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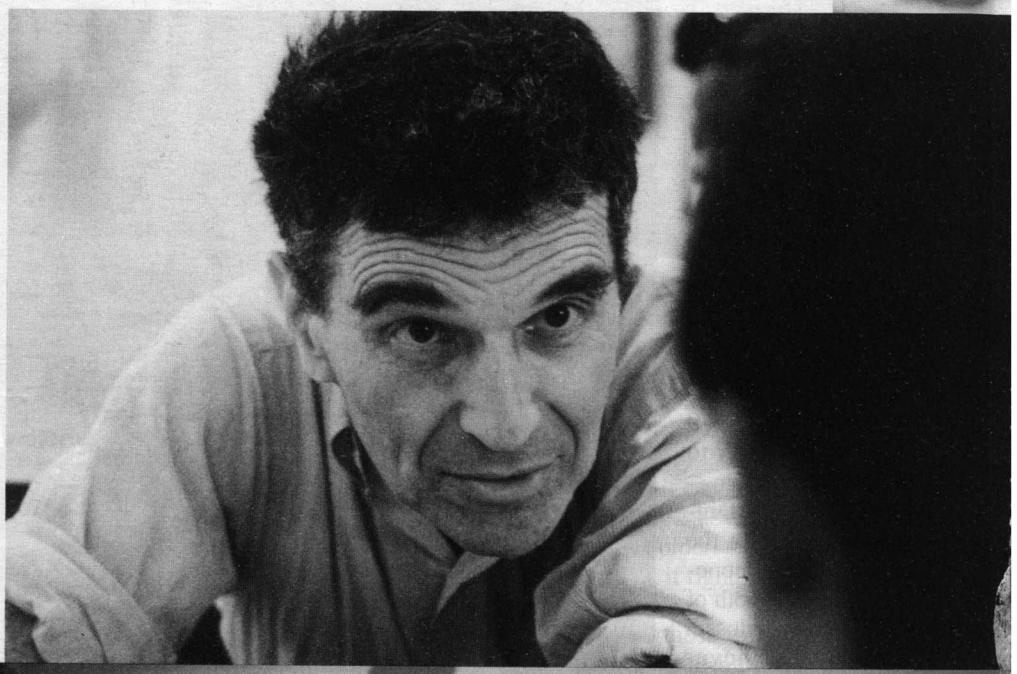
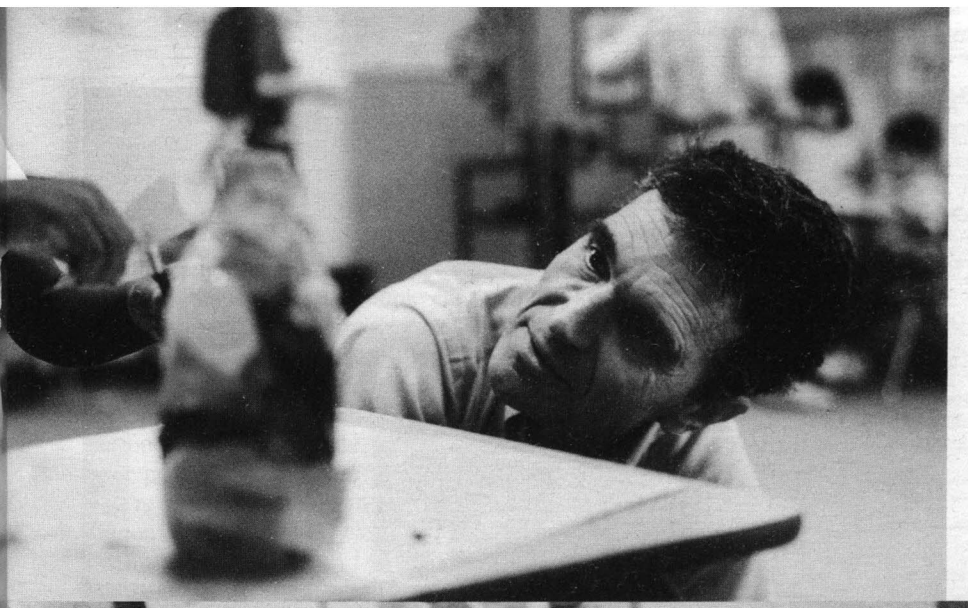
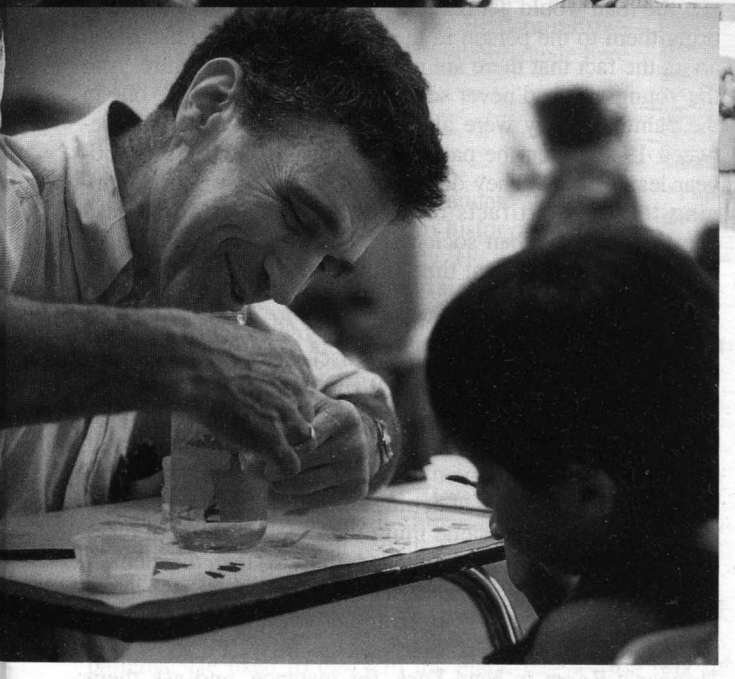
How to Look at a Mountain

