

Art and the Adolescent

True Art challenges the image that we receive of Man today

by TED ROBERTS

The age of puberty has never provoked as much controversy as it does today; educationalists, sociologists, psychiatrists and parents are confronted with problems which become increasingly difficult almost day by day. Educationalists call for parent participation, parents call for stricter guidelines from schooling establishments, sociologists complain about environmental conditions, psychiatrists research parent-child relationships and report the lack of care and understanding. While opinions and advice differ greatly, the adolescent continues to bang more loudly and violently on the doors of established authority.

It is difficult within the context of a short article to discuss puberty and its problems in any detail. I hope within this brief description of the art curriculum in the upper classes of a Steiner or Waldorf school to show how the art teacher approaches these very urgent and complex difficulties of the adolescent.

The phenomenon of light and darkness reveals the physical world to our senses. We are able to gauge our movements by it, in fact our whole life is governed by the light and dark cycle of day and night, summer and winter. For the adolescent who is experiencing the first inner stirrings of his unfolding individuality, the world appears dark, unconsoling and indifferent to the struggle of transformation that is taking place within him. Suddenly for him the harmonious days of his childhood are gone; no longer is his life

full of sunshine; no longer does he see his parents or his teachers as the infallible, all-seeing, all-knowing lights of his life. The spell of childhood is broken, he feels lonely and confused, cast out into the world of man with all its strengths and weaknesses. It is at this point in his development that one introduces through art the conflict of his inner situation, the conflict of light and darkness.

For the fifteen-year-old, the drama of light and darkness provides the ground for artistic experience. With charcoal in hand the pupil embarks on his first drawing; and with controlled, deliberate strokes proceeds to darken the white surface of his paper. Slowly he builds up areas of shading, intensifying its strength, and as he does so, these darker areas call forth the lighter elements of the surface into a dramatic confrontation. The teacher encourages him to explore further; gradually the pupil realises that not only skill in handling the charcoal is necessary, but also deliberation and decision is called upon if he is to maintain a balance between these two opposing forces. With lighter strokes the shading is carefully extended; the pupil begins to allow the darker and lighter areas to blend together, thus producing intermediary tones of grey. On stepping back from the surface he is able to absorb the total effect, one of complete balance. Inwardly the pupil feels a certain satisfaction with what he has achieved.

From this balanced composition to the next exercise, where the teacher can present the pupil with a different problem, to allow the



darker areas to cover most of the surface, only allowing the penetration of small shafts of light. Instantly the pupil is thrown into an extreme situation, where the pervading darkness evokes a mood of melancholy, solitude and almost hopeless despair; he feels its constricting power give way to rising tensions. The mood is set. The dim light suggests a form here and there, adding an element of mystery and haunting excitement to the picture as the dramatic possibilities of light and darkness are revealed.

Through his outer creative efforts the adolescent provides the balance for his inner torments and struggles. The skills of crafts such as joinery, basket-weaving, modelling and pottery, when practiced, encourage his sense of symmetry, structure and balance. The image one is working with as a teacher, is that of the ideal harmonious man, the picture of which emerges in a study of Renaissance Art. The great works of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, are discussed with the pupils, through which the teacher leads them to an experience of the divine status of man — Man

of whom the sculptor Michelangelo had this to say:

“He who made the whole made every part; then from the whole chose the most beautiful, to reveal on earth, as He has done here and now in His own sublime perfections. The human figure is the particular form in which beauty is most clearly manifested.”

The Godlike image of man, this was the ideal for Michelangelo. It would seem that in the present day, when there is much talk in schools of the need for sex education where often only the mechanics of the subject are described, the young person is deprived of the real needs of his inner nature which cries out for a true, all-embracing ideal picture of man. Here art can play its role, to instruct, inspire and reaffirm the spiritual origins of man's existence. Art challenges the image that we receive of man today, man as an economic pawn, conditioned by his environment, a victim of mass media, driven and dictated to by his desires and external circumstances. The

challenge is one which must be taken up by the teacher if he is to see beyond behaviour problems of the adolescent, to the young man who yearns to experience the 'sublime perfections' of his own inner nature.

