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Mala News

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Anne Gilmour, Education Trustee, describes one of the ways she brings out the best in the children

One of the things which I enjoy most about my visits to the Project Mala schools in India is the opportunity to introduce the children to new subjects or to different ways of looking at things, then watching as these talented, curious youngsters exceed all my expectations.

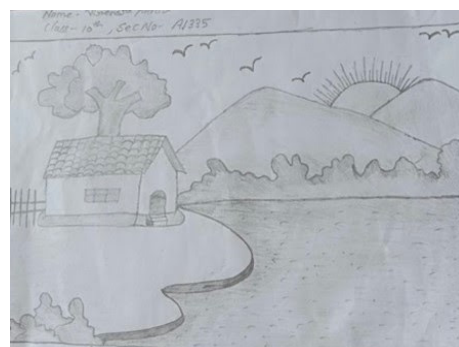
Over the past few visits I have tried offering art sessions to some of the older pupils who are interested in the subject.

Art, as taught in the UP Board curriculum, is a thoroughly sterile process of learning a range of set pieces by the process of copying a model drawing and reproducing it as accurately as possible. We do not have any art teachers in our schools, but art is taught by those teachers who, though interested in the subject, were themselves taught the same formulaic drawings.

Some of our pupils are very talented artists and excel at traditional art forms like rangoli (the patterns made coloured powders, especially at Diwali) or mehndi (henna decorations on hands and feet, often for weddings).



They also learn to draw the stylised landscapes required by the Uttar Pradesh Examination Board, though the models they copy have little or no artistic merit in the first place and bear no relationship to anything they see around them.



While there is much to learn from copying from the masters, our pupils do not have access to really excellent examples of traditional art to work from and their work, while pretty, is unimaginative and derivative.

They have very little opportunity to try other types of art, or to experiment with drawing from life, or from their imagination. When they do so, however, the results are often startling.

My intention has been to introduce pupils to some other ways of approaching art, and to free them up to experiment, try different mediums, make mistakes and learn to draw from observation.

Last year a small group of senior pupils had their first ever still life class. Using just a couple of kitchen utensils which were at hand, I gave them a choice of subjects, a large sheet of paper and a stick of charcoal. After a brief demonstration of how charcoal could be used, and some ideas on how to look at getting proportions accurate and using the charcoal to express tone, the group set to work.



Honestly, I was amazed. The resulting drawings were exciting and expressive. One or two of them were exceptionally assured and it was hard to believe that none of these young artists had ever before held a stick of charcoal.



On my next visit I tried a lesson on perspective – our schools, with their long corridors, balconies and angles give the perfect opportunity to practise. After a quick lecture on the principles of basic one and two point perspective, I set them loose to draw parts of their school. They quickly learned by trial and error that if you don't check your angles and keep uprights parallel, balconies appear to topple sideways and doorways lean disconcertingly.





What next?

I hope to try life drawing next time, and maybe some sketching trips to draw in the local environment. Also a visit to the collection of traditional Indian art in Varanasi would be good, so that they can be inspired by all that is excellence in their culture.

Watch this space!

If you know anyone who you think might be interested in this newsletter, please forward it on.

Regards
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