

Artistic Expression

of Children in the Atrium

TILDE COCCHINI

Tilde Camosso Cocchini studied art at the Accademia di Belle Arti ("Academy of Fine Arts") in Rome, from which she graduated in 1944. Her drawings have been in exhibits and publications. She has teaching experience in the Montessori section of the Virgilio Secondary School, at professional institutes, at the Liceo Scientifico ("Science High School") and other high schools.

She has participated in Level II formation courses of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd given in Rome and has worked both with children as a catechist and with adults as a formation leader. Tilde's atrium, opened in the parish Nostra Signora di Lourdes ("Our Lady of Lourdes"), was visited by Pope John Paul II in 1983.

Tilde has collaborated with Sofia and Gianna in the atrium on Via degli Orsini since 1977.

For many years I have been observing and reflecting on the child's capacity for artistic expression and on the assistance that the adult can give the child from the first years of life, and so I thank you for asking me to write something on this topic.

The children draw with pleasure in the atrium. Their papers are full of drawings made with black or colored pencils, with crayons or oil colors, and with felt-tipped pens. (The catechist is cautioned against increasing the number of drawing and painting instruments beyond what is essential, especially with the youngest children. In the brief time available, we run the risk that the children may be more attracted to the instruments than the content they want to express.) Much of the children's time in the atrium is occupied in this activity, and some choose to continue to express themselves through the activity of drawing throughout the period of childhood.

The term "to express oneself" is derived from "expression." It is a bringing out, a pushing out of something from the inside to the outside. The discovery of the ability to express oneself is for every human being a great joy experienced for its own sake. This pleasure can be lost through the mistaken intervention of an adult. However, if the adult is capable of observing and understanding this potential of the child, then

the adult can help the child to continue to experience this joy, to develop it, or to find it again if it has been lost.

In our atriums the child finds an adult who announces the Word of God in a prepared environment with material that has the function of helping the child in meditation with the Interior Teacher, together with other human beings of the same and different ages, who share this same purpose of listening and working in silence.

Maria Montessori wrote in 1926, "What is important is this: that you, child, develop to the greatest fullness and beauty the divine germ that was put in the secret of your soul, and I will make myself your servant" (*Popular Culture*). We have the

In C.J.'s first year in the atrium he would draw very intricate pictures of airplanes and could explain how the wings had to be shaped in a particular way so that the air would travel over them to keep the plane aloft. He was technically minded and drew many of these finely detailed pictures. Then one day, a few weeks after he had seen the presentation of the parable of the mustard seed, he came up to me with three seeds on the palm of his hand—a lima bean, a grain of wheat and a mustard seed. He asked, "Which one is the biggest?" I said, "It is the lima bean." He replied, "No, it is the mustard seed." When I started to protest, he said, "The mustard seed is the biggest seed; it is far bigger than you can see with your eye. Don't you remember about the kingdom of heaven?"

—C.J., age 5

*St. Hubert Catholic Church
Hoffman Estates, Illinois*

good fortune of finding the human being in her or his most creative phase, and precisely because of this we must become the “useless servants” of the gospel (Luke 17:10).

The children who arrive at the atrium have already had experience with drawing and perhaps also with clay (painting and modeling) work. If they have been allowed the freedom to work spontaneously in this activity as long as desired, then they will already have a repertoire of figures they can draw that enable them to continue to express themselves.

Among these primary figures two are most frequently drawn: the spiral circle, and dots that become a line. When children discover the resemblance between the figures that they draw and something they know in their environment, they will begin their first realistic drawings: houses, trees, the human person, the sun, flowers.

Each child makes the discovery for herself or himself. These realistic drawings do not necessarily indicate a more advanced level of artistic development; they are simply drawings that adults recognize and approve.

The commonly held view that children’s artistic expressions are without value if they are not realistic prevents children from drawing what pleases them. It spurs the adult to intervene and propose realistic drawings to the child prematurely, without regard for the personal development of the child as deduced from preceding drawings. (See Figure 1.)