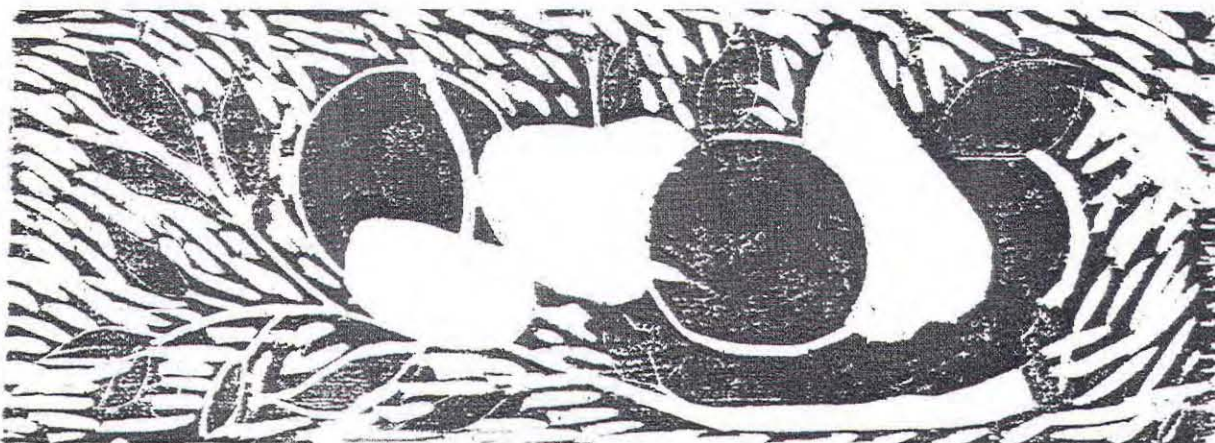
The initial turmoil of puberty slowly gives way to a more settled period at the age of sixteen when the pupil gradually comes to grips with the dichotomy of his situation. He now looks out to his fellow men; hence he moves into a more social realm where his experience becomes one which leads him into a more conscious appreciation and understanding of the world.

The previous lessons in light and darkness can now be developed by the teacher towards appreciation of layout and composition. The sixteen-year-old is invariably keen to gain an understanding of the basic elements of design, such things as poster-making, still-lives, lino cuts from drawings which have been made from a direct study of nature, for within nature's rhythms the pupil will find the force of growth and inspiration for his compositions. Still-life drawings help the pupil to understand the relationship between objects and the way in which the light affects their surfaces. The texture and quality, whether an object be hard, soft, rough, smooth etc., each demands from him a different approach, a different solution within the context of the whole composition. Poster-making requires a more graphic approach; sketches can be made, a process of selection gone through before the right combination of forms is found for the design. This process encourages the pupil to bring about order in his own thinking, a type of thinking that encourages a fresh approach to each task and refrains from falling back on old solutions for new problems. Through this work also a real social sense can arise, particularly in discussions where a give and take and sometimes the courage to sacrifice one's own treasured opinions are necessary. A sense of direction can be grasped and a feeling for the rightness and value of his own contribution to the whole. A grand social design emerges in which each individual makes his contribution, plays his part. The pupil moves towards a sense of the artistic in the social realm.

Romanticism heralds the arrival of the pupil into his seventeenth year. Through Art the pupil seeks to discover the world of the Spirit in nature. The teacher looks towards the Romantic poets and painters, who strove to experience a mystical union with nature. Constable, Blake, Turner, are the three great painters of this period; Constable with his often repeated studies of his native landscape of Dedham in which he experienced the presence of the Christ-being; Turner with his 'Golden Visions', surfaces of colour dissolved to re-unite in the hearts of men; Blake with his sureness of line and vision which depict clear forms of classical figures, figures carrying the seed of 'poetic genius'. All three journeyed along different paths, all three sought to unite themselves with the undying, creative spirit which lives in nature and man.

The Spirit of Romanticism is an integral part of the inner life of the sixteen- to seventeen-year-old pupil. His is a journey towards the realization of the Self, to an experience of the divine workings of Spirit which makes each man unique, which inspires each to take his particular or individual path in life.

