Two Sides

What Color Is Your Smile?

Deanna Sirlin and
Melanie Margolis

"You are also familiar with the case that, when you have the feeling of running your finger over several combinations of sounds or color, you feel that your finger has been 'pricked.' As if by spines. But at other times your 'finger' runs over painting or music as if over silk or velvet.

Finally, is not violet less odoriferous than yellow, for example? And orange? Light blue-green?

"And as 'taste,' are not these colors different? Such savory painting! Even the tongue of the spectator or the auditor commences to participate in the work of art.

"These are the five senses known to man."

— Wassily Kandinsky
(Chipp, 1928, p. 348)

It often seems that the most intense visual stimulus in a child's world is a moving image on a television screen. Certainly, children seem to be much more attuned to this moving picture than to the stark, silent images on the wall of a museum; they respond spontaneously to movies and TV but must be taught to appreciate paintings. The forbidding atmosphere in which most children are exposed to visual art does not contribute to a positive experience; they are told in no uncertain terms to look, but DO NOT TOUCH!

In the spring of 1983, the Firelands Association for the Visual Arts (FAVA, Oberlin, Ohio) sent an outreach program (What Color is Your Smile?) designed to make painted images more accessible to young people in 24 elementary schools. The concept of this program was to engage all five senses, not just sight, in the appreciation of art. The program had three stages: Preparatory sensory activities led by the children's classroom teacher, a session with a FAVA instructor, a take-home booklet, and post-program activities.

Pre-program activities were intended to make the children more keenly aware of their senses through such exercises as the "Smell Game." The children gathered herbs, grasses, spices, dried fruits, and flower petals, placing each item in its own container. As they passed the containers, they tried to visualize the object from its odor. Favorite and least favorite smells were discussed, as was the effect of smell on perception. What if a rose smelled like a rotten egg? The children drew pictures to show what the world would be like if the expected relations between odors and their sources were altered.

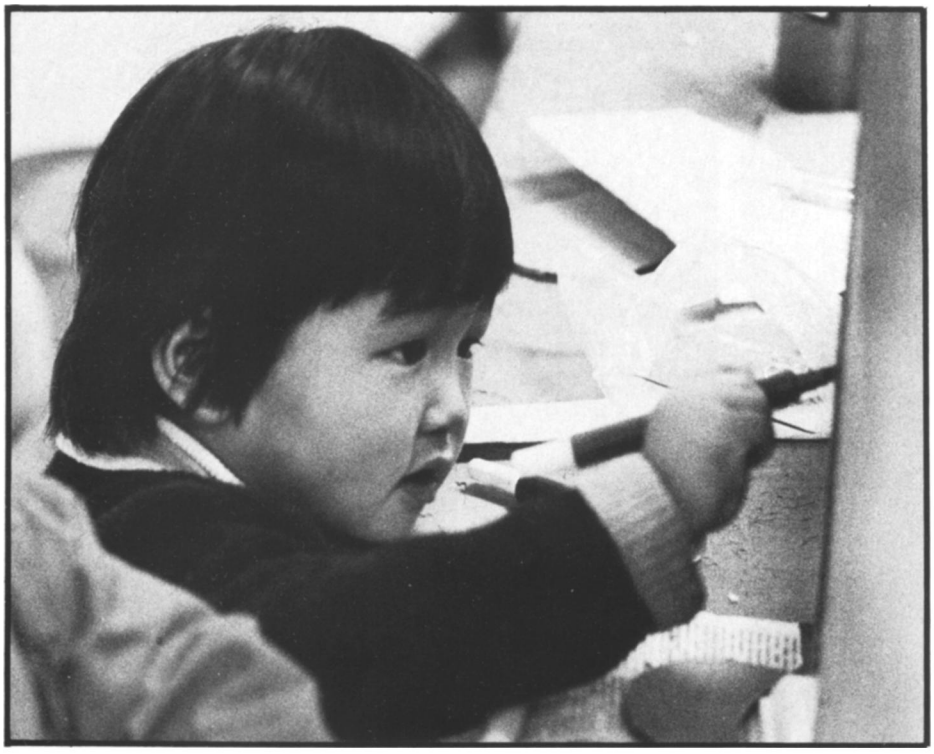
The first part of the FAVA instructor's visit furthered the children's awareness of self and environment. They were asked to focus on each of their senses in isolation; closing their eyes, they listened to their breathing and heartbeat. They took a deep breath, and smelled spring in the air; they touched their clothes and their skin to compare their textures. The instructor asked them to taste their skin to see if it was salty. Finally, the children opened their eyes and looked carefully at their hands, searching for variations in color and texture.

