

Teaching Design to Children:  
The Meaning of Richardson's 'Pattern-making'

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## Abstract

ENGLISH art educator Marion Richardson (1892-1946) is well-known for inventing a method of art education for children which stressed the importance of imagination and the spontaneous conception of ideas. Richardson took an opposing position to the traditional training methods of the Royal Academy of Arts, which were the dominant methods since its founding in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and would have instructed to repeatedly portray natural objects realistically. Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Herbert Read (1893-1968), who have both had an enormous influence on the English-speaking world's art/design in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, supported Richardson's views. Richardson's emphasis on children's grasping of forms and their 'patternization' derived from the child's individual senses, bears a remarkable affinity to Fry's theory of modern art.

One can see Fry's appreciation of both modern art and drawings by children from the viewpoint of art form in his early essay, 'Expression and Representation in the Graphic Arts (1908)'; where he criticized the academic art which dominated the art world at the time: 'we find that no test of accuracy in the imitation of the appearances of nature will ever suffice to distinguish between what we find to be great works of art and inferior ones.' Even in Richardson's 1929 lecture on teaching design to children, we can find a viewpoint similar to Fry's Formalism. In this lecture, she explains that 'pattern-making' and 'picture-making' are not separate activities but coinciding ones, despite the traditional conceptions which allocated them into different categories, the former belonging to graphic design, and the latter to painting. We can see such an affinity with Fry's Formalistic idea in her approach as it focuses on compositions formed by colours and lines, rather than reading the subject matter and the stories narrated by them.

In this paper, I will consider Richardson's innovative methodology, where creativity is expressed not only in 'art' but in 'design' as well, confirming that the creativity-oriented method of art education of our time comes from her conception of children's drawing education. Furthermore, I will point to how she differentiated herself from preceding art education methodologies promoted by Thomas Ablett (1848-1945) who had a great impact on Richardson.

*Keywords: Pattern; Drawing; Marion Richardson*

## Introduction

THIS paper addresses the significance of drawing education for children by English art educator Marion Richardson (1892-1946) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was the origin of a strong tilt towards 'free expression' and 'creativity' as well as an innovative challenge to a range of areas including art and design. Firstly, we will overview the historically specific situation of English society, which provided the context for Richardson's innovative challenge. Secondly, I will show how she differentiated herself from preceding art education methodologies promoted by Thomas Ablett, who had a great impact on Richardson, and will discuss her relationship with Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Herbert Read (1893-1968), two leaders in the modern art world. Thirdly, we will focus on the key ideas of her theory of 'pattern.' Richardson thought of 'pattern' not as the repetition of a single figure or decorative matter, but as fulfilling the role of organizing the total design. I will further clarify the particulars of her conception of 'pattern' as influenced by Fry's Formalism and Reed's ideas on *Art and Industry*.

### Drawing Education in England at the Turning Point of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

CHILDREN'S education was conceived to fulfill a societal need in the modern state. After the Industrial Revolution, specifically in England, design reformers such as Henry Cole and Robert Redgrave advanced vocational training in design for children. For them, the Great Exhibition in London (1851) triggered an awareness of a delay in domestic arts, crafts, and design behind that of international industry. Stemming from their regret from the Great Exhibition, their movement, which was supported by the state, developed educational programmes to teach practical design skills and established design schools and museums to be the implementation sites for these programmes. This social-historical background fostered the connection of the contemporaneous needs of England with conceptions regarding the assets of taming nature, children, and their sensibility and creativity as expressed by Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and his followers, such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852).

One example contributing to the connection between education and vocational training before the design reform movement of the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century includes social reformer Robert Owen's (1771-1858) ideas on educating at the infant stage. Fröbel aimed at nurturing the innate nature of children by using educational toys called 'Spielgabe (Fröbel Gifts)' in his 'Kindergarten' on the basis of German-Romantic aesthetic education, such as Goethe and Schiller. Owen, on the other hand, tried to cultivate humanity through one's innate (natural) intuition, having the children work and attend 'The Institution for the Formation of Character,' which was built within factory grounds. In this case, 'work' means working in the processes of the machine industry, which was different from both the 'skills' in the apprenticeship system stated in Rousseau's *Emile*, and the work of the manufacturing labour of early capitalism. Owen aimed at organizing communities in a rational society for the purpose of 'the well being, and happiness,

of every man, woman, and child.’<sup>1)</sup> Thus, it is almost expected that the Continental educational philosophy of treating children the same as nature became loaded with the importance of industrial efficiency in England.

