

LANGUAGE OF THE LINE: a Reinvented Art-form of the Waldorf Schools

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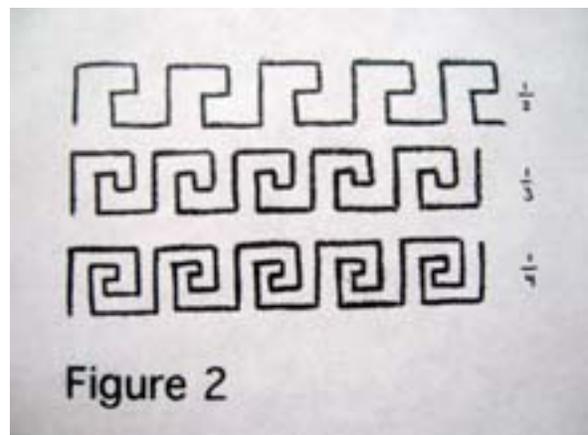
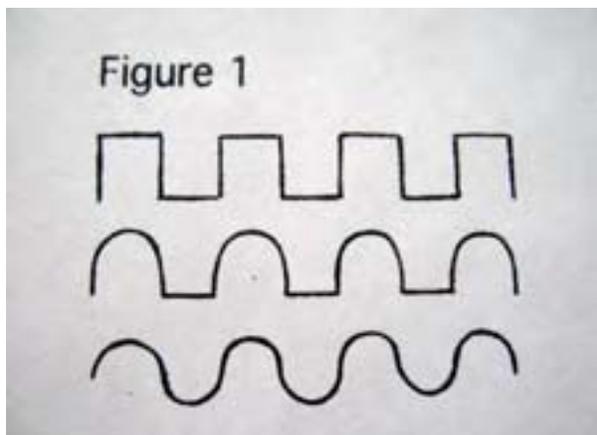
"The lines and forms are visible signs of divine gestures. Learn to understand them and you will comprehend how God created the world."

~ Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446)

One of the many unique features of the Waldorf-Steiner Schools is the subject known as Form Drawing. Taught in Classes 1 through 5, but ideally going right through to Class 12, Form Drawing is introduced in such a way as to show the young child that all shapes in the world are derived from the two-fold alphabet of form: straightness and roundness. All drawing consists only of the straight line and curved line or the combination of the two. As the Renaissance mathematician and astronomer, Johannes Kepler (1571-1680), said: "...God in His ineffable resolve chose straightness and roundness in order to endow the world with the signature of the Divine. Thus the All-wise originated the world of form, the total essence of which is encompassed in the contrasts of the straight and rounded line." Straight line and curve are the *ying* and *yang*, the great polarities of form.

In Form Drawing children are encouraged to draw free-hand straight and curved linear forms in rhythmic repetition and to practice simple linear patterns and designs. Over the years, these drawings gradually become more and more complex while their practice improves hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, and aids in the development of handwriting.

One type of Form Drawing is the ribbon pattern or running form. This drawing repeats a particular form motif in a horizontal direction from left to right. In introducing such forms, the teacher might have the children walk in stiff, straight lines, changing direction abruptly at specified points like a guard on duty atop a castle wall (fig. 1).

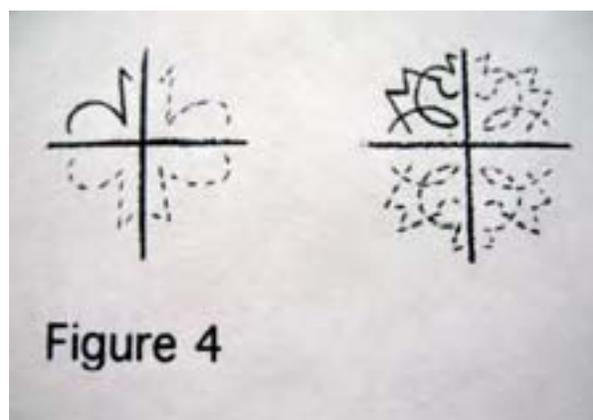
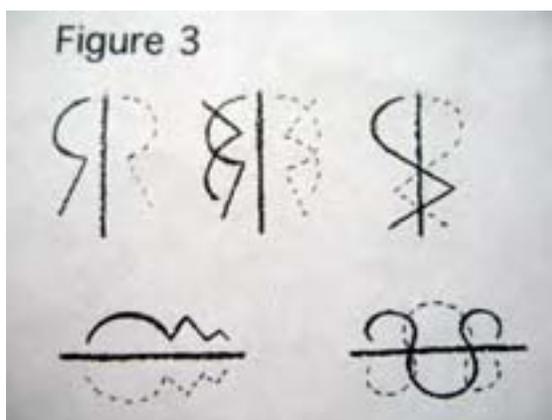


Or with the storyline of a giant stamping his feet the class might act out this form. Then the class could move in a flowing, serpentine, running river-like form. The children experience the different qualities in a playful, imaginative manner and then draw the forms on their paper.

