

Character Development through Art Education: A Montessori Perspective

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Jubilee Center Conference, University of Birmingham, July, 2018

Intro...Many thanks to Jubilee Center, Aidan Thompson (for chairing this session and inviting me to submit a proposal), University of Birmingham for hosting, etc.

This paper is part of a much broader project laying out the philosophy of Maria Montessori. At present, I am working through Montessori's epistemology and her conceptions of various intellectual virtues. In that context, I've done a lot of thinking about character in Montessori's pedagogy, and this paper helped me work out some of the connections between character in her sense and art education.

1. Maria Montessori on Art, Creativity, and Beauty

The focus of this paper is on Montessori's notion of character and how art education contributes to character formation in Montessori's sense, but I start here with some of Montessori's specific comments about art. I wish I had time to discuss her many discussions of aesthetic appreciation and beauty, which play central roles in many different aspects of her pedagogy,¹ but I'll focus here on the creation rather than aesthetic appreciation of art. At times,

¹ For just two examples...One chief aim and result of Montessori's "sensory education" is the cultivation of sufficiently refined senses that one can appreciate art and music. And because every material in a Montessori classroom – including the teacher herself – is meant to attract students to work, Montessori emphasizes the importance of beauty as a (spiritual) source of attractiveness to work.

Some relevant quotations: everything ought to be attractive. Dust cloths ought to be multi-colored, brushes brightly colored, and soap interestingly shaped. Attractive objects invite the child to touch them and then to learn to use them; he will be attracted to a brightly colored cloth and learn that it is used to dust tables, or to the brush for his clothes, or to the soap with which he must wash his hands. In this fashion, beautiful things will attract him from every corner (*The Child in the Family* 49).

Little pieces of furniture were made, gaily coloured and of every kind, little cupboards, bright curtains, little round tables, very low and brightly painted, higher rectangular tables, little upright chairs and armchairs. The dinner service was particularly attractive...On everything there was an ornament, a sign of refinement. There were pretty pictures on the walls and vases of flowers everywhere...they grew flowers, there were ponds of gold-fish and dove-cots (*Secret* 149).

"If we have a brain, senses and organs of movement, they must function...Even if we wish to uplift ourselves, make our brains finer for instance, we cannot do so unless we use all the parts...we can obtain spiritual uplift through action" (Montessori 473).

"I remember, one day, I had taught a little girl...the names of three colors...I had, on the table, six of the colour spools in pairs, that is two reds, two blues, two yellows...I placed one of the spools before the child, asking her to find the one like it. This I repeated for all three of the colours, showing her how to carefully arrange them in

Montessori seems to de-emphasize or even disparage art education. She begins her discussion of representational art by admitting that “The exercises which we have described as ‘drawing’ actually were intended to train the hand so that it would be ready to write,” (DC 2:280). She highlights in her systematic discussion of drawing how “As the children draw, they learn many particulars concerning the geometric figures: the sides, angles, segments, diagonals, hypotenuses, circumferences, perimeters, etc.” (AMMII 13:302). And she even suggests that when “the children work many ... hours on drawing[, t]his is the time we seize for reading to them ... and almost all their history is learned during this quiet period of copy and simple decoration which is so conducive to the concentration of thought” (AMMII 13:303). All these comments seem to imply that the main purpose of art is to help develop skills that are more traditionally “academic.”

Montessori’s comments about “free drawing,” arguably the most common early expression of art education in most schools in the world, are even more striking:

The so-called ‘free drawing’ has no place in my system. I avoid those useless, immature, weary efforts and those frightful drawings that are so popular in ‘advanced’ schools today. (DC 2:280)

[T]he hideous drawings which are exhibited in the common schools, as ‘free drawings’ characteristic of childhood, are not found among our children. These horrible daubs so carefully collected ... are nothing but monstrous expressions of intellectual lawlessness. (AMMII 13:308)

She even boasts that “We do not give lessons in drawing or in modeling” (DC 2:281, see too AMMII 13:308). And such strong statements are not limited to drawing. Montessori infamously rails against fantasy, fairy tale, and fiction, saying for instance that “the child with too much fantasy is a disturbed child” (Adol 12: 21).

Nonetheless, “art education” of a sort plays three fundamental roles in Montessori’s overall pedagogy. In most of this paper, I focus on the role of artistic education for the development of children’s character, but two other roles are worth mentioning here. First, as already noted, various artistic forms are used for cultivating other culturally relevant intellectual disciplines; thus drawing cultivates the muscular skills needed for effective writing (and thereby for reading, math, and so on). Relatedly, Montessori sees dance as cultivating poise and balance, drawing as cultivating sensory attentiveness, story-telling as cultivating the imagination (which

pairs...The little girl learned to recognize the three colours and to pronounce the name of each. She was so happy that she...began to jump up and down” (Montessori 141).

“God forbid that poems should ever be born of the desire to be crowned in the Capitol! Such a vision need only come into the heart of the poet and the muse will vanish. The poem must spring from the soul of the poet, when he thinks of neither himself nor of the prize...The true reward lies in the revelation through the poem of his own triumphant inner force” (Montessori 40).

is not the same as “fantasy,” cf. 12:21), and so on. Second, Montessori sees art as a fundamental form of human self-expression. There is an “instinct for self-expression” that “looks for a means to manifest itself; and this may be in at least one of two ways. One ... is through writing... and the other is through representative art” (DC 2:283). In that sense, the cultivation of various other skills – poise and balance, sensory acuity, manual dexterity, and so on – become means for the development of artistic expression. “To confer the gift of drawing we must create an eye that sees, a hand that obeys, a soul that feels; and in this task the whole life must participate” (AMMII 13:309). Because the cultivation of human excellence is Montessori’s overall goal, and self-expression is a basic feature of human life that requires perfecting, artistic development is a fundamental goal of pedagogy.

