

# **Observation Drawing with Children**

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**A Framework for Teachers**

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**Nancy Smith and the  
Drawing Study Group**

**Laraine Cicchetti  
Margaret C. Clark  
Carolee Fucigna**

**Barbara Gordon-O'Connor  
Barbara A. Halley  
Margaret Kennedy**

**FOREWORD BY DENNIE WOLF**

## *What Is Drawing?*

The act of drawing has different outcomes for both adults and children, depending on the artist's intention. There are maps, diagrams, and plans made primarily for practical purposes. There are images of imaginary beings and places, as in Sir John Tenniel's drawings for *Alice in Wonderland* (Figure 1.1a) or a 7-year-old's picture of planes bombing dinosaurs and volcanoes (Figure 1.1b).

There are renderings of the expressive essence of objects, as in Matisse's drawings of the round voluptuousness of women (Figure 1.2a) or a 9-year-old's rendering of a fat, curvy rabbit (Figure 1.2b).

There are schematized renderings of objects in narrative pictures, as in ancient Egyptian wall paintings (Figure 1.3a) or a 7-year-old's drawing of her sister sleepwalking at night (Figure 1.3b).

And there are images offering the illusion of a visual experience, as in the nature studies of Dürer (Figure 1.4a) or an 11-year-old's rendering of her boot (Figure 1.4b).

This short list—practical, imaginary, expressive, schematic, narrative, and illusive—includes only some of the most common intentions that motivate drawing.

Note that illusionism—that is, the representation of the world from a single, static viewpoint, sometimes achieved through the use of techniques such as perspective—is the artist's intention in only one kind of drawing. Most people think that the primary purpose of drawing is to create a visual



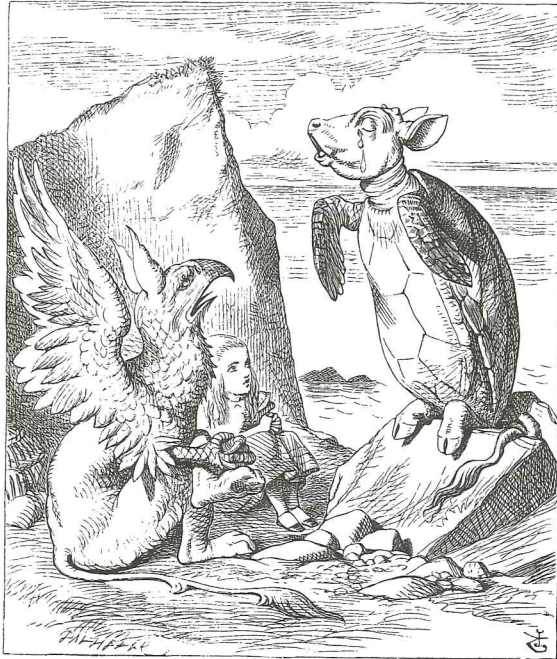


FIG. 1.1A: Alice Illustration, Sir John Tenniel, reproduced by arrangement with Macmillan Children's Books.



FIG. 1.1B: Dinosaurs, Volcanoes, and Bombs, Grade Two.



FIG. 1.2A: *Seated Nude, Back Turned* {Nu assis, vu de dos}, Henri Matisse (1913); Lithograph, printed in black, composition: 16 5/8" x 10 3/8" (42.3 cm x 26.4 cm); The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, 3rd.; Photograph © 1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Copyright © 1997 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York.

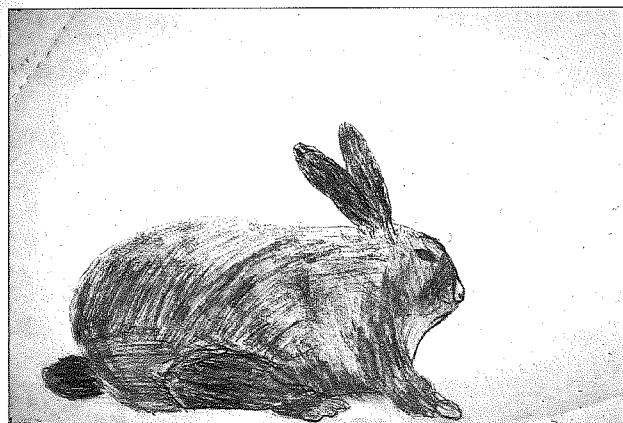


FIG. 1.2B: *Fat Curvy Rabbit*, Grade Three.