Forms such as these can even help to illustrate the ideas of fractions and ratios in a completely pictorial and artistic way (fig. 2). The Greek key patterns, found on ancient painted vases (sometimes indicating meter in music), are perfect examples of the mathematics revealed in linear forms. The child is given a very visual, pre-numerical way of working with fractions prior to the study of fractions in Class 4. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), founder of Waldorf-Steiner education, suggested: "It is meant that especially in the very young child that the intellect, the intelligence which works isolated in the soul, ought not yet to be developed. However, all thinking ought to be developed by means of

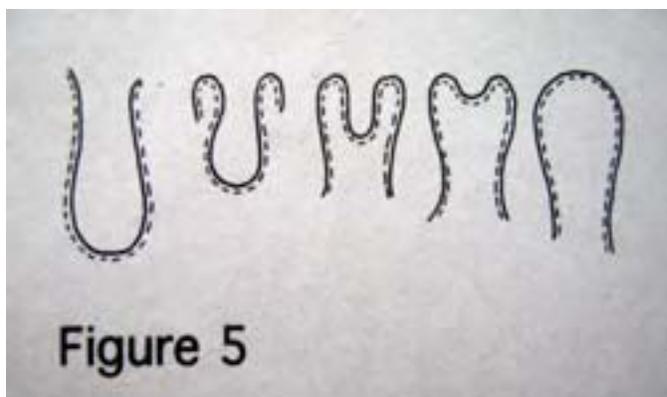
the visual, the pictorial.” This visual thinking can be developed in the early classes by means of Form Drawing.

Symmetry exercises are another important type of Form Drawing. A kind of visual measuring through cognitive feeling is developed in the child by solving such form problems. By completing the other half of a form that the teacher has drawn on the board, the child can find his or her inner balance and a sense of natural harmony (fig. 3). Rudolf Steiner said in the fourth chapter of *The Kingdom of Childhood*: “In this way one educates the child toward a real feeling for form, toward a feeling for harmony, for symmetry, and toward a feeling of relationships. In this way one can guide the child into those harmonies which also exist in the world around us.” And further on he says: “...the child will develop on the one hand more thoughtfulness in his observations and on the other hand more intuition in his thinking.” One could say a kind of moral imagination is introduced through such exercises that insist on the virtue of veracity and visual truth.



Besides the vertical (left/right) symmetry introduced late in Class 1, horizontal (up/down) symmetry may be brought late in class two followed by exercises that cross the line of symmetry. Four-fold symmetry problems may be brought in Class 3 (fig. 4). These exercises are not only a real challenge for the students, they can be great fun as well.

Symmetry exercises are used as a diagnostic tool, as children with perceptual difficulties, such as dyslexia and other learning differences, can be spotted early on by means of their drawings. Continued Form Drawing given by a qualified and practiced teacher can work as an aid in the correcting of such learning differences.

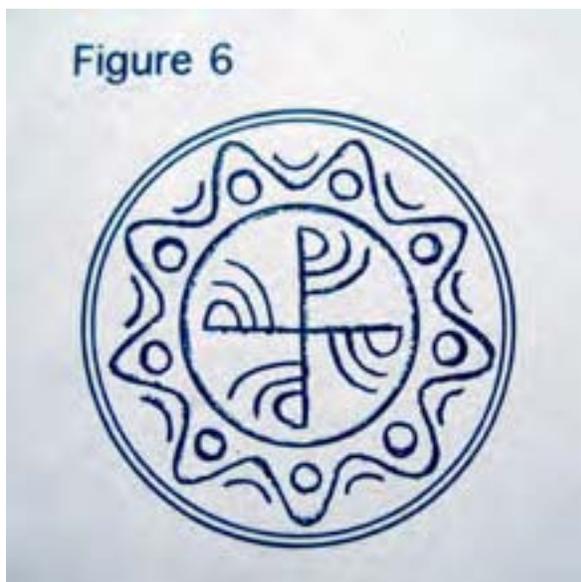


Metamorphosis exercises have a place in the Form Drawing curriculum as early as in Class 2. These exercises encourage a mobility of thinking when one follows a form through a process of development that can include inside-out and upside-down reversals (fig. 5). This is a very helpful preparation for the organic sciences (such as Class 5 botany) and bears a direct relationship to projective geometry. Again, flexibility in thinking is encouraged entirely through the pictorial.

Another type of form design practiced throughout the classes is the drawing of self-contained forms: circles, spirals, lemniscates, triangles, squares, stars and independent polygons of all kinds. Children

should be familiar with all these forms through repeated drawing of them from different points of view. Poems, songs, stories, games, dances, and plays support this learning of the language of form.