2. Maria Montessori on Character

While its instrumental value in fostering various specific skills and even its intrinsic value as a form of expression are two important roles for art in education, by far its most important role is the way that art education contributes to Montessori education is in the development of children’s characters. Character is *the* central concept in Maria Montessori’s philosophy of education and the ultimate goal of her pedagogy. She describes our “greatest social problem” as the need “to reconstruct the character of individuals,” saying that “here lies the source of those moral and intellectual values which could bring the whole world on to a higher plane” (1:218-9). While emphasizing its importance, she also notes that the *concept* of character has been poorly defined:

Old time pedagogy has always given a prominent place to character training, though it failed to say what was meant by character ... Certain virtues have always been highly valued: courage, perseverance, the sense of duty, good moral relationships with others ... But this notwithstanding, ideas remain vague in all parts of the world as to what character really is. (1:175)

One central goal of Montessori’s ethics is to articulate this “character” that grounds the virtues and is a central goal of education. Montessorian character ends up quite unlike Aristotelian notions prevalent in many contemporary theories. Character is first and foremost “a tendency ... to raise oneself up” (1:191), to “gravitate toward ... perfection” (1:219). Its “roots” lie essentially in human “creativity” (1:177). More Nietzschean than Aristotelian or Kantian, character does not arise from habituation (as in Aristotle) nor consist of principled action (as in Kant), but is an active “drive” (1:190) to become more than one already is, a striving distinctively each one’s own. Particularly important in this context from an educational perspective is Montessori’s optimistic view that character is an innate tendency of children that requires only room to manifest itself, in contrast to many philosophers who have seen character

as something to be instilled into children, for example through habituation.² As she puts it, “children construct their own characters” (1:190).

The central phenomenon of Montessori’s pedagogy is a *concentration of attention* in focused work that arises from an inner impulse to activity, an active responsiveness to one’s inner impulses that Montessori calls “character.” Character in this sense is the central feature of ethical life, wherein “lies the source of those moral and intellectual values which could bring the whole world on to a higher plane” (AbsMind 239). Character involves several related components, starting with “the power ... to concentrate”: “The first essential for the child’s development is concentration” (AbsMind 209, 222). Partly implicit in concentration and partly following from it, character involves a capacity “to do [one’s] work carefully and patiently” (AbsMind 209). It thus requires persistence, but this persistence is neither a habitual disposition (as in Aristotle) nor a principled and reflective commitment (as in Kant).³ Instead, it is a capacity for sustained, attentive work, an ability to set oneself tasks and follow through on those tasks: “A person of character is able to finish the work he begins. Some people begin a dozen different things and do not finish any of them. They are incapable of making a decision” (17:236). The impossibility of “making a decision” is reflected in the lack of perseverance in chosen work.

The connection between perseverance and “making a decision” introduces a new and important element of character. For Montessori, character is *autonomous* in that those with character “are driven by their own motors” (7:86). Partly, her claim here is empirical; the sort of intense and prolonged concentration that defines character occurs only (or at least primarily) when one works on projects chosen by oneself (see AbsMind 202; 1913:135). In addition, however, Montessori sees autonomy as an *intrinsic* part of what character actually *is*. Thus she distinguishes those with character – who have become “absorbed in ... work that attracts them” – from two “abnormal” types, two “simple headings” under we can group various “defects of character”: “*strong* children ... and ... *weak* children” (AbsMind 201, 197)

² Against Aristotle, she makes character the *precondition* of the acquisition of habits, rather than a consequence of (or condition of) habits. Habits do play an important part in human life, from habits of grace, courtesy and mutual respect to cognitive “habits” such as the motor memory involved in writing and reading or the habitual recollection of mathematical techniques. These habits even facilitate the self-directed and persistent effort in which character consists. But these habits all first *arise through* persistent, self-directed work. That is, they all depend upon antecedent character.

³ Against Kant, who famously claims that “there are few who have [character] before they are forty” (7:294), Montessori insists that character is present even in the youngest children, beginning in infancy. The task of the educator is not to create or even, strictly speaking, cultivate character. Rather, educators’ task is to provide a context within which character can express itself and embark on its normal process of development and growth. Moreover, while this character can become reflective and highly self-conscious, particularly in the setting of long term goals and ideals, it is initially and for the most part pre-reflective and un-self-conscious, the sort of self-directed persistence involved in countless “flow” activities of children and adults alike (see Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

In the first [*strong*] group are capriciousness and tendencies to violence, fits of rage, insubordination and aggression. ... Children of the *weak* type are passive by nature and their defects are negative ... [T]hey cry for what they want and try to get others to wait on them. They are always wishing to be entertained and are easily bored. (Abs. Mind 197)

Both sets of children suffer, not from any “problems of moral education, but of character formation,” and in both cases, the essential cause is a “starved mind” that lacks opportunities for sustained “work at an interesting occupation” (AbsMind 199-200). Of the two, the weak type are typically regarded as “good (passive) and to be taken as models” (AbsMind 201), but they are in many respects *further* from true character because they lack even the autonomous interest that provokes attention. The addition of autonomy is not merely ad hoc but an essential part of having a character *of one’s own*.¹ Insofar as character is, most basically, an *internal* drive towards self-perfection, one whose drive for this or that perfecting activity must be externally imposed lacks character properly speaking. Character, in that sense, is the trait by which one is able to really *be* an intellectual agent, through choosing intellectual work of one’s own and then constraining oneself to carry out that work. In explaining the right environment for the development and flourishing of character, then, Montessori emphasizes the importance of both freedom and appropriate opportunities for work: “we give these children the opportunity to exercise their patience, to make choices and persevere – every day of their life. They must have the opportunity to exercise all these virtues that, together, form character” (1946:236).

Moreover, character is not merely something one possesses in one’s “mind” or “heart.” Rather, it is essentially *embodied* (and especially en-handed). What Montessori says about the will applies especially to character: “There can be no manifestation of the will [or of character] without completed action” (SA 9:132). The attention that constitutes character is essentially an actively embodied attention: “The child who is absorbed in some task, inhibits all movements which do not conduce to the accomplishment of this work; he makes a selection among the muscular coordinations of which he is capable, persists in them, and thus begins to make such coordinations permanent” (SA 9:135). “Concentration [and thus character itself] can only be achieved,” she explains, “when hands come into play. Use of the hands brings a profound attention” (1946:153).⁴

Crucially, character is not the capacity for concentration on just *anything*. Attentive work is *normatively-loaded* in that it requires internal⁵ *standards of perfection* to which one aspires. Character involves “a natural attraction ... *toward perfection*” (AbsMind 210, emphasis added), “a tendency, however vague and unconscious, to *raise themselves up*” (AbsMind 209).