FIG. 1.3A: *Banqueting Scene*. Wall painting from Neb-Amun's Tomb at Thebes, c. 1370 B.C. Copyright British Museum.



FIG. 1.3B: *My Sister Sleepwalking*, Grade Two.

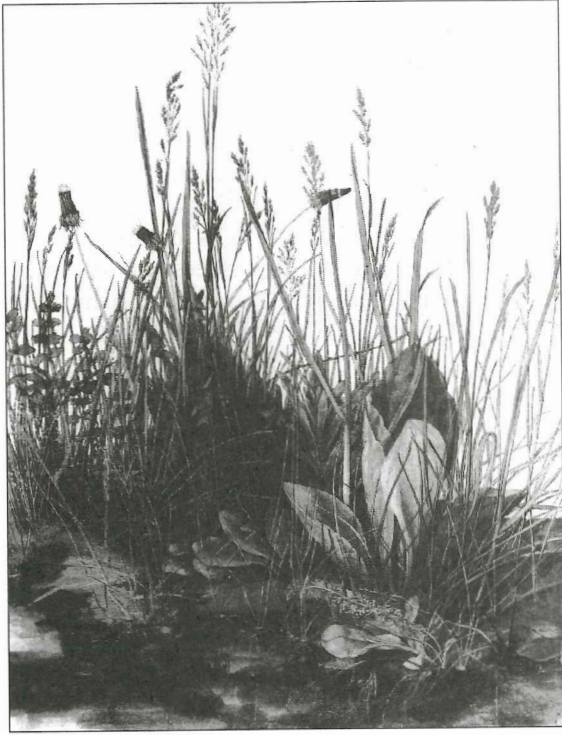


FIG. 1.4A: *The Great Piece of Turf*, Albrecht Dürer, 1503, courtesy of Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Wien.

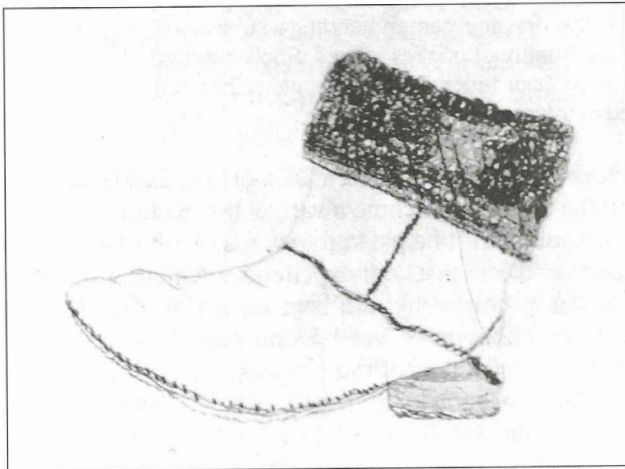


FIG. 1.4B: *Boot*, Josie Ann, Grade Five.



illusion. They also believe that illusionism is achieved by making an accurate replica of a retinal image.

As trained artists know, it is not possible to make an exact replica of a retinal image, because the perception of reality is subjective. First, the artist must select the information most relevant for the kind of drawing intended. Information considered highly relevant to a diagram of an object could be considered irrelevant if the artist is responding to light on an object. Second, because objects are not delimited by marks as much as by surfaces, the artist must devise a means of translating those surfaces into marks on paper. Finally, since we live in three-dimensional space, the artist must use or invent a system to represent depth and volume on a flat sheet of paper.

