The Child as Visual Artist

Ellen Winner and Jennifer Drake

ELEMENT SCRIPT

Dec 22 2021

In this Element we consider what it means to think of the child as an artist.

Artistic thinking is just as important as logical-mathematical thinking. But developmental psychologists have spent far more time studying children’s logical-mathematical development than artistic development due in part to the powerful influence of Jean Piaget, for whom the end state of development meant thinking like a scientist.

In this short video, we tell you a little about some of the issues we address in this element:

We begin with the emergence and development of children’s representational drawing

Children typically make their first marks on paper by the age of 1. But it is not usually until the age of 3 that children make their first representations that actually, look somewhat like objects in the world.

These early drawings are not at all realistic, and children do not seem to care.

This is how children all over the world first depict people—a circle with lines emanating outwards standing for legs (left). Or for legs and arms (right).

These are called tadpole drawings for obvious reasons.

What children are trying to do here is to create the simplest possible structural equivalent of a person that will be recognizable as a person

Why don’t they make it more complex? Because the task of mapping a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface, maintaining all of the object’s parts in the correct relationship, is a very difficult task.

Children are not troubled by the many oddities in their drawings. They are not striving for realism.

Children’s drawings have their own logic and intelligence. Some of these oddities can also be found in modern art when artists are not striving towards realism.

And this leads us to the question of the aesthetic properties of child art.

In the 19th century no one would ever consider children’s drawings as works of art. But this changed with the emergence of modernism in the 20th century. Many modern artists like Paul Klee, Joan Miro, Pablo Picasso, and others were actually influenced and inspired by the art of children – the lack of realism, the flatness (they do not depict depth), the naïve style, the playfulness, the bold colors.

Look at this drawing by a child done in a class in Austria taught by Franz Cižek, the founder of the child art movement in Vienna.

This drawing was ridiculed by a traditional art teacher as showing no talent. Cižek disagreed, saying “But look at the strength of these figures, they are as monumental as the Sphinx, as powerful as figures in a bas-relief of Ancient Egypt. How characterized they are and what rhythm there is in spite of their stiffness!”

We do not just discuss typical children’s artistic development but also the extraordinary drawings and paintings of child art prodigies.

The most obvious kinds of art prodigies draw with extreme realism at a very early age. We call these precocious realists:

Contrast the figures by 3 year old precocious realist Gracie Pekrul with a tadpole by a typical 3 year old. These figures provide a sharp contrast to the far simpler typical children’s tadpole humans

It is indisputable that these children have an inborn talent of a very specific kind.

Not all prodigies draw realistically. Some paint abstractly. You can find these children on the internet: their parents have created websites and are often marketing their children as prodigies in abstract expressionism.

You might think these abstract works are no different from the abstract works of typical 2 and 3 year olds.

But we have shown this is not so:

It turns out that the paintings of abstract art prodigies were quite indistinguishable from paintings by abstract artists. These prodigies have an artistic talent but it is a very different kind of talent from that of the precocious realists.

We conclude this brief video by noting that including the visual arts in the Elements series is an important statement. A full picture of human development should not – indeed cannot – ignore the arts. We hope that this volume makes a modest contribution towards this goal.