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Self-expression or Teacher Influence: The Shaw System of Finger-Painting

Mary Ann Stankiewicz

When Ruth Faison Shaw in 1931 added the rainbow to mudpies and thus perfected finger paints, she completed a pendulum swing in art education from one extreme to another. The free, emotional, subjective expression encouraged by finger painting was the antithesis of the accurate, geometric, objective results sought by the first American art educators. (Green, 1948, p. 190)

Today, when many art educators emphasize the content of art as much as its developmental, expressive activities, we can critically examine some assumptions and recommendations of earlier art educators. During the 1930s and 1940s, finger-painting was used as a means of creative expression in progressive schools, a projective technique with disturbed children and adults, and a common art medium in American primary schools and homes. Some contemporary art educators have recommended finger paint in the classroom, such as Gaitskell and Hurwitz (1975), Mattil and Marzan (1981), and Hubbard (1982), while others see finger-painting as a kinesthetic activity with little aesthetic value (Lansing, 1970; Chapman, 1978). Lowenfeld and Brittain (1964) recognized the use of finger-painting as an emotional outlet for some children and as a kinesthetic activity for all, but suggested that consistency of the material might cause regressive behavior in young children, hindering use of finger-paints as an artistic medium. History of the Shaw System of Finger-Painting not only provides an example of what Efland (1979) has described as the expressive-psychoanalytic tradition in art teaching, it also illustrates contradictions often found between the rhetoric and actual teaching practices of that tradition.



Figure 1. Ruth Shaw demonstrating how to finger paint, ca. 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Ruth Faison Shaw papers, in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

Ruth Shaw, Teacher of Finger-Painting

Ruth Faison Shaw, born in North Carolina in 1889, began her career as a classroom teacher in rural Appalachia. Like most young women teachers of the day, she had graduated from secondary school but received no specific training in pedagogy. While teaching in the elementary schools of Wilmington, North Carolina, Shaw demonstrated an interest in art and was regarded as artistic by friends and family. During her six months as a YMCA canteen worker in World War I in France, she used her free time to draw and paint. The opportunity to see Europe provided by the war fired Shaw with a desire to remain there, and in January, 1923, Shaw opened an American school for English speaking children, ages 5 through 12, in Rome. Shaw's students enjoyed her teaching methods. In her first book on finger-painting, Shaw (1934a) reported the story of a little boy who told people he did not go to school. When his mother protested that indeed he did go to school, the boy responded that he went to Miss Shaw's parties every day. Birthday and holiday parties were a regular occurrence at the Shaw School in accord with

her belief that education should be fun.

Shaw (1933) believed that simple roots existed in each school subject; children should discover these root ideas through playful sensory experiences with simple materials. She believed that children learn by receiving from without and that they create from within, uniting the two by their adaptability. In order to encourage creation from within in written work, Shaw had her students dictate stories to her, an older child, or into a dictaphone. The child was the author since the ideas were his/hers expressed by the voice, without a need to master writing or spelling. In Shaw's (1934b) view, the teacher should be a sympathetic listener, a guide who won the child's confidence and learned from the child, and one who encouraged the child to discover principles.

Shaw's work with finger-painting grew from her philosophy of education. She had already found a way to encourage children's literary expression, but she also recognized that children express ideas and experiences visually. In Shaw's view, "pencils, paint and so on are of little use because they are the materials of the expert" (1933, p. 500).

She argued that because mastery of traditional artistic media was beyond the young child, a simple medium needed to be developed for the child's use. Shaw narrowed her search for such a visual medium after an incident with one of her pupils in Rome. A little boy cut his finger and was sent to the bathroom to put iodine on it. When the child had not returned after a reasonable time, Shaw went to the bathroom where she found him happily drawing on the door with an iodine-smear finger. This experience led her to search for a formula that would combine pigment and binder in a non-toxic, water-based, gelatinous form that could be spread smoothly and not dry too quickly. Her English-speaking students in Rome named the resulting mixture "finger-paint."

Finger-Painting and Its Rhetoric

Shaw had been working to develop finger-painting from late 1926; by 1931 it was ready to be presented to the world. During the summer of 1932, Shaw attended the Congress of the New Education Fellowship in Nice, where she made contact with American progressive educators Harold Rugg and Thomas Munro. They were among those who expressed interest in learning more about Shaw and her work, and this led to her acceptance of a half-time position teaching art at the Dalton School in New York. Thus, finger-painting made its American debut in the fall of 1932.

