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AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF PICTURES BY CHILDREN

By RUDOLF PINTNER, Ohio State University.

A number of children ranging in age from six to fourteen were asked to arrange six pictures in the order of their preference, beginning with the one they thought most beautiful.¹ The six pictures were six different executions of the same theme, differing only in accuracy of drawing and perspective and in coloring. Number 1 was a colored print of a picture, entitled "The Mill," and the other five were water-color copies of this. Number 2 was a very good copy of the original. Numbers 3 and 4 were slightly inferior to number 2, differing from each other in color tone rather than anything else. Number 4 was more subdued than number 3. The artist herself ranked number 3 as superior to number 4. Number 5 was distinctly inferior to the preceding in drawing, and was characterized by rather brilliant colors, a bright pink and a bright yellow being very conspicuous. Number 6 was drawn very badly and the coloring was very crude. The colors were not, however, as bright as those of number 5.

The children were very interested in the experiment and experienced no difficulty in coming to a decision. A group of 83 university students were also asked to arrange the pictures. Among these adults some hesitation in making a decision was occasionally shown.

At all ages a great diversity of preference was manifest. The distributions of the rankings for each picture for each age are too lengthy to give here. It may be sufficient to note that most of the pictures were given every possible ranking at almost all ages. This is equally true of the adults. Picture number 6, the worst picture, was given first place by at least one child at every age, with the exception of ages 10 and 12. Two adults also ranked this picture first. An exception to this wide scattering of ranks, at least in the upper ages, might be seen with picture number 1, the best picture. At ages 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 this picture was not ranked last by

¹ The writer is indebted to his wife for securing the data for this article and to his sister, Miss Dora Pintner, for painting the necessary pictures.

any individual. It was, however, given last place by one adult.

The average of the ranks accorded each picture at each age is shown in Table I. The table is to be read as follows: the

TABLE I. AVERAGE RANK OF PICTURES

Age.	N.	PICTURE No.					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
6	15	3.0	4.1	3.7	3.6	2.7	3.9
7	23	2.3	4.1	4.2	4.0	2.5	3.8
8	27	2.6	3.1	4.1	3.9	3.0	4.1
9	18	2.0	3.9	4.1	3.3	3.2	4.3
10	18	1.3	3.1	4.0	3.3	4.8	4.7
11	27	2.1	3.6	3.4	3.8	3.9	4.6
12	26	1.2	3.2	3.7	3.7	4.7	4.9
13	13	1.5	3.1	3.5	3.4	4.5	5.0
14	11	1.6	3.1	3.5	3.3	5.2	4.4
Adult	83	1.4	2.6	3.7	3.5	4.4	5.2

average of the ranks assigned by 15 six-year-olds to picture number 1 was 3.0, to picture number 2 it was 4.1, and so on. At age seven the average rank for 23 children for picture number 1 was 2.3, and so on for the other ages. It will be noted that there is not very much difference between the average ranks for the six pictures at age six, indicating little agreement among the children as to their preferences. As we proceed to the higher ages, the difference between the average ranks becomes gradually more marked, indicating a more general agreement among the individuals as to the preferred order of rank. Aesthetic judgment would seem to become more uniform as the child grows older. He is gradually learning to conform to the aesthetic standards of his environment. It would seem from this experiment that this conformity begins surprisingly early in life and would seem to be effected at a comparatively early age.

This may be seen from Table II, which shows the first,

TABLE II. PICTURES ARRANGED ACCORDING TO ORDER OF CHOICE AT EACH AGE

Age.	CHOICE					
	1st.	2nd.	3rd.	4th.	5th.	6th.
6	5	1	4	3	6	2
7	1	5	6	4	2	3
8	1	5	2	4	3	6
9	1	5	4	2	3	6
10	1	2	4	3	6	5
11	1	3	2	4	5	6
12	1	2	4	3	5	6
13	1	2	4	3	5	6
14	1	2	4	3	6	5
Adult	1	2	4	3	5	6

second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth choices for each age, as determined by the average rank of each picture. The picture, which on the average ranked highest for the six-year-olds, was number 5. This was followed by numbers 1, 4, 3, 6 and 2 in the order named. A glance at the table shows us that picture number 1 was given first choice at every age, except age six, where it took second place. This would seem to show that children, even as young as seven, on the whole have learned to recognize as most beautiful what is so designated by the adult taste. This tendency is also operative, though not dominant, at age six, where we note that picture number 1 takes second place. Picture number 5 was characterized by bright pink and yellow, and is ranked first by the six-year-olds, presumably because of the coloring. It is interesting to note how picture number 5 struggles to retain a high place, and succeeds in securing second place at ages 7, 8, and 9, but ultimately falls to fifth or sixth place at all succeeding ages. There are among the seven, eight and nine-year-olds quite a number of children who still rank as most beautiful the picture with the bright colors. After age nine there are very few children who rank number 5 highly. Conformity to conventional standards in this regard evidently develops rapidly from age nine onwards.

It is interesting to note how picture number 2 rises from last place at age six to second place at age ten, and from age twelve onwards retains the second place continually. Picture number 6 is given fifth or sixth place at all ages, with the exception of age seven, where it actually is placed third.

As we have already stated, there was very little difference between pictures 3 and 4, the artist inclining to rank 3 superior to 4. At ages twelve, thirteen, fourteen and adult 4 is placed higher than 3. If 3 is superior to 4 according to the canons of fine art, then we may conclude that our older children and adults have not yet reached the highest possible development in their aesthetic taste.

In conclusion, we may say that as far as this experiment goes, it would seem to indicate a very early conformity of young children to the conventional standards of aesthetic judgment of pictures. There are indications that this conformity is developed gradually and that for pictures of the type with which this experiment deals, it is fairly well developed in the majority of children at age seven and about completely developed in the majority of children at age ten.