

# INTRODUCTION

## A NEW WAY TO UNDERSTAND “ART”

“Art” is a tricky word. Often, “art” is seen as static, a word describing a finished product made of paint and paper, or clay, or collage materials. Sometimes, teachers of young children use “art” to refer to spontaneous, open-ended, and often messy explorations of color or texture, with little or no teacher direction or involvement. As we explore new possibilities for ourselves as teachers, however, we begin to use the word “art” to describe a lively process of engagement with a range of materials—an engagement that is sensual and reflective, creative and deliberate, and that deepens and extends children’s learning.

Through encounters with a wide range of media and materials, children explore the sensuousness and beauty of color, texture, movement, lines, and space. They learn to look carefully and discern nuances, to move with thoughtful intention, and to follow their intuition. They also learn to find joy in the play of their senses. As children become more comfortable and skillful with these media, they are able to use them to communicate their understandings, emotions, and questions. Their fluency in a range of art “languages,” in turn, opens new possibilities for collaboration and dialogue, for taking new perspectives, and for deepening their relationships with each other.

At Hilltop Children’s Center, where I am the mentor teacher, these understandings of the power of art shape our daily practices with children. Our teaching and learning at Hilltop are inspired by the pedagogy of the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and its emphasis on “the hundred languages,” or the ways in which art media can be used to “speak” about experiences, observations, feelings, and theories.

My fellow teachers and I first began to learn about the schools in Reggio Emilia in the early 1990s. At the time, we were using a fairly traditional theme-based

curriculum with an overlay of High/Scope teaching practices. But during a staff meeting one day, we watched the video *To Make a Portrait of a Lion*, which traces the efforts of children in one of the schools in Reggio Emilia to create a portrait of one of the large marble lions in the town square. That video left us shaken and unsettled, challenged to reconsider our teaching practices, and eager to learn more.

We began a journey of change, first as just a handful of teachers experimenting with ideas from Reggio Emilia, and then, eventually, as a whole program. When we committed to exploring ideas from Reggio in a formal way, we created a half-time position, the mentor teacher, to guide our professional development; that’s the position I currently hold at Hilltop.

## START WHERE YOU ARE

The preschools in Reggio Emilia have full-scale art studios in each school building, as well as mini-studios in each classroom. The physical spaces are shockingly beautiful—in fact, when I visited them, I wept. The schools have *atelieristi*, which are full-time teachers based in the art studios who are masterful artists and teachers of young children. Children are immersed in a culture of drawing, painting, sculpting, and writing, as they represent and reflect on their encounters with the world and each other.

At Hilltop, we have only makeshift studio spaces, and no art teacher. Most of our studio spaces don’t have sinks, and the spaces are small, with every bit of space at a premium. Our studio spaces double as eating and napping spaces during the course of our days with children. Our physical space is like the physical space of most child care programs in the United States—space not initially designed for young children, space carved out of church basements, elemen-

tary schools, and office buildings. We're a full-time, year-round child care program, with the typical challenges and struggles and improvised spaces that come with being that.

But within our space, we aim to create a community of children, families, and teachers engaged together in collaborative inquiry and joyful play. We aim to embrace beauty and full-bodied sensory experiences. And we aim to use art media to anchor these inquiries and to bring beauty into our lives.

We are still inventing our way into this vision for our work. We read about the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of the schools in Reggio Emilia, and we watch videos from the schools; we attend workshops and seminars that stir our imaginations and inspire our dedication. In all these resources, however, we have not found any concrete guidance about "how to do" the work we feel called to do. So, day by day, we experiment with how to bring our values, beliefs, and commitments to life. Through mistakes and satisfactions, through reflection, collaboration, and celebration, we invent our way—just as you can, to bring the language of art into your program.