"There are a lot of things we can do in teaching art to students at every level," says Robert Coles, the noted psychiatrist







Coles with children of migrant workers in eastern North Carolina in 1990. Art, he says, "is a means of both instruction and amplification of communication between teacher and student and among students. It's a tool for discussion about all sorts of matters—environment, esthetics, personal experience. . . . Visual literacy ought to be acknowledged as part of cultural literacy."

Dr. Robert Coles, the child psychiatrist, is the author of more than 50 books, including Children of Crisis, *for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. His latest book,* Their Eyes Meeting the World: The Drawings and Paintings of Children, *was published last November by Houghton Mifflin. It is a beautiful and moving book, edited by Margaret Sartor, with 50 drawings that are among the thousands of pictures Coles has gathered from all over the world. The youngsters range from a 9-year-old boy from a black ghetto in Baltimore to a 12-year-old in Tunisia to privileged white suburban children.*

A warm, unpretentious man, Coles is professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at Harvard University. He and his wife live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and have three sons.

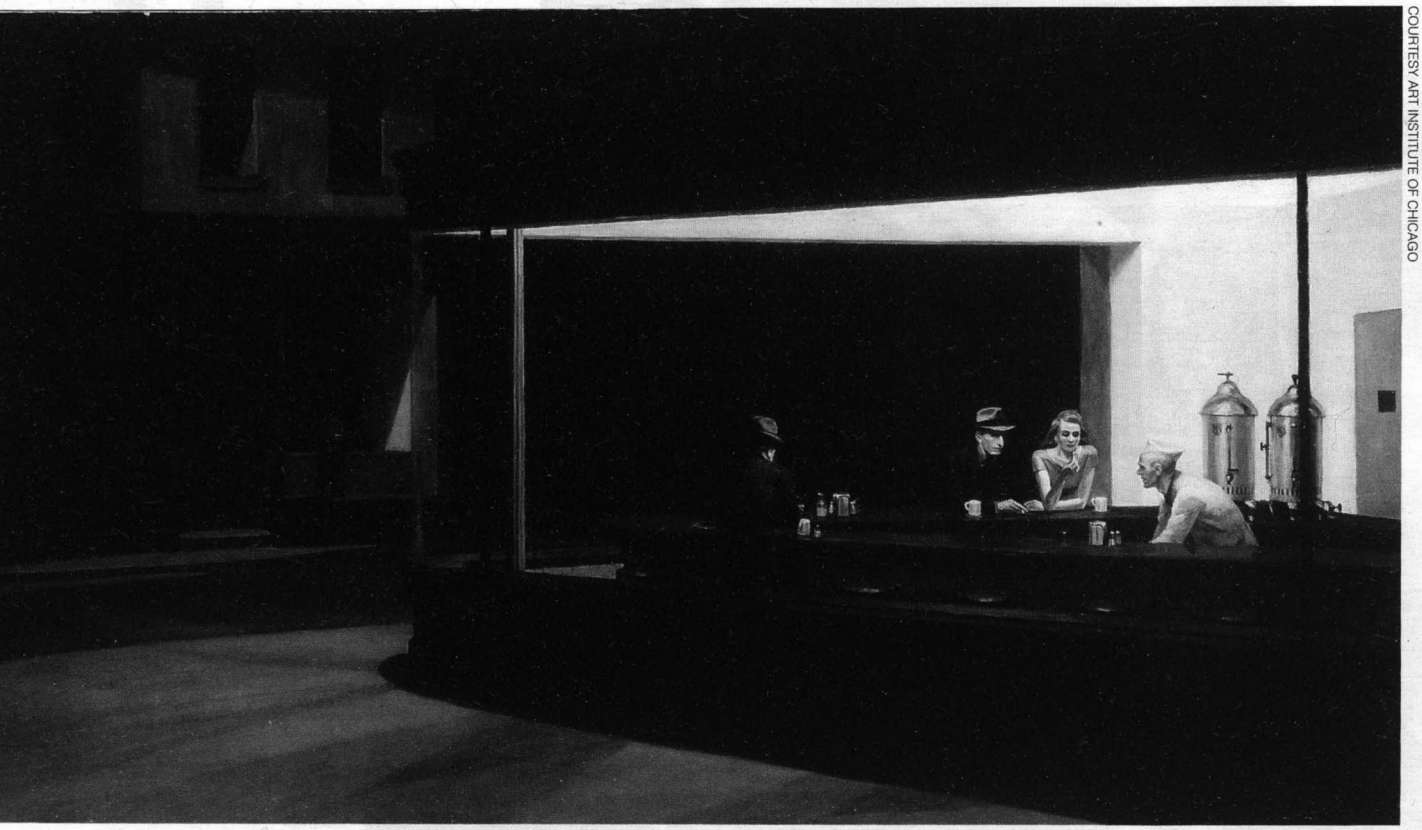
Coles, who is 62 years old, was born in Boston and received his bachelor of arts degree from Harvard University in 1950 and his medical degree from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1954. His many honors and awards include honorary degrees from 40 colleges and universities.