⁴ See too

If little children are interested in color, for example, you may think they should be given quantities of beautiful colors ... [But when] children [merely] see all these marvelous colors around them ... they have an impression of all this, but nothing remains – no knowledge, no interest, no concentration, no detail ... But if the children can move objects with their hands, their movements become correlated with their senses and their intellect develops accordingly. (1946:168)

⁵ As one grows older, one also becomes capable of integrating externally-given standards of perfection into genuinely autonomous choices.

Character requires not merely persistent concentration, but persistent activities that increase or promote one's *perfection*. This reference to perfection inherently appeals to normative standards, to "virtues, carried to the highest level" (AbsMind 213). So what are these standards, these virtues, this "highest level"?

To some extent, Montessori refuses to answer the question of what perfection(s) those with character seek. There are no fixed and determinate goals towards which those with character must aim.

Man does not have a precise heredity to do one special thing ... he is not obliged to do just one thing ... Man is capable of everything but has no heredity for anything. This sounds like a strange fact. But from this stems the obvious fact that every man must prepare in himself an adaptation that is not hereditary. He must prepare his own adaption ... Does he have a cosmic task ...? The great man with his great intellect, with his special adaptation, does he have a purpose on this earth or is he here only to enjoy it? (1946:91)

While other animals have specific and determinate "perfections" of their nature, human beings have none. As with Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, Montessori's concept of perfection lacks a precise formula or determinate state of affairs that fully determines the content of her ideal. The variability in Montessori's case, however, is not due merely to the changing conditions under which human beings act. Her point is that human beings lack a predetermined ideal even of the general sort that falls under Aristotle's concept of the mean. There are two important reasons that she rejects such a preset standard. First, this character is always the "character of individuals" *qua* individuals (1:218). In principle, one might develop a Kantian account of autonomous character according to which all people autonomously choose in ways that are universal. But for Montessori, not only does character involve self-directed work, but human beings are naturally drawn to different things: "Every individual has different powers to bring to fruition" (AbsMind 74). Thus what counts as "perfection" for any given individual will differ from what is "perfect" for another. Second, human beings are constantly *progressing*. As each generation further develops human excellences, the human race as a whole changes. The new child in each generation "must be considered as a point of union, a link joining different epochs in history" (AbsMind 66), for the child "absorbs" the level of culture attained thus far and provides the basis for reaching a new, hitherto unknown, level of human perfection.

Even while reject a "heredity to do one special thing," however, Montessori does not leave the concept of perfection *wholly* without meaning. For one thing, perfection involves the execution of a "task," or tasks, and an "adaptation" to the world, even if not any determinate one. It is thus sharply distinguished from a conception of humans' end that would identify it with mere *enjoyment*. To achieve perfection is to become more capable of *action*, not simply to become happier.

Elsewhere, Montessori further develops several elements of this perfecting of agency. For one thing, it requires increased "*independence*." One with character is "*independent* in his powers and character, able to work and assert his mastery over all that depends on him" (AbsMind 170). Early childhood is fundamentally a "conquest of independence" (see AbsMind

83-96). Thus the child's "attraction towards ... manipulative tasks has an unconscious aim. The child has an instinct to co-ordinate his movements and to *bring them under his control*" (AbsMind 180, emphasis added). Those with character seek more and more to bring themselves and their environment under their agential control, from early developments such as learning to walk or grasp through adolescence and adulthood, as one develops a desire for such goods as "economic independence" that allow one to "make himself feel capable of succeeding in life by one's own efforts" (Adol 64, see too AbsMind 83-96).^{6 7}

Beyond independence and integration, perfection involves *precision*. Montessori identifies her insight about the importance of precision as having come to her from observations of children:

In thousands of cases we have seen that the child not only needs something interesting to do but also likes to be shown exactly how to do it. Precision is found to attract him deeply ... It happens no differently with ourselves in sport ... [T]his feeling of enhancing our abilities is the real source of our delight in the game. (AbsMind 180, cf. 186, 210, 212)

Whether one eats food or writes letters or composes poetry, one with character aims to engage in the activity with exactness. To some extent, "this precision itself seemed to hold their interest" (AbsMind 186), so that the requirement of precision is both necessary and even sufficient for the exercise of attentive concentration. Precision, here, can more broadly be seen as the need for *internal normative standards*. Perfection is a normative concept, so whatever one with character does, he aims to do it *well*, which means that there need to be exact – and demanding – standards of excellence in order for the work to constitute a character. Precision thus provides a basis for

⁶ At the same time, this independence is an independent *adaptation* to the world. No one is *wholly* independent of their environment, including their social environment. The goal of independence is to increase one's control over "all that depends on him." Relatedly, independence does not imply going-it-alone. Both of these points are illustrated by the second example (of representational art) in §3.

⁷ Relatedly, perfection involves an *integration* of previously separated aspects of oneself, a "unity of personality" (1946:139). This emphasis on integration is consistent with Montessori's broader metaphysical concept of higher forms of agency emerging from the harmonious relation of lower forces (see Frierson, 2018). In the human case, it means that one with character strives not only to perfect various particular powers but also to integrate these into a coherent individual personality:

The ... development of each of its [psychological] parts, which is at first carried on separately from birth till three, must in the end become integrated, when it will be so organized that all of these parts act together in the service of the individual. That is what is happening during the next period, from 3 to 6, when the hand is at work and the mind is guiding it. If outer conditions prevent this integration from occurring then ... [t]he hand moves aimlessly; the mind wanders about far from reality; language takes pleasure in itself; the body moves clumsily. (AbsMind 203)

One who strives for "perfection" strives for a dexterous hand capable of moving food to his mouth and a sensory acuity capable of recognizing that food, but also for the hand-eye-stomach-mind coordination that brings these perfections together. She strives not only for strong fingers, visual-cognitive recognition of letters, and trained motor skills in hand and arm, but also for an integration that brings these together into an ability for writing. Over time, she seeks to develop further capabilities, such as that independence of mind that lets her consider new food sources or think new thoughts, and further integration, such that she can cook and eat those new foods, write down her new thoughts in creative stories, or compose poetry about tasteful delights.

attraction to activity, normative guidance within that activity, and a means of increasing self-enhancement.

