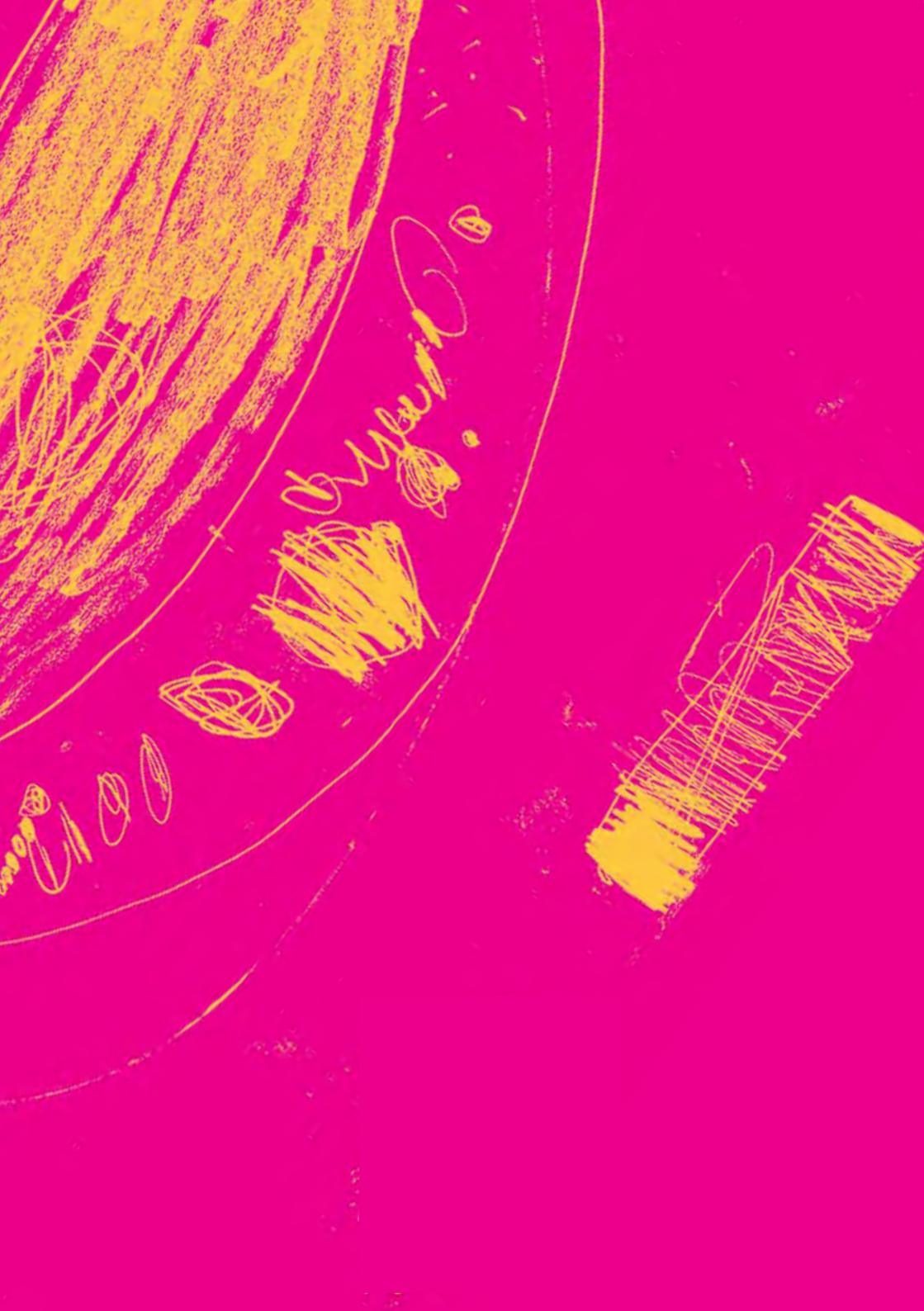
Includes five booklets in slipcase:

- *Art is all about looking: drawing and detail*
- *Hoping for accidents: media and technique*
- *With an eye on design: the power of presentation*
- *It looks to me as if: talking about picture books*
- *Sharing a common vision: community learning for  
community futures*

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*Visual learning in the community school* narrates one year (2003-2004) in which several types of creative bridging and partnering took place within Hythe Community School in Hythe, Kent. Behind these links were the inspiration and support of Creative Partnerships. Central roles in this tale are played by visual artist Roy Smith and architectural designer Ben Kelly. As resident artist, Roy Smith spent one day a week at Hythe Community School during the academic year. Ben Kelly and members of his design team worked together with the children to design the reception area of the new school building. But this narrative is also decidedly shaped by the play, faith, humour, curiosity, and tenacity of many more characters. The children take on new roles beyond that of pupil as they enact, remember, and promote their triumphs and set-backs. They do so in the company of teachers, parents, administrators, and community supporters, who delight in asking questions rather than giving answers. The storytellers are Shelby Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath who added their questions in order to capture, count, and recount the language and thinking behind creative work and play. Here the two researchers tell of the shifts in language and ways of thinking that lie behind the sustained power of creative learning that holds out new roles for all partners. Each of the five booklets within *Visual learning in the community school* takes readers behind the relationships, risks, and probabilities of the many adventures possible in *Learning for Creative Futures*.



## “A youngster drawing is a youngster thinking... When will we know that?”

William Carlos Williams—poet, physician, and artist—often took art materials to young patients on his house calls. His friend and apprentice, Robert Coles explained:

[Williams] was endlessly intrigued by what children could accomplish with crayons or paints, and he believed that all of us, parents and teachers, might learn from what boys and girls have to “say” as they struggle to create images, to present scenes, on paper. “Look at them, looking,” he once urged me as we watched some children draw—and then he added, “their eyes meeting the world.” He wished that schools, especially, would take the child as artist more seriously: “A youngster drawing is a youngster thinking... When will we know that?” (1992, p. 1).

Williams’ question still hangs in the air in most educational settings—a hollow echo in the halls of bureaucracies where decisions about the structure of young children’s school days are made.

All too often, children are denied artistic opportunities, through a stronger focus on “traditionally academic” subjects and with inevitable budget cuts. Indeed, as the report *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture, & Education* warned: “current priorities and pressures in education inhibit the creative abilities of young people and of those who teach them. There is a particular concern about the place and status of the arts and humanities” (NACCCE, 1999, p. 8).

Many would argue that a curricular focus on creativity—particularly the visual arts—is only an aside to the essentials of literacy and numeracy, and worse, only child’s play. Yet, we believe that children’s involvement in the arts is cognitive work—a clear activation of the mind as children learn to look at art, engage with materials, and craft as well as reflect on their own creations. David Perkins (1994) argues that children engaged in art develop “thinking dispositions” and that “art provides a context especially well suited for... helping learners mobilize their mental



powers" (p. 4). Drawing is thinking, and it's time we knew that.

