Children's Drawing and Primitivism at the Dawn of the 20th Century

Corine Pencenat

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1724>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1724

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2004

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Corine Pencenat, « Children's Drawing and Primitivism at the Dawn of the 20th Century », *Critique d'art* [Online], 23 | Printemps 2004, Online since 22 February 2012, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1724> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1724

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Children's Drawing and Primitivism at the Dawn of the 20th Century

Corine Pencenat

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Pernoud, Emmanuel. *L'Invention du dessin d'enfant en France, à l'aube des avant-gardes*, Paris : Hazan, 2003

- 1 In the European continent at the end of the 19th century, the Nordic countries developed their interest in practical art instruction in schools, based on a messianic and educational vision of art, which certainly factored in increased economic gains for the nation. The introduction of the praxis of free, not to say spontaneous, artistic expression, where the child became the instructor's guide, and the subsequent development of artistic style and taste at a very early age were actually part and parcel of the Arts & Crafts vision in England, as well as being included in the idea of encouraging individual and social well-being in Germany. In this area, France lagged a good twenty years behind. It was not until 1909 that Gaston Quénieux, a teacher and chairman of the Société Nationale de l'Art à l'Ecole [National Society for Art in Schools], managed to have a ministerial decree voted in, for the abandonment of geometry-based drawing instruction in favour of a teaching programme based on an intuitive method.
- 2 Emmanuel Pernoud here fills in the gaps concerning the specific French state of affairs and retraces the various ups and downs which made this reform possible at both political and educational levels. No evolution was possible without the contribution of psychological research involving the child psyche, for which drawing acted as much as investigative matter as exhibits. However, psychology proposed a progressive vision of drawing, helpful for the development of the child. What is more, this instrumental aim, which invalidated the very notion of the pleasure of making things, lay at the roots of an

educational system with undesirable effects, which the author underlines on various occasions: at the dawn of the 20th century, granting children freedom meant helping them to be what was known about their nature!

- 3 The difficulty with this book is the one encountered by all researchers when they formulate a new theme. In the first three chapters dealing with the possibility of the emergence of the “children’s drawing” *topos*, there comes a moment when the issue is raised about what this has to do with art. Some editorial attention would probably have helped to weave in the host of artistic experiments and experiences with this new archaeology of learning. The impact of Alfred Jarry’s *scribbles* can only be understood by resituating France’s lateness in the approach to children’s drawing, and the same goes for Matisse’s distance and his discretion with regard to critics a thousand leagues from grasping the challenges of an autonomy of the desire of the line which they describe as *childishness* when it is not *infantilism*! The challenge of this book is of the same dimension. Who has not questioned the proximity of those vehicles for the imagination represented at the turn of the 20th century by art forms produced by exotic civilizations, mad people, and children?

- 4 E. Pernoud opens up the field of investigations helping to think these issues through. He himself operates between the two markers offered by way of introduction in the analysis of Courbet’s *The Studio*; on the one hand, Romanticism, or the idea of a virgin eye, for which the child beside the painter at work is the perfect metaphor; on the other, the question on the track between the first tentative steps of art and its culmination, legible in the face of the child on the floor engrossed in its own scribbles. Between these two conceptions, he shows the gradual emergence of a transformed way of seeing both the child and its drawings, resulting from a network of research in psychology and education, and a remarkable number of exhibitions devoted specifically to children’s artwork. In the first half of the 19th century, Töpffer, forerunner of the comic strip, was one step ahead of the vision which made it possible for French artists to recognize children’s drawing: in it, childhood is not that paradise whose innocence has to be reclaimed, but a time when there develops a particular logic which can be identified in the child’s drawing as *an intention of thinking*. In 1913, the Bergsonian philosopher Luquet described the production of drawings by children as *intellectual realism*. The romantic *cliché* of the child’s drawing occurred in Vassily Kandinsky’s work and later on in the Cobra group, but absorption in the act of drawing authorizing the automatic chance of a line in the process of being defined on a flat surface can also be read in Pierre Bonnard, as well as in Paul Klee and Henri Matisse, not forgetting Henri Michaux. Between the two, the style close to that of childhood as an opposition to, and snook cocked at, propriety is as much that of Jarry as of Toulouse-Lautrec and Pablo Picasso. Oddly enough, Jean Dubuffet, who apparently seemed close to this position, borrowed the *cliché* of the child as a miniature man trying to be noticed, but without touching it.

- 5 The challenge of this book can be grasped from the vision of childhood peculiar to the author, which is offered by way of conclusion. The child is a being endowed with a gift of speed and a system of specific references. To confront it is to accept what is elusive in the creative process, otherwise put, the automatic functions of chance. As for the necessity of reaching this point, this might be looked for in what the romantic quest gives us, as a symptom. The mad person, the child, and *savages* have in common the quality of a *primitivism* shared by those who have a world system, capable of imbuing their activity with an effectiveness capable of thereby altering their situation... This *primitive* vision in

which art is action conveys the refusal of a materialist and rational world incarnated by visual realism. The deconstruction of illusionist perspective can be understood as a revolution of mental functioning disputing the Cartesian dualism of body and soul. In artistic praxis, this rejection has in particular developed from a specific attention paid to physical movement, which evacuates reflection at the very moment when the decision to act is taken. This absorption in the automatism of action is a special moment during which man undergoes the experience of his necessary unity: leisure, popular spectacles—circus, cabaret, puppets—and sexuality are its vehicles. “The child’s drawing” as *topos*, and as the free practice of a playful activity of deconstructing and restructuring the world contributed to this transformation of forms of representation. This was only possible after the acknowledgement of an autonomous childhood, with its own laws and logic.