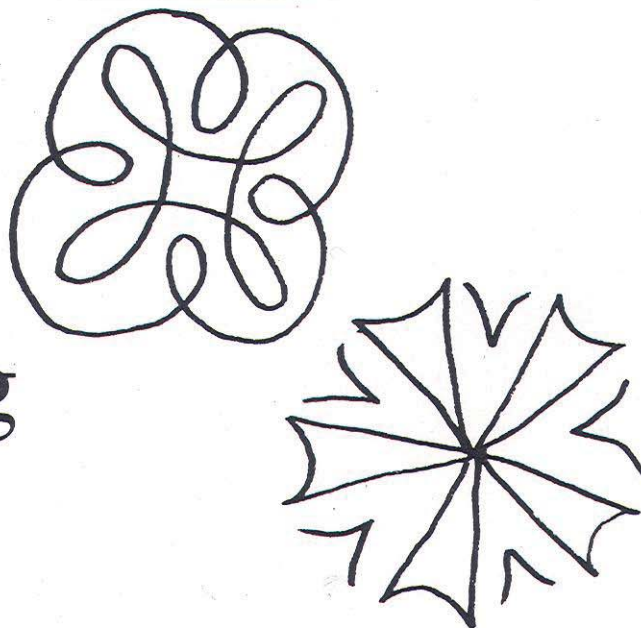


Form Drawing

by ROSEMARY GEBERT



Form drawing is taught in Classes 1 to 5, and consists essentially of freehand drawing of non-representational forms. It was an entirely new subject when Rudolf Steiner introduced it in the first Waldorf school in 1919. Today it is still new, in the sense that we are still discovering fresh aspects of it, and different applications.

Looking at form drawings in a school exhibition – rhythmically repeated patterns, reflections and rotations, geometric figures, intricate interlaced designs – parents may ask: ‘What is the purpose of this type of drawing? Does it help my child’s development?’ or they may wonder: ‘If, as the class teacher says, feelings are the key to educating seven-to-fourteen year olds, does form drawing really affect the feelings? And if it does, are the effects good?’ These are likely and legitimate questions, because Waldorf education claims to teach each subject so that it furthers the children’s development, as well as adding to their knowledge and skills.

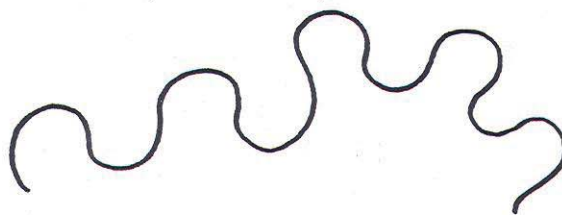
It is not easy to see the educational value of form drawing by looking at the children’s drawings, for its effectiveness is realised in the process, not in the product. It is the *act* of drawing that educates, not the result. The drawings displayed in an exhibition are a visual record of the process that produced them, but they cannot tell us much about it. We should learn more if we could observe children in class. In Class I or II we might see them ‘moving’ the form, walking it on the

floor, experiencing it in a whole-body fashion. We should watch them translate the large three-dimensional experience into a much smaller, two-dimensional form on paper. We should see the external part of the process in action.

Even if we cannot observe a class, we can gain some insight into the children’s experience by putting ourselves briefly through part of a similar process. The following two experiments were designed to provide that process for trainee Waldorf teachers, and to convince them that movement affects mood (even in sceptical adults) and that moving in specific forms produces predictable effects. The experiments are based not on the fine, subtle eye/hand movements used in drawing, but on whole-body movements which have more intense, and therefore more easily observed results. (They should *not* be used with children, for whom the forms would be fine, but for whom the duration, intensity, and above all the self-examination would be unsuitable.)