One place that clearly understands the role of the arts in children's cognition is Hythe Community School in Kent. Pressed up against a stony stretch of beach along the English Channel, the town of Hythe was one of the original Cinque Ports designated to defend the English coastline as well as supply ships and men for the Crown. But over the years the once bustling harbour silted up, making it impossible for large ship use, and the small boat sitting up high and dry in the front yard of the school is a reminder of those long-lost shipping days. Still, in the early morning light, when the youngest children of Hythe sail into school, nothing seems in the least bit lost.

Indeed, working in collaboration with Creative Partnerships, Hythe has committed to a year-long project, inviting local artist Roy Smith to work with their Reception, Year One, and Year Two children to help them learn even more about art. Although art is an

everyday event at Hythe, Roy comes once a week and works with small groups of children in sessions that run throughout the day. His art lessons focus on the need for developing an eye for detail, often through the use of props. He helps children learn to draw with accuracy as well as imagination to capture the emotional heart of their art. This booklet describes Roy's emphasis on drawing and detail, and it demonstrates the power of art in children's thinking as they attend more closely to and create the world around them (Anning & Ring, 2004).





**The more young children develop the ability to focus on the details they see, the greater their capacity for metaphorical language.**

#### **With an eye for detail**

Before we begin the story of Roy and the young children of Hythe Community School, it is useful to acknowledge what those who study the brain and the human powers of learning tell us about seeing, especially about developing what is sometimes called “deep sight.” Eric Booth (1999) is a teacher, artist, and thinker who writes about “the everyday work of art.” He has particularly explored the effects of guiding the looking and seeing of young children as they work in the arts. He wants the young to learn to focus on visual details in order to push their creative and critical thinking.

Several long-term advantages come from steady attention to helping young children see, relate, compare, and remember details. All of these are, to be sure, at the heart of all the arts, whether verbal, visual, musical, or in dance, and they also provide the foundations for learning in the sciences and

navigating problems in the world. The first of these advantages comes through the movement of mental processes back and forth from the visual to the verbal. The more young children develop the ability to focus on the details they see, the greater their capacity for metaphorical language. Metaphor is a manifestation of the human capacity to perceive things and communicate about things as other than they first—or superficially—appear (Winner, 1988).

Every verbal metaphor depends on linking key traits or features of one situation or item to another. Often it is only a slight movement or swirl or the particular alignment of bubbles that gives us the power to name one thing as another. The leaf of a tree becomes a triangle to a child who sees sharp points and names the leaf a triangle. Very young children tend to make their earliest metaphors on the basis of shape comparisons, but later



## Children who learn very early to note details are beginning to practise vital habits of mind.

they see more deeply into internal components or non-surface features, such as general structural similarities. With a family member, a two-year-old reads a book whose cover portrays a mother holding her baby close; the book's content is about "I love you." Months later, the child sees a book cover showing a large bear holding a baby bear in her lap, and the child announces "This book is love." Thus, the child holds deep within memory both details and the general structuring of the mother-child theme in ways far too complex for us as adults to predict or identify specifically.

Learning to see details also brings the capacity to see the big picture—to relate the bits and pieces to what will become a larger whole. As children create visual arts, construct musical compositions, or develop a dance together, they focus on the tiny details of movement and coordination. In doing so, they know that these parts add up to a whole—something larger than the sum of the parts. This

fundamental principle applies in the sciences, everyday problem-solving, and spatial navigation within the world. Managers and musicians, plumbers and painters, engineers and videographers become successful largely through their ability to see beyond small details into the larger picture. Children who learn very early to note details within their context and to think about these in the structuring of something much greater are beginning to practise vital habits of mind.

Heraclitus, an early Greek philosopher, created a maxim that



captures an additional advantage of seeing details. With apologies for the male focus within the maxim, we note its value: "Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play." Watch children deeply immersed in play, whether alone or with others, and we see their very seriousness focuses the details of what they are creating. Whether in the high degree of specificity in their rules ("No, not that tree, but this one over here") or in their choice of costume, prop, or use of space, children care about the bits and pieces that amount to the whole they see in their play (Wolf & Heath, 1992). Pattern and beauty, cohesion and connection, and details that seem to be inserted simply for their own sake make up children's play. Every parent knows the resistance children mount when their play is interrupted. Scientists have speculated that when children play, they build within their minds a scenario of what is to be, and they see themselves in control of the accumulation of details and rules that make up the play they have in



mind. Interruption by an outsider announces to them that they are not in control and that play is not serious to everyone else. Thus, the investment in thinking about detail in self-constructed play matters to young children, and Heraclitus reminds us that play should matter to all of us throughout our lives.

Finally, seeing detail calls for visual focus—sustaining the eyes on a space for more than a few milliseconds. The area of the brain dedicated to visual focus lies at the very centre of the various sections given over to vision. Focus

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– regardless of form or medium—they  
gain practice in holding attention.**

matters, because it allows viewers to look deeply within an object or situation and see detail from line to shape and colour to motion (Zeki, 1999). Hence, as young children work in creating art—regardless of form or medium—they gain practice in holding attention on a sphere of action or range of space. In doing so, they take in the fundamental elements or building blocks of the world around them. They gain inner vision. This ability to focus and see deeply and infer meaning develops in even very young children for both the inanimate and animate aspects of the world about them. Babies can detect facial details that portray anger, joy, pleasure, and disappointment. Similarly, they know the difference between one

space for sleeping and another. As they grow older, this sensitivity to details of surroundings must be guided into sustained looking, identifying meaningful details, and detecting differences and similarities. Otherwise, their original gift of discerning vision would drive them mad. They need guided looking, so as to sort out the details that convey meaning from those that do not. It is not necessary—indeed it may be damaging—to notice the fine hairs about one's mother's lips and point these out. Far more significant to human relationships is detection of a questioning brow or tearful eye, a grimace or an amused grin.

Now let us move in close to watch and listen to Roy Smith—artist in residence at Hythe— working with young children at a Year One art table. We see and thereby can know much more than may appear in the chaos of eager five-year-olds gathering to work with Roy, settling in their seats, waving their hands, clamouring for attention, and toying with the jumble of materials—pencils, paper, and







books—that make up the content of just one session.

Roy explained that this day's session would be devoted to portraits. He and the children first discussed three famous portraits by Van Gogh, Manet, and Leonardo da Vinci. Then Roy handed each of the children a small mirror and encouraged them to look closely at themselves while they drew. His emphasis on looking is a constant feature of his teaching, for he finds that pupils are all too often eager to "fill in missing details with their mind's eye; their idea of complete" rather than looking more closely at the reality of their reflection or the object in front of them.

Even with the mirrors in hand, several children took a quick glance at their faces and then proceeded to draw, eyes down on pencil and paper. But one boy, Matthew, studied his reflection with care, holding the mirror closer and closer to his eyes, staring intently into the glass. He would look and then draw, look and draw, look and

draw, and his resulting first-effort portrait showed much more precision than his peers. His eyes were particularly precise, highlighting the web of lines in the iris and his own set of long lashes. Roy praised his eye for detail, and his compliments sent many of the other children back to their mirrors to have another look and add more to their own portraits.