Under the leadership of Helen Parkhurst, the Dalton School was one of many progressive educational institu-

tions supporting art education. According to Cremin (1961), post-World War I progressive education differed from pre-war progressive education in several respects. Pre-war progressives focused on social reform through schooling, which Cremin labelled radicalism; post-war progressives exemplified bohemianism, "a polyglot system of ideas that combined the doctrines of self-expression, liberty, and psychological adjustment" (p. 201). Post-war progressives believed that each child possessed unique creative potential that should be developed, by schools, so that each child could develop into a healthy, integrated person. The progressive philosophy of creative expression was powerful; artist-teachers, such as Florence Cane and her sister Margaret Naumberg, advocated artistic expression for bringing to consciousness buried emotional problems that could then be solved through art activities. Freudian psychoanalytic theories joined the progressive philosophy, and seeds were sown which would blossom into art therapy. When Shaw arrived in New York, in the fall of 1932, she brought a receptive mind, a personal educational philosophy, and an art medium suited to this new interest.

The first New York exhibition of finger-painting was held in January, 1933, at the Dalton School. Although other works by Dalton students were on view, finger-paintings captured the public interest. A second exhibition was held in March, on East 57th Street. Edward Alden Jewell (1933), reviewed this

**In this article—
Stankiewicz describes the invention and introduction of finger-painting into the progressive education schools of the 30s and 40s. She questions use of the medium and calls attention to inconsistencies between rhetoric and practices of that era. "Examination of the Shaw System of Finger Painting illustrates how potent teacher influence can be in transmitting artistic style."**

exhibition for the *New York Times* and remarked on the spontaneous rhythms that seemed especially suited to convey abstract ideas, even in the hands of young children. Jewell praised the exhibition's display of imagination and facility.

With publication of Shaw's book, *Finger-Painting*, in 1934, the medium received national attention. Reviewers discussed the flowing lines and dreamlike forms which gave finger-paintings abstract qualities similar to those found in Art Deco designs (Telfer, 1934; *Fortune*, 1935; Duff, 1935). They also emphasized the simplicity of the material and its power as a means of emotional release. By the mid-thirties, finger-paint was nationally distributed by Binney and Smith. The company paid Shaw to tour the United States and Canada demonstrating to school groups, educational conferences, women's clubs, and in department stores. Headlines for press releases on her work accented the sensational more than the artistic, frequently describing finger-painting as a means of tapping

Figure 2. Typical underwater scene for demonstration fingerpainting by Shaw.



the child's subconscious fears and obsessions. While most articles stressed the ease with which young children could obtain pleasing results from playing with the medium, Faulkner (1938) described its use in the University of Minnesota's General College Art Laboratory!

Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, finger-painting continued to attract public notice. A recurring theme in reviews was the therapeutic value of finger-painting, often described in mystical terms of free self-expression and emotional release. Even when *Art News* (1938) sought to debunk the sensationalism, its critic recognized the rhythmic qualities of the flowing, abstract forms.

While art critics admired the formal qualities of finger-paintings by Shaw and her students, psychologists were using the medium as a projective technique for personality diagnosis and therapy. Lyle and Shaw (1937) indicated plans for future research to investigate the effect of the teacher and her rapport with the child on finger-paintings produced. Most other researchers assumed that finger-paintings simply revealed the painter's personality, emotional state, or, as in research by Blum and Dragowitz (1947), developmental level.

With rare exceptions, the rhetoric surrounding finger-painting revealed a certain way of thinking about art in general and child art in particular. Art critics

responded to formal qualities in finger-paintings done under Shaw's tutelage. They described the works as rhythmic, flowing, dreamlike, abstract, and imaginative; colors were bright, and forms suggested qualities of depth. Art critics seemed surprised that paintings by young children should display qualities valued in adult art. Psychologists discussed formal qualities only as they might support Freudian interpretations of personality; their principal concern was the release of obstructed emotion. Both groups, as well as educators and art educators, supported an expressionist aesthetic, bohemian philosophy of education, and Freudian explanation of personality. Ruth Shaw shared this rhetoric; her method of finger-painting was described in terms compatible with it.

The Shaw System

Shaw insisted that finger-painting sessions be orderly. She described her method as one which encouraged freedom but not license. Sessions would begin with talk about tools, paint, and other supplies (Nikel, Note 1). Then Shaw would demonstrate how one finger-painted (Fig. 1). As she demonstrated each step in the procedure, Shaw kept up a rhythmic pattern of conversation. Shaw always told a story in her finger-paintings, for example, tales of seahorses, Dobbin and Daisy, and their underwater adventures with Sailor Bill

(Fig. 2). In her story paintings, Shaw demonstrated various possibilities of the medium, wiping out her first story to tell a second or third with the paint.