All these features of perfection – independence, precision, and normative standards – underdetermine the object of character-driven work. When she turns to consider *what* we do independently, with precision, and so on, Montessori simply points to the need to “***make progress.***”

By character we mean the behavior of men driven (though often unconsciously) to make progress. This is the general tendency. Humanity and society have to progress in evolution. There is naturally an attraction towards God. But here let us consider a purely human center of perfection, the progress of mankind. Someone makes a discovery and society progresses along that line. The same thing happens in the spiritual field, a person reaches a high level and gives society a push forwards ... If we consider what is known of geography and history, we see this constant progress, because in every age some man has added a point to the circle of perfection which fascinated him and drove him to action ... Admiral Byrd undertook the humiliating task of collecting money in order to explore the South Pole. Then he exposed himself to all the torments of a polar expedition. But all he felt was the attraction of doing something never before done, and so he planted his banner among the others in the zone of perfection. (AbsMind 213)

Beyond “perfections” internal to particular activities and the general perfections of precision, integrity, and independence; there is a general striving for improvement *as such*. As she explains elsewhere, “The brain always asks for work which becomes more complex. A child with intelligence will have the desire to climb higher and to better things” (7:89). This ideal is necessarily indeterminate, and it will vary from one person to another. But it provides a constant impetus to move on to new tasks and challenges, with their concomitant new particular standards.

To sum up, then, character involves

- 1. Concentration of attention**
- 2. That is autonomous,**
- 3. That uses both mind and body (especially the hand),**
- 4. Governed by normative standards of perfection that require**
 - a. Independence**
 - b. Precision**
 - c. and Progress**

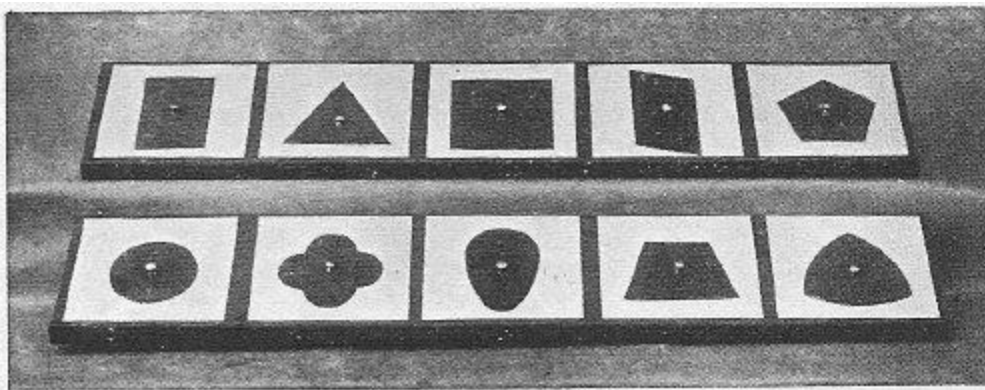
3. Character Development Through Art

Most fundamentally, art involves a concentration of attention. The degree of this concentration can vary considerably depending upon the kind of art children are engaged in, such that often “copying some design” can be “a work of application” that “clarifies and rests the

mind instead of rousing it to intense activity” (AMMII 13:303). This sort of activity does not particularly exercise character, but it keeps his mind “sufficiently stimulated ... as not easily to wander away into the world of dreams” (13:304), so this sort of artistic work is best accompanied by “the reading of books” to the children (13:303, 304). Other sorts of artistic creation, however, such as during periods of intense “creative design” or even “drawing from life,” engage the child intensely: “[T]he child is deeply and wholly concentrated. His entire intellect is at work and no kind of instructive reading would be at all fitting” (13:305). This sort of intense creative engagement fosters and expresses all of the virtuous elements of character. The child can persist, “follow[ing] out their artistic ideas for days and even weeks” (13:305).

There are countless examples of art education in Montessori classrooms, and virtually everything that children do in the classroom is infused with art. Their movements as they walk from one table to another are informed by the poise and balance acquired in lessons in dance. They illustrate the stories they write, and the elegance of their handwriting (even when, say, writing numbers for math) is informed by their exercises in drawing. There are musical instruments, tone bells and “tone bars”, so that a Montessori classroom can and should be filled with music. And so on. But for the sake of this paper, I focus on two particular sorts of drawing – examples Montessori herself highlights in her own discussions of art education.⁸

The first example is an exercise done with a set of “metal insets.” Here is Montessori’s description of them⁹:



In the didactic material there are two sloping wooden boards, on each of which stand five square metal frames, colored pink. In each of these is inserted a blue geometrical figure similar to the geometrical insets and provided with a small button for a handle. With this material

⁸ For the sake of time, I also merely focus on laying out Montessori’s overall account. There are many ways that this approach could be – and has been – criticized. Montessori’s disparagement of fantasy in favor of engaging with reality (even in art) has been widely criticized. Dewey famously criticized the contrived and artificial nature of Montessori environments, a criticism that applies very directly to her metal insets. And there are many possible objections to her conception of character. For the purpose of this short paper, however, I simply pass those criticisms over.

⁹ From *Dr. Montessori’s Own Handbook* (Fred Stokes: 1914), at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/29635/29635-h/29635-h.htm#linki_31, pp. 87-88.

we use a box of ten colored pencils and a little book of 87 designs which I have prepared after five years' experience of observing the children. I have chosen and graduated the designs according to the use which the children made of them.

