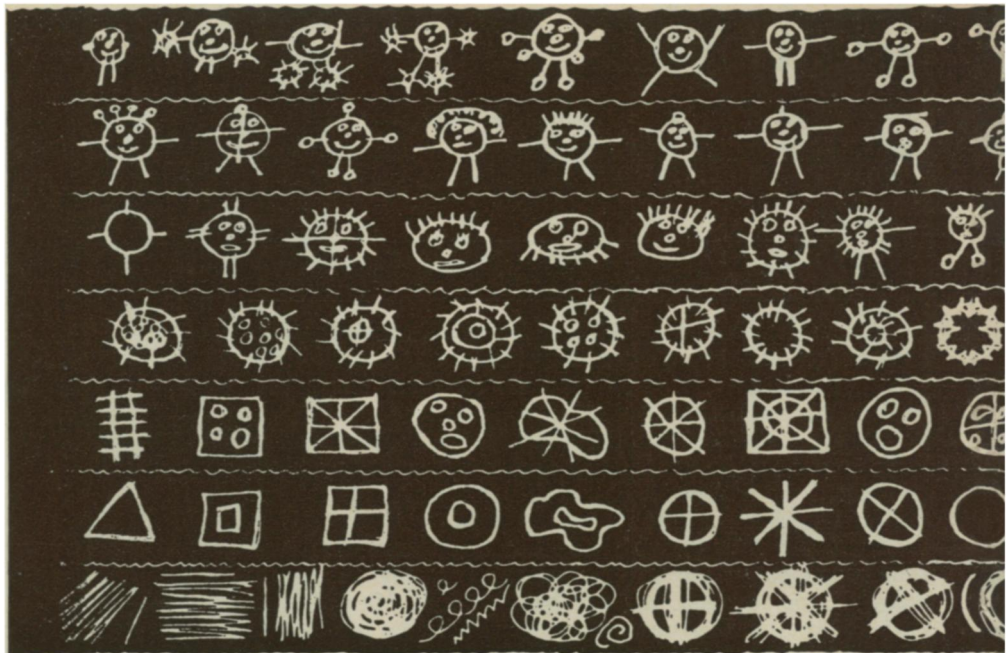


Mining the Child's Art

Symbols, stages of preschool art offer a rich vein for understanding mental growth

by Patricia McBroom



A child begins with scribbles (bottom, above); progresses to abstract designs which

The adult view of children's art tells more about the adults than it does about children.

Let a three-year-old loose with paper and pencil and he will draw abstract designs. Let an adult loose with his imagination and he will see boats, houses, cars and people—that is if he stretches a point here and there.

Adults expect to see the concrete in children's art and so a triangle on top of a rectangle becomes a boat. But to the child it isn't a boat. It's a triangle on top of a rectangle. And a square on top of circles is just that—a design—not a car with wheels.

By pointing out resemblances to concrete objects, adults adulterate the child's art and direct him toward pictorial drawing, says Rhoda Kellogg, a San Francisco educator and authority on children's art, whose recently published work, "The Psychology of Children's Art" (CRM-Random House; \$7.95), is receiving substantial attention—more, however, as an art book than a psychology work.

Her new book, "Analyzing Children's Art," is due for publication in March; it will be a more detailed, documented case for the Kellogg theories and should command more attention from the psychological profession.

Miss Kellogg, executive director of the Golden Gate Kindergarten Association, speaks from 40 years of experience with children when she says their art follows a natural progression through sets of abstract designs that are the same the world over. Each child modifies the designs according to his own aesthetic promptings, but only gradually realizes that they resemble

objects in the real world, she believes.

If her thesis is true—and the San Francisco educator has half a million drawings collected over 20 years to back her up—it challenges the validity of all the art-based tests used to measure emotional health and intelligence in young children. Perhaps more importantly, it provides a rich new basis for evaluating growth in children.

For years, psychologists have used drawings to test the very young, partly because so few good instruments are available. Though some verbal tests now cover the early preschool years, drawing tests still command a wide following—in particular the Goodenough Draw-A-Man scale, which rates a child's mental-emotional development by the way he draws a human figure, and the Bender Motor Gestalt test.