### DEFINING OBSERVATION DRAWING

In many of the kinds of drawing mentioned above, children or adults work from memory or imagination. But sometimes, they draw from observation. Observation drawing is especially subject to the assumption that its purpose is visual illusionism—an assumption we challenge. Instead, we propose that the intent of observation drawing is the creation of what the artist Nathan Goldstein (1977) describes as a “responsive” drawing.

All drawings motivated by a wish to inquire and to experience . . . are *responsive*. They are all founded on our intellectual and intuitive judgments about a subject and its organized expression on the page. . . .

Here *responsive* refers to our perceptual, aesthetic, and empathetic interpretations of a subject's properties that hold potential for creative drawing. In responsive drawing, comprehending a subject's actualities precedes and affects the quality of our responses. Such drawings do more than recall what our outer or inner world looks like. They tell us what our intuitive knowledge informs us it is. (p. 11)

Observation drawing can be defined as responsive drawing because it helps the artist and the viewer to become aware of the elusive as well as the obvious qualities of subjects. It helps, in the words of John Dewey (1934/1958), to “concentrate” and “enlarge” our experience. With this definition in mind, it becomes easier to comprehend a broader set of possible intentions for observation drawing that move well beyond illusionism. Observation drawing, for example, can be part of the process of learning to see. And thus, the marks on paper are tracks that record the process of looking, not the presentation of an illusion (Figure 1.5). It can also be an investigation of the internal structure of an object, its movement, or the proportion of its forms (Figure 1.6).

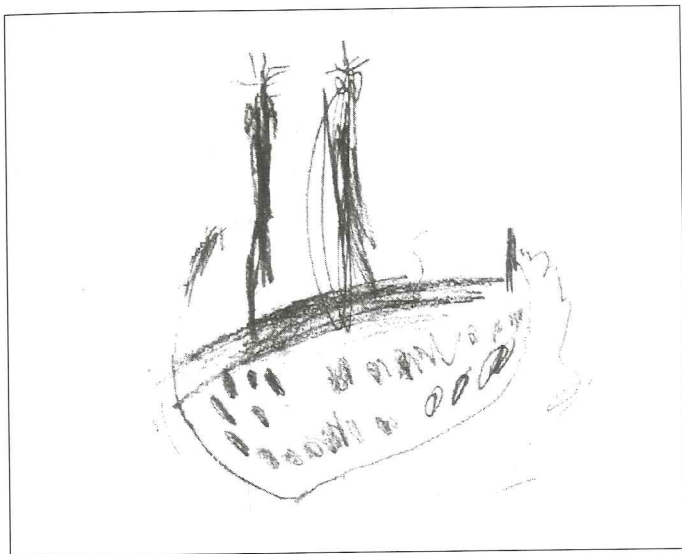


FIG. 1.5: *Narcissi*, Michael, Kindergarten.

Observation drawing can entail responding to the expressivity of an object or imagining one's personal vision of an object (Figure 1.7). Representation, then, is secondary to emotion.

Finally, an observation drawing can be an exploration of artistic issues held important to the artist. These may be understood by the viewer as the artist understood them, or they may be understood in a mode specific to the viewer. For example, a Michelangelo study for the Sistine ceiling carried different meaning for a Roman of his time than it carries for a contemporary viewer. In another instance, a 7-year-old's figure drawing carries sufficient information for her, but not for many adults.

## MEANING AND AESTHETICS IN OBSERVATION DRAWING

Observation drawings can convey meaning to the viewer in three ways. The most familiar is the narrative, the story of the subject depicted. Drawings such as Rembrandt's *Saskia Asleep in Bed* or *My New Bicycle* exemplify meaning conveyed through narrative (Figures 1.8a and b).

Almost as familiar is the metaphor. In these observation drawings, the objects depicted stand for ideas or emotions. For example, Dürer's *Hands in Adoration* implies the experience of religious worship; an 11-year-old's *Weeping Tree* suggests the child's growing sense of human loneliness and isolation (Figures 1.9a and b).