The two sloping boards are set side by side, and on them are placed ten complete "insets," that is to say, the frames with the geometrical figures. (Fig. 28.) The child is given a sheet of white paper and the box of ten colored pencils. He will then choose one of the ten metal insets, which are arranged in an attractive line at a certain distance from him. The child is taught the following process:

He lays the frame of the iron inset on the sheet of paper, and, holding it down firmly with one hand, he follows with a colored pencil the interior outline which describes a geometrical figure. Then he lifts the square frame, and finds drawn upon the paper an enclosed geometrical form, a triangle, a circle, a hexagon, etc. The child has not actually performed a new exercise, because he had already performed all these movements when he *touched* the wooden plane insets. The only new feature of the exercise is that he follows the outlines no longer directly with his finger, but [88] through the medium of a pencil. That is, he *draws, he leaves a trace* of his movement.

The child finds this exercise easy and most interesting, and, as soon as he has succeeded in making the first outline, he places above it the piece of blue metal corresponding to it. This is an exercise exactly similar to that which he performed when he placed the wooden geometrical figures upon the cards of the third series, where the figures are only contained by a simple line.

This time, however, when the action of placing the form upon the outline is performed, the child takes *another colored pencil* and draws the outline of the blue metal figure.

When he raises it, if the drawing is well done, he finds upon the paper a geometrical figure contained by two outlines in colors, and, if the colors have been well chosen, the result is very attractive, and the child, who has already had a considerable education of the chromatic sense is keenly interested in it.

These may seem unnecessary details, but, as a matter of fact, they are all-important. For instance, if, instead of arranging the ten metal [89] insets in a row, the teacher distributes them among the children without thus exhibiting them, the child's exercises are much limited. When, on the other hand, the insets are exhibited before his eyes, he feels the desire to draw them *all* one after the other, and the number of exercises is increased.

The two *colored outlines* rouse the desire of the child to see another combination of colors and then to repeat the experience. The variety of the objects and the colors are therefore an *inducement* to work and hence to final success.

Here the actual preparatory movement for writing begins. When the child has drawn the figure in double outline, he takes hold of a pencil "like a pen for writing," and **draws marks up and down until he has completely filled the figure**. In this way a definite filled-in figure remains on the paper, similar to the figures on the cards of the first series. This figure can be in any of the ten colors. At first the children fill in the figures very clumsily without regard for the outlines, making very heavy lines and not keeping them parallel. Little by little, however, the drawings [90] improve, in that they keep within the outlines, and the lines increase in number, grow finer, and are parallel to one another.

When the child has begun these exercises, he is seized with a desire to continue them, and he never tires of drawing the outlines of the figures and then filling them in. Each child suddenly becomes the possessor of a considerable number of drawings, and he treasures them up in his own little drawer. In this way he *organizes* the movement of writing, which brings him *to the management of the pen*. This movement in ordinary methods is represented by the wearisome pothook connected with the first laborious and tedious attempts at writing.

The organization of this movement, which began from the guidance of a piece of metal, is as yet rough and imperfect, and the child now passes on to the *filling in of the prepared designs* in the little album. The leaves are taken from the book one by one in the order of progression in which they are arranged, and the child fills in the prepared designs with colored pencils in the same way as before. Here the choice of the colors is another intelligent occupation which encourages [91] the child to multiply the tasks. He chooses the colors by himself and with much taste. The delicacy of the shades which he chooses and the harmony with which he arranges them in these designs show us that the common belief, that children love *bright and glaring* colors, has been the result of observation of *children without education*, who have been abandoned to the rough and harsh experiences of an environment unfitted for them.

The education of the chromatic sense becomes at this point of a child's development the *lever* which enables him to become possessed of a firm, bold and beautiful handwriting.

The drawings lend themselves to *limiting*, in very many ways, *the length of the strokes with which they are filled in*. The child will have to fill in geometrical figures, both large and small, of a pavement design, or flowers and leaves, or the various details of an animal or of a landscape. In this way the hand accustoms itself, not only to perform the general action, but also to confine the movement within all kinds of limits.

Hence the child is preparing himself to write in a handwriting *either* large or small. Indeed, [92] later on he will write as well between the wide lines on a blackboard as between the narrow, closely ruled lines of an exercise book, generally used by much older children.

The number of exercises which the child performs with the drawings is practically unlimited. He will often take another colored pencil and draw over again the outlines of the figure already filled in with color. A help to the *continuation* of the exercise is to be found in the further education of the chromatic sense, which the child acquires by painting the same designs in water-colors. Later he mixes colors for himself until he can imitate the colors of nature, or create the delicate tints which his own imagination desires. It is not possible, however, to speak of all this in detail within the limits of this small work. (Handbook, pp. 87-92)

Young children begin working with these metal insets from a very early age, and they serve several important functions within Montessori education. As she highlights in this passage, they build on the cultivation of the "chromatic sense," that is the sensitivity to fine-grained distinctions amongst colors and an appreciation for how colors harmonize with one another. Most emphasized here, they are an essential component in literacy education. For Montessori, young children learn to write before they learn to read, and learning to write involves two key

components: learning firm and dexterous pen and pencil control, and learning the motor movements for shaping the letters. Of these, the first is arguably the hardest, and the specific exercises with the metal insets are designed to foster just the kinds of finger strength and dexterity that children will need for writing. Elsewhere, Montessori emphasizes that the insets – many of which are regular geometrical figures – also cultivate the mathematical sense. Children have a fully embodied sense of the differences amongst shapes and can easily begin to identify and label regular figures (square, rhombus, etc.).

The most direct instruction of the metal insets, however, is artistic. Children create “very attractive” figures in which they are “keenly interested,” which “seize [him] with a desire to continue them,” and which he “treasures ... up in his own little drawer” (ibid.). This artistic exercise also prepares the child for further developments in artistic expression through cultivating the finger and arm movements necessary for precise and fluid drawing and the sense of order, color, and balance needed to compose original compositions. The geometric insets themselves, “which are all definitely related to one another in dimensions and include a series of figures which can be contained one within the other, lend themselves to very beautiful combinations[, with which the children make real creations and often follow out their ideas for days or even weeks” (see figure 2 for some examples).