After this initial self-portrait—done with little instruction other than to look and look again—Roy drew a portrait of a face bit by bit, demonstrating to the children that the head was really a long oval, not a circle, and that the mouth had more shape than the smiling lines they typically drew. As he drew each part of the face, he asked the children to follow his movements, and they discussed each feature in turn. He paid special attention to the eyes and was able to highlight Matthew's discovery of the lines of the iris to add even more detail.

**Roy:** Now, the next thing to do is draw the eyes. Now, are my

## Roy's talk is filled with reminders to look – in the mirror, at each other and at his face as well.

eyes on the top of my head?

**Children:** [Giggling.] No! They're down there.

**Roy:** They're down here. If I measure it on my face, they're about halfway. So halfway down my face is where I draw my eyes And we'll draw them as long squashed circles called ovals. Now you draw two ovals halfway down the head. Perfect, Louis! Now, they are not circles. They're long oval shapes like Spiderman's eyes in a way, aren't they?

**Connor:** Yeah!

**Roy:** Right. Next thing to do is to draw a circle inside the eye's oval, and that's going to be the iris. That's the part of your eye that has colour. What colour are your eyes?

**Charlene:** Blue.

**Roy:** Blue, aren't they? What colour are my eyes?

**Children:** Green. Greeney grey. Brown.

**Roy:** Browney. Greeney. Funny coloured eyes! You've got hazel eyes, haven't you?

**Connor:** Mine are blue. Look!

**Roy:** And yours are blue. Lots of

blue eyes out there. Now, inside the eye, if you look at the person next to you, there's a black bit.

There's a black circle. Can you see the black circle in my eye? Can you see the black circle in yours? [The children look deeply into each other's eyes.] Let's draw that black circle in there. That's called the pupil. We can make that nice and dark. Fantastic! Now we saw earlier that if you look at the eye, you'll see that the brown and the blue have little lines in them.

Matthew showed us. So we can draw those little lines in there. It's a bit like a wheel, isn't it? A bit like a bicycle wheel.

**Louis:** Yeah, like my bicycle at home.

**Roy:** Exactly. Next thing to do is to draw some really small eyelashes. You can't do these too big. Now let's have some eyebrows on here. I'll give you a choice. You can either do the skinny banana or you can do the hairy caterpillar.

[He demonstrates the latter.]

**Rea:** That looks like an old man!

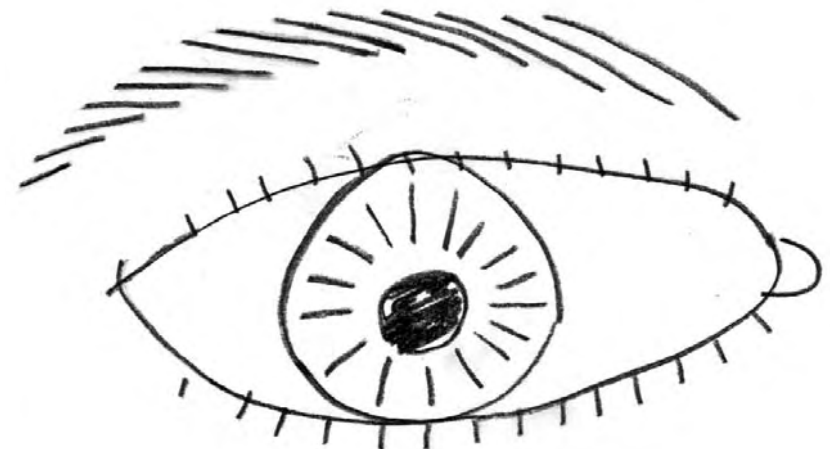
**Roy:** Or you could do the skinny banana. And over the top of

that, draw some lines. That's it. Perfect!

Roy's talk is filled with reminders to look—in the mirror, at each other, and at his face as well. His talk is marked by visual vocabulary, which calls the children to see comparable shapes. These visual reminders contain vocabulary that is particularly image-producing for young children: "squashed ovals," "Spiderman's eyes," "a bicycle wheel," the "hairy caterpillar," and the "skinny banana."

Yet, Roy's emphasis on detail and visual vocabulary extends far beyond drawing the eye. In

another lesson on drawing, Roy encouraged a group of Year Two children to look carefully at the fruits and vegetables he had spilled out in the middle of their art table. Again, the children gave a quick glance and set to their drawing of shapes outlined by memory rather than reality. But through Roy's constant calls to look and look again, they began to attend more closely to the fruit. One boy, for example, quickly drew an oblong shape for a banana and then announced he was finished. Roy suggested that his "banana could be a little bit fatter," and the child drew a second version, adding shading along the



side as well as dots for the markings of the fruit. Another boy began to work quickly and Roy reminded him, “Jacob, you’re not looking. Copy the dots [on the banana] where they are.” Jacob picked up his banana and started to look more carefully before applying the dots, instead of just randomly poking at his paper. When still another child cried, “I’m done,” Roy replied, “Yeah. Now, what about that shading we talked about? Look to see where it’s darkest and it’s lightest. He held the pineapple up to the light and asked, “How are you going to handle these diamonds in here?” The child began to draw diamonds within his pineapple shape, but quickly ran out of steam. “I can’t fit more diamonds in,” he complained. Roy countered, “I think you can! I can see some



more spaces. Have you been looking at the pineapple? Have you stopped looking at it? Keep on looking at that pineapple.” Kallam tried to finish up his banana as if art were a contest of speed. “Okay, I’ve done it!” he shouted. Still, Roy suggested that he look again, “What I can see are all these lines and ridges like bones.” With the visual vocabulary—“lines and ridges”—and the added thrill of the word “bones,” Kallam refocused his gaze on his banana, and the end result brought much praise from Roy: “Look at your shading. That’s fantastic! Art is all about looking. About looking very closely. If you can see it, then you can draw it.”

Two other children, Emma and Aaron, took very different approaches to their drawings. Emma’s pepper was quite detailed—crosshatched all over to capture “the wobbly pepper” shape and with an added dimensionality to it that made it look ready to wobble off the paper. On the other hand, Aaron’s orange was a quicker sketch, with just a

smattering of detail in the seeds and in the shading of the surrounding peel. Roy later explained: “Looking at the way that kids draw and use shading and tone, we’ve got two completely different ones here. Emma’s is really, really expressive and it’s actually quite incredible for a 7-year-old to be able to use shade like this.” He turned to Aaron’s orange and continued,

This is much more typical of the age group really. Where they want to draw something very, very quickly. But there are elements where he really looked closely. So the observation’s starting, and then things just get better and better as far as drawing is concerned. When



kids normally say that they can’t draw, it’s usually because they haven’t learned the patience to be able to look. Once they can



do that, then there’s no problem with it really. It’s like when kids do portraits. And they don’t want to do a portrait because they think it doesn’t look like the person that they’re trying to draw. So they never, ever do it again. And the important thing is not whether it looks like the person, but whether you’ve looked and seen that the eyelashes are down there, and the shape of the nose, and the features. Observation is the important thing, and the rest of it comes later.