As you begin your own journey into these practices, you can start by making some simple changes in your thinking and in your teaching:

- Take a closer look at the role of art in your life and in the lives of children. Pay attention to the ways in which art invites children to look closely, to ask questions, to take new perspectives, to explore emotions, to examine thinking, and to communicate and listen.
- Watch children draw. What subjects do they choose to draw about? What details do they include in their drawings? What frustrates them as they draw? What fuels their determination? As they draw, do they tell stories related to their drawing?
- Notice how children interact with each other while they draw. Does one child's drawing inspire another child's work? Do children point out mistakes in each other's drawings, offering suggestions about how an image ought to look?
- Listen to how children talk about each other as artists. Do they identify a child as a "good drawer," knowing that certain skills and knowledge are important for artists to have? Your growing insight into the way children approach

art might inspire you to make tangible changes in your classroom environments and teaching practices.

- Experiment with expanding the supplies in your art area to include materials such as fine-tip black drawing markers, oil pastels, chalk pastels, and colored pencils; a range of paper sizes and textures; many varieties of tape and glue; and scissors and other tools for cutting. You might add watercolor and tempera paints, and paintbrushes in a range of sizes and bristle firmness. You might include clay and clay tools, and collage and construction materials. As children gain mastery with art materials, you might move those materials onto shelves that are accessible to the children so that they can use them when they need them. Try making a simple shift in your language, calling your art area an art studio. Does that shift in language influence what you think belongs in that space and what sort of work should be done in that space?
- Consider the art activities you offer children. Rather than planning product-oriented art activities, try offering children an art medium such as watercolor paint, inviting them to get to know the paint and paintbrushes well. Provide coaching about techniques for using art media to help children build skills. Offer them repeated encounters with an art medium rather than one-shot activities. Emphasize the process of creation rather than the goal of finished products.

You can create a culture of investigation in which children build relationships over time with art media and turn to art media when they have an important idea to communicate, an experience to record, or a memory or emotion to honor. "Art" becomes a verb, and "studio" becomes a way of being rather than a specific place.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The sequence of this book follows the rhythm of a year with children. The year begins simply, with initial art explorations. We introduce the children to an art medium, as we would introduce two of our dear friends to each other, launching a relationship that will be built over time with many encounters.

We invite children to explore a new art medium with all their senses so that they come to know it intimately in their bodies.

*What does tempera paint feel like on your hands?*

*How does it move on rough paper? On smooth paper?*

*What sound does tempera paint make when you spread it with your hands? With a big paintbrush? With a toothpick?*

From this intimate, sense-based knowledge, we invite children to explore ways in which an art medium can be used for representation.

*How might you use tempera paint to make a portrait of your sweet, silly dog?*

*How might you use tempera paint to tell the story of your birthday party?*

As children's repertoires expand, we invite them to compare the usefulness of media.

*To add color to your drawing, do you think tempera paint or watercolor paint would be the best choice?*

Drawing on children's increasing skill with a range of media, we begin to invite children to use art media for communication and for critical thinking.

*Let's draw the city that you built with Legos so that you can remember your work when you come back to school tomorrow.*

*Can you sketch your idea of how the pulley in the loft would work, so that we can all see what you're thinking?*

*Can you use wire to show how the lines of a leaf are like its bones?*

In this book, you'll find guidelines and strategies to help you bring the language of art into the heart of your teaching. The book is divided into two parts. The first part, "Studio Explorations," offers guidelines for setting up a studio space and fifteen explorations related to texture and movement, color, sculpting and building, and representational drawing and painting. These explorations give children fluency in the language of art, which they need before they can use art for communication and for critical thinking.

Art as a tool for investigation is the focus of the second part of the book. In "Moving Art from the Studio to the Classroom," you'll find principles and guidelines for using art in both short-term and long-term investigations, illustrated with stories from Hilltop to give you a feel for what doing so looks and sounds like in action. The final chapter tells the story of an in-depth, long-term investigation into the identity of leaves, in which art was the primary language for our study.

We don't expect all children to become poets or novelists or essayists, but we teach all children to read and write because we want them to be confident, expressive communicators. Similarly, we don't expect all children to become professional artists, making their living through painting or sculpture. We do, however, teach children how to use a range of art media so that they may communicate their ideas, experiences, emotions, questions, and insights in many languages. And, we want all children to know beauty, creativity, and expressive emotion.