The work with metal insets not only cultivates artistic and other skills; most importantly, it fosters character. To see why, notice how the different elements of this style of artistic expression map onto the key elements of Montessori character.¹⁰ The whole structure of the material is designed to foster a **concentration of attention**. It takes work to hold the metal frame (and then the inset) steadily, and the young child’s hand must carefully trace the inside of the shape. This attention also quite directly **uses both mind and body (especially the hand)**. What engages the attention of the youngest children is precisely the disciplining of the hand by the mind, the effort – at first – to hold frame and pen steady and thereby reproduce the proper shape, and eventually, to color within the lines and in finer and finer strokes. The result is a “hand that has been trained to the most delicate movements” and of which “the children are masters” (AMM-II 13:312), and thus a child who has at least the manual competence – the manual autonomy, we can even say – to draw “freely.” “The best way to teach drawing is not to leave a child completely free, but to provide the means for its natural development by training the hand” (DC 2:284). As in the case of character itself, manual proficiency is not *sufficient* for

¹⁰ There are many other aspects of Montessori’s pedagogy illustrated in her approach to teaching drawing. Most prominent are her emphases on indirect preparation and the prepared environment. Many features of Montessori education “indirectly prepare” students for more advanced work, often through cultivating sensory or manual skill. A child who attempts a more advanced task without sufficient preparation will do so clumsily and ineptly and will eventually lose interest in the task. With respect to drawing, she remarks that “When a child gives up the effort to express himself with his hand, he hampers the free development of drawing. To avoid this loss, we should ... indirectly prepare his hand to carry out its functions in the best possible manner” (DC 2:284).

Montessori’s concept of the “prepared environment” emphasizes that much of the education of children comes in a carefully prepared environment that invites children to engage in character-building activities, rather than in direct instruction in this or that discipline (or even direct “character education”). Thus to cultivate drawing, “we should enrich his environment with means of expression” (DC 2:284), and the specific presentation of the metal insets – for instance – should be such that children are constantly invited to attentive work by the aesthetic appeal, variety, and simplicity of the material.

artistic excellence, but it is necessary: “The sensory and manual preparation for drawing is nothing more than an alphabet; but without it the child is an illiterate and cannot express himself” (AMMII 13:309).

Moreover, this concentrated attention is **autonomous**, however. Throughout her description of the insets, Montessori emphasizes that the materials themselves are designed to attract the interest of the child; they are “arranged in an attractive line” and produce “very attractive” results. The word “attractive” here is *both* aesthetic *and* motivational; the child takes “keen interest” in this work. Moreover, throughout, the work is guided by the choices of child; he will “choose one of the ten metal insets” and “choose the colors by himself.” The attractiveness and the choices are not separable, either. Montessori highlights that what “may seem unnecessary details” are “as a matter of fact, all-important” precisely because the presentation of choices to the child cultivates in him a “desire to draw them.”

However, the **autonomy** of the child is not a lawless license. So-called free drawing, where children are just told to draw whatever they choose, might seem to be more autonomous, but Montessori’s conception of autonomy always requires normative standards. To be autonomous is to govern oneself; even in art, children choose work that has intrinsic normative standards. The child must try to duplicate with a pen or pencil the shape of the inset. There is even what Montessori calls a “control of error,” a mechanism within the material itself by which the child can evaluate their own success or failure at their chosen task. When the child tries to put the inset onto the shape they have drawn, and especially when they then trace that inset in a new color, they can immediately see the extent to which they have succeeded in the task that they chose for themselves, and they can aim to improve their strength, dexterity, and hand-eye coordination. There are clear normative standards for art with metal insets, and children make **progress** in drawing by being more **precise** in their movements. In contrast to the “monstrous expressions of intellectual lawlessness” against which Montessori rails (AMM-II 13:308), these drawings combined exact standards of perfection with creativity in design. Finally, once the hand becomes “more skilled and flexible,” children can set aside the insets, drawing fluently and **independently**.

This notion of independent gives rise to a second example of artistic education, one that I will discuss only very briefly for the sake of time. In a reversal of the early passages in which she seemed to instrumentalize art for the sake of other “academic” disciplines, Montessori observes that “The study of natural science proved to be a great help in drawing” (AMM-II 13:313), and explains how an experiment in which she gave lessons in botany to very young children showed her children’s natural desire to create representational art. She had students dissect flowers to observe the various parts of the flower, but then, to her “great surprise,” the children “did not despise or throw away the dissected parts, as we older [university] students used to do. With great care they placed them all in an attractive order on a piece of white paper ... Then with great joy they began to draw them” (AMM-II 13:313).

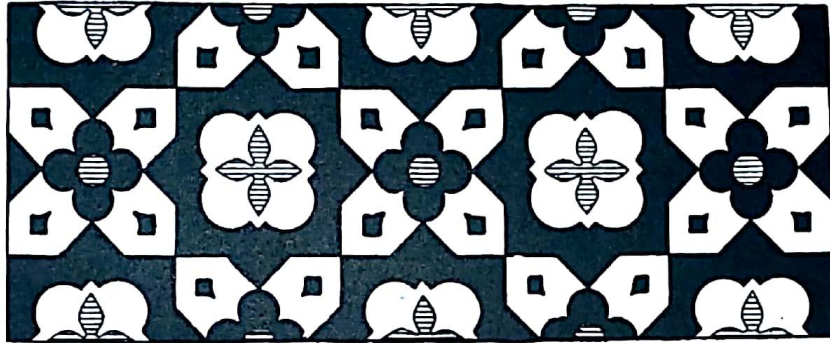
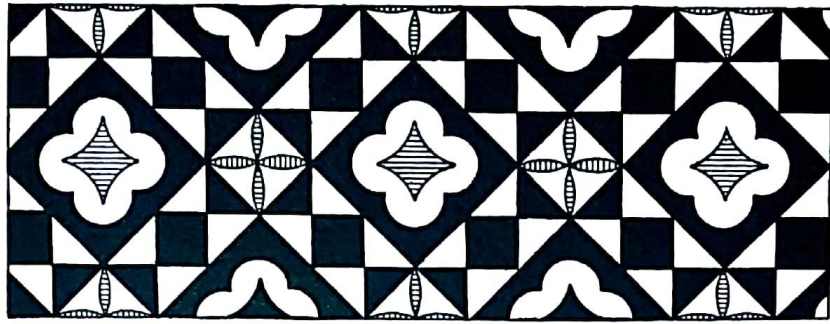
Many details of this example would be worth further reflection, but I want to highlight – as Montessori highlights – features of their work that contribute to character. Montessori emphasizes that “they were accurate, skilled, tireless, and patient” (13:313). In order to get just the right shades to depict the parts of the flower, they had to “mix and dilute their colors” (13:314). The painting inspired further creative work – “the following day a little girl brought a charming vivacious written composition” (13:314). Throughout, the inspiration was wholly their own, but it also had to meet high normative standards and involved considerable focus of attention. It required manual dexterity and refined senses, and it provided a context for further refining these. It drew upon, and cultivated, character.

