

# Art and Craft in the Middle School

*'Go about your work placidly, unhurriedly taking time to make your products comely.'*

I have never known the origin of that quotation but it sums up for me all that is best in good craftsmanship and epitomises the attitude that I have sought, in forty years of teaching, to foster in children of Middle School years. We live in a machine age, one indeed in which there are very real and understandable fears of the effects of automation on personal identity, but the use of a high-speed drill in place of an auger need not thereby occasion the loss of this spirit of pleasurable enjoyment in creating — the joy of making rather than of possessing.

I am concerned with the teaching of the age range 10 to 13, mostly, but not exclusively, boys and in general my teaching has been in residential schools or in schools where there is a fifty-fifty balance between day — and boarding-pupils: this gives the added bonus of plenty of time outside the normal school timetable.

If the work is to be of value it must be based on a sound syllabus which, though possessing a firm framework, must itself be sufficiently flexible to be moulded to the requirements of the children rather than restricting them to teaching that is over-directed. We must look for, and it is our responsibility to get, a high standard of work.

To take an example: in the better weather I take a class out-of-doors to make studies (in individually selected media) of trees, plants or animals. A small

number will produce work of high pictorial quality, the rest of the work may well be little to look at. Nonetheless, this very real communicating with nature gives a deep sense of satisfaction to all who participate and a simple test in the art room at a later date will show by how much even the weakest draughtsman has improved his knowledge of the subject.

Looking is of significance — to develop the 'seeing eye'. Children should be led to look at the world around them with an analytical and enquiring consciousness; to seek for the essentials and distil these into art.

We have a large, single room set aside exclusively for art and well equipped to handle most crafts. Not seldom in the formal classes and always in out-of-school work, a wide range of different crafts will be in progress at one and at the same time and, as a consequence of this, it is not necessary to buy a large number of most pieces of equipment, which makes for economy. On the other hand, the requirement for clean working conditions for some crafts has caused me to take the decision to forego pottery and fired work in clay. This is not such a deprivation as might at first appear since I can compensate for it in other craft-work and it is available in most senior schools.

*Group work: discussing the lay-out of a composition of hand-coloured discs of scrap-metal.  
Ages: 10½ to 11.*



*Screen-printing on fabric.  
Age: 12½.*



The art room is open on at least three evenings each week from 4 p.m. until 8.30 p.m. and children are encouraged to come and go as they please to fit in with their other commitments. Much craftwork is done in this time which may mean thirty or more children of a mixed age range working at many different crafts. It needs the physical presence of the art teacher who must be able to cope with a constant stream of enquiries of all sorts from many sides at once, some trivial others requiring some deep discussion, whilst at the same time having an eye open to all the work that is in progress. Each child must know that his particular piece of work is as important to the teacher as it is to himself. The work is tiring, somewhat taxing to the nervous system, but infinitely worthwhile! The more advanced children can, and do, help beginners: it

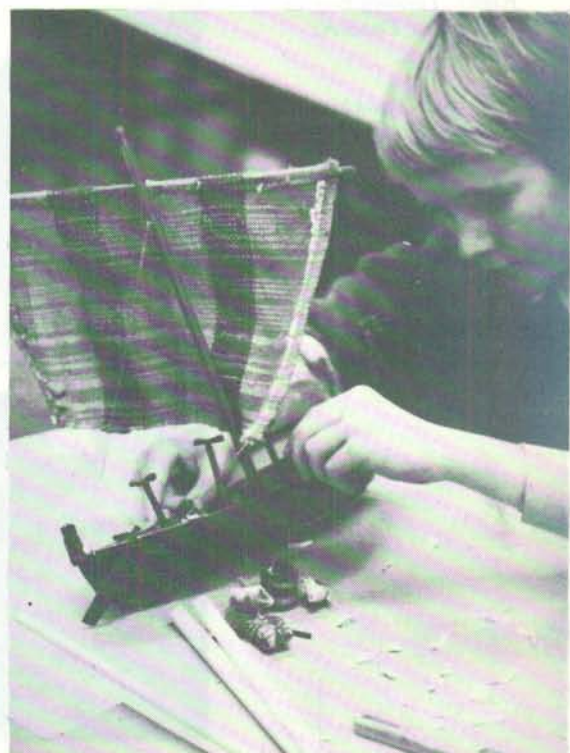
gives them confidence in their own abilities but they do need watching for bad habits proliferate as easily as good ones.

Over the past school year, work has been done in the following crafts:-  
BOOKBINDING: ENAMELLING: LEATHER-WORK: PRINTING — Monoprints, Blockprints, Screenprints, Engraving: REPOUSSE COPPER or PEWTER: SCULPTURAL FORMS in — Self-hardening Clay, Cast Plaster or Resins, Carving in Wood or Plaster: MOSAICS: WEAVING.