If children are allowed to be free, they will move on to realistic drawings gradually, departing always from their primary figures. Indeed, we often see the primary figures hidden in the realistic figures. In the drawing “The Mustard Seed,” made by a five-year-old girl in the Atrium of the Good Shepherd in Croatia, we find two primary figures: the spiral circle and emerging dots. (See Figure 2.) When primary figures are present in a marked way, as in this case, it may indicate the child’s own personal experience.

Children who have been interrupted in this activity and have not been able to discover the evolution of their first figures on their own arrive in our atriums with difficulties expressing themselves artistically.

The Norm Is the Child

In order to make the child’s desire for self-expression reemerge afresh, it is necessary that the catechist see clearly that this desire cannot spring from the catechist’s choice and way of

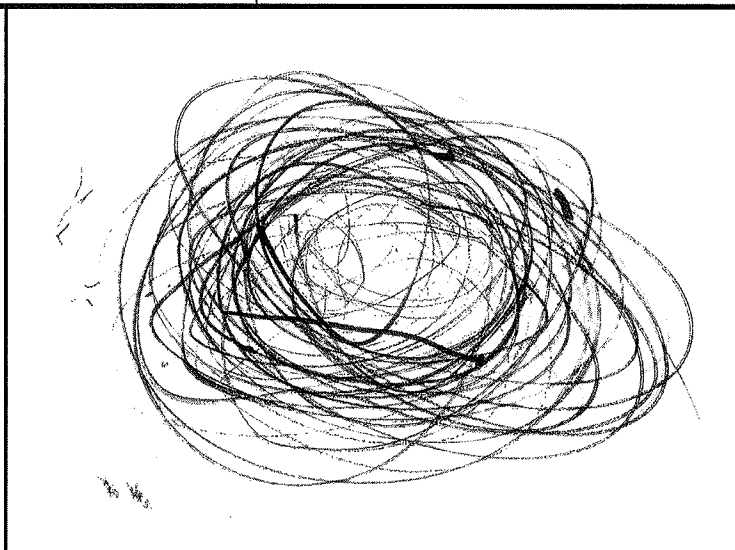


Figure 1
Takara, age 3
Church of the Epiphany
Washington, D.C.

In an earlier session in the atrium, we had done the Altar lesson, in which we talk about the altar as a table where we share a special meal as God’s family—a meal to which Jesus calls us and in which he is present with us. The day this was drawn, we’d done the globe lesson, in which we see where we live and where Jesus lived and then reflect on how, despite the time and distance, we still know the story of Jesus all over the earth. The picture was drawn by Takara, who said it was “The Altar Ball.” I asked if she meant “globe,” and she said, “No, it’s an Altar Ball.” She explained that it’s because Jesus is with us, and we are all with him, everywhere. And so this is all an altar. Sofia Cavalletti has added there is perhaps an intuition of the cosmic aspect of the Mass.

