The National Curriculum and beyond

A Parents' guide to helping their children
to make the most of the learning opportunities
offered in the Primary School

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CHAPTER 6 Art, Craft and Design

What is Art, Craft and Design really about?

The three elements - ***art, craft*** and ***design*** - are very similar, in that they all make use of similar materials, media, technical skills and aesthetic judgements. However, they do differ slightly in terms of their focus. In *craft*-based projects, children concentrate on honing their practical skills in order to create objects of the highest possible quality, which are pleasing to the eye and/or to the touch. *Design* projects aim to deliver a message through a visual piece of work or an object, so children arrange and present ready-made components such as pictures, patterns, words, text or other materials in particular ways - a successful design is one where the viewer not only appreciates the form of the object, but also understands its message. *Art*-based tasks do not really need a viewing audience at all; artists (in this case, the children) focus on exploring the world and attempting to make sense of it all, responding to what they see and feel by creating something imaginative, fresh and unique.

The subject as a whole has two main aims: first, to cultivate children's interest in the visual and tactile world around them, and second, to get them involved in doing art, craft and design themselves.

Developing powers of observation and building an art vocabulary

The idea of *visual and tactile sensitivity* is an important feature in art, craft and design. This requires children to really look and see and touch and feel, rather than simply gaining a vague impression of what is in front of them. So they are helped to appreciate the visual and tactile qualities of the things they see and touch, and to develop an art vocabulary with which to describe them. They are encouraged to develop an eye for beauty, both in the natural world and in man-made objects, and take pleasure and delight in what they see.

Looking at man-made objects, works of art and the natural world, and by studying the work of professional artists, children are helped to explore and describe their physical qualities by reference to five so-called ***elements*** - ***colour, line, texture, tone*** and ***shape***. As they explore the world around them, they are helped to identify these five elements, and to ***say what you see*** as precisely as possible, without being distracted by preconceived ideas about what they think they might have seen or felt. For example, is a blackberry really black? do railway lines always look parallel to each other? are shiny

things always smooth? which is the lightest part of the classroom, and are there any shadows? how does a roof change its apparent shape when viewed from different angles? And when they look up and see rain clouds, do they notice and comment on their shapes, colours, patterns and textures?

Colour: Children learn to recognize and name ever more subtle shades of colours, beginning with the primary colours (red, yellow, blue) and gradually gaining experience of variations that have their own name, such as lilac, turquoise, crimson, ochre; and variations on colours that share the name of their base colour, for example sky, navy, cornflower, duck-egg or royal blue. They learn to describe colours as bold, brilliant, dominant, vibrant, pale, dark, light, thick, watery, warm, cool, earthy, monochrome (not just black and white, but tints and shades of any single colour). And they begin to mix their own colours to achieve particular effects. How exactly would we describe the colour of a Scottish hillside, or our best friend's skin?

Line: There are very few lines in real life. The children learn that when they use lines in pictures, as often as not they are defining the edges of an object. For example, when they draw a house, they use lines to show the edges of each component (the wall, roof, door, windows and so on). In the world of children's pictures, as in cartoons, these edges might be shown with a black line; in more mature pictures, colours merely butt up to each other. They also learn to use lines to represent texture in pictures, for example human hair, animal fur, folds or creases in a shirt, wrinkles and so on. This is a way of representing 3-dimensions in a 2-dimensional format. Despite the fact that these lines are imaginary, the children are taught to identify them in the real world, and to describe them according to their weight, shape and pattern, using an art, craft and design vocabulary. Are there really any lines on a staircase, or on a human body?

Texture: The children learn that the word texture describes the quality of a surface, and how it feels to the touch. During the course of their primary school career, they identify surfaces as hard, soft, spongy, squashy, wet, moist, damp, dry, sticky, flat, bumpy, high relief, low relief, smooth, silky, slippery, delicate, coarse, rough, knobbly, stippled, spiky, sharp, abrasive, fine, grained, corrugated, furry, hairy, prickly, velvety, leathery. And in our world of picture-making, it can also mean an ***implied*** texture - how do artists make us believe in their candy floss? And how do they portray the leathery skin of a tortoise's neck?