The initial approach to each of these crafts is by direct contact between tool and material. To attempt to prepare a design first presupposes a knowledge of the craft which does not as yet exist. In more advanced work it becomes practicable, and often

*Right: Fabric-printing from string-block.  
Age: 13*

*Far right: Model making (Viking ship) from scrap materials and hand-woven sail.  
Age: 11½.*



*Enamelling: applying moist ground enamel*  
Age: 12½.



desirable, for the pupil to prepare a general lay-out for himself of the work he intends to do.

Three-dimensional work is satisfying; one has only to watch fingers probing, squeezing and moulding clay to know that this is so. Self-hardening clay which can be painted to add further expression (but not to imitate glazed pottery) enables complex shapes to be preserved without the problems of casting. Irregular lumps of plaster-of-Paris are useful for carving and small blocks may also be impressed into clay from which a rubber mould is made for producing cast plaster tiles, in any quantity, that can be built into sculptural forms: this provides a useful basis for group work. Small and quite intricate shapes can also be cast in resins by this method. Wood carving can be approached by way of hand-sculptures — billets of softwood some 15 to 20 cms

in length which are shaped by knife, file, drill and glasspaper into a form which is not only visually satisfying from all viewpoints but which fits comfortably into the grasp of its creator's hand. The final work can be stained, polished or painted as desired. This work is non-representational and relies on the interaction of tool and material along with a satisfactory tactile experience. Large sculptures can be developed in crystalline manner from simple geometrical solids of thin card.

I have referred to group work; this is highly valuable in social terms — encouraging children to work together, but it needs skilful handling to prevent a strong-willed child taking charge of a group and the others either opting out or working to his instructions. Although this pitfall can be avoided, those with the greatest ability are still

*Right: Tooling clay as setting for Enamels.*  
Age: 12.

*Far right: Bookbinding gglueing up in a lying press.*  
Age: 11½.



going to turn out the more accomplished pieces of work (as they ought) but since the completed whole is greater than the sum of the parts, those less able are encouraged by the knowledge that they too have made a contribution to the final work and I always find a site, in or around the school buildings, where these artifacts can have a permanent home for all to see. From time to time we are offered space beyond the confines of the school where they can be enjoyed by a wider public.

Enamelling, which is the application of coloured glass to copper (or to silver or gold if your budget will run to it!) by means of heat, can be done in a small and not expensive electric kiln. The very small, round kilns supplied by some craft shops are of little use for class work since there is such a loss of heat during use that progress is impossibly slow. This work supplies much of the excitement of glazing pottery and is a craft which can be effective at the simplest level with very young children — I have used it with six- and seven-year-olds — or capable of development to very advanced work. The colour effects and surface textures are of considerable aesthetic interest. The initial outlay on materials is fairly expensive but they do last for a long time. Care and discipline in the use of the kiln are obviously essential to avoid accidents but courtesy on the part of the children towards one another and sensible precautions by the teacher make this as safe as any other craft.

Thin gauge copper or pewter sheet has wide possibilities for 3-D work. Fashioned with pressure from the simplest of tools and in a small space, it

gives direct contact between tool and material and is a medium that children soon learn to handle most effectively. When the modelling is completed it can be oxydised, polished, gilded or otherwise treated to give further interest. In conjunction with other materials, especially with enamels, it can be used to construct dramatic sculptural forms.

Leather is a sympathetic material and, although skins are no longer cheap, only a little is required by each child and wastage is minimal. Calf and basils are good for modelling and blind-tooling the surface; skivers for smaller articles and for bookbinding. Leather can be decorated also by gold-tooling, pokerwork, incising, mosaic, dyeing and painting; synthetic alternatives have uses in their own right but not as a substitute for the real material. There is a danger in the utilitarian nature of the articles that can be produced in leather and which may tempt some children to be more concerned with the end product than with the making of it. This is readily overcome if emphasis is placed on the use of tools on the material rather than on the designing of leather goods.

Bookbinding (or bookcrafts, which more accurately describes some of the related crafts) can be developed at many age groups and levels of manual skill. It requires a precision and discipline in working that is of value and, although cognitive rather than affective, it can provide an opportunity for a closer consideration of the structure of books in general — the balance between print, illustration, paper texture and choice of binding. With a class of twelve-year-old boys we have followed through the complete production of a book from the initial literary work (done under the aegis of their English teacher) through the visual expression of the same ideas by way of illustrations, these either in pen-and-ink or on scraperboard, until each child was able to take away a finished copy of his own. It was necessary to include work on lettering and book-hands before the pages could be written up, the illustrations pasted in and the whole photo-copied sufficient times so that each boy had the pages to bind up for a complete book. Sheets of tinted paper were printed by various processes for the endpapers and covers, the sheets were then stitched together, backs covered in bookcloth, sides in printed paper and, as a final touch, the spine was labelled or gold-tooled with the title. Along the way, we made some paper (though this was not used in the finished book) by thoroughly mixing wood pulp and size in a liquidiser and the resulting 'stuff' shaken out on a hand mould.