This example of drawing of natural objects also highlights two further features of character that I cannot discuss in any detail. For one thing, it was *social*. The children participated in this task, to some degree, together, helping lay out the parts, mix the colors, and so on. For Montessori, character need not be solely individual, and there are forms of shared attentive work – what Montessori calls “social solidarity” – in which we have character together, as a group. Secondly, the emphasis on drawing nature highlights a feature of Montessori’s approach to art that is often criticized: her emphasis on *reality* as opposed to fantasy. For Montessori, self-expression is expression of oneself in relation to the world in which one finds oneself. In highlighting the autonomy that is required for both character and good art, Montessori insists, “*Free drawings* are possible only when we have a *free child* who has been left free to grow and perfect himself **in the assimilation of his surroundings** [emphasis added] and in mechanical reproduction; and who when left free to create and express himself actually does create and express himself” (AMMII 13:308-9). Likewise, when she criticizes fairy tales and the “child with too much fantasy,” she does so in the context of exhorting teachers to cultivate imagination, but an imagination combined with “courage and [intellectual] strength,” one that the child “uses to create.” To be truly self-expressive and truly creative, Montessori argues, the child requires “precision” and needs to be “aroused on the basis of reality,” so that “the desire to know more on the subject is born at the same time” (Adol 12:21).

4. Conclusion

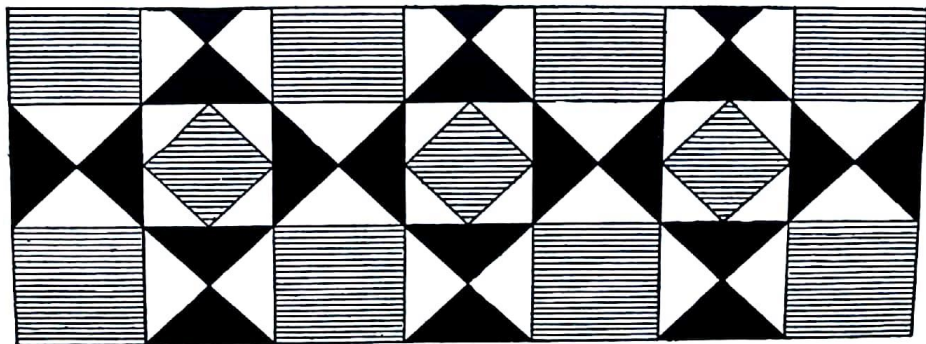
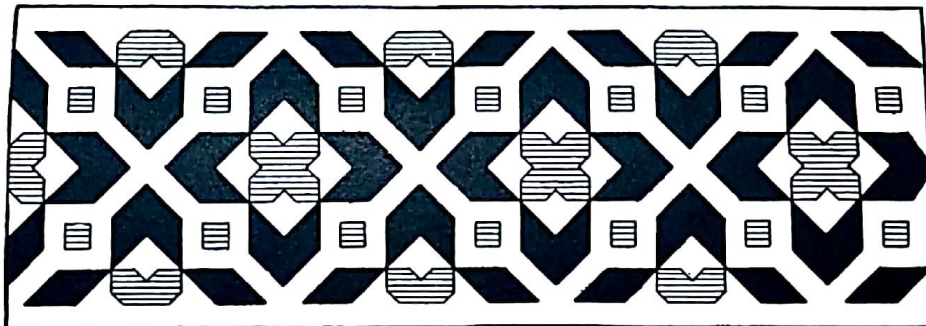
I have focused here on laying out the basic feature of Montessori’s conception of character, and some specific ways that art education fosters character in that sense. For Montessori, character is crystalized “as soon as the children become absorbed in a piece of work that attracts them” (AbsMind 1:183). This absorbed and prolonged attention to self-chosen work is *the* fundamental feature of Montessori’s education, which is first and foremost an education in character. And art education is among the best and most natural contexts for children to discover and engage in work that can completely absorb them. Montessori’s conception of character, of course, implies that some forms of art education will be better than others. Notably, the best art education for Montessori will require sustained concentration of attention, progressively build

manual proficiency (and sensory acuity, though I didn't focus on that), and be governed by clear and precise normative standards that allow for increasing levels of perfection. But it must first and foremost be *attractive* to students. One of the great advantages of art education in many classrooms is that children do not need to be coerced to draw or paint; they joyfully embrace it. In Montessori classrooms, the joy in music or drawing is only increased by rigorous standards of excellence that children can appreciate and progressively achieve. And it is these standards, autonomously adopted and attentively pursued, that manifest and thereby cultivate children's characters.