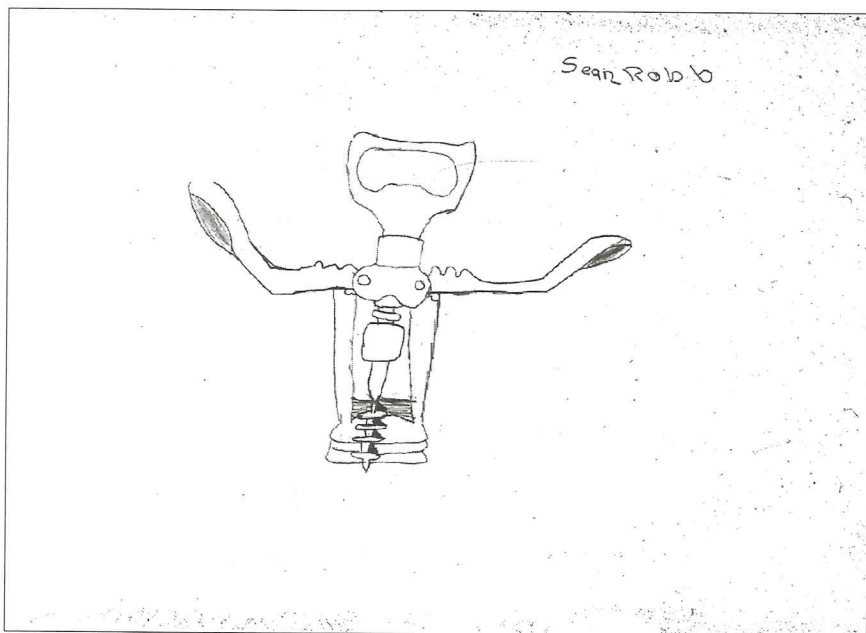


FIG. 1.6: Corkscrew, Sean, Grade Four.

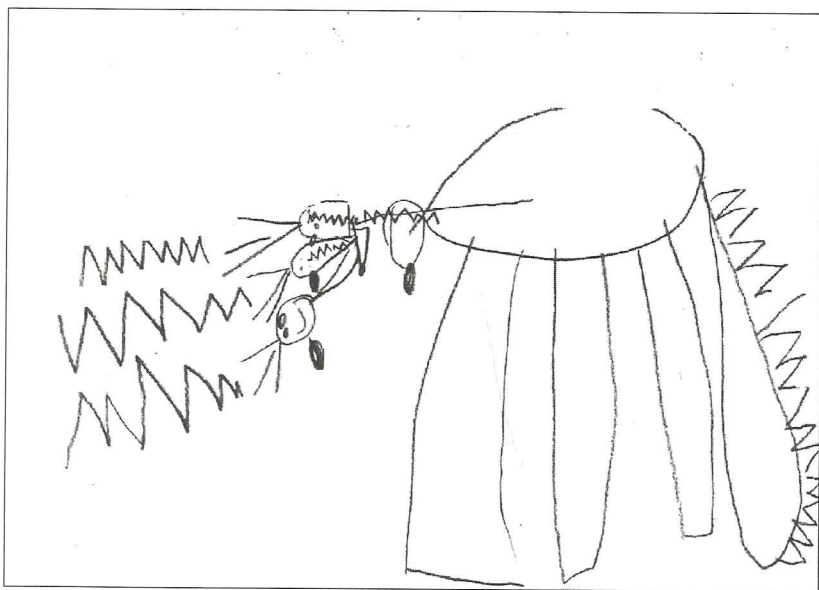


FIG. 1.7: Dragon, Devra, Kindergarten.