Another example of the connection between children’s education and social-industrial needs can be found in Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), whose thought and activities introduced Pestalozzi’s methodology to the education world in England. He is well known as not only a utilitarian philosopher, but also an evolutionist. He thought that children’s education led directly to the evolution of human society, promoting children’s education regarding child development and human history in a parallel way.

The education of the child must accord both in mode and arrangement with the education of mankind, considered historically. In other words, the genesis of knowledge in the individual must follow the same course as the genesis of knowledge in the race... since both, being processes of evolution, must conform to those same general laws of evolution above insisted on, and must therefore agree with each other.<sup>2)</sup>

Spencer thought children’s education encouraged a child to develop and would lead to the benefit of society as a whole. This analogy brought about the idea of equating a child with savageness to art education. For example, English psychologist, James Sully (1842–1923) stated, ‘As we all know, the lowest races of mankind stand in close proximity to the animal world. The same is true of the infants of civilized races.’<sup>3)</sup> As Sully mentions, ‘the lowest’, in this instance, and above all in sociology, suggests the extended interpretation that ‘primitive tribes’ placed in the lowest stage of evolution. This idea of ‘savages’ at an earlier stage of human history was compared to the early natural state of childhood and both came to be labeled ‘primitive.’ As written in Sully’s book, a child’s work was thought of as primitive in the art theory of those days. This tendency provides a contrast to Pestalozzi’s philosophy which regarded the child’s creativity as an innate, positive, ability.

During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, English art critic Roger Fry, who organized post-impressionist shows in 1910 and 1912, also found the expressions known as ‘primitive’ in modern art. Such ‘primitive’ expressions were typified by some of the works of Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin which were thought to be different from art that aimed at the ‘imitation of nature.’<sup>4)</sup> In this overlap of conceptions of ‘primitiveness,’ children’s art education came to involve modern art theory in England, with both regarded as ‘extraordinarily expressive.’<sup>5)</sup>

1) ——— R. Owen, *The New Moral World*, vol.6, New York: Greenwood Reprint Corporation, 1839/1969, p.675.

2) ——— H. Spencer, ‘On Education’, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects*, London: Everyman’s Library, 1862/1976, p.60.

3) ——— J. Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1895/1896, p.4.

4) ——— R. Fry, ‘The Post Impressionists’, *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1910/1996, p.84.

5) ——— *Ibid.*

## Comparing Contemporaneous Drawing Education to Richardson's Drawing Education

FRY's theoretical concerns led him to his interest in children's art and in 1917 he held a children's drawing exhibition at his Omega Workshops. When a young English art lecturer, Marion Richardson, visited the exhibition, Fry's idea of an analogous connection between modern art and drawings by children incited a relationship to art education through Richardson. Richardson also conducted art classes by using a method that focused on the original ideas and creativity of children, questioning the traditional school education called the 'South Kensington Approach' that let pupils to repeat through imitation, a technique developed from the academic method. Blending her educational method with Fry's theory, after his death, and with the support of Herbert Read, educational ideas regarding art that emphasized children's primitive creativity became the mainstream for children's art education later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the process, the emphasis on children's creativity moved from Fry's idea of the intellectual form towards Read's concept of the restoration of a child's first unitary perceptions.

An idea central to Richardson's subsequently developed educational method lies in the importance of teaching school students to emphasize on their expression of inner images and to break away from the mainstream educational methodology of observational drawing of that time. One reason for this emphasis is Richardson's influence from classes such as 'Shut-Eye Drawing' or 'Visualisation' given by Catterson-Smith who was also a lecturer and a designer associated with the Arts and Crafts movement at the Birmingham College of Art and Design.<sup>6)</sup> Prior to this, as an example of an alternative to the 'South Kensington Approach,' Thomas Ablett developed a drawing education and systematized its method for an examination at the Royal Drawing Society. However, even though Ablett encouraged free drawings inspired by memories or imagination in children, Richardson did not adopt his method for her practices as Ablett's approach was inclined to moral conditioning and shifted towards the imitation of nature through observation-centered training in art, which was the norm at the time.<sup>7)</sup>

Richardson would criticize Ablett's approach. She states, 'But we must be careful that in the name of visualising and free expression our teaching does not become rigid and uncreative again,<sup>8)</sup> 'The new ways sometimes only *pretend* to be free, *pretend* to encourage the child's own expression of his own vision.'<sup>9)</sup> Here, 'the new ways' Richardson refers to are the contemporaneous conceptions of art education which employed the words 'free expression' blindly. Richardson uses 'pretend' twice, attacking 'the new ways' as leading to a false 'free expression' by children. In her statement in the notes of the exhibition catalogue in 1938 we find:

6) ——— J. Swift, 'Birmingham and its Art School: Changing Views 1800-1921,' *Journal of Art and Design Education*, Vol.7, no.1, 1988, pp.5-29; T. Naoe, 'Richardson kenkyu no kihontekimondaiten,' *GeijutsuKyoikugaku*, Vol.7, 1995, pp.45-55.