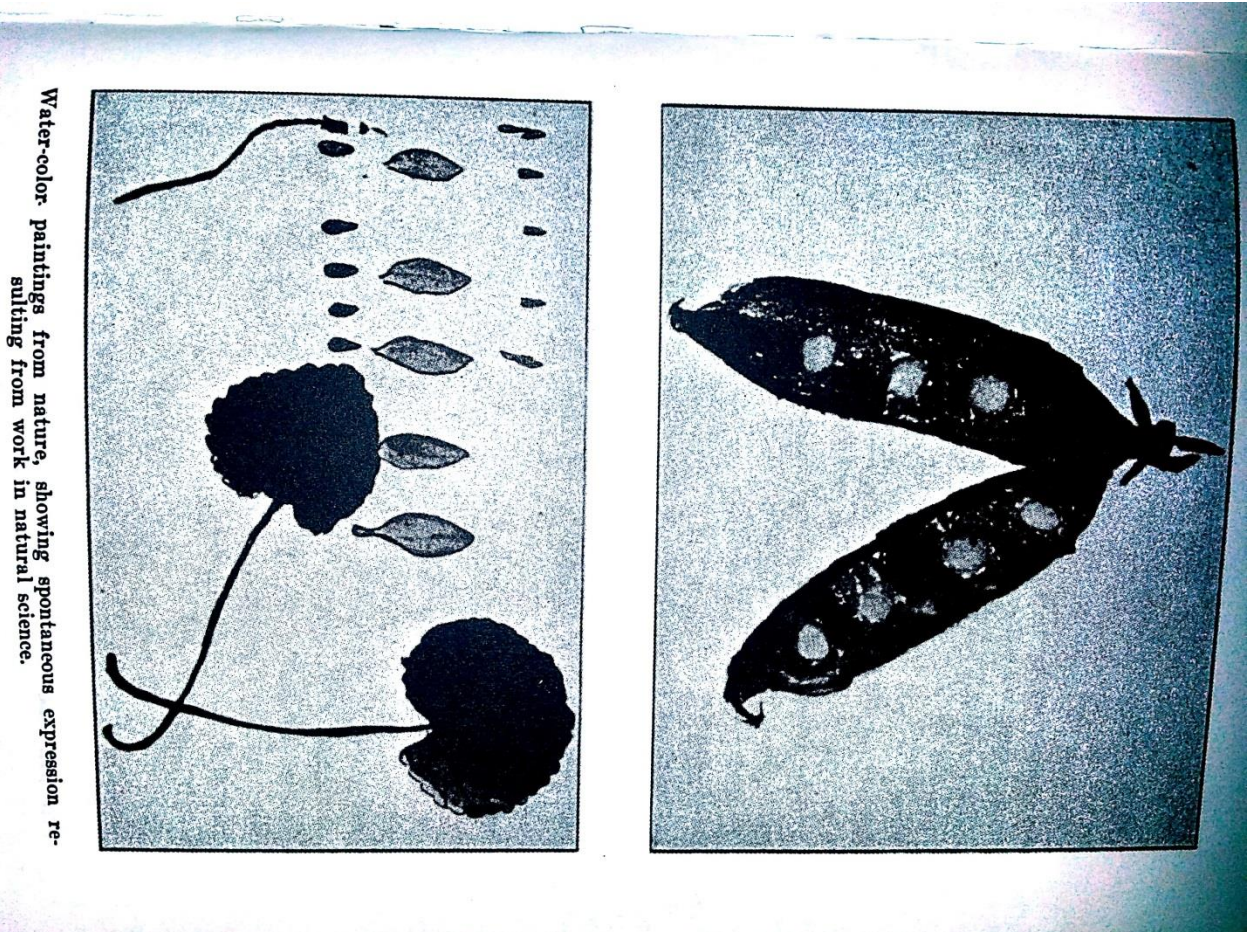
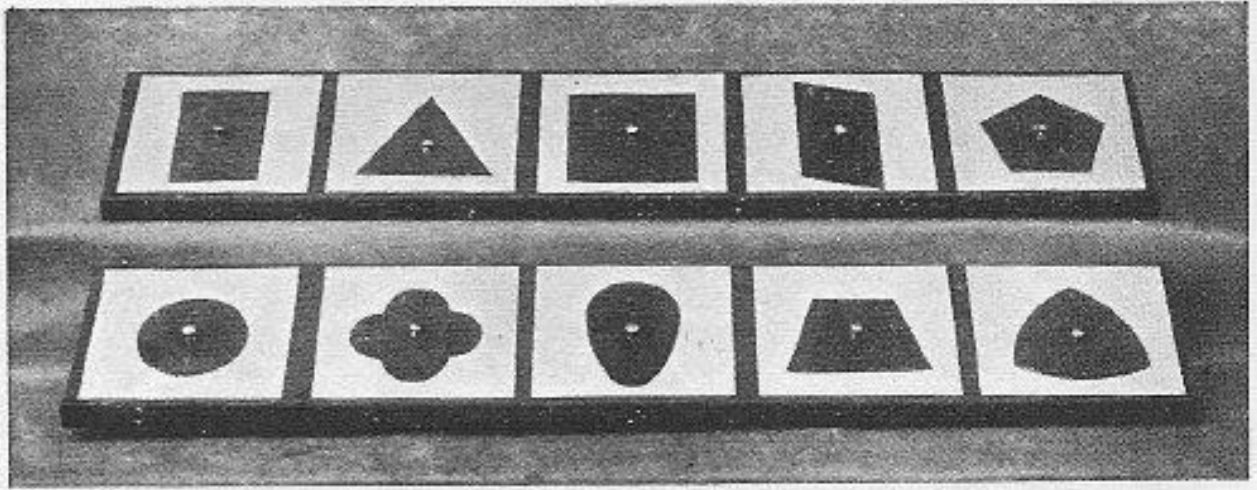
Designs formed by the use of the geometry squares, circles, and equilateral triangle, modified by free-hand drawing. In the design on the right the "flower" within the cross is made with compasses; the decorative detail in the arms of the cross and the circle in the center are free-hand. The design on the left is similar to a decoration in the Cathedral at Florence, in the windows round the apse.

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Decorations formed by the use of the geometry insets. That on the right is a copy of the design by Giotto shown below the picture of the Madonna in the Upper Church of St. Francis d'Assisi (Umbria).

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Water-color paintings from nature, showing spontaneous expression resulting from work in natural science.