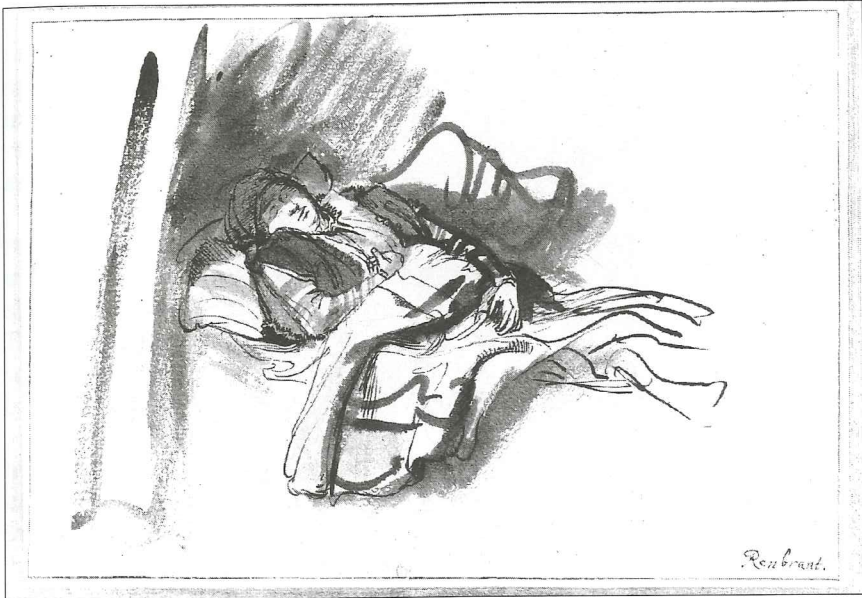


FIG. 1.8A: *Saskia Asleep in Bed*, Rembrandt, c. 1635. Courtesy Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

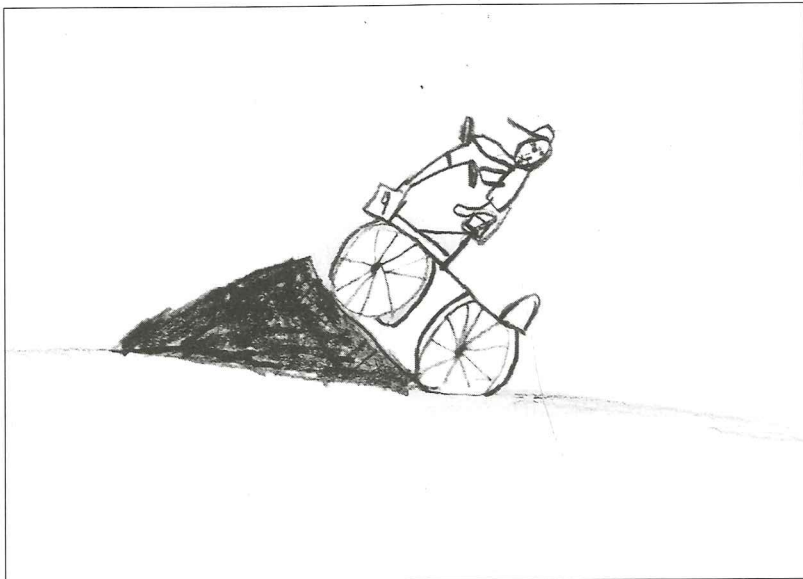


FIG. 1.8B: *My New Bicycle*, Grade Three.



FIG. 1.9A: *Hands in Adoration*, by Albrecht Dürer, courtesy of Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

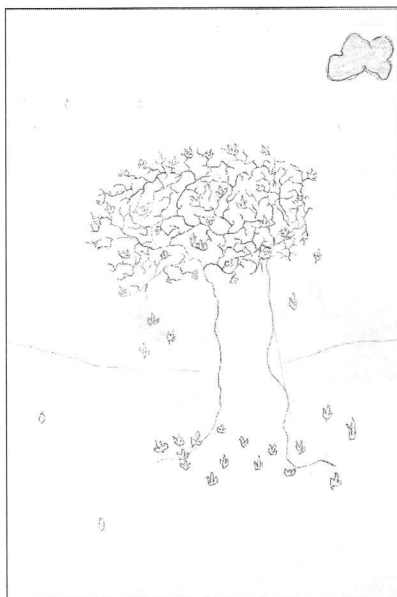


FIG. 1.9B: *Weeping Tree*, Grade Five.