**“... the more difficult it is to draw, the better your drawing will be.”**

### **Upping the power of observation through props**

Roy helped intensify the children's power of observation through the use of props. The mirrors helped some to see more than they usually might. The sheer variety of fruit on the table provided choice as well as challenge, as he prompted the children to choose pieces that might prove more difficult to draw. When the children were first presented with the fruit and vegetables, for example, they started to select the simplest pieces. Roy, however, chose the pepper and said, “I think it's a fantastic shape, and I'm surprised that nobody chose the pepper. But I can understand it, because it looks very hard to draw. But the more difficult it is to draw, the better your drawing will be.” He showed them the grapefruit, which he had decided not to include as a prop because if they drew it, “it would just look like a football.”

Books on art were constant props, as Roy encouraged the children to study and discuss the work of

famous artists before they began their own efforts. For example, the Year Two children examined several paintings of Claude Monet's waterlilies before they drew their own egg-shaped lily pads. And Roy showed them a range of artists including Chagall, Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Van Gogh, Manet, Matisse, Picasso, and da Vinci, each representing specific artistic techniques that he wanted the children to try.

With his strong emphasis on drawing before engaging in other media, Roy also used props much more familiar to the children than the work of classic artists. For example, working with the four-year-olds in the Reception classes, Roy asked them first to draw a figure of a person; for this task, he gave no specific instructions. Next he provided small models—Spiderman, Action Man, and Barbie—to help the children look more carefully at proportion, though he admitted



"Look at your shading. That's fantastic! Art is all about looking. About looking very closely. If you can see it, then you can draw it."

## The power of observation depends not only on looking closely at what you can see, but also realizing what you can't.

that including Barbie in a lesson on proportion "can be a bit odd!" The differences in the children's before and after drawings were quite remarkable.

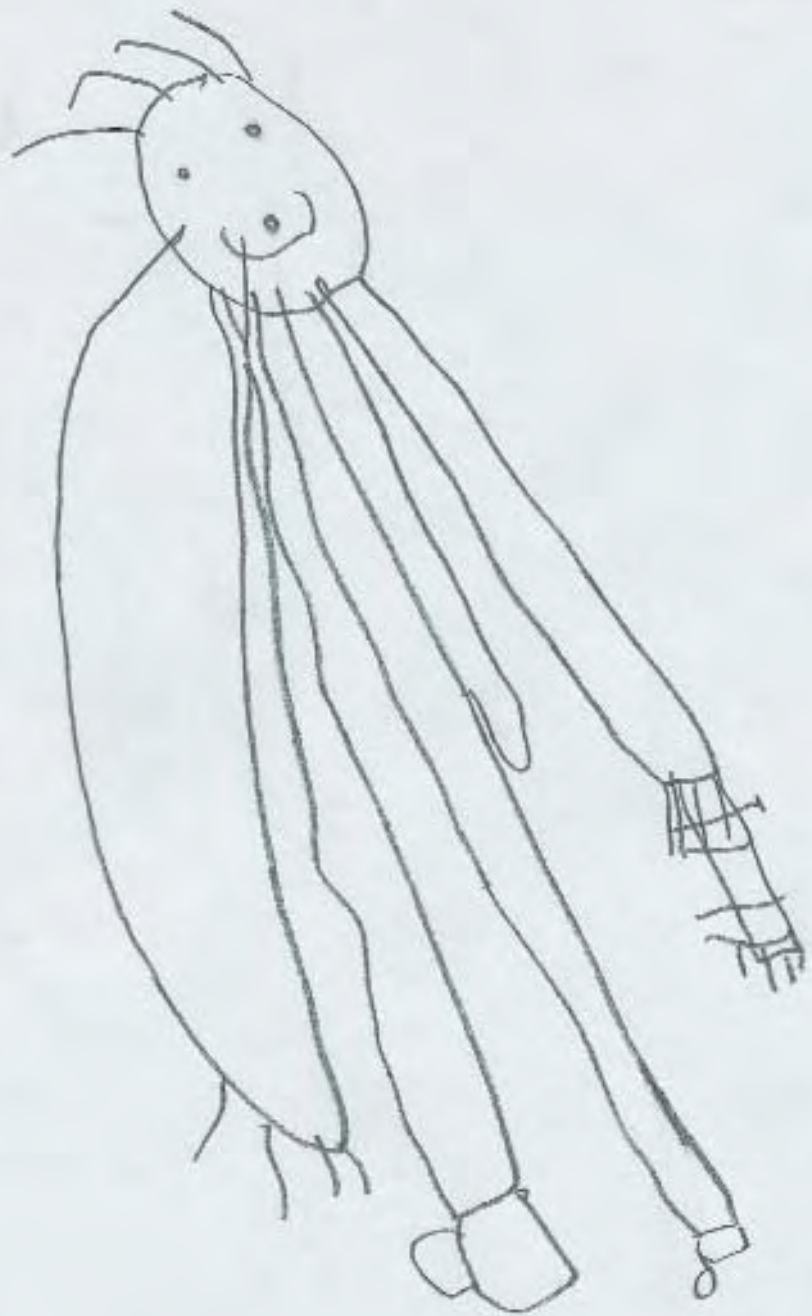
Leanne's initial figure has all the appendages extending directly from the head. The fingers are skeletal, the hair sparse, and the features the simplest circles and lines. Her second figure—done only a few minutes later with the aid of an Action Man prop—shows Leanne is learning to look. The eyes have shape and include the iris and lashes. The hair shows a jaunty fringe, and ears with detailed inner lines have appeared. The mouth is full. Indeed, the entire figure is filled out, and the fingers in particular have taken on a more realistic shape. And you can see Leanne's dissatisfaction with the size of the figure's arms as she redrew them, thickening them with every line. Most important is Leanne's addition of a neck, which gives her figure a better sense of human balance. For a child who writes her name so neatly in

reverse, taking the time to look is a critical step.