Printing is a craft with virtually limitless possibilities. Monoprints, using both found and created shapes, are a useful starting point and enable the process to be experimented with in depth. Block-prints can be made from a host of different materials — linoleum, vinyl, wood can be incised with lino-tools. I introduce this craft by giving out small pieces of vinyl (ordinary floor-covering tiles or off-cuts) which is softer to cut than lino, along with the three basic cutters viz. U, V and knife. Provided

*Impressing clay with carved plaster block. Age 12.*



*"Demon" – Cloisorne  
Enamel set on wood  
decorated with poker-  
work.  
Age: 10½.*



that the children are shown how to handle each without cutting themselves (but keep the sticking-plaster handy!) they are then best left to shape the surface for themselves, with the proviso that a picture, as such, is not required. When these blocks are completed they can be used as repeating all-over patterns or by combining several together quite intricate patterns can be produced.

Blocks can also be built up using card, cord, cork, nailheads and the like which will provide an interesting textural surface. A useful piece of equipment is a press into which the block can be put to level the surface under pressure. At one time, heavy cast iron

copying-presses could be had for a song but now, I fear, these are becoming collectors' pieces. Multi-colour printing by the wastage method using lino or wood blocks is an economy of material as all the colours are printed from a single block – Picasso made significant advances in this technique. To print unmounted lino or vinyl the most efficient and cheapest device is an ordinary rubber-roller mangle which can usually be bought second-hand for a pound or two. If you are lucky enough to get hold of one of the really massive older types then these will exert immense pressure and are a most useful piece of equipment.

Vinyl tiles are effective too for engraving. The drawing is made directly on to the surface using a needlepoint set into a piece of wood dowel; the deeper the scratch, the darker the printed tone. The printing ink is applied with a pad and the print made on damp paper using the mangle. Some sensitive prints having somewhat of the quality of etchings can be made by this process and it is possible to print in more than a single colour.

Screenprinting, again, requires little equipment that cannot be homemade and which can be used over and over again. The prints may be on paper or on cloth which provides a way in to work with textiles. In printing on fabric it is helpful if children assist each other by working together in pairs.

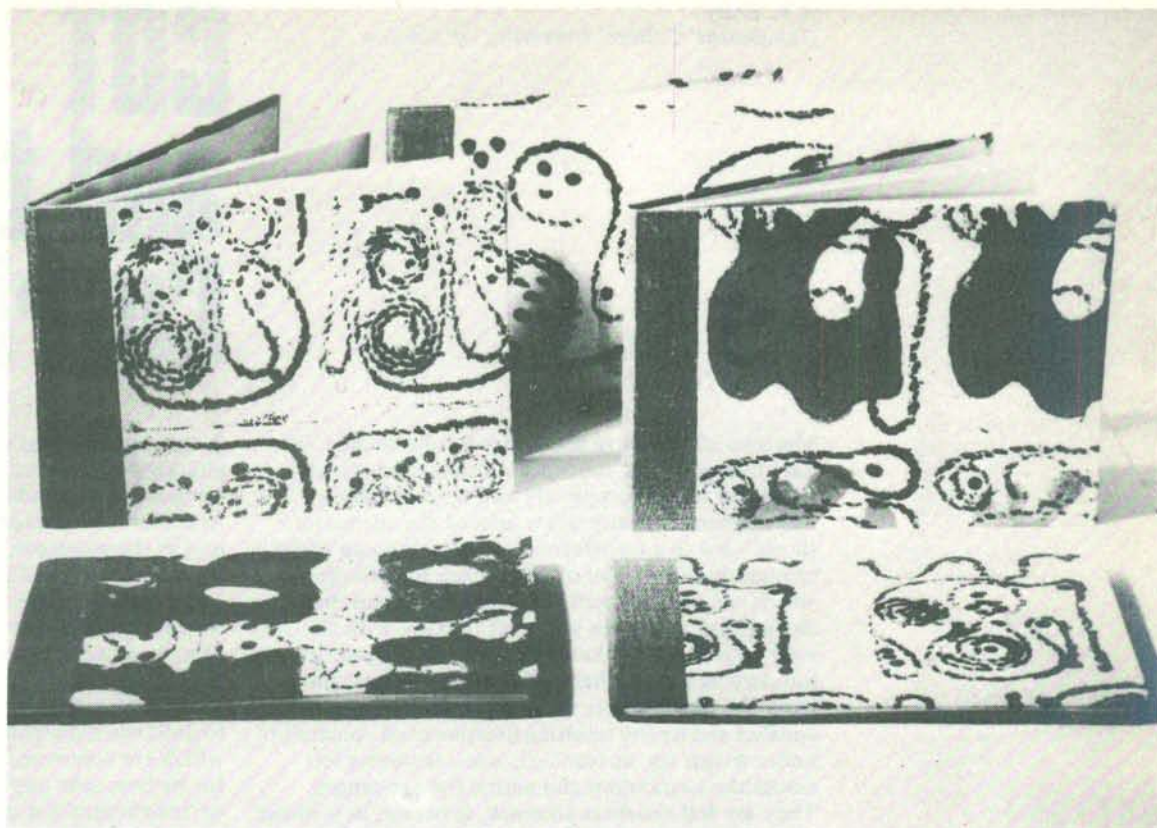
The depth of colour and intricacy of surface pattern that are possible in printing make this not only one of the most delightful crafts but also one offering scope for genuine experiment and discovery at all levels of attainment.