7) ——— M. Richardson, 'L. C. C. Lectures,' MR 3424B, 1925.

8) ——— M. Richardson, MR 3049, p.2.

9) ——— Ibid.

For work such as is seen here is not ‘free expression’ as generally understood, which may be merely unconscious imitation, but a disciplined activity in which the teacher’s own imaginative gifts play a very important part.<sup>10)</sup>

She thought that the simple laissez-faire attitude towards education that did not include instruction would actually foment imitation easily. In her conception of education, teachers should appropriately support their students to enhance not only their technique but also their imagination without leaving the students to their own resources. This would put a relationship of mutual trust and earnestness between teachers and students as the most important point in drawing education. It is very interesting that Richardson’s practice is regarded as the origin of creative ‘free expression’ in art education, particularly in Japan,<sup>11)</sup> against her true intention where instruction plays an important role. But what did Richardson consider as the correct way for teaching children and developing ‘free expression’?

### The Significance of ‘Pattern-making’ in Art-Design Education for Children

As we have seen, Richardson’s drawing education was different from the vocational training, academic art education, and others that supported ‘free expression’ at that time. She raised doubts over Rousseauian philosophy, questioning the ‘return to nature,’ and if ‘man is born with the innate power to produce and to understand art, and that he loses it by living in a world where values are false and materialistic.’<sup>12)</sup> Richardson argued that the appropriate help of the teacher was necessary for students, as distinct from repressive instruction or sheer abandonment of instructors. The teacher should train the child to be faithful when recording the child’s mental imagery.

She developed what she called ‘the mind’s eye ‘seeing,’<sup>13)</sup> where Richardson would pursue a ‘mind picture’ in her classes, teaching her students to grasp an inner image and to represent it, detaching themselves from everyday concerns. The ‘mind picture’ seems to have a correlation with the idea of ‘pattern’ which formed the basis of her educational theory. Pattern could be involved in both art and design, defining them. In a 1934 lecture, Richardson described her educational method as follows,

The theme of the lecture is the teaching of design, but you must not think that my subject deals only with the teaching of design in the narrow sense of two dimensional pattern. It has always seemed to me a very great mistake in the teaching of children to distinguish between their work in pictures and in pattern.<sup>14)</sup>

10) ——— M. Richardson, ‘Note by Miss Marion Richardson’, *the Catalogue of Exhibition of Children’s Drawings at the County Hall*, 1938, p.2.

11) ——— Now, I am writing about this subject in another paper for the International Conference of Design History and Studies in 2016.

12) ——— M. Richardson, ‘Children’s Drawings’, *Athens*, vol. 4, no. 1, MR, 1936/1947, pp.3-4.

13) ——— *Ibid.*, p. 4.

14) ——— M. Richardson, ‘Teaching Design to Children’, MR, 1934, p.1.

Unfortunately, a sizeable portion of this document, 'Teaching Design to Children,' is missing, but existing materials and biographical information can provide us with an important context. In the background of such statements regarding pattern was Richardson's experiences giving classes not only for paintings and drawings but also for embroidery and handwriting, and her preoccupation with studying the spontaneous scribble.<sup>15)</sup> Her book titled *Writing and Writing Patterns* (1935) was aimed at training a sense of form related to the basic exercise of handwriting. Here Richardson strove to develop the child's sense of form, rather than to become better at handwriting: 'by scribbling, they were teaching themselves both to write and to draw,' and 'in scribble the same patterns occurred over and over again,'<sup>16)</sup> thus we can interpret that the pattern has a formal aspect including 'coherence' or 'unity,' beyond the categories of 'figure' or 'decorative.' The child's sense of form seems to be based on the formal principle of natural rhythm and the development of movement in both drawing and handwriting.