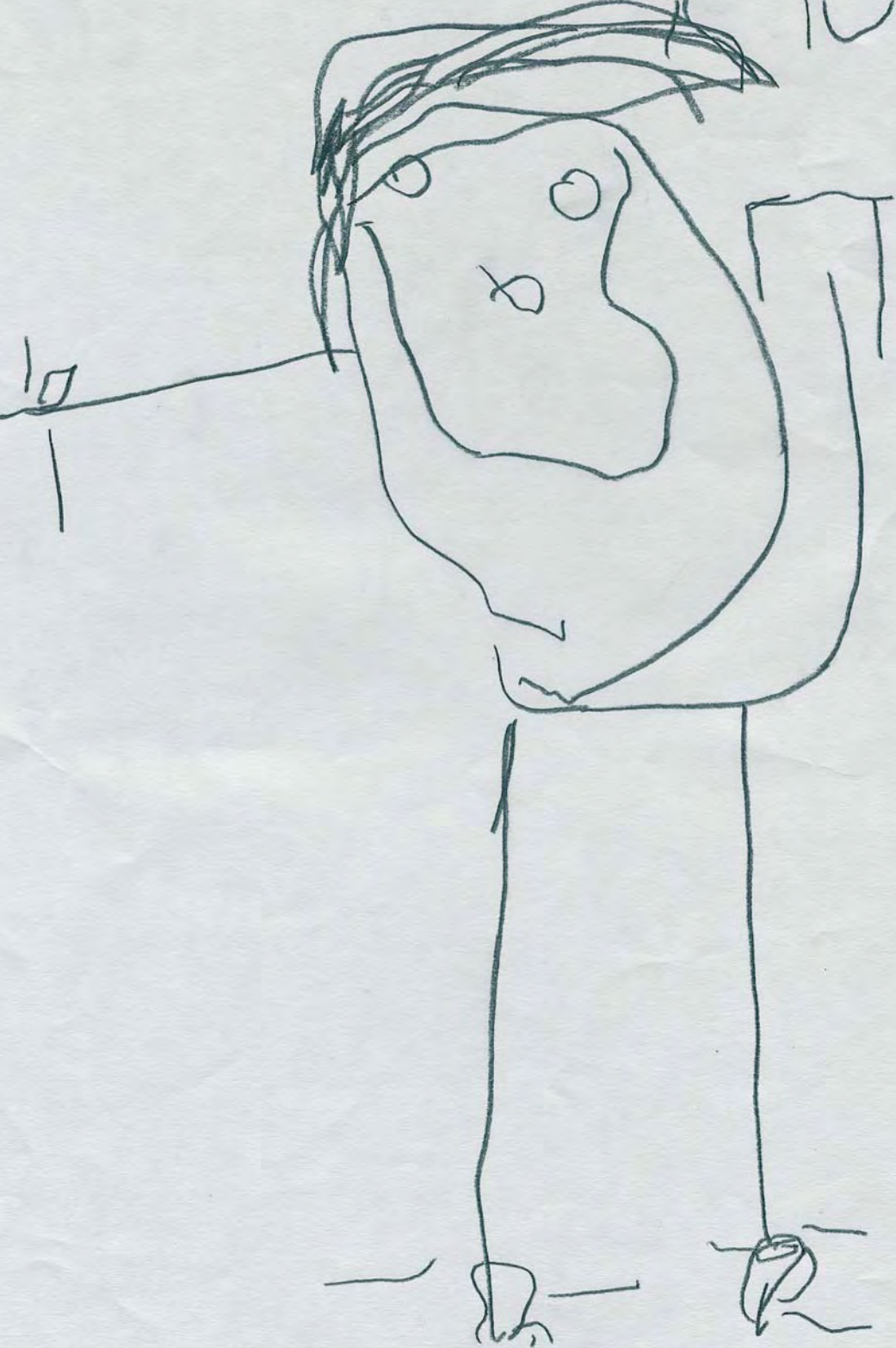
The Reception children's developing understanding of proportion is born out in Nikita's before and after figures. Like Leanne, all her stick figure appendages extend directly from the face, but Nikita's face dominates the page like a pumpkin face on Halloween night. In her second figure, however, the face takes a more balanced position. Although some of the features are detached from the face—like the uplifting hairline and the free-floating ears—both the eyes and the nose contain greater detail. Nikita, too, added a neck, and while there is no trunk, the arms and legs have moved from simple lines to wider appendages. The fingers on the left hand are particularly detailed, with knuckles no less!

Roy often provided these "before and after" opportunities for drawing, allowing the children to draw first from their "mind's eye"









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and then offering them helpful props to improve on their perceptive powers. As art educator, Jean Morman Unsworth (2001) explains:

Drawing is first seeing, perception. Very young children are unlikely to take notice of the subject while drawing and they have difficulty with proportions. Creating a climate of quiet

concentration, giving the children confidence that they can draw, and leading them to “let their eyes do the drawing” results in sensitive, perceptive drawings. (p. 6)

But the power of observation depends not only on looking closely at what you can see, but also realizing what you can't see.

## Not drawing what you can't see

In a discussion of a Van Gogh self-portrait, several Year One children agreed that this was the artist who had cut off his ear. Roy explained that this particular portrait was done prior to Van Gogh's self-mutilation, although there were other portraits that showed the artist with a large bandage around his head. Because Van Gogh was pictured tilting his head slightly to the left, only one ear was visible in the picture, and this positioning may have led the children to believe that the ear was missing:

**Roy:** Oh, it's on the other side of his head. You can't see it. [Roy demonstrated the tilt of the artist's head by turning slightly away from two boys in the group.] Can you see my ear now?

**Ian:** Yes!

**Roy:** Can you? Look at me. Can you see both my ears?

**Ian:** Yes!

**Matthew:** No. I can't!

**Ian:** Yes, I can!

Though Matthew realized what he could and couldn't see, Ian's insistence shows his continued dependence on what he could see with his mind's eye.

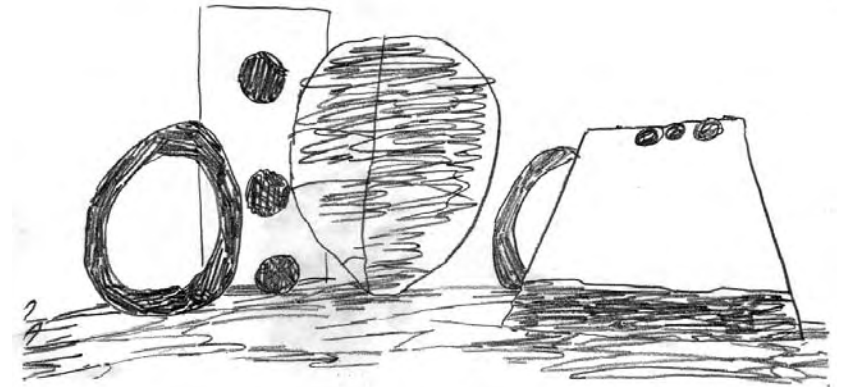
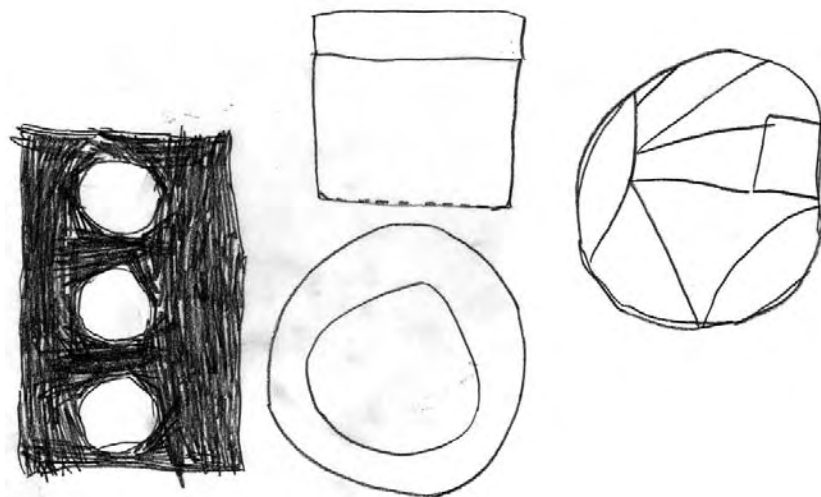
Later when Roy used mirrors as props to help the Year One children draw their self-portraits, several of the five-year-olds started to draw their bodies as well. Roy asked them to look again in the small squares of glass he'd given them to see if they could really see their bodies. Several children tipped their mirrors down to view their shoulders, chests, and arms. Ian even put his mirror under the table to view his legs and feet. Roy laughed, but he reminded them that they had to hold their mirrors up to their faces, and when they did, it was impossible to see the rest of their figures.