Experiment I

In a space large enough to allow freedom of movement, walk in wavy curves:



Keep the curves even, continuous and flowing. Move freely in the available space. Continue for 3 minutes, giving the experience your full attention. Then sit down and consider these questions:

- a) How did I feel while moving in this form?
- b) How do I feel, what is my mood, now that I have stopped?
- c) If I had continued to move in the form for a longer time, how would I probably have felt?

Most adults answered:

- a) I felt pleasantly calm, relaxed.
- b) After stopping, I still feel relaxed, and peaceful, friendly.
- c) If continuing the movement intensified the mood, I should feel dreamy, 'spaced out', perhaps silly or giggly.

Experiment II

Move as before but in this form:



Keep the lines straight, the angles accurate. Give it your full attention for three minutes. Then sit down and consider the same three questions. Trainees said:

- a) At first I liked the precision. Soon the constant changes of direction annoyed me. The movement seemed jerky and automatic.
- b) After stopping I feel alert, but tense and restless.
- c) If the mood intensified I would probably feel irritable, keyed-up.

Many years' experience has convinced me that most adults have similar sensations. They are often surprised to find how directly their *feelings are affected* by moving in certain forms. They soon realise that children, being more sensitive, are more easily and profoundly affected, even by the subtle movements of drawings.

Hermann Kirchner, who developed the use of form drawing with handicapped children, called his method Dynamic Drawing*.

The word dynamic in its various connotations sums up the quality in form drawing that affects the emotions so directly, and which makes such a ready appeal to children, with their love of movement and action.

A form drawing is a present record of a past movement, the remaining trace of a finished gesture. Just as tracks in the snow record the passage of a skier, or the meander of a dried-out water-course records the flow of a river, so does a form-drawing record the movement that created it. That movement, expressed in line, is the vital essence of form drawing. To preserve the essential gesture, the use of colour is restricted. To 'colour in the background' is to form surfaces, areas, that detract from the line and rob it of vitality. Children love to 'colour in', but that sometimes rather mechanical activity should not be allowed to blur and dilute the strong lines of their forms. Line, strong and eloquent, is the essence of form drawing. It needs no embellishment.

Having established the connection between the dynamic quality of form drawing and its effect on the feelings, we might still ask ourselves: 'Is it right for teachers knowingly to influence children's feelings? Doesn't it smack of manipulation?' That is an important question that deals with a basic principle of Waldorf education. Much has been written about it and to deal with it in depth here would take us too far. However, common sense supplies two partial answers:

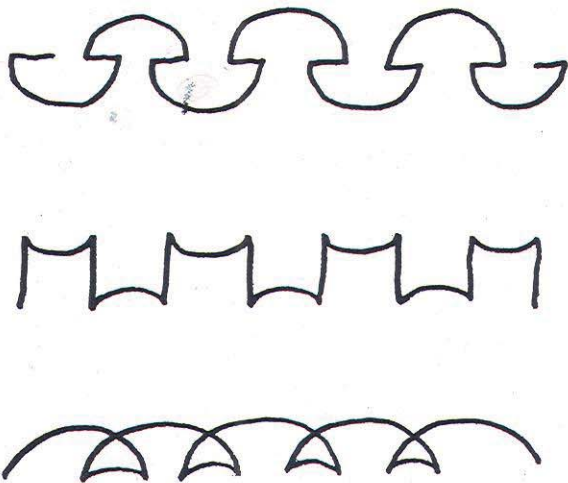
- a) children's feelings are affected all the time, willy nilly, by everything around them; by advertisers and the media; by Nature and technology; by the doings and sayings of friends, family, teachers and by a thousand other things.
- b) children's emotions need to be, not manipulated, but refined, guided, towards balance and harmony and eventual self-control. Such guidance is an essential part of the long development which changes a helpless baby, a self-centered toddler into a rational, socially mature adult.