Tone: The word tone is used rather differently in art from the way it is in

everyday life. Here, it refers to variations in light, brightness, shade and shadows. The children learn that light falling on an article or a scene has a source (this might, for example, be the sun, a flame or an electric bulb); it might be bright or dim (or a tone in between); and it strikes from a particular direction, which causes the side furthest from the light source to appear darker than the nearside, and may cause a shadow.

Children usually find that discussing tone in relation to real life subjects is fairly straightforward. However, identifying it in paintings and pictures is more difficult, as artists use a variety of techniques to show light, shade and shadows, for example colour variations to indicate lightness, and combinations of colours, lines, shading, hatching and dots to create shade and shadows. Words they use in relation to tone include light, bright, dark, contrast, shadow, shade, clear, dim, dull, gloomy, shiny, reflective, flashing, matt, gloss, subtle, muted, dramatic, foggy, misty. An underwater photograph of a shoal of fish creates great variations in tone, as the sun reflects off the darting silver bodies, set against the darkness of the deep.

The children also learn a little about some of the tricks and conventions that artists use in their paintings and pictures: as well as using tone naturalistically, they use it creatively to draw attention to particular characters or particular parts of a scene, or to create a sense of menace in the shadows; for example, film-makers can make characters look more sinister by lighting their faces from below.

Shape: Artists would say that a shape is something that ***occupies a space in our field of vision***. Shapes can be 2-dimensional (flat ones, such as pictures) or 3-dimensional (objects with height, width and depth); the word ***form*** is also sometimes used to mean shape when talking about 3-D objects. They can be ***positive*** (the things we draw, or the things we see) or ***negative*** (the areas around and between objects - the spaces that are left, when we look at the main shapes). So, for example, a bird (or a picture of a bird) has a positive shape and fills its own positive space, but the space around, above and underneath it is deemed to be a negative space. Shapes can be ***geometric*** (square, circular, cuboid, spherical, etc) or ***organic*** (these are also called ***natural shapes***). Although there are many, many exceptions, man-made objects tend towards geometric shapes, while nature's shapes tend towards the organic. And they can be ***simple*** or ***composite*** (made up of a number of smaller shapes) - for example, a single bird has a shape, but a flock of birds creates an interesting composite shape. The children will use a wide variety

of words to describe shapes, include long, short, wide, thin, narrow, curly, angular, stretched, squat, round, circular, oval (or any other geometric shape), symmetrical, regular, flat, curved, concave, convex, tapering, pointed, rigid, stiff, dangly, floppy etc.

Bringing these elements together: Whenever the children examine man-made objects, works of art and the natural world, as well as considering the five principal elements in isolation, they are encouraged to take note of *composition*, that is, how elements relate to each other as they combine to form the whole. This will include consideration of the ***foreground, background, focal point, viewpoint, perspective, scale*** and ***proportion***. This broader view requires the children to focus both on the detail of the piece and on the broader picture. For example, when studying birds, they might wish to consider a bird in the context of its environment, as well as exploring, perhaps, the detail of its feathers or beak.

Learning how other people have used visual and tactile media

As an integral part of each project, the children are introduced to the work of one or more renowned artists, craft-workers or designers. For example: when a unit focuses on sculpture, the children might take a close look at the work of Anthony Gormley; when working with textiles, the children might examine the Bayeux tapestry; and when exploring colour, shape and texture in nature, they might be introduced to the work of William Morris. In this way they build an acquaintance with some of the great artists, designers and architects from history and from across the world.

Of course, we don't want children just to look at and admire these works in a casual way, we want them to appreciate what the creator was trying to achieve, and how they used the various techniques to achieve the effects they wanted - and perhaps also to gain inspiration from them. Sometimes, the children are invited to make their own pieces ***in the style of another***, or ***using the same processes as another***.

However, as we have seen, designers, craft-workers and artists have different aims when making their pieces, so the children learn to discuss, appreciate and understand them in terms of their makers' intentions.

The youngest children will immediately be able to say whether they like a piece, which parts they like more than others and why that is, and how it makes them feel. As they are introduced to an ever-widening range of historical and world art, teachers begin to develop the idea that art is created

in a context. The children explore when a piece was made; where it was made; what materials and techniques were available at the time; whether it conformed to a particular artistic or cultural tradition; what historical and social conditions prevailed at the time; why the piece would have been made, and so on.