Colour can be re-discovered at this stage, having been put aside during the previous two years; it should be introduced as a language, a language which has its basis in the moods it creates. Colour as it appears in the landscape changes throughout the year from the blues, black and greys of winter giving way to the greens and yellows of Spring and Summer and finally to the Autumnal months which fade in a blaze of oranges, golds and reds. Each period of the year has its special appeal not only to the senses, but also to the developing life of the soul. A breathing takes place between man and nature: just as nature contracts and expands in its eternal process of recreation, so does man when he passes through the cycle of the year, from the outer physical activities of the summer months to an inner contemplative life of the winter time. A similar experience can be gained from the realm of colour; in reds, yellows and oranges one can feel the stimulus for action, warmth, expansion, which in the painted surface can



also give expression to feelings of joy, passion and wrath. On the opposite scale of blues and violets, the experience is one which calls forth action of a different kind: one is drawn out into distant reaches, but the mood is also one of inner calm, of self-searching. A new perspective emerges, one which springs from the activity of the colour itself, warm colours increasing in energy as they radiate towards us, while the colder colours recede into the distance. With these experiences the pupil begins to create out of his own experience, not merely copying outward physical phenomena, relegating colour to a secondary descriptive role, but rather arriving at his content through an inner living relationship which exists between himself, colour and nature.

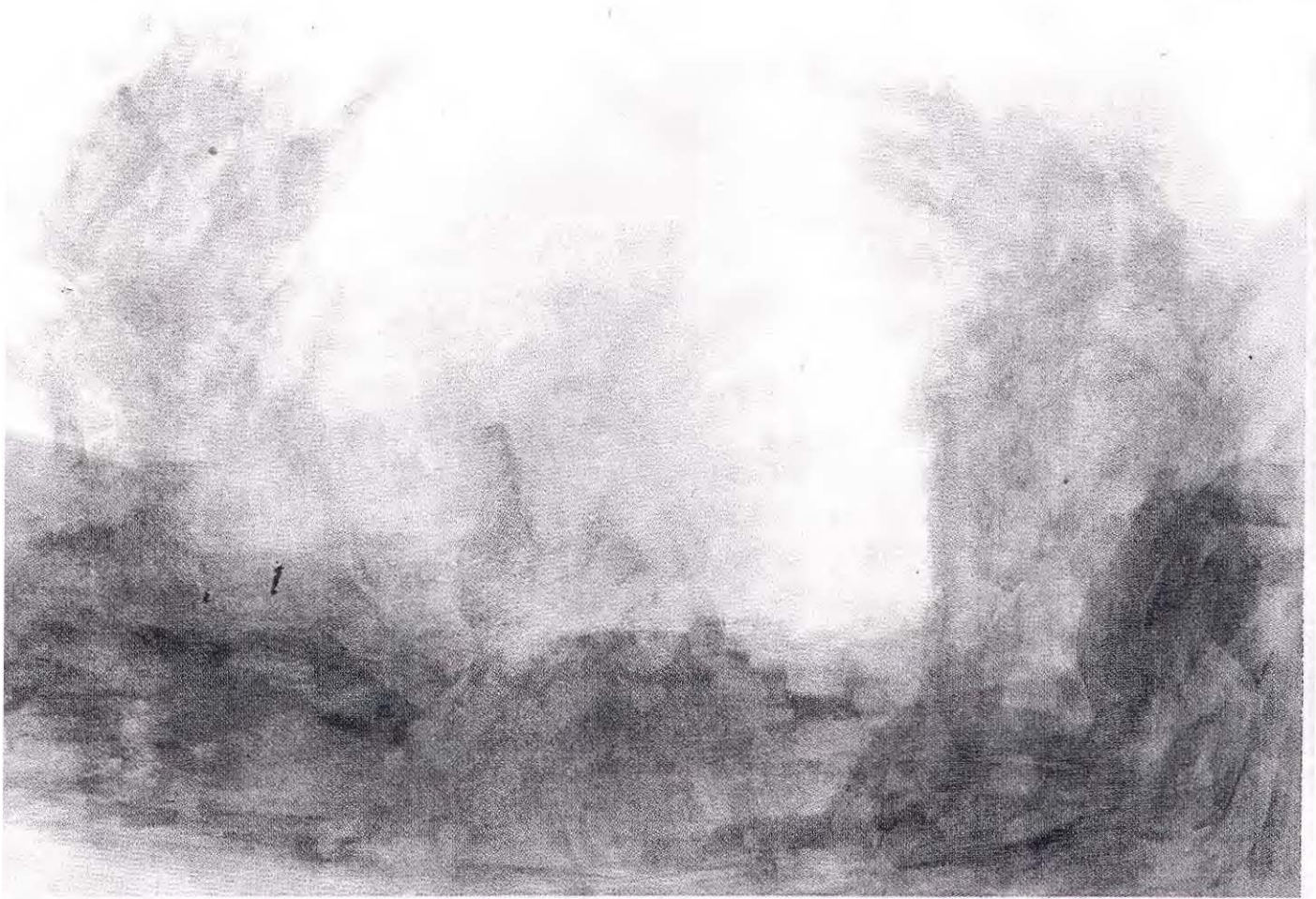
Finally, at the age of eighteen, we pause for a moment and look back on the path we have travelled. Memories of his past experiences in his life and education fill the pupil; this is to be his final year of schooling and he now stands on a threshold between school and life itself. It is with mixed feelings that he looks forward to his new life of independence, feelings which contain a slight foreboding. From the harmonious pictures of the Renaissance to the struggles experienced by the 20th century painters Van Gogh, Cezanne, Gauguin; all three felt isolated in a modern technological civilisation which had lost its sense of human values. Man's imagination had become stifled by his external success in harnessing the forces of nature, and he began to feel himself isolated, rootless, an outcast in his own society, the appendage of some unwieldy