Individual counselors and psychologists like the Goodenough test. Draw-A-Man is one of the most widely used diagnostic tests; it is easy to give and easy to score, when a child is suspected of either emotional disturbance or retardation, says Dr. Wayne Dennis, professor of psychology at Brooklyn College.

Supposedly based on natural children's art and standardized from 3000 drawings, the Goodenough test places high priority on realism.

The child, for instance, gets one point for indicating eyes in any manner, more points if the eyes are oval-shaped, have pupils and eyebrows. Appearance of fingers is another index of mental level.

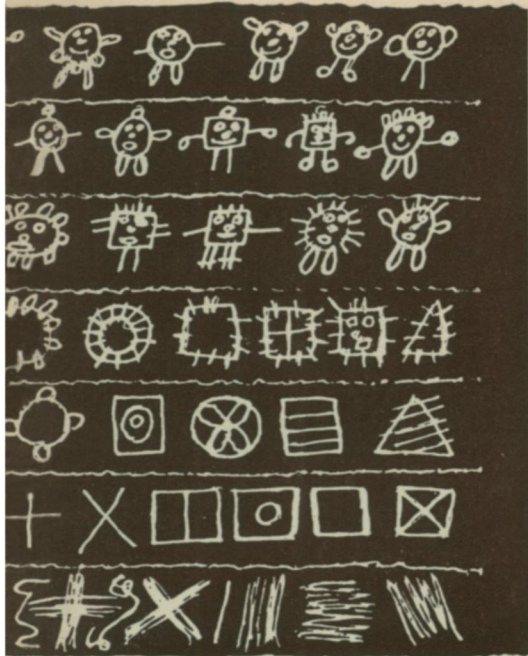
This is pure fantasy, "a psychological ritual with no scientific validity," says Rhoda Kellogg. Despite statistical

trappings, the evidence on which the test is based, is "so meager and highly selected as to be absurd," she says.

Dr. Robert Heath, psychologist at Stanford University's Research and Development Center on Teaching, tends to agree. "One gets pretty skeptical of that after seeing the Kellogg material," he says.

Dr. Heath ran a pilot study on the Kellogg collection two years ago when he was with the Educational Testing





Kellogg

eventually modifies to make the human figure.

Service, a leading supplier of tests. Though there were few children in the study—only 30 to 40 with 100 drawings apiece—he found the results very encouraging. He saw a definite sequential pattern in the art corresponding to growth, and it was possible, he says, to pinpoint the times when a child first begins drawing the human face and when cultural influences first appear.

“Up to a certain age, you see no cultural differences,” says Dr. Heath. Then, quite distinctly, a scribble by an Oriental child looks Oriental; it is colored in pastels for one thing, while an Arab child scribbles in strong hues.

Dr. Heath agrees with the Kellogg thesis that children’s drawings, properly analyzed, could be used to predict and measure mental development, but so far the money to do the job isn’t available.

The Kellogg collection offers half a million drawings, says Dr. Heath. “If you could get a grant and do a statistical analysis of them, it would be well worth the money.” Research on nursery school children is pretty weak, he says, and a “lot of witchcraft” is involved in testing their growth.

Miss Kellogg criticizes the Draw-A-Man tests on several grounds. In the first place, she points out, a child changes his drawn human figure so much and so often, he cannot be judged by one sample. One week he may rate as a three-year-old on the Draw-A-Man test; the next week, he may score as a five-year-old.

Secondly, the child is not copying nature, unless his expression has been channeled by adults, says Miss Kellogg. In fact, his first drawings of the human

look very strange—arms come out of the head and the body resembles a round ball.

She explains that children build a human figure from the abstract designs of earlier stages. A sun, for instance, perennial symbol in children’s art, becomes a human face and its rays, human arms—thus the arms come out of the head.

According to the Kellogg theory, natural child art follows this progression: At the age of two, a child starts to scribble. His scribbles are not random, but fall into 20 basic patterns that form the basis for later symbols. Soon the scribbles become “placement patterns,” that is, they are located on the page and the child becomes aware of top, bottom, right, left and diagonal.

The shape stage begins near the age of three with six symbols, a circle, square, triangle, upright cross, diagonal cross and kidney shape.

From then until the time he begins to copy nature—which depends on how much adult guidance he has—the child modifies and combines these symbols to make pleasing designs. A circle crossed by one X or more makes the sun. It also makes a mandala, the Sanskrit word for magic circle, which is marked by perfect balance and symmetry. To draw humans, the child modifies his suns and mandalas.