So we should not ask if children's feelings should be knowingly influenced, but rather, wonder *who* is influencing them anyway, and

**Dynamic Drawing: its therapeutic aspect.* (R. S. School N.Y.)

**The Way of a Child* (Rudolf Steiner Press 1979).

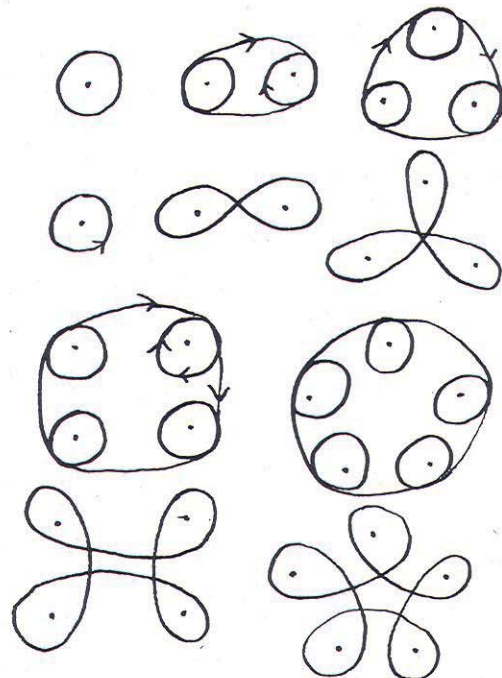
In general, angular forms are related to thinking, they have an awakening tendency, and increase alertness and concentration. Curved forms, on the other hand, call on the unconscious forces of the will, they have a relaxing effect. The class may be quieter than usual while drawing curves. Designs combining straight and curved lines are more balanced, tending to neither extreme, and are related to the ebb and flow of feeling.

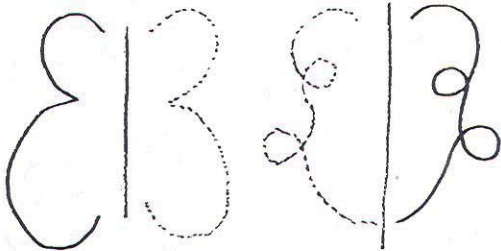
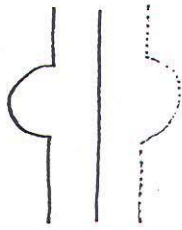


The teacher has here to hand a pleasant means to alert a sleepy class or to soothe an over-excited one. Individual children can benefit from a few minutes of drawing daily, tailored to their particular needs. An angular form might help a dreamy child to be more alert, especially if the line crosses its own track, or includes a reversed direction. A form using gentle curves might calm a flushed and talkative child who is over-excited. The principle here is oversimplified, and needs tact in application. It is important to expect the children's best work. Is the form well chosen? Too easy? Too difficult? At what point in the drawing does the difficulty occur? As the experiments with adults showed, timing is important. A form that is soothing and calming initially may reduce the class to giggles if overdone. A form intended to make children alert could make them tired and restive if carried on too long.

The forms taught early in Class I may seem very simple, but the teacher expects a high degree of care and effort. To walk a form and then draw it, to keep lines straight, curves smooth, angles sharp, to begin a line in the right place, and stop it exactly where you mean to; to centre your form on the page; these are demanding tasks for 6 year olds. They train hand and eye to work together, and develop other 'readiness for writing' skills, just at the time when the children are learning their letters.

When the first writing lessons give way to arithmetic, and numbers occupy the main lesson, form drawing again can play a supportive role. It is easy to learn to count, to recite the numbers. One-to-one correspondence is not so easy, even when you are counting shells or acorns. Does it matter if you miss out a number, or count one twice? . . . But if the numbers are represented by your classmates, and you can run loops round them while you count – then it's easier. After all, you would not miss out a friend, would you? And if by mistake you did, they would tell you. And when you draw you remember where they stood, and where you ran, and soon the numbers have real meaning, and 5 can never again seem much the same as 4 or 6.