*Box (approx natural  
size) in repousse pewter  
with enamel inserts.  
Age: 12.*



*Classwork – Exercises  
in bookbinding with  
hand-blocked paper  
sides.*

*Age: 11½ to 12½.*



Weaving ought to be looked upon more as an opportunity to play with textures than as a means of making cloth. A large box full of threads of every variety will supply the food for the imagination. Simple looms can be home-made quite cheaply if the metal heddle has been bought. The finished piece of weaving is to be considered as a work of art in its own right rather than as a piece of fabric to be made into something else. If space and funds permit, a larger 4-shaft loom enables work to be taken to a more advanced level but the setting up of such a loom is a tedious process which may dampen enthusiasm.

In the teaching of drawing and painting there is a need to discriminate between the content of a work and the technique employed. I give formal teaching in the basic theory of colour, ways of expressing form, the creation of space and properties of media. A recurrent obstacle to progress is the negative approach of 'I can't draw', often derived from the child's parents. On consideration this is as meaningless as entering a French class for the first time and announcing 'I can't learn French'. Like any other skill, drawing needs to be learned though in this, as in other activities, it will come more easily to some than it does to others. The converse is equally irksome since an early facility in drawing too often leads parents into assuming that their child is a great artist in the making. An ability to draw is a technical accomplishment; once some adequate progress has been established (and no artist worthy of the name will ever reach a state of complacent satisfaction in this respect) then it becomes easier for the child to begin to express his ideas in visual form. Some understanding of colour widens the scope for experimentation in all media. I look upon the acquisition of skills in drawing and painting as the grammar and vocabulary which will enable a child to communicate to others the vision that he has, to open the eyes of the world to the beauty that, though all about us, has been hitherto unperceived.

I encourage the use of a sketchbook, small in size so it can be carried on the person, cheap in quality so that it will be used. Its function is to be a notebook for entering observations in visual, rather than verbal, terms so that it becomes a habit

to see, to extract the essentials and to put them down on paper.

In selecting subjects for compositions I try to steer a middle course between the extremes of giving a subject title which may have little or no response in the child and leaving the choice entirely to him, when he will waste a large part of the lesson with a blank mind wondering what is expected of him. I hope to provide stimuli e.g. by choosing an open-ended idea such as 'Great Heat' and getting the whole class to discuss anything and everything that this suggests to them and then each settling down to put his ideas on paper – possibly several different approaches at first from which the child can select the one he wishes to develop further. Other triggers could be: taped music or abstract sounds (there are some useful ones to be had from the BBC): one's own recordings of natural sounds – the sea, countryside, factories, football crowds, motorcycles and the like: verse or prose readings: and all the myriad experiences that crowd in upon a growing child's life.

To conclude with a note on materials: there are some things which will have to be bought but there are, if one looks for them, many sources locally and further afield from which surplus or waste material can be freely obtained. Many Local Authorities issue a list of such stocks. Parents are the greatest mainstay that I have and it is well to keep a note of those whose work makes it possible for them to provide useful material; they are always pleased to help in this way, to offer technical advice and to feel that they are contributing to what is as much their concern as it is the teacher's.

I am all too conscious of so many crafts and techniques that have received no mention in this brief account but I hope sufficient has been said to demonstrate the value, the possibilities and above all the sheer excitement of the subject. In my work I have tried to provide a framework within which the able may attain to excellence and the inadequate find for themselves the satisfaction of achievement.