Book Review

Drawing with Hand, Head, and Heart by Van James

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"Teachers should love art so much that they do not want this experience to be lost to children," Rudolf Steiner said in 1923, "When children engage in [art] they feel their inner nature uplifted to the ideal plane. They acquire a second level of humanity alongside the first."

Those words are among the scores of inspiring quotes by Steiner and others to be found in the remarkable new book by Van James, *Drawing with Hand, Head, and Heart: A Natural Approach to Learning the Art of Drawing.* James has created a volume that (as its title would suggest) brings a wealth of technical advice concerning the Hand's role in drawing, clarity and common sense about the "why" of drawing that speaks to the Head, and an abundance of work by children, student teachers, and accomplished artists that touches the "emotional intelligence" of the Heart.

In compiling such a book, James has set himself a daunting task. In only 300 pages, he has actually created two books: the first a drawing manual specifically for teachers, the second an instruction manual for anyone learning to draw.

It is a testament to James' organizational skills that the volume never feels like two manuals cobbled together. The sections complement one another, and, in fact, the reader can begin with either Part One or Part Two; James' creative cross-referencing will invariably draw you to want to read the other section as well.

Part One is at once an exemplary collection of Waldorf student art from the N/K through Grade Twelve, a clear description of the Waldorf curriculum in those grades, a concise overview of the child's psychological and physiological development from birth to age eighteen, and a guide to teaching children to draw. From the outset, James indicates that he will be showing student work that is mostly "middle range," an approach that is meant to be un-intimidating for teachers and children alike. (Almost all of the work is well done, and all of it is impressive.) It would be easy enough to present these four streams in a formulaic manner, but James moves with grace from the scholarly to the artistic, from psychology to pedagogy.

Before we are drawn into the specifics of the grades, however, James takes up work with the young child in a chapter entitled "Growing the Picture," which I would especially urge class teachers to read; indeed, this section alone is worth the price of the book. Under headings such as "Straight and Curved Lines," "Blackboard Drawing," "Visual Intelligence," and so forth, James goes to the heart of any number of issues that have, over the years, grown stale, dogmatic, steeped in controversy, or ignored. Among the questions that James approaches in his straightforward way are: How often should new blackboard drawings appear? Block or stick crayons for younger children? What about black crayons? When are pencils appropriate? What about "slant drawing"? Should children draw only with the right hand?

James cites the many points of view that have attached themselves to all of these issues, acknowledges their virtues, and usually concludes with a surprising quote from Rudolf Steiner that is probably the opposite of what generations of mentors may have claimed that "Steiner said."

Countless blackboard drawings by Van James himself lay out the simple and systematic "growing" of the picture that characterizes his approach. These, in turn,

lead to examples of teacher-drawn blackboard art and student work that emphasize the variety of children's responses elicited by the teacher's model. This threefold interplay of 1) the steps the teacher can take to create a drawing, 2) the steps taken by the children as they imitate their teacher, and 3) the actual results on the blackboard and main lesson book page makes James' book exceptionally helpful for the novice Waldorf instructor.

With each succeeding grade, James' text ranges more broadly over and deeply into the growing complexity of the subject matter. His discussion of Grade Four, for instance, leads James to an insightful and practical digression on geography and map-making that brings to light the artistic and cognitive value of this sometime neglected skill. As he leads the reader through the challenges of puberty in Grade Six, James takes the time and space necessary to reveal the important role played by geometry as it melds drawing and mathematics, balancing the subjective and objective forces of the twelve-year-old. "Euclid alone has looked on beauty. …"

James is so at home in the Waldorf curriculum that he rarely touches upon any subject in any single grade without being able to cross-reference its recurrence or metamorphosis in a number of other grades. Like all Waldorf practitioners, James is emphatic about the primacy of process over product, but this is that rare book whose narrative flow and "theme and variations" structure actually allow the reader to experience a process-driven approach to education.

In "A New Perspective," James' survey of the Waldorf High School, many of the pages overflow with the vitality and complexity of high schoolers' work. Now we see how the deceptively simple exercises of "growing the picture" and the austere structures of form drawing have laid a foundation for self-expression and creativity, on the one hand, and dispassionate observation and objectivity, on the other. In these sections on the high school, James' style changes as we are led into stimulating discussions of, among other things, color theory, the principle of metamorphosis, and the dynamic relationship of the ever-changing currents of modern art to the soul and spirit of the adolescent. Throughout this section we can sense that we are in the presence of a veteran teacher who leads his high school students through the example of his own openness to the world and his artistic sensibility.

In the second "book" within this book, "Drawing for Students/Artists of All Ages," James once again works with all of the elements he approached in Part One, e.g., "growing the picture," form drawing, portraiture, color and line, and so forth. In Part One, these elements served as vehicles through which the teacher could begin to awaken the artistic capacities of the child. In Part Two, James reveals that these elements are double-edged swords, capable of awakening very different capacities in the adult. An anecdote shared by the author illuminates the wisdom of this approach: James describes a portraiture workshop he once gave at an international arts conference:

> …[A] German architect taking part in the class grew impatient with having to do the childlike drawing exercises that we started with on the first day. He complained that he was an adult professional and wanted to draw like an adult professional and so he dropped out of the class.

At the week's end, the architect is astonished at the quality of "advanced portraits" created by workshop participants. James comments:

> …It is just this process of going through the developmental stages of portraiture that can provide the background and resources for entering into and unfolding the ability to capture something of the essence of the adult professional portrait. (p.265)

James' phrase—"this process of going through the developmental stages"—could serve as the motto of his book. The child goes forward through these stages; the adult must swim in a different current of time and replay the stages in reverse. In this respect, Part One concerns itself with artistic activity as a means of helping the child to incarnate, while Part Two presents the same activity as a path through which the adult can healthily excarnate, i.e., spiritualize her relationship to the sensory world. The effect of this book, in its entirety, is to help us breathe.

Anyone familiar with Van James' earlier books, particularly *The Secret Language of Form* and *Spirit and Art*, will know that he draws not only on a deep store of anthroposophical knowledge, but also on the insights gleaned from a wide range of hierophants, artists, philosophers, and contemporary scholars. The same eclectic spirit pervades this book, and it is one of its most salient features. This book appears at a time in which many anthroposophical writers are urging that we "de-historicize" Rudolf Steiner and stress the unique spiritual inspiration of his ideas, eliding their connection to the times in which he lived and taught. Although Steiner quotes play a central role in this book, as befits a volume so interwoven with Waldorf education, James' scholarly integrity necessitates an approach that is heterogeneous rather than hagiographic. The lapidary quotes that begin chapters and embellish sidebars are drawn from a rich store of perennial, and not exclusively anthroposophical, wisdom. Rarely is Rudolf Steiner quoted in a vacuum; the artists and psychologists, scholars and teachers whose words appear alongside those of Steiner allow for healthy contextualization and conversation—qualities that in no way diminish Steiner's insights but rather serve to strengthen our convictions about Waldorf methodology. Van James' ease in hosting this meeting of minds and hearts belies the courage it takes to bring anthroposophy to the world—and to bring the world to anthroposophy.

Drawing with Hand, Head, and Heart: A Natural Approach to Learning the Art of Drawing by Van James
Paperback 9.2 x 8 inches, 311pp
Full color, illustrated
Rudolf Steiner Press, April 2013
ISBN #978-0880106-44-3