Knowing what you can and can't see is critical in drawing. When Roy did still life drawings with the Year Two children, he grouped

several objects on the table—a brick, a jug, a ring, and a ball. Most of the six and seven-year-olds drew each object individually. Some lined them up like ducks in a row. Others distributed the objects and added shading, but they still attended to them one at a time. Pointing to Louise's still life Roy said, "Their drawings may have some texture and detail. And the objects are close to each other, but they're divorced from each other." From where Louise was sitting not all parts of the objects were visible. The brick was behind both the ball

and the ring. But in her mind's eye, she pulled them out of their cluster and attended to the details of each object on its own.

On the other hand, Alex took into account his view of the grouping. Both ring and ball stand in front, their shapes obscuring parts of the brick. In addition, the ring and the ball are a bit further down on the surface Alex provided. His jug is even further down on the page, providing a sense of dimensionality. Looking at Alex's still life, you know that the jug is



closer, and the brick stands at the back. Hubbard (1989) tells us that one "way to create a sense of depth on the page is to have one form obstruct our view of part of another form" (p. 74).

Roy agreed, but he found the use of overlap rare among his young pupils. Alex was one of only three children in the class who used this technique.

They actually saw it in three dimensions and overlapped and used perspective and depth. It's lovely what they were doing, and it's a real surprise. And that

is where I would want them all to get. To see depth and to see things in three dimensions, rather than in terms of two dimensions and a flat representation of three-dimensional figures on the page. So I'll try to get them to think about how shading can bring things forward and how your viewpoint changes depending on where you look. And that if you can't see something, then you don't have to draw it!





### Seeing through to the emotional heart

Roy began every art session with a discussion of professional art. He would show the children two or perhaps three different famous works and encourage them to voice their interpretations. What did they think the piece was about, and more important, how did it make them feel?

Because Roy wanted the children to think about art, Rodin's *The Thinker* seemed a particularly appropriate choice. In an explanation of his famous bronze, Rodin said, "What makes my Thinker think is that he thinks not only with his brain, with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils and compressed lips, but with every muscle of his arms, back and legs, with his clenched fist and gripping toes." When Roy showed the Reception children the sculpture, the four-year-olds held the following conversation:

**Matthew:** It's a statue. He's sad 'cause he's all alone.

**Chloe:** I think he's thinking.

**Evie:** I don't know what he's thinking of.

**Jade:** He's thinking of someone to play with.

**Libby:** He's sad because no one is playing with him.

The children, though quite young, were easily able to see the thought in the statue's positioning—to see through to the emotional heart of the art. They even began to create a narrative around his situation. It was not enough that he was "alone"; instead, there had to be a reason for his loneliness, such as a missing playmate.

Reception children in other groups had stories for *The Thinker* as well, and they ranged from rather mundane explanations ("He's putting his hand on his chin 'cause he's waiting for a taxi.") to more meaningful explorations of *The Thinker's* pain: "He was a daddy, and he lost his little girl." Very few children responded to how



**“Children can be taught to appreciate the great works of art by talking about them.”**

*The Thinker* made them feel, but Charlotte shared: “I like it. He looks like a nice man.”

However, a shift in media—especially the use of colour—and a picture of a boy close to their own age, brought the four-year-olds closer to connecting with the art.

Roy showed them *The Young Beggar* by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo—a 17th century Spanish painter known for his tender portrayals of beggars and orphans. The Reception children began with descriptions of what they saw, though they soon began to make a story of the boy’s situation:

**Callum:** He’s on the floor.

**Charlotte:** I can see worms.

**Brandon:** He’s doing his buttons up and his clothes are ripped.

**Chloe:** He looks like my brother. He’s grumpy.

**Natasha:** He’s sad. He’s not got any money ‘cause he’s got no pockets.

**Charlotte:** He’s got no shoes. He’s thinking about things he wants.

**Isaac:** Looks like the boy has

slipped. He’s sad ‘cause he tripped over the shrimps.

He’s lost his daddy.

**Chloe:** He’s ripped his T-shirt, and he doesn’t want to be told off.

**Callum:** He’s a boy like me. I think he’s been hit.

The boy was clearly poor and on his own, but the four-year-olds provided a variety of explanations. Perhaps he’d lost his father. Perhaps he was thinking of all the things he didn’t possess. Perhaps he was worried about getting into trouble over his ripped shirt. Perhaps he’d been abused. Olsen (1992) argues “children can be taught to appreciate the great works of art by talking about them... When young children are permitted to become personally involved by talking about the narrative content of a work of art, their attention span is amazingly long” (p. 33). And this was certainly true of the Reception children as they studied Murillo’s *The Young Beggar*.

When Roy showed this picture to the Year Two children, the six and



seven-year-olds used more extensive vocabulary to describe the boy's situation, but their conclusions were similar:

**Josh:** He's feeling sleepy and has no food. He's lost.

**Sophie:** He's dying 'cause he has no food.

**Connor:** He's got no shoes. He's left on his own with no mum and dad.

**Ellie:** Poor little boy. No mummy or daddy in the dark.

**Josh:** He's poor. He's a beggar.

**Sonny:** I think the boy's getting tortured. He's an orphan, all alone.

The Year Two children were more able to voice their feelings about *The Young Beggar*. Ellie said that looking at the picture "makes me feel sad." Sian explained he was "upset" for the "lost boy." Josh said he was "worried for him," and Sonny expressed "pity" for the tortured orphan.

The children's willingness to guess, to take risks in interpretation, and to feel for the

child in Murillo's portrait shows the clear advantages of discussion about art. As Fiske (1999) explains in *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*: "Unlike other learning experiences that seek right or wrong answers, engagement in the arts allows for multiple outcomes.... Effective learning in the arts is both complex and multi-dimensional" (p. xi). Thus, the children were free to agree and disagree, to build on one another's ideas, or to put forth conjectures based on their own life experiences.