In the fifth class, immersed in ancient cultures such as India and Greece, the children take their mastery of running forms and symmetry exercises to a new level in the mandala and shield designs. Here they place familiar line forms within the round form of the circle (fig. 6). As young Indians or Greeks, students may create their own circular designs in full color for their class play.



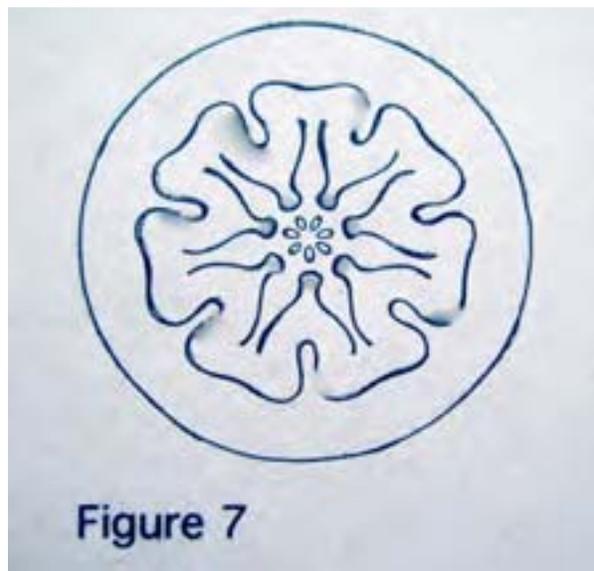
In this way the mandala and shield can be seen as the culmination of the different types of Form Drawing coming together in one design.

This is particularly so if Form Drawing is continued through to Class 12 where students may experience the principle of metamorphosis working within the circle, as in Rudolf Steiner's planetary seals (fig. 7).

The Form Drawing of each class can parallel and enhance the subject matter taught at that level. Ribbon patterns, symmetry exercises, elements of metamorphosis, self-contained forms and seal designs all contribute to learning the language of the line.

Students discover from their own practical experience in Form Drawing that forms, lines, and gestures speak of particular qualities. The qualities of precision, sharpness, or rigidity in angular forms are contrasted for the children with the qualities they perceive in forms made of flowing, graceful, moving curves.

Even if they do not become artists, architects, engineers, or designers, such a grasp of the language of linear form will translate into a rich and beneficial experience of the relationships and patterns that exist among all things in the world.



Form Drawing serves the student in at least six areas of education. *Mathematics* is prepared for on an intuitive level by the “measuring and weighing” of form ratios, proportions, and fractions as we saw in fig. 2. The *Science* of form is observed and practiced through drawing many of the marvelous form patterns existing in nature (see fig. 5). From the snowflake and the honeycomb to flower forms and water patterns, the incredible language of form opens up. *Humanities/History* provides a cultural connection to visual designs from Indian and Norse mythology, Greek, Roman, and Medieval history (see fig. 2). *Physical Education*, coordination and balance are related to how we live within our organism. The experience of symmetry whether it is in our perceiving, grasping or gesturing movements, is essential to physical coordination (fig. 3); Form Drawing deals directly with this

problem. *Moral Balance* in the life of the individual is also constantly being worked on through Form Drawing. Again, on an intuitive level, the student experiences the artistic differences between “straight” and “crooked,” and “upright” and “bent.” Such gesture-meanings originate in the language of form and shape the ethical stature of the child. The various *Arts and Crafts* are also aided by work in Form Drawing. This is most obvious when one considers the decorative and ornamental patterns incorporated into main lesson books and also articulated in handwork, woodwork and metalwork design motifs throughout the Waldorf school (fig. 6 and 7).

Form Drawing is a subject that lays a basis for helping the child grow into a well-rounded human being. It is a language capable of spelling-out for the young student the incredible range of visual meaning in the world, and at the same time making visible the beauty and balance that can live within one's own soul life. Form Drawing is clearly a language that enhances our communication with the world in all its many forms.

Ancient cultures always developed a language of linear form-symbols before a written alphabet appeared. The fifth century Greek Neoplatonic philosopher, Proclus (410-485 AD), declared in strong ideas the shaping power of linear design: “Ars Lineandi [Form Drawing] is the recaptured memory of the invisible ideas of the soul, and this is its achievement: it gives life to its own cognition, awakens the spirit, purifies understanding, and brings the formative element, which is part of our being, to light. It eliminates the baseness and ignorance that cling to us from birth, and liberates us from the bondage of unreason. It rouses the soul from sleep and impels it towards the spirit. It makes us a true human being, allows us to behold the spirit and guides us towards the gods.” It only makes sense that a child's education should include learning an art that teaches one how to become a “true human being!”