From the realm of sensory awareness, the instructor moved to that of sensory imagination. Following the instructor's example, the children turned their classroom walls into chocolate, light fixtures into clouds, flooring into oceans, and the teacher into an ice cream cone, all in their minds. (This exercise was inspired by De Mille, 1973). Another exercise dealt with correspondences between color and other sensations. The children suggested that rushing water is electric blue, that a gunshot is bright red, and that a racing car is a streak of brilliant yellow. Still other exercises had the children scrutinize everyday objects in terms of their sensory properties of color, texture, smell, etc.

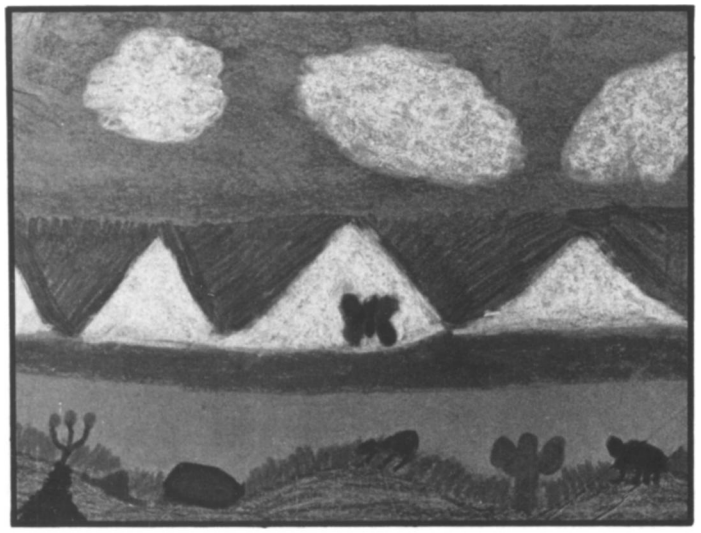
With sensory awareness heightened, the children turned to art. Reproductions of five or six paintings, ranging from highly representational works such as Grant Wood's *Paul Revere's Ride* (1931) to more abstract pictures such as Joan Miro's *Seated Woman I* (1938), hung in the room. Students were asked to imagine they were inside one of the paintings. The instructor posed questions, encouraging the children to answer them in pantomime as well as in words: Where in the painting are you? What are you doing? Are you alone? Is it day or night? Warm or cool? Winter or summer? Now or long ago? What are you wearing? What kinds of sounds, smells, tastes, and textures are there in the painting? By conceiving of the painting as an *environment* rather than simply as a picture, they were able to enter into it physically, sensorally.