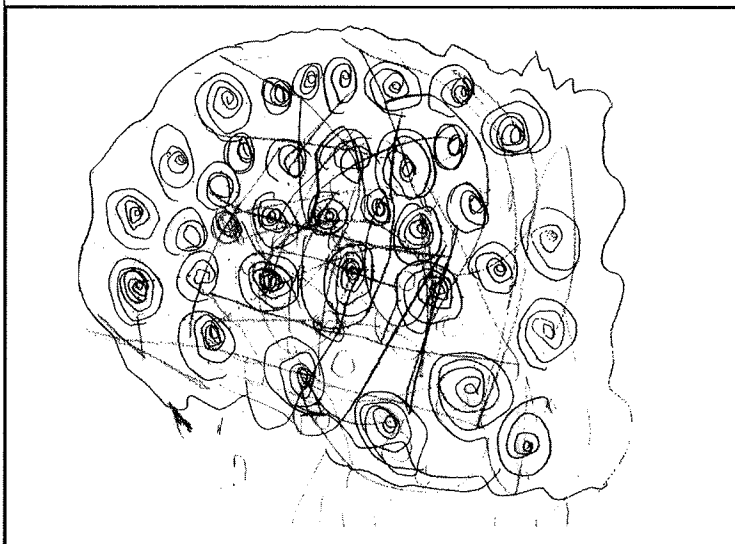


Figure 2
“The Mustard Seed”
Josipa, age 5
Dakovo, Croatia

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seeing things; rather, it is the child who will indicate the time and the manner. It is the child that must choose the form of the drawing. If the child finds it difficult to draw figures on a sheet of paper, tracing work may help, or a ready-made figure that needs completion and has a particular learning intent could be used, such as nomenclature (as in historical geography and objects of the altar). For the other topics (parables, gospel narratives, sacraments), it is better to assist children in attempting to express themselves freely.

After the child has worked with a material, the catechist can recall with the child some words or phrases of the accompanying text in a way that enables the child to imagine the scene and then draw any detail that has captured attention. The ability to wait and give the child all the time required in order to absorb from the environment the incentive to try is what is most needed.

We should be convinced that the tendency toward expression is always present at any age because it is not within the power of the human being to destroy it. One can suffocate it and be unable to see it covered under mistaken interventions; however, with adequate help, this tendency can emerge again, even in traced drawings through variations that reveal that the child is particularly taken with the topic they represent.

Our attitude is important. Montessori writes, "The teacher moves slowly and silently; she comes closer to [the one] who calls her—she watches so that whoever has need of her will feel her presence immediately—and who does not need her, [does] not realize she exists" (*Freedom and Discipline of the Child*).

We are spectators of a special concentration in the atrium when a child chooses to do a drawing that he or she invents. Through the drawing the child expresses a particular listening that God has engaged the child in, a contemplation that we can compare to that other free expression of the child: prayer. For that too is a response to listening, and we know how important it is that the adult give the child all the time needed to receive the Word of God, to absorb it, to make it her or his own and to enjoy it. When this time is given, the response comes forward spontaneously. Just as we put care into ensuring that prayer is not a mechanical repetition of formulas, we also need to take care that the child is able to express herself or himself as spontaneously as possible.

Emily, age 5

The Atrium at St. Patrick Parish
Tacoma, Washington

The children had just been presented with the parable of the Seed. This was an artwork using clay done in the same atrium session. After the session, the adults put it on a blue cloth for the photo.

Photo by Kim Ward



It is so important that the catechist learn the necessity of adopting the child's rhythm if the catechist wishes to help the prayer of the child be the child's own. Caution needs to be exercised in interventions during and after the execution of a drawing.

Let us recall that the term "expression" does not necessarily mean that what is expressed is directed toward others to communicate something, although the term is usually understood this way, eliciting the question, "What does this [drawing] mean?" Even the question, "Would you like to talk to me about your drawing?" can be embarrassing for the child of three to six years of age.

Graphic figures are the child's expressive vocabulary. If, after finishing, the child shows the catechist a drawing, the child honors the catechist by sharing it, and we catechists should rise to the height of this honor. We should not be seeking to see something we recognize. If we do not succeed in understanding what the child has drawn, this is not the moment to ask the child directly and, most especially, not to interpret the drawing to the child. One can only attempt a short comment or otherwise risk distorting the child's expression by inviting

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a child to make drawings that do not correspond to the child. Sometimes a smile and a few words such as, "It is beautiful," or "I like it," are enough to communicate to the child that we are content with the work.

The child should feel free and satisfied with the work solely because the child has done it. If the child speaks about a work the adult should listen attentively, always measuring his or her words and remembering that the catechist is neither the initiator of the work nor the one to whom it is addressed. It is enough, at times, to recall a phrase or an important word in the text with the child in order to let the child feel our support and give the help that will permit him or her to continue. This is nourishment for new experiences.