Finally, there is the expressive mode of conveying meaning. This mode ranges from the emotional character of the composition and forms, such as the *Weeping Tree* and *The Dragon* (Figure 1.7), to the meaning in marks. Depending on the arrangement of lines, shapes, and values (lightness and darkness) in a composition, an object or scene can be made to appear tranquil or agitated, eerie or exuberant.

The ability to see meaning in marks is a phenomenon of perception that causes the viewer to sense such things as motion in a flowing line even though it is lying fixed and still, or weight and balance in groups of shapes even though they are merely an arrangement of lines on flat paper. The artist's convincing and sensitive deployment of meaning in the marks used in a picture creates the difference between mundane drawing and one that evokes excitement and insight in the viewer.

It might seem that expressive properties in drawings are phenomena too remote for children to understand and use. Nonetheless, response to expressive properties is a primary mode of perception for young children; in fact, it is probably the basis of the aesthetic aspect of their drawing (Smith, 1979, 1987). The insightful developmental psychologist Heinz Werner (1957/1978) describes this sort of perception as a primordial manner of perceiving and states that "it grows in certain individuals such as artists, to a level not below but on par with that of 'geometric-technical' perception and logical discourse" (p. 123).

When drawing from observation, the child applies expressive perception to looking at objects and to making marks on paper. The child first directs his perception toward an object, searching for characteristics such as the movement of its forms and structures, and then tries to establish similar characteristics in the marks of the drawing. This process is repeated as the drawing develops (Arnheim, 1974; Smith, 1983).

Thus the ability to perceive expressive properties and produce organized records of their responses is well within the reach of children. In fact, these abilities go through developmental changes that have been described in the work of Biber (1936/1962), Willats (1977a, 1981), Burton (1980–1981), Smith and Fucigna (1988), and Clark (1995). Conscious use of the three modes of conveying meaning emerge in a particular developmental pattern beginning with narrative and followed by expressive and then metaphoric meaning (Smith, 1990). This development generally occurs when opportunities to draw from observation are combined with thoughtful interactions between children, teachers, and peers. Art education that focuses on observation drawing concretizes strategies children have been using unconsciously and furthers their understanding that this kind of responsive drawing is not a matter of talent but a matter of hard work and thinking.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD OBSERVATION DRAWING IN ART EDUCATION**

Although research and practice have shown that children have the capacity for expressive perception and the ability to produce organized and expressive records of their responses, observation drawing has been misunderstood or absent from art curricula in the United States. Sometimes U.S. children are encouraged to use observation drawing to record information in science and social studies, but not in art. Some U.S. art teachers seem to feel that young children cannot draw from observation, and should not be asked to do so, because observation drawing might undermine children's natural abilities and creativity (Clark, 1995). This attitude has multiple historical roots.

The ancient Greeks saw drawing as scientific inquiry (Gombrich, 1969). The skilled artist's objective was to create an illusion so believable that the viewer would be deceived. This view of drawing faded by the Middle Ages but reemerged when Alberti developed the drawing system of perspective during the early Renaissance. The use of perspective to create an illusion of depth and space remains a favored method of spatial representation in Westernized art today. Drawings that do not create this believable illusion, such as those created by children, are sometimes criticized as inaccurate or as failed attempts at realism (Clark, 1897).

Researchers involved in some of the early studies of the psychology of children's art also judged children's drawings by illusionistic criteria. Luquet (1927), believing that children base their work on knowledge rather than perceptual information, suggests that children draw what they know and not what they see. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1982), in their influential textbook on art education, describe children's drawings as "schematic" or "generalized." Piaget and Inhelder (1948, 1969) noted that young children tend to include all of the salient features of an item whether they are visible or not.