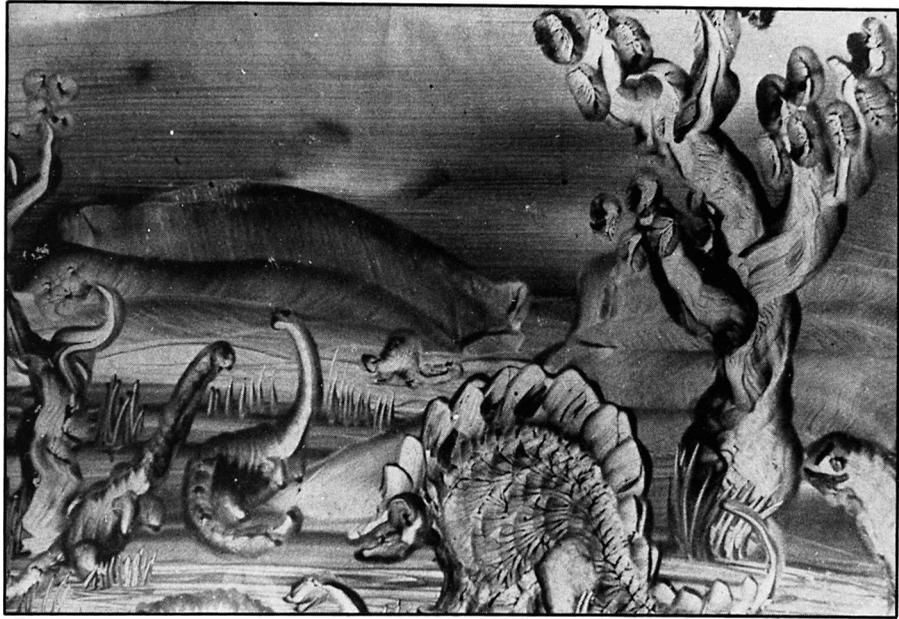
After Shaw completed her demonstration, young finger-painters tried their hands. Each was required to follow Shaw's method of preparation until ready to explore the movement of paint on glazed paper. Then, the painter was let alone to discover a personal vocabulary of motion. After the painting was completed, the painter finished the job by washing hands and arms and cleaning the working surface with wet rags as Shaw had demonstrated. Finally, the painting was titled. Shaw encouraged people to develop stories about their paintings. If, as sometimes happened, the painter imitated Miss Shaw's procedure and her subject matter, she described this as flattery and tribute to her. Shaw never suggested a subject to paint. Instead, she told students to paint, then see what theme they could find and develop.

Style in Finger-Painting

If the rhetoric surrounding finger-painting was sound, examples of finger-painting should differ according to the developmental level, personality, and emotional state of the individual painter. Yet, we find art critics using similar phrases to describe finger-paintings by Ruth Shaw and her students. Examination of Shaw's paintings and those done according to her system shows a complex of interrelated traits, a particular style. As described above, Shaw had a definite system of finger-painting; everyone who worked with her followed her methods. In addition to learning her method, Shaw's students also learned her style, although the self-expressive rhetoric of the era denied this possibility. Finger-painting relied on a variety of movements of hand and arm. While there are many possible movements of the normal hand and arm, certain gestures were favored by Shaw. Conventional representations resulted: fish made with the lower side of the forearm, and "inch by inch" motion with the side of the hand or knuckle was used for segmented objects such as palm trunks or reptile hides, a pressing motion of the finger-tips created foliage (Fig. 3).

Ruth Shaw taught finger-painting throughout her life and used finger-painting as therapy during World War

Figure 3. "When the World Was Very Young" by Shaw.



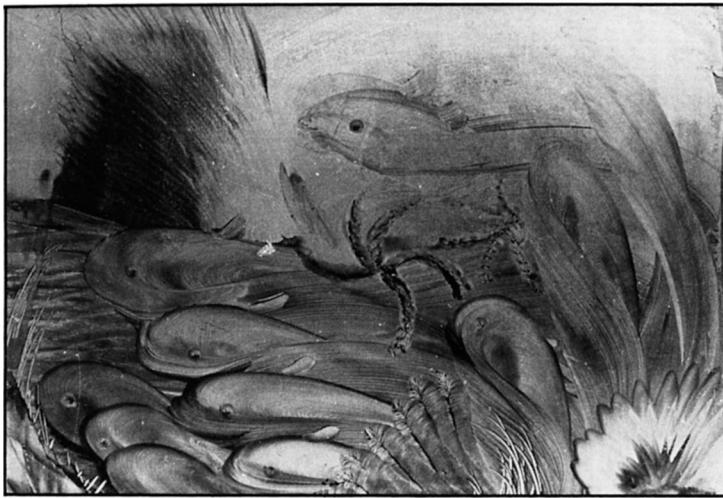


Figure 4. Finger-painting by unidentified student of Shaw's.



Figure 5. Finger-painting by unidentified student of Shaw's.