machine. It was for these reasons that all three painters shunned the modern fashionable society of Paris in the 1880's, to seek for a new set of values in nature and in its interpretation. Van Gogh in his search for the 'Peasant of all peasants', Cezanne with his geometric interpretation of nature saw himself as the 'primitive of the new way', Gauguin who took from nature by 'dreaming about it', 'Dream and then just go ahead and paint'. All these sought for a new beginning, all three felt themselves to be prophets of a new age, a Renaissance.

The pupil at this stage will also feel himself to be entering a new phase of his development, and it is out of the spirit and the thinking of the late 19th, early 20th century that one works, as a teacher, realising that in his artistic development the pupil has now reached the colour experiences of his first year at school, but now through his fully awakened consciousness.







To present to the individual, an individual and unique view of the world, the pupil is encouraged to see the world through the eyes of the Impressionists; to see in their pictures an attempt to capture the ever-changing appearance of light upon surfaces in nature. Objectivity was all-important to the Impressionists, and their paintings sought to express the total experience of the changing face of nature throughout the course of a day. Monet's series of the 'Haystack' and 'Rouen Cathedral' are good examples of this. The pupil, with background guidance from the teacher begins to deepen his knowledge of painting through a study of various techniques, using the knowledge of colour and composition he has gained in previous lessons to explore the modern concepts of man and nature. His ability to think more analytically is brought into play, not simply in order that he becomes clever at directing opinion, but to enable him to strengthen and consolidate his

own position in life through an understanding of what is trying to express itself in modern painting. Through this study of contemporary artistic problems the pupil can become a true man of his times, not conditioned to think in this way or that, or to be swayed by popular opinion, but someone who can work out of the unique forces of his own individuality and at the same time yearns to recognise in others what lives within himself, the mysterious workings of the Spirit which reveals the origin of all men.

"Yearning for indivisible being, liberation from the sensory illusion of our ephemeral life: this is the state of mind at the bottom of all art. Its great goal is to dissolve the whole system of our partial sensations, to disclose an unearthly being that dwells behind all things, to shatter the mirror of life to behold being." Franz Marc.

Ted Roberts is artist, designer and art teacher at Michael Hall