The growth of nonrepresentational art in this country, which began with the Armory Show of 1913 in New York City, may have been another influential factor in the underutilization of observation drawing in U.S. art classes. Artists such as Grant Wood and John Stuart Curry turned away from the regional realism that until then had characterized art in this country and began to emphasize free expression. This shift finally culminated in the abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s.

While tradition and research argued that children could not draw from observation, progressive forces in art education neglected observation drawing in the literature. Children's work was believed to evolve naturally toward more adult forms (Kellogg, 1970). Attempts to guide or influence that evolution were seen as potentially damaging (Schaefer-Simmern,

1961). Art educators believed that noninterventive methods supported children's natural ways of working with art materials. Thus, children's natural work was considered "inaccurate," yet teaching children to draw "accurately" was considered damaging.

Whether all or some of these factors contributed to a lack of consistency in the teaching of observation drawing is not clear, but the fact remains that observation drawing has been either omitted or misunderstood in public school art curricula.

This book questions some of these long-standing assumptions about observation drawing and presents new, more constructive ways for it to be included in elementary art curricula. Modernism has shown us that illusionism is just one of the many systems available for the creation of viable representation. Recent research indicates that children seek out opportunities to draw from observation (Clark, 1989); that children use drawing as a problem-solving activity requiring cognitive, perceptual, and technical skills (Golomb, 1992); that children discover increasingly complex drawing strategies (Willats, 1977a; Colbert & Taunton, 1985; Smith, 1985); and that children select strategies according to the intended purpose of their drawing (Wolf & Perry, 1988; Clark, 1995).

Observation drawing has always been a staple of elementary art curricula in Great Britain and Italy. Great Britain's most recent version of its National Curriculum in Art clearly states the importance of including observation drawing (Thistlewood, 1992). And in the provocative and much-studied curriculum of Reggio Emilia, Italy, children have "extensive experience" with drawing from observation and from imagination (Katz, 1993).

Art teachers in the United States who incorporate observation drawing in a developmentally sensitive context report that children approach it with enthusiasm (Clark, 1989) and provide articulate descriptions of their drawing strategy choices (Burton, 1980–1981; Clark, 1995). The assumption that children cannot and should not draw from observation is questionable in the light of this new information.

## **CONTEXT AND GOAL OF OBSERVATION DRAWING**

We believe that children should be offered many opportunities to draw from observation—opportunities that are consistent with children's intentions and are grounded in a solid understanding of child development. Research conducted by Willats (1977b), Burton (1980), Smith (1983), Smith and Fucigna (1988), and Clark (1995), as well as our own many years of classroom experience, support the notion that observation drawing should not



use correct illusionism as its goal. Instead, observation drawing should be guided by the more sophisticated understanding that it is responsive drawing and that it resides in a particular context and has a particular goal.

The context for observation drawing with 4- to 12-year-olds is defined by six principles.

1. Children within this age range are developing a repertoire of drawing strategies for capturing their visual world. Their choice of strategy depends on the intent of their drawing, which might be a map of their route to school or something very different, such as a description of the landmarks they pass.
2. Observation drawing is an intellectual, emotional, and intuitive response to objects and events, not a "correct" rendering or visual illusion.
3. Observation drawing involves the translation of this response into marks on paper.
4. Marks on paper have a meaning of their own, in addition to the objects they depict. A line that represents the edge of a saw is in itself sharp and jagged.
5. Children's responses and translations change with age and education. For example, a 5-year-old's drawing of a three-headed dragon figure may be focused on the number of dragon body parts present, while an 11-year-old's drawing displays a response to the textures on the dragon's body.
6. There are individual differences in responses and translations within a given age group. One 5-year-old may focus on the fact that the dragon has three heads, while another may focus on the fact that the dragon has many sharp teeth.

The goal of observation drawing for young children is the development of mental and physical abilities used in the discovery and creation of meaning through drawing. This book offers teachers guidance in helping children reach that goal.