“Almost all drawings of humans that children create before age six fit nicely into an implied circular or oval shape, no matter what distortions of anatomy are required,” Miss Kellogg contends. “This leads me to conclude that the child is not at all concerned with trying to draw his humans so that they look like people; he is striving for variety within a set of aesthetic formulas.”

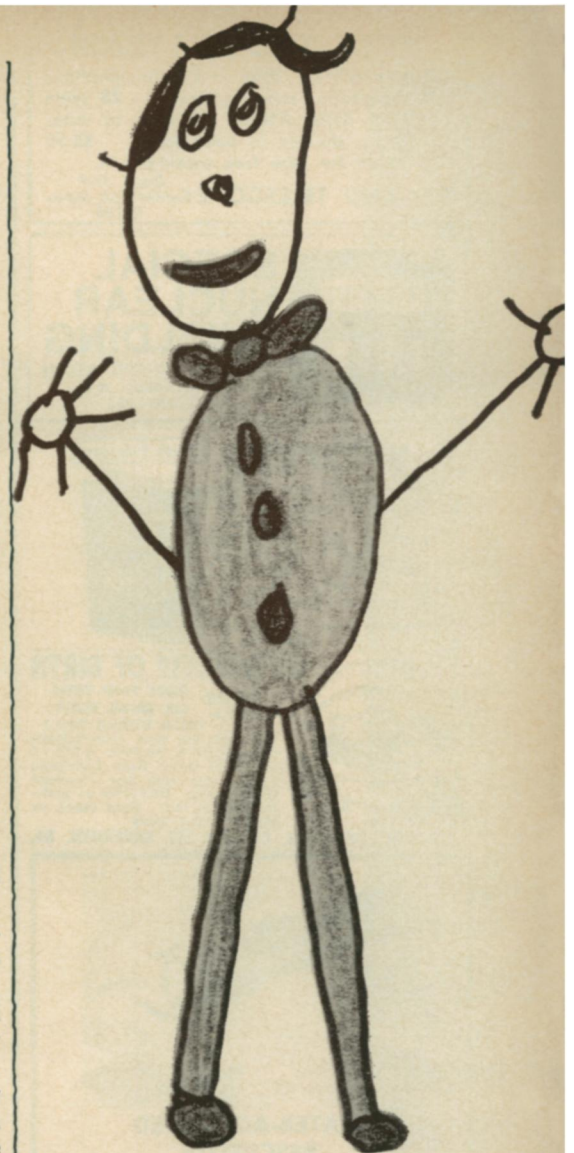
From drawings collected by people in England, Egypt, the Philippines, Bali and Nepal, among other countries, and stored along with the San Francisco material, it appears that the stages and symbols of early art are universal. For this reason, Miss Kellogg believes, they are based on innate patterns of neurological growth common to all humans.

If so, children’s art could well be a window on mental development and a possible therapeutic method as well.

Children need to scribble and draw, not just for motor ability, but because the activity develops and extends a capacity for abstract expression, says Miss Kellogg. Most letters of the alphabet appear in early form in children’s art, but the teaching of reading and writing has never capitalized on the child’s natural interest in abstract symbols.

Miss Kellogg waxes particularly eloquent on the tendency to view ghetto children as backward because of environmental deprivation.

They are not backwards, she says, but



their knowledge tends toward different kinds of information. “They don’t get the moral support other children get for going to school and listening to the gaff.”

As for their art, “it’s fully normal—except for those who have been to school and been corrupted.”

Miss Kellogg is also administrator of a model kindergarten, the Phoebe A. Hearst Preschool Learning Center, situated opposite a housing project. About 50 percent of those in art classes are Negro, from families on relief.

“Whenever adults underestimate a child’s ability based on pseudo-science, it does untold damage,” she says. “The child knows it . . . but adults haven’t known how his mind functions.”

Scribbles should help unravel some of the mystery. Miss Kellogg is now working toward getting the drawings of a thousand children analyzed for the age at which various items appear—the sun, humans, houses and animals.

So far, the psychological profession views the Kellogg work more as art than psychology. The end result may be to demonstrate how closely the two are interwoven.