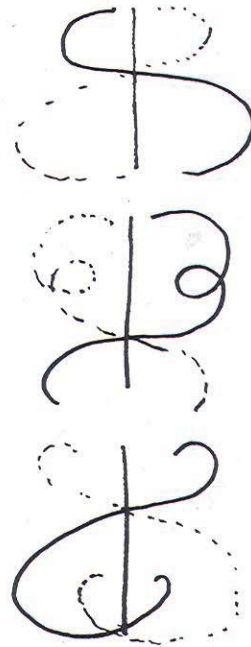


That is multisensory learning, where ears and eyes and voice, hands and feet, mind and memory, all work together to reinforce each other.

It is impossible to do justice to the whole field of form drawing within a short article, so we shall look at a single category: symmetry designs. We can follow their development through from simple to complex, from Class 1 to Class 5, and see how they meet the changing needs of the child.

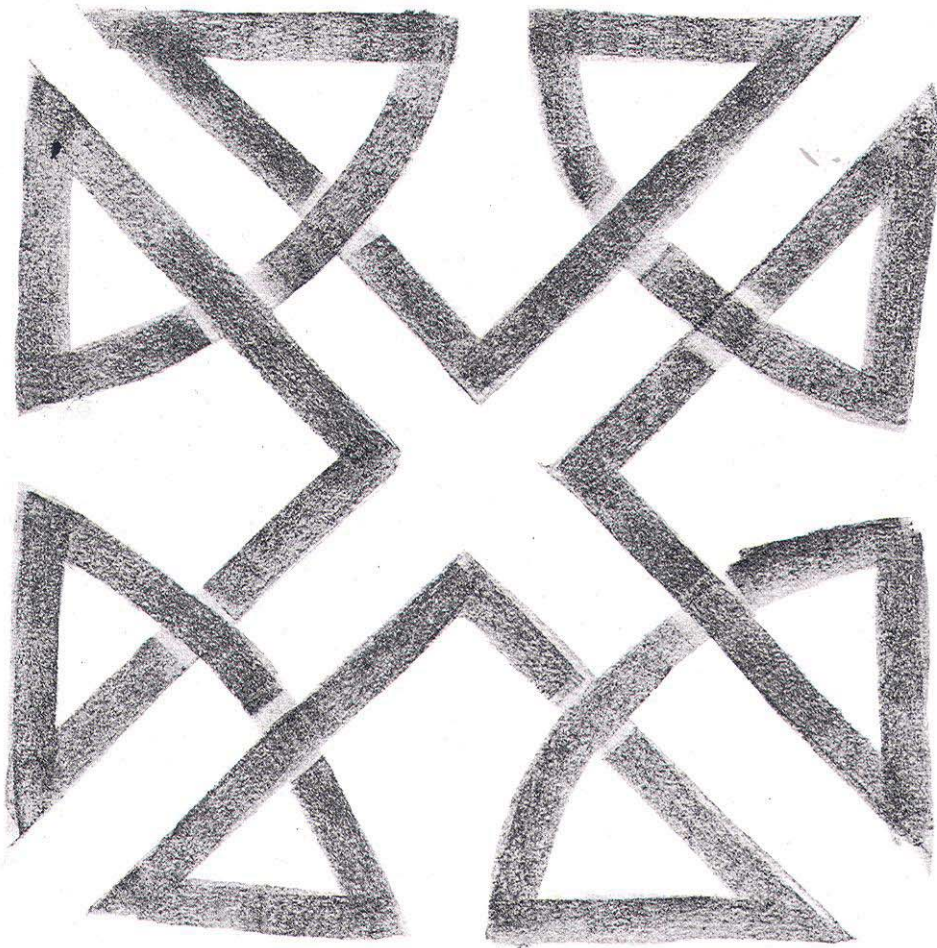
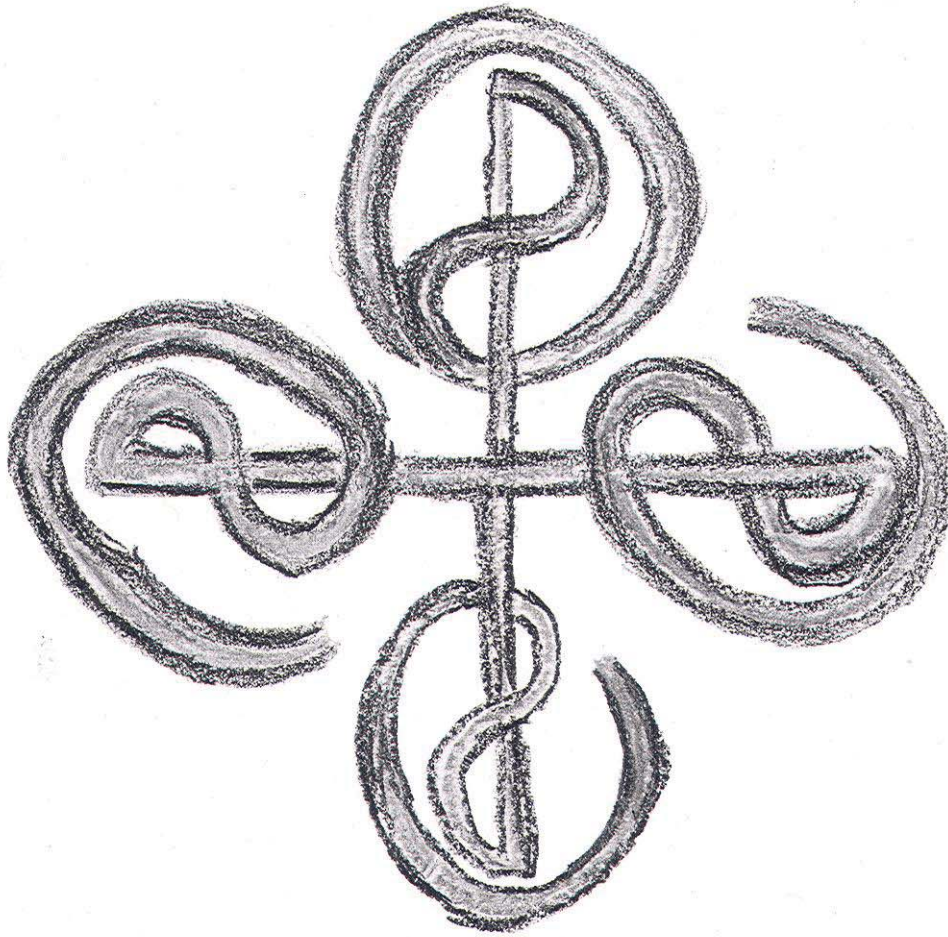
Soon after birth, babies begin to explore how to live and move in a three-dimensional world ruled by gravity. By the age of six they move confidently upright and love to skip and run and jump and climb, but they have a new pre-occupation: the inner and outer experience of left and right. Somewhere along the way from infancy to Class 1 they have become 'left-handers' or 'right-handers'. Now they try to deal with the *reality* – that one side of their body has a different quality and different skills, from the other, and with the *idea* that one side is left, the other right. 'Do I write with my right hand?' 'How can my right foot be the wrong foot?' Many traditional children's games stress the struggle to come to terms with laterality. Children signal it in their drawings by a strict attention to symmetry. . . . A central house, flanked by equal numbers of identical trees, has flowers lined up on each side of a garden path. . . . Form drawing provides 'completion exercises' during the seventh year, so called because the teacher draws one side of

a design and the children are encouraged to complete it. The senses of movement and balance, a feeling for left and right, and proper proportion, are all called on by this kind of task.