As they increase their knowledge, skills, understanding and experience in this area, the children gradually learn to discuss both 2-D and 3-D pieces in greater depth, considering questions such as:

- ***what can you see***? what is the subject of the piece? which part seems to be most important? is it treated in a realistic way, or are some parts exaggerated or distorted
- ***how is it put together***? does it have just one subject, or does it bring together several ideas or objects around the central theme? how has the work been arranged? how is the eye drawn to particular points? how has the artist made use of the five elements, lines, colours, textures, tones and shapes? which of them is most important in the piece? do any of the elements form a pattern or a rhythm of any sort? what effect does this give?
- ***what techniques were used***? what is it made from? what tools, processes and techniques did the artist use? would the artist have used sketches in preparation? what particular visual and tactile qualities did the artist / craft-worker / designer aspire to, and was it successful? what is the overall quality of the craftsmanship?
- ***what is the mood of the piece***? how do the people in the piece feel? are the colours warm (red, orange, yellow, yellow-greens) or cool (blue-greens, blue, blue-purples), are the colours pastel (suggesting calm and peace) or strong and contrasting (which can indicate drama and conflict)? what did the artist think about the subject? how does it make you feel?
- ***what is it really about***? what idea or message is the piece supposed to carry? is it really about the subject, or is it designed to make a social, religious, moral or political comment? is there any symbolism? are there any hidden meanings?

Of course, not all of these questions will be appropriate for all pieces, but discussing questions like these can lead children to make links between what they ***see*** and what they ***feel*** (in an emotional sense), and move them closer to

an appreciation of what the artist / designer / crafts-person was trying to achieve.

During the course of their studies, the children have several opportunities to speak with contemporary artists about their work, and to ask them about their inspiration, their intentions, and the processes and techniques they employ. This helps the children to feel more comfortable with art, craft and design, and more inclined to visit a gallery with confidence. It also helps them to appreciate the difference between mass-produced manufactured objects and well-made hand-crafted ones and, as a consumer, to distinguish between good and mediocre design.

Of course, examining art at this level of detail also helps children to improve their own art, craft and design, as they make connections between the work of professionals and their own pieces.

Creating their own pieces, using materials, media, tools, techniques and processes skilfully

We might say that children become truly creative when they bring technical skill to bear on their imagination, as they convert an idea in their mind's eye into a high quality physical piece. There are a number of stages to be worked through.

The teacher might suggest a starting point: for example, to create a piece that describes a person, an object, a place or an event, or which tells a story, expresses an emotion or explores an idea.

In response, the children might carry out a little research and gather up ideas in a personal sketch-book: notes on how artists and craft-workers have treated similar subjects; ideas from photos and magazines; sketches of real-life objects; jottings about ideas that might be used at a later date; notes and diagrams showing how to carry out particular techniques; practice pieces, and so on. The children are encouraged to combine these initial thoughts with their own ideas, imagination and flair to reach a conclusion as to how they personally wish to treat the subject.

The next stage is to consider all the materials and media available to them (clay, paint, fabric, photography, and so on), and choose one or more that they think will be suitable for the project. This inevitably leads to consideration of the tools, equipment and processes that will be needed to create the piece, together with a plan of the stages of production through which it will pass on its way to completion.

Finally, the children need to get on with the practical work, handling the materials, media and tools skilfully, and combining the different elements of the piece to create a whole that makes a visual impact, and ensuring that the message or the idea or the emotion shows through.

Clearly, a great number of decisions need to be made at every stage of this process. Strategic questions such as: what subject / message / idea should I portray, and how should I go about it? Detailed questions such as what sort of dog should be in the picture, and should the old man be asleep or awake? And practical questions such as how do I show reflections, how can I stop my fabric from fraying at the edges, how do I prevent my dragonfly sculpture from collapsing? Qualitative questions too: is the piece as I imagined it in my head, which parts of the piece are fit for purpose, have I got the lines / colours / textures / tones / shapes just right, what about the composition, how could I do this better next time?