When the child has acquired verbal language, knows how to speak that language well, and has a desire to express himself or herself that includes the purpose of relating to others, the adult will gradually become aware that the child speaks with greater desire about his or her work. While what we have written about the younger child remains valid, our intervention can now be different, bearing in mind that we can never be respectful or sensitive enough in our relationship with the child.

If children perceive that their work is not appreciated, they develop a sense of distrust, inferiority or rebellion with manifestations that we do not comprehend. I have an example from the three-to-six atrium that speaks to this point. One child often drew a deer in the atrium. The catechist wanted the child to do some other drawing, one more related to the topics she touched upon, so one day she interrupted the child as he again began to draw a deer. The child said nothing; however, the next week the child did not return. After a bit of time had passed we asked the mother what had happened, and she herself had no explanation for why the child refused to return, saying, "He used to like to come."

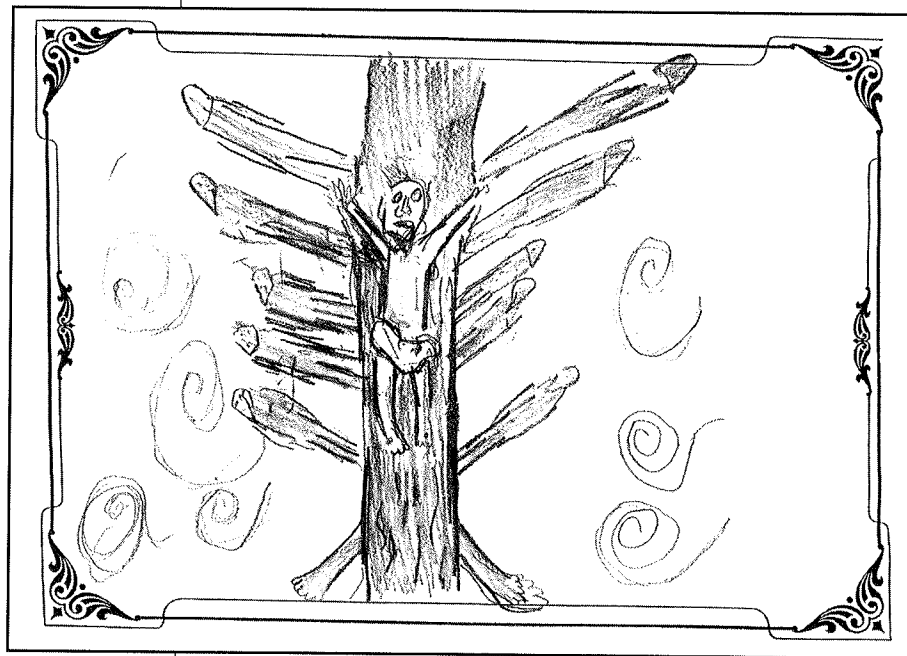
The catechist told the mother about the deer drawings and the mother told her that the child would draw a deer when he was happy. His action of drawing a deer in the atrium was a

demonstration that he felt content. What did he experience when he was prevented from drawing it?

Often, the children have a favorite drawing, and frequently they begin their activity with it, or return to it between works. It is necessary to understand that they draw it because they are feeling at ease or wish to relax, or for some other reason we do not know but that is valid for them. While they are engaged in this activity we should intervene only if they are disturbing others.

We catechists of the Good Shepherd have the good fortune of finding the essence of theology expressed in some of the children's drawings, as well as some glimpses of the relationship that God is living with God's creature. (Revisit the first five drawings published in the *Religious Potential of the Child from Six to Twelve* [not yet available in English].) We should know how to enjoy being able to see in each drawing the free work of a being that is constructing itself.

Translated by Maureen Armas



Harry, age 9
Christ Church Cathedral
Nashville, Tennessee

This picture was drawn after True Vine I presentation.
The wisps to the right and left of the Vine are the wind.