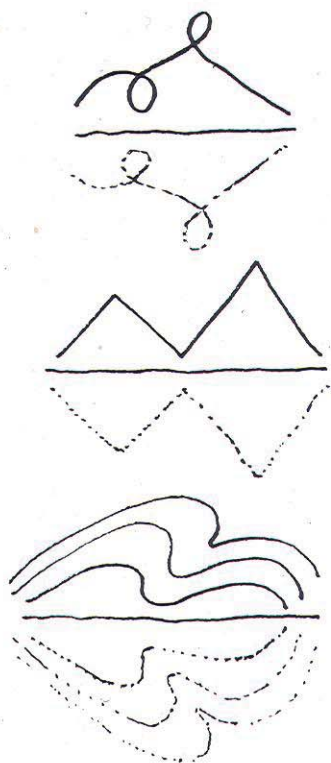


The concept of left and right implies awareness of something midway between these extremes. We experience our right side or left side with respect to an invisible centre line. Nose marks it, mouth straddles it, otherwise our features are neatly one on each side of it. Breastbone marks the centre too but limbs, again, are symmetrically arranged. That invisible mid-line can be a very real barrier to some children – often those who are cross-lateral (preferring for example right eye but left hand). They tend to use the right hand for activities to their right, and the left hand for activities on their left. Thus, if such a child, standing facing the blackboard, is to draw a line from left to right straight across it, he will want to change hands half way across. The following kind of design, where the line crosses the axis of symmetry, is very helpful to such children. However, the imagination, ability to visualize, the awareness of movement away from, towards, and over the central line, all these are called upon, and thus the whole class benefits.

Four-fold symmetry drawings. Form-drawing was one of Steiner's most far-sighted educational innovations (opposite).



We experience left/right symmetry (often called mirroring) in relation to our own bodies. We project our inner experience outwards. Not so with symmetry around a horizontal axis. Our bodies provide no above/below symmetry; what is above the waist is quite unlike what is below it; head and feet are a polarity. Yet this type of symmetry often occurs around us in Nature, especially as reflections in still water. Because it is an observed, rather than an inwardly felt, experience, reflection designs demand more objectivity than does mirroring. Children deal more easily with them during their ninth year.



The time around their ninth year is difficult for many children. No longer do they feel themselves to be the hub around which a generally benevolent world revolves. The long dream of childhood finally fades away, and they see with new eyes. Uncomfortable adjustments must be made, to fit into this different-seeming world. Form drawing offers opportunities to consider the world within and the world without, imaginatively and artistically, and objectively. Such designs

emphasise centre and circumference, the interplay of forces out from the centre and in from the periphery, in expansion and contraction. (see page 8)

Now we can move on to 3, 4 and 5-fold designs with quite complex mirroring. As with some earlier, simpler designs, the teacher draws only one section, allowing the class to complete the rest. Younger children enjoyed being surprised by the finished design. In Class 5 it is better for the children to visualize the completed design before they begin to draw, and later to check their mental picture against the real thing. As a final, more complex step, this type of design can rotate around a central point, rather than being mirrored at each axis.

Form drawing ends with Class 5 but its good effects continue to be felt afterwards. Kindred subjects such as drawing and illustrating, geometry, and design for crafts benefit most directly. But artistic ability, some degree of technical skill, imagination, and accurate observation can be building stones for many school subjects.

Certain abilities and attitudes that form drawing encourages go well beyond this. They can outlast school days and work on into the future. They include: a sense for beauty, harmony, and proportion; an imagination lively enough to take practical limitations in stride; the will to size up problems and find appropriate solutions; flexible thinking to adapt to changing situations; and the integrity that comes from being content only with your best work. Such abilities, nurtured in an artistic sphere in childhood, can grow and mature into life skills in adulthood. It is difficult to foresee what life will be like when today's school children are grown up. We can be sure, though, that such skills will help these young adults meet and deal with what life may eventually bring to them.

After class-teaching, Rosemary Gebert gave courses in form-drawing at the Waldorf Institute of Mercy College.

For further reading she recommends 'Form Drawing' by Hans R. Niederh usen and Margaret Fr hlich (R. S. School N.Y.)