However, even though we could deal with picture and pattern in terms of their formal aspects, how does one move between pattern and picture in the process of creating? Herbert Read gave an explanation of Richardson's method as elevating pattern to design,

Miss Richardson has, in effect, invented a technique for discovering innate talent. She has shown that the youngest children, if aided by mechanical and schematic means, become supreme inventors of pattern. By such devices as the folding of paper to make a scaffolding of creases, the repetition and inversion of simple integers (figures, letters, etc.), she can induce an *inventive* activity in the child's mind; this activity can then be extended to the harmonizing of colours, and finally produce a design of high aesthetic value.<sup>17)</sup>

In the last review of her experiments in child education, Read thought of pattern as a previous step before picture, but this was not her intended meaning of pattern. For her, pattern should develop in parallel with picture, and by drawing, a consistent pattern arises: '[I]t seems to me, that he instinctively paints pictures rather than patterns. He learns to understand about patterns through his pictures.'<sup>18)</sup> This statement implies the influence of Roger Fry's formalism. In fact, Fry commented on her student's works in the drawing exhibition in 1933:

Now Miss Richardson has discovered a way to give satisfaction to this overpowering desire of infancy for colour. The children are all more or less familiar with some written letters, they can at least make the preliminary pot-hooks and so she gets them to make patterns by using these simple and easily-made forms in different combinations and then filling in the spaces with colour.<sup>19)</sup>

While Fry thought that the patterns made by the child were not art, he believed these patterns had the potential to translate into beautiful textiles with minor arranging and modifying.<sup>20)</sup>

15) ——— M. Richardson, *Art and the Child*, London: University of London Press, 1946, p. 55.

16) ——— Ibid.

17) ——— H. Read, *Art and Industry*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935, p. 127.

18) ——— M. Richardson, 'Teaching Design to Children', MR, 1934, p.3.

19) ——— R. Fry, 'Children's Drawing at the County Hall', *New Statesman and Nation*, June 24, 1933, p. 844.

20) ——— Ibid.

This reminds us of his experiments with the Omega Workshops in the 1910s, where young artists adapted the formal patterns in their artworks into the design of everyday goods such as furniture and furnishing. Moreover, we can connect one of the experiments in Richardson's art classes to French fashion designer Paul Poiret's (1879-1944) *École Martine*, which served as a model for the Omega Workshops.<sup>21)</sup> In *École Martine*, early-adolescent girls drew a rough design for clothing fabric and the better designs were adopted into commercial products in Poiret's shop.

Richardson also taught her students to translate some of their designs onto household materials: potato and carrots, rubber erasers and so on were used to make prints which were then placed around the house. For example, linen curtains printed by hand from lino cuts were produced and hung in the staff room.<sup>22)</sup> At a children's art and design exhibition in the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester in 1928, many from the textile industry who attended had an interest in some of her students' potato block-printed patterns. In 1930, a member of the Calico Printers Association, Adam Murray Ltd, actually bought 23 designs and reproduced them on rayon crepe fabric and called the line 'Maid Marian'.<sup>23)</sup>

## Conclusion

THIS paper examined Marion Richardson's educational ideas and practices, which are considered the origin of creativity-oriented children's art education. While some parts of the document on 'Teaching Design to Children' are missing, producing an insufficiency in research materials, through a reading of existing materials, this research shows that Richardson did not uncritically encourage children to develop 'free expression' or spontaneous creativity. I have also examined how Richardson incorporated Fry's formalistic conceptions into her educational methodology. Richardson's two aspects of the line drawing, 'pattern' and 'picture,' were also taken into consideration by Fry, regarding them as 'decorative' and 'calligraphic' in his criticism for modern art.<sup>24)</sup> We can conclude that Fry's and Richardson's mutual theoretical influence produced a different direction for the art/design education for children in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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\*Notes 7, 8, 9, 12,13,14, and 18 refer to documents courtesy of the Birmingham City University Art and Design Archives ("MR" before item numbers).

21) ——— M. Kaname, 'Design for Whose Sake: The Case of the Omega Workshops,' *Design Discourse*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2005, p. 2, retrieved from [http://designhistoryforum.org/dd/papers/vol01/no2/01\\_2\\_2.pdf](http://designhistoryforum.org/dd/papers/vol01/no2/01_2_2.pdf)

22) ——— R. Sassoon, *Marion Richardson: Her life and her contribution to handwriting*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011, p.16.

23) ——— M. Richardson, *Art and the Child*, London: University of London Press, 1946, p.35.

24) ——— R. Fry, 'Line as a Means of Expression in Modern Art,' *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1910/1996, pp.326-338.