

# PAINTING AND THE CHILD

by

Caroline von Heydebrand

translated by Irene Brown

All children love color. Every healthy child delights in the red, yellow, and blue of flowers on the green meadow or as they appear woven or dyed into his apparel. Children always have favorite colors with which they feel friendly and happy.

They seize any blunted stub of colored chalk and feel impelled to throw themselves wholly into some creative and colorful outburst on paper, floor, table, or wall! Still happier the child who can dip his brush deep in a cup of fluid color to beautify or adorn some large surface. This child has a feeling of healthy satisfaction, for colors are in their own true element in water. Their waving, shimmering, and streaming nature is manifest the moment they lose their heavy and earthy hardness. Thus it is a healthy and natural thing to dissolve and free the color from its solid state, lifting it into an activity more suited to its creative nature, as we pour it into clean cups. Children understand this quite naturally and find most happily that the brush is no pencil; and they feel, as they lay the color broadly over a flat surface, that this wide brush has quite another duty to perform from any pencil, that painting is something quite different from drawing.

Three cups of color lie before the child—red, yellow, and blue; and a dish of water nearby for cleaning his brush. He spreads the colors fondly and carefully one next to the other. But there is no green, and he would have green to paint a meadow or green tree. Then from the cup of blue color we pour a few drops into a clean white cup, followed by a few drops from the yellow, and the child is surprised to learn how the green comes out from mixing the dark earthy blue and the light sunshiny yellow!

Little children up to seven years of age (or the change of teeth) are always imitators; and most beautiful are their pictures if those near them, their father or mother, are painters, for then they “want to paint too.” The child wants to discover himself in all the little details and peculiarities of the world. He wants to feel out their forms as he paints a tree, a house, the cat or dog, or the man. Through this painting-drawing he acquires knowledge which is quite his own. He lives in the nature of things and seizes upon the characteristic

movements. It is not only a sensing of the external appearance. The man whom he represents has extra long spread fingers; and the child has a sense of his hand reaching out and gripping to take hold, for an inner organic feeling rules within him. Thus he paints—untrue to nature from the adult's point of view, but true to character, nevertheless.

If a child is slow in his intellectual development and not quite awake but dreamy, almost asleep, we may take part in his painting by describing quite vividly what we encounter or experience in our walks, or what love we are doing at home. Here is the mother washing, or the father chopping wood, the child carrying the bundle of wood to the pile, while the cat sits looking on—a many sided life! But if the child is already developed intellectually and is too precocious for his years, much good may come from leading him into a happy sensing of the nature of color for itself. Let us paint a quiet blue which withdraws into itself, then a radiating yellow, streaming toward it from one corner. This will tease and almost torment us until we place a good warm red in between, which excites the veiled quiescent blue at the same time that it softens and appeases the boldness of the yellow. Color surfaces or waves of color flowing into each other, not strengthening or crystallizing into too hardened forms, bring the over-precocious or too clever child back into the appropriate condition of the more dreamy atmosphere of childhood.

Thus there are ways of helping the young child if we paint with him, either by letting him look on and imitate us or by leaving him to himself—to his own imagination. Let us not be troubled if he smears a little, for he will tryout and experiment and cease his blundering, and he will exult and rejoice in the color. For this an old apron and some corner where the marks of his activity can do no harm are the chief essentials. And as for us, we shall resolve to enter into his presence with no pedantry or well-meant theory of education, but as we stand and look on at his accomplishment we shall enter into his purpose, in an atmosphere of understanding and friendship. For the child is quite willingly left to create by himself, to realize his aims; but, wrapped in his surroundings as he is, he will be most deeply satisfied if quite lovingly and tactfully we take part in this creative activity, and do not leave him entirely alone. However happy he may be when left alone, his joy is of a more inner nature if he may think, “Yes, this picture father and I painted together.”

To the school children painting at home we must try to bring an appreciation and reverence for the materials. A fine piece of white water color paper must be regarded for its value, and its joy and light; nor must it be arbitrarily destroyed. The best condition for its use will be enjoyed when it has been moistened on both sides, and the edges pasted on a wooden board. When it dries, it is stretched smooth and worthy of any painter. The child learns to be ordered and neat, and this well-stretched sheet rewards his effort. The broad brushes must be kept washed, and each color pure and clean. After such care in preparing to paint, all wanton carelessness that would make this superfluous is painfully avoided; and good results repay the trouble. In painting, the child comes into an inner relation with the colors which become

friends, dear to him, even though each one has something very different to say to him. Blue will key his soul to quite another tune than red, and yellow quite differently from green. Blue will have another story to tell yellow from what it tells red. They will affect the child differently, even as they influence each other differently.

We call blue a cold color; but it is not only cold—it is submissive almost to a lamenting sadness. If it is bright, then its brightness is very different from the resonant and raying brightness of yellow. Green can give us a peculiar peace; but it can also be a monotonous, philistine color. Red can be festive and proud; but it can also be aggressive and wrathful. Violet is pious, but it can also be hypocritical and even coquettish.

What infinite possibilities of expression lie in colors. How active they are with one another, and what constant possibilities lie open to the painter! There is yellow, for instance—it will ray forth gaily, but when a cold dark blue closes it in, its force is held mercilessly imprisoned; yet it can grow stronger, becoming fiery red, and break through the blue somewhere, pouring its orange-red waves forth in light!

When the child finds the colors in this true way in his own inner experience and being, then he finds them again in nature and looks at them with eyes from which shine an artist's sensitive response. Now the mountains will not be drawn in hard outlines; he will paint the darker blue of the mountain, and then something of the tender, light, greenish-blue of the sky; and where the two colors meet, the outline of the mountain will arise of itself. He sees the tree—how the sunny sides of the leaves look yellow-green, and on the shadow side are softened into a somber blue. The play of light in the color lives in the soul of the painter, for he has learned as a child to trust it. Endless wonders of color in nature now surrender to him; the growing human being will no longer become a slavish imitator of nature, but will—if it lies in his destiny—become a creative artist. And if not, he will have attained an understanding and appreciation, awakened from his dullness and no longer blasé toward the world, for he is awakened to reverence.

So color is one of the ways through which the child may be led to understanding and activity in the world. Not only taste and artistic sense, but an awakening conception, a religious acquiescence, and moral creative capacity for activity, are nourished into being. For that which is presented to us from the truest Art, even if we are not ourselves artists, is never a luxury, but a force and a help for our deepest being in our relations to the spiritual world around us.

**Author:** *Dr. Caroline von Heydebrand was one of the original teachers at the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany.*