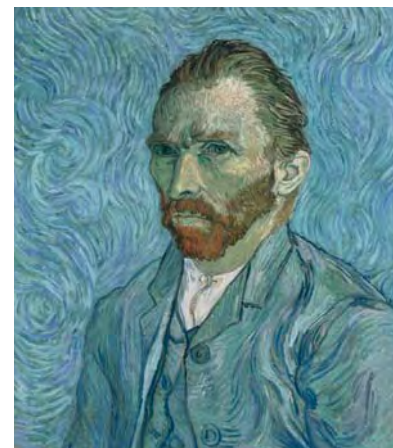
They looked at the muted tones, and though the boy sat in a circle of light, they focused instead on the shadow that surrounded him. They noticed the condition of his clothing—the ripped sleeve, the shoeless feet—and knew that the boy was poor and perhaps even abused. They studied the scant food on the ground, and while some thought it might have been the cause of his stumble, others felt it was an indication of how little nourishment he'd had. They studied his face, in particular, and

the downcast head and eyes led to their interpretation of his despair. Though to one he looked like a grumpy brother, most others saw an orphan, a beggar, a tortured soul, lost in the darkness with no parent to guide him.

As the children talked more and more about art, they learned that artists could feel lost as well, particularly when they felt dissatisfied with their work. When Roy showed the children Van Gogh's self portrait, he asked them if they knew the painter:

**Roy:** Do you know who it's by?

**Deacon:** Vincent Van Gogh.



**Roy:** That's superb, Deacon!

**Ellie:** He painted himself because he was sad.

**Roy:** Why do you think he was sad, Ellie?

**Ellie:** He doesn't feel very well.

**Roy:** Ah! And what colour do you go when you don't feel very well?

**Chorus:** Blue or green!

**Roy:** Greeney-blue. Yeah! Well, is there any other reason why he could be sad? What do you think?

**Deacon:** He was sad because he thought that he couldn't do really good painting. When he did good painting, he was happy. But when he thought he couldn't do good paintings, he felt unhappy.

**Roy:** Wow! That's incredible.

You're right, exactly. He wasn't—the word is confident, isn't it? You know the word confident? When you can walk down the street and feel really good. Well, Van Gogh wasn't very confident about his work. And it's true. He liked his work, but he wasn't sure about other people's opinions.

**Deacon:** He was sad because he thought he couldn't do a really good painting of himself, but in



the end he tried to do it and he did it! When he first tried it, it didn't work, but when he tried it once more, then he did it.

**Roy:** How do you know this?

**Chorus:** Our teacher read the story.

**Ellie:** And we painted sunflowers as well!

The conversation of the children with Roy captures the artist's poor health as well as his emotional depression about his work. While Van Gogh was prolific and often inordinately proud of his paintings—claiming he would be famous after his death—he also suffered debilitating days. Afflicted throughout his life with poor health, he worried over the fact that none of his paintings sold, save one, and that he received little critical praise.

Still, when compliments came from a young French critic, Van Gogh was devastated:

Aurier wrote a glowing article about him in an avant-garde magazine, *Mercure de France*,

calling him “a terrible maddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque.” This was the first published article written about Vincent, who, instead of rejoicing, wrote to [his brother] Theo, “Please ask M. Aurier not to write any more articles on my painting... it pains me more than he knows.” But it wasn't being called “maddened” that upset him. Vincent thought Aurier had been too flattering and that others, such as Gauguin, deserved more praise (Greenberg & Jordan, 2001, p. 92).

Thus, the children's commentary on Van Gogh's unhappiness with his work captures the emotional heart of the artist as well as his art.

## Drawing as a solid form

In his early career as an artist, Van Gogh “focused on drawing, persuaded that it was the foundation of everything” (p. 36). Hythe Community School's artist in residence, Roy Smith, agrees. Every session, no matter what the final media would be, began with drawing. And as he worked with the children over a period of months, he brought in increasingly complex props for them to draw. Because he wanted them to draw what they saw with “their actual eye rather than their mind's eye,” he thought unusual shapes that they had never seen or had seen only rarely would help them to look more carefully.

Halfway through his year at Hythe, Roy brought in a sheep's skull for the Year Two children. He let them touch it, moving their hands over the smooth bone, the rough teeth, and the fine lines that zigzagged along the seams of the skull. He told the children: “It's interesting how you can feel something and then try and draw what you feel.

Like make something that you draw look as though it's rough or spiky or smooth. It's hard to get your head around it. It's hard to think about it, but you can do it.”

He then gathered the children around him and drew the skull, pointing out that because they were standing so close they could see his view: “You need to be able to see my viewpoint. Otherwise you won't understand it.” He reminded them again of the need to attend: “So I'm looking and looking and looking all the time. You look once, you draw once, you look once, you draw once. That way you can start to put in the detail inside. And don't worry about making a mistake. There are no mistakes. But the more you look, the better you'll draw.”

When the children set to their drawing, the differences in their attention between this session and beginning ones were notable. The children looked and drew, sometimes leaning in closer to



study a particular detail, and most of the seven-year-olds drew in studied concentration for over 30 minutes. Even when Roy began to lay out the more eye-catching media—such as fabric paints—to go with the next part of the lesson, they kept drawing. In earlier sessions, the children leapt on more colourful materials, eager for the paints, the clay, or the tissue paper for collage. But now they were so intent on their drawings, they ignored them. Once after Roy picked up the skull to comment on its features, he placed it back very carefully. But it wasn't good enough for the children. Harry and Sophie put their heads together, discussing its position to make sure it was exact and nudging the skull back to where they'd last seen it.

While they worked, many children were silent, though some talked as they drew about the images they saw within their drawings:

**Roy:** What bit are you drawing?

**Harry:** That weird bit.

**Roy:** Your idea of weird might be

very normal to me. So which bit do you mean?

**Harry:** That bit that looks like a dog with its collar.

**Roy:** Oh! Your picture has turned into a new thing. [Regarding Harry's drawing] I can see it.

**Sophie:** Or it could be a horse, and that's the mane.

**Roy:** Yes, there's the big horse's head, and there's the ear and the mane.

**Liam:** [Pointing to Sophie's drawing.] That looks like a castle! Don't you think so?

**Sophie:** [Tilting her drawing on its side.] No, it looks like a chicken to me. See! That's the head and that's the tail and that's the wing.

**Roy:** Oh, it does. It looks like a big fat chicken, doesn't it?

The shapes the children saw importantly emerged from their accurate images of the skull. The intricate whirls, forms, edges, and empty spaces actually lent themselves to the imaginative eye.

Sophie was particularly willing to voice the images she saw, and her skull was remarkable in its detail.



She was a picture of concentration as she drew, her head moving up and down between a thoughtful gaze on the skull and then on her art. And Roy was impressed. In an interview following this session with the children, he explained:

Sophie's is just outstanding, and I would never ever have imagined it. All this is observed, and it's not random in any kind of way. Everything is extremely deliberate. She was just so accurate and looking really, really intently. And especially

when she came to the nasal cavity. She can see what a negative space is and what a positive space is, and she's able to draw those things.