During their primary years, the children have experience of a great many different materials and media. Whilst there are too many to mention, these include modelling materials (such clay), sheet materials (card, etc), natural materials, fabrics and digital media, as well as paints, inks and other finishing materials. They learn to work with each of these materials safely and skilfully, using suitable tools. This enables them to learn techniques and processes such as animation, appliqué, assembly, batik, calligraphy, carving, ceramics (making pots and free-form pieces using slabs, coils, pinching and throwing), collage, creating new colours by mixing, cutting, decorating with pattern and texture, drawing, embroidery, glueing, image manipulation, jewellery making, rubbings, marbling, modelling, moulding, origami, painting, paper-making, photomontage, printing, sculpting, sewing, shading, video-making and weaving. In line with the primary ethos of providing a starter kit, the children are encouraged to have a go in every area - there is time to specialise later in their school career.

Children come to each project with their own unique blend of imagination, insight, appreciation of the five elements, technical skill and maturity. As a result, they approach each project in their own individual way, and inevitably produce a piece that is different from everybody else's. We need to appreciate that, whatever shortcomings might be apparent in any of these areas, this is real art, and should be recognised as such.

The children are encouraged to discuss their artwork with each other in the same way as they would discuss professional art, and comment on whether

and how their piece was influenced by the work of a particular artist, craft-worker or designer (the subject, materials, colours, shapes, techniques etc). In this way, the children become more sensitive to the skills employed by professional artists, craft-workers and designers. For example when they see paintings of babies and older people, they will notice that different brushstrokes have been used to create smooth and wrinkled skin; when they buy a soft drink in a plastic cup, they will become more conscious of its shape, colour, weight and texture, and of the logo printed on the side; when they look at shop fronts, they will begin to appreciate how designers have tried to give a flavour of the shop inside.

Developing transferable skills and personal qualities

The benefits of art, craft and design lessons are not confined to the subject itself, however. As their powers of observation are honed, the children are better able to make sense of the sights and images around them and so increase their awareness and understanding in all parts of the school curriculum and in all areas of life.

They also develop knowledge, skills and understanding of a more general nature: imagination, inventiveness, creativity, aesthetic awareness; problem-solving skills, skill and understanding when carrying out techniques and processes, manual dexterity; decision-making and self-organisation skills; research skills; and understanding historical and contemporary cultures.

Beyond this, the subject also provides fantastic motivation for children to develop positive personal qualities, such as concentration, persistence, self-discipline, care; a willingness to experiment; an awareness of the value of *trial and improvement*; an appreciation of the benefits of cooperation and collaboration, but also the value of individuality; confidence when making decisions; playfulness and curiosity, interest and excitement; pride in their achievements.

And, of course, it is always possible that the lessons might lead the children to an absorbing hobby, which provides fun, interest and satisfaction into adult life.

But in the end, we return to the idea that art is a means of expressing oneself, of communicating ideas. If we know in our heart what we want to say, but we can't think of the words, we can always draw it, paint it or create a model of it: isn't that why Mums prefer birthday cards that their children have made themselves?

What can we parents do to help?

Art, craft and design has two overlapping parts: appreciation and personal creativity. You can help your children in both areas by:

- ~ encouraging them to exercise their imagination in all its forms, valuing their individuality and inventiveness, and treating their creative attempts with respect
- ~ playing I-spy type games, to encourage observation skills and vocabulary development (I spy with my little eye something: blue / with a wavy line on it / rough / that's casting a shadow / that's a circle)
- ~ discussing objects and landscapes in terms of their colours, lines, textures, tones and shapes
- ~ giving them access to beautifully crafted objects - at home and in galleries and shops, and discussing the work of crafts-people, artists and graphic designers, and things to which they have made a contribution (what have they done here? how did they achieve that particular look? do you like it?); remember, too, we don't have to like something to appreciate it
- ~ encouraging them to keep a scrapbook of images that they find interesting, as professional artists do. Anything can be included: faces, colours, lighthouses, rabbits, reflections, shadows; they can be taken from any source
- ~ giving lots of opportunities to experiment with different materials, media and tools - remember, mess can be cleared up
- ~ encouraging them to trust their judgement; and to be flexible, in a spirit of trial and improvement
- ~ talking with them about their work
- ~ accepting that collaborative work is okay
- ~ encouraging them to work safely and to take care of materials and tools. As they will probably have time to taste a particular technique only once or twice in school, let them practise again at home, so that the knowledge, understanding and practical skills become established, and therefore part of their repertoire that can be called upon in future project