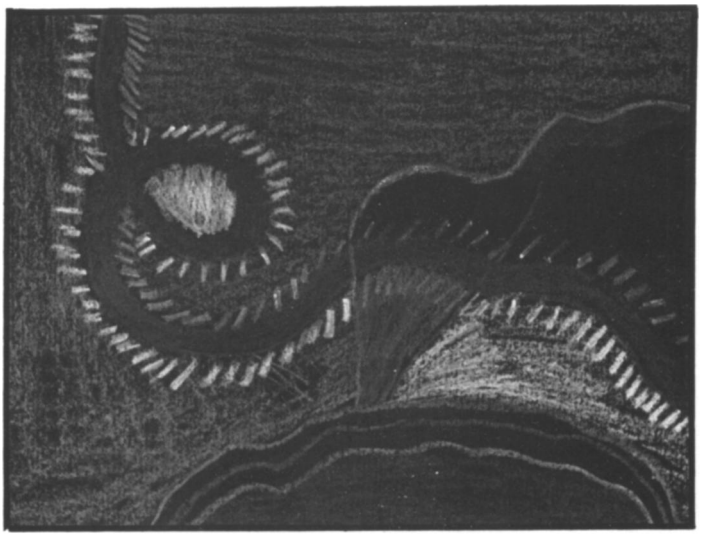
In the last phase of the classroom visit, the children made drawings of their own. As the instructor narrated a story replete with sensory detail (e.g., a walk through the woods), the children closed their eyes and projected themselves into the situation described. They then illustrated their experience with drawings.

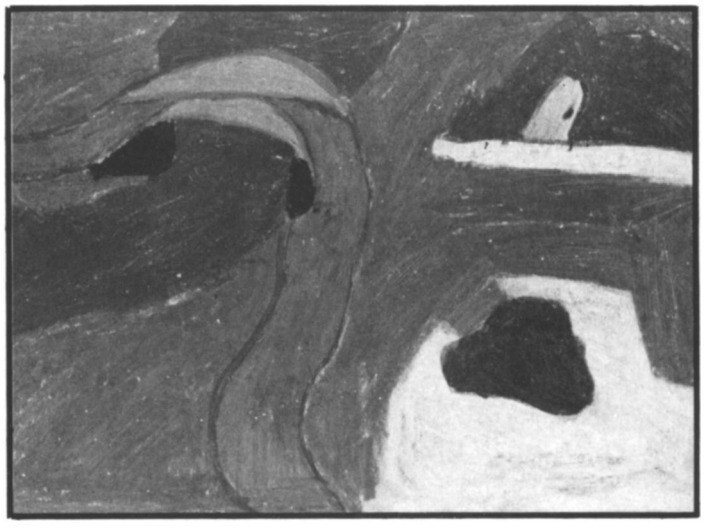
In addition to these classroom sessions, each child was given a booklet to work on at home. Each page repre-



In this article, on one of two sides . . . Sirlin and Margolis share their experiences with a multisensory project. "The object of this program was to show that, as Kandinsky would have it, we need not receive painting by the eyes alone, that evey painting is an imaginative environment with its own sounds, flavor, odors, and tactility."







sented an imaginative/sensory exercise and included space for a corresponding drawing: "*Smell:* Fire smells are smokey and hot. How do they make you feel? Draw shapes and colors to show me." The instructor also left a list of suggested follow-up exercises with each classroom teacher. One of these projects was to have the children make textural collages, pictures constructed of velvet, feathers, sand, and other highly textural materials and intended to be touched as well as seen.

The object of the FAVA program was to show that, as Kandinsky would have it, we need not receive painting by the eye alone, that every painting is an imaginative environment with its own sounds, flavors, odors, and tactility in addition to images. In representational paintings, these non-visual impressions can be stimulated by recognition of and associations with the objects, people, and places they depict. But even non-objective paintings communicate sounds, taste, tactility, and smell through color, texture, and composition if the viewer is sensitive to these formal entities and their relations. Just as there is more to experiencing a painting than simply seeing, there should be more to responding to a painting than just verbalizing; song, movement, pantomime, improvisation, and visual media all offer possible means of reacting to an aesthetic experience. Ultimately, the experience of looking at a painting should be more exciting than watching television precisely because the child is offered the freedom to see, taste, smell, hear — even touch! — in whatever way he or she desires. The only boundaries of perception and response are those of the imagination. The picture cannot move but it can move us, and we can move around imaginatively within it. ■

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Resource Centers

Dayton (Ohio) Art Museum. The experience center (a participatory exhibition).

Dayton (Ohio) Schools. New Visions: An art museum for children.