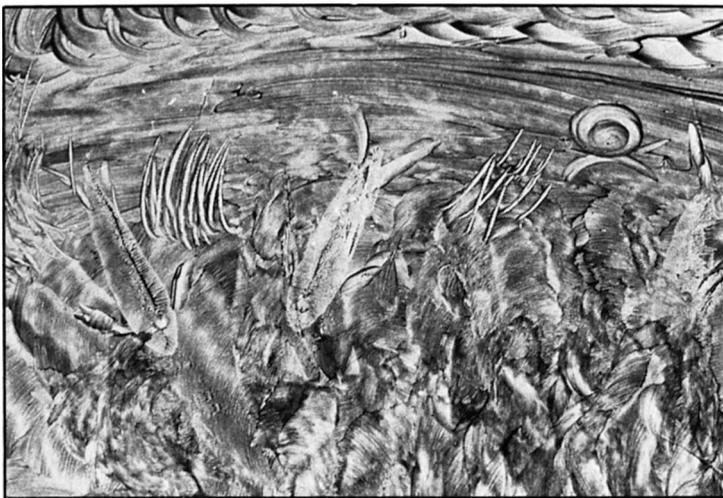


Figure 6. "The Fate of the Diver", finger-painting by 13½ year old male student of Shaw's.

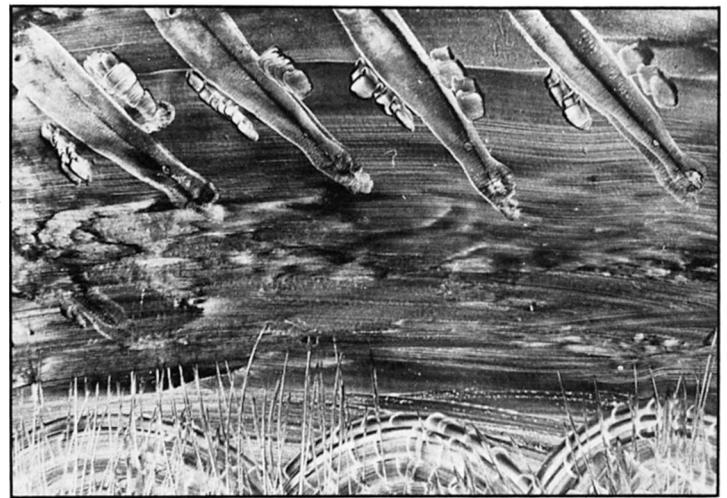


Figure 7. "The Bad School of Fish", finger-painting by 12 year old female student of Shaw's.

II. She compiled an extensive collection of finger-painting by those who worked with her, a collection now the property of the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Finger-paintings by normal adults were most likely to imitate characteristics of Shaw's style (Fig. 4, 5). Young children, artists, and some psychiatric patients demonstrated the least influence from Shaw. We can however, find many elements of the Shaw style in work by children as young as seven (Fig. 6, 7).

In spite of the rhetoric of natural, unconscious self-expression typical of the finger-painting literature, the Shaw System of Finger-Painting demonstrates what Wilson and Wilson (1982) call the influence principle, a trait also noted in other proponents of self-expression by

Munro (1929). After visiting Cizek's art classes in Vienna, Munro argued that the work Cizek believed was spontaneous self-expression, was in fact, similar in style to Austrian folk art, popular illustrations, and contemporary Expressionist painting. The style apparent in finger-paintings by Ruth Shaw and her students suggests that influences similar to those Munro found in Cizek's classes were at work in Shaw's studio as well.

Examination of the Shaw System of Finger-Painting illustrates how potent teacher influence can be in transmitting artistic style. When teacher influence goes unrecognized, a conflict emerges between theoretical goals and practical results. Finger-painters working with Shaw imitated her style and believed they were expressing their unique

creativity. In Shaw's case, the unrecognized standard of healthy self-expression was in fact success in imitating Shaw's artistic personality. Arneim has criticized analyses of children's art which "risk misinterpreting features of formal development as personality indicators" (1974, p. xix). In the Shaw system of finger-painting, her style became the norm. While educational and psychological rhetoric of the time argued benefits of emotional release through self-expression, Shaw was actually teaching a naive but popular style through her work with finger-painting. Because of Shaw's own lack of formal art education, she could not introduce her students to aesthetic qualities, historical styles, or critical appreciation of art. Finger-painting,

therefore, did little to promote self-expression and even less to introduce students to the richness of art. ■

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Reference Notes

1. Nikel. Observation notes on finger painting demonstration, March 10, 1942. Ruth Faison Shaw Papers, in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

Footnotes

The author wishes to thank the staff of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, for their assistance in making the Shaw papers available for research. Richard Schrader, Rebecca McCoy, and their staff graciously allowed me to use materials not yet processed. Mr. Al Sharlip, Business Manager of the library, gave me access to the Shaw collection of finger-paintings. Without their generous assistance and that of the Ruth Shaw Memorial Committee in Chapel Hill, this study would have been impossible.

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