Roy stressed that children need to see negative spaces like the nasal cavity or the eye socket as shapes as well, because they were "just as important visually as the solid form itself. I really want the children to get to a place where they can look at empty spaces and see a solid form."





## Summary

In many ways, Roy's comment serves as a metaphor for validating the arts in school, for drawing is a solid form, not an empty space. For far too long, art in schools has been regarded as the extra and often weird bit added when rare spaces in the traditional curriculum occurred. But as Roy so accurately stated, "Your idea of weird might be very normal to me." When will it be that art in schools is normal for all?

Hythe Community School has taken a chance on art, though that chance has been encouraged and supported by Creative Partnerships as well as expanded through the artistic and communicative talent of Roy Smith. And the results are clear. Hythe children, though very young, are learning to attend to and articulate art—to notice, to discuss, to debate, to ponder, and to portray the emotional heart of art—through their drawings. Their attention to detail runs contrary to established and expected notions of the

attention span of very young children. Their shifts in before and after drawings through the use of more complicated props and done only minutes apart attest to children's willingness to look and look again if given the encouragement and again, the chance.

Children deserve art. Under the best of circumstances, it builds their cognitive stamina, deepens their verbal explanations, and offers multiple opportunities for individual as well as thoughtful expression. "Look at them looking," William Carlos Williams stated, "Their eyes meeting the world." With the innovation, intention, and invention of art in their lives, there's only one question remaining: "Is the world ready for them?"

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Pictures courtesy of:  
Page 32: Auguste Rodin, The Thinker  
The Bridgeman Art Library

Page 35: Bartolomé Esteban Murillo,  
The Young Beggar  
The Bridgeman Art Library

Page 37: Vincent Van Gogh,  
Self Portrait St Remy, Sept 1889  
The Bridgeman Art Library .

Design: Ranch

Creative Partnerships is a national government-funded organisation, managed by Arts Council England, committed to the positive development of young people through cultural practice and creative learning. The aim is to help develop the imaginations and skills of young people through meaningful and sustained cultural experiences in the formal and informal education sectors. Creative Partnerships currently works in 25 areas of England with a range of cultural practitioners, creative industries, businesses, and local government bodies.

*Learning for Creative Futures* is a series of publications for general, arts practice, and academic readerships, that portrays how learning environments engage children and adolescents in sustained creative work and play. Assuming roles and relationships that bring close association with professionals who work in creative industries, young learners experience the vital mix of imagination, long-term planning, knowledge accumulation, skill development, and informed critique. The international research team of *Learning for Creative Futures* includes scholars from the disciplines of anthropology, education, linguistics, psychology, political science, and sociology. This international enquiry network is led by Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf.

All stories have behind them many other stories. The tales told in this series are no exception. Behind *Visual learning in the community school* are the people and the contexts that give the qualities of character, time, setting, and energy to their narratives of creative learning.

Hythe Community School serves the seaside community of Hythe in Kent. The school provides education at the Foundation Stage (Reception Year and nursery children) and Year 1 and Year 2 ages 4-7 (following the Key Stage 1 curriculum). The school shares its site with Hythe Early Years Centre, which offers full-day and sessional care to children between the ages of 2 and 4 and follows the Foundation Stage Curriculum. Recognising the worth of each child and teacher, the school seeks to transform educational standards and raise achievement, through working with other educational establishments, parents, and the local community. Hythe Community School is a happy, safe and stimulating environment where all members of the community, adults as well as children, are valued as individuals and encouraged to work together. This community school aims to nurture within each person:

- a lifelong love of learning
- the desire to achieve the very best, to rise to a challenge and enjoy success

- the opportunity to speak out, listen to and respect others, sharing the knowledge, skills and understanding we need to live together in harmony within the community
- and the chance to look carefully, reflect on what we have learned and see that the world is a very special place.

Creative Partnerships Kent is run by a small, highly experienced team that has local, national, and international expertise in facilitating cultural and educational programmes. Team members believe in providing the highest quality and most challenging arts and cultural experiences for young people. To this end, they sought partnerships with The Sorrell Foundation (and thereby Ben Kelly Associates), Roy Smith, Shelby Wolf, and Shirley Brice Heath. The quality of work that has taken place is the result of an inspired school and exemplary practitioners who have seriously undertaken the challenge of partnering creatively with teachers, children, parents, and community. These booklets represent sharing of a common vision that extends from artist to administrator, teacher to researcher, adult to child. The experiences enjoyed by the children at Hythe are what Creative Partnerships wants for all children and believes is the entitlement of every child.

The research: From the spring of 2003 through the school year 2004, two scholars, Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf, looked closely at how language, attention, inspiration, and collaboration within Hythe Community School changed through artistic partnership. Their work brought teachers, artists, and students into the research process as questioners, data interpreters, and readers and respondents assessing the results as set forth in this series of booklets. The research upon which *Visual learning in the community school* is based includes transcripts and fieldnotes recorded and analyzed during the year and reported here through thematic patterns. Academic publications of the *Learning for creative futures* series will report detailed comparative analyses of language and cognitive development in the context of specific features of creative learning environments.

Shirley Brice Heath, linguistic anthropologist, has studied how different kinds of learning environments support children's later language development. She takes as her focus within-school creative programmes as well as sustained interactions young people have in their work and play within families, peer relations, and community organisations. She is the author of the classic *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (Cambridge University Press, 1986/1996). Heath has taught at universities throughout the world—most notably Stanford University and Brown University, and currently as Visiting Professor at Kings College, University of London. Of emphasis in her research are the long-term effects of learning in environments heavily dependent on the arts. Within this work, she has given special attention to science and environmental projects, and those that encompass social justice concerns. Her resource guide and prize-winning documentary *ArtShow* (2000) feature young leaders in four community arts organisations in the United States. [www.shirleybriceheath.com](http://www.shirleybriceheath.com)

Shelby Wolf, an award-winning teacher and educational scholar, is a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research centres on children's language and learning through engagement in literature and collaborative as well as creative modes of expression— discussion, writing, the visual arts, and drama. Her most recent book, *Interpreting literature with children* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), portrays her close work with teachers as co-researchers in the study of children's literary learning. She has worked within numerous school-change programmes to validate the perspectives of teachers who undertake enquiry into how learning works in their classrooms. She is a senior author of *Houghton Mifflin English* (2004), a textbook series devoted to helping children improve as writers. With Shirley Brice Heath, she wrote *The braid of literature: children's worlds of reading* (Harvard University Press, 1992). <http://www.Colorado.edu/education/faculty/shelbywolf>.



*Art is all about looking: drawing and detail* explores how children's language and cognitive abilities develop when they learn to look carefully and draw in detail. Technical vocabulary, types of question and sentence structures develop with increased engagement with materials, art history and comparative work. As they work with visual artist Roy Smith, the children of Hythe Community School begin to acknowledge what they can and cannot see, and to understand that creative art lies as much in the detail as in overall design.