Milton Esterow, editor and publisher of ARTnews, *recently interviewed Coles at Harvard. Following are excerpts:*

There's been a lot of talk recently in art education circles about "visual literacy." You've been doing some interesting work using art to engage students of various ages and backgrounds in a broad range of learning. Can you tell us how this evolved?

Some years ago, I volunteered to teach a fourth-grade class in the Martin Luther King School in Cambridge, Massachusetts—really only a mile or two away from Harvard, but an ocean away in terms of sociocultural separation. I also taught a ninth-grade English class at the old Boston English High School. Most of the kids at both these schools were not very well educated. They came from homes that I suppose would be called lacking in cultural literacy. Many of the kids were headed for, it seemed, nowhere and were having trouble with arithmetic as well as reading and writing.

I was supposed to come in once a week to teach English



COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, 1942, "cast a spell" on Coles' fourth-grade class, and the children responded with stories from their own lives.

and writing, but for a long time I had a lot of trouble getting the kids to even *talk* about things, much less write about them. Half my time was devoted to trying to quiet them down enough to focus on anything connected to studying. Finally, because I was floundering and desperate, I came to the class one day with some slides of art. I came with some Edward Hopper pictures. I started showing them first to the fourth-grade kids, and I got a tremendous response. First of all, they shut up. For the first time the class was quiet. The pictures cast a spell on the classroom, and gradually the students began to ask me questions—Where was this painted? Who was this guy Hopper?

I thought, "I must be on to something here," so I said, "Let's do this every week." They were pleased, and I started bringing in more slides. Some teachers said, "Well, you're turning this into an art class." I said, "Look, let's not define what I'm doing with words like art, literature, composition, English. Let's just see what goes on."

This was the beginning of a wonderful teaching experience, not only for the children but for me, because they began telling me stories from their lives related to the pictures. There's one I'll never forget. I showed them *Nighthawks*, Hopper's famous picture of the all-nighters in a coffee shop. A girl raised her hand and told the class that her mother worked in a Dunkin' Donuts on the midnight-to-seven shift in Cambridge. Her mother told her, "You ought to see some of the people who come in there." She started telling the class about the nighthawks at the Dunkin' Donuts. Her mother had a whole schedule of them—the truck drivers, the people who are drunk and need some coffee to go home, the semiviolent weirdos who frighten her. The class was wide-eyed.

Then I brought them back to Hopper. I said, "Who are these people in the painting?" After a bit, they started to pay attention to the individual figures. They talked about the man sitting alone, away from the couple. They wondered why he didn't have a girlfriend. The kids had him upset because he was alone and the other two were together. The girl whose mother worked at Dunkin' Donuts said that most of the people who come in there tend to be alone, or if they were a couple, the man would get out and get the coffee and donuts and bring them to the person in the car. This started a discussion about the fact that there are no cars in Hopper's picture. And the youngsters had never seen a coffee maker like the one in the painting. They were already making the connection between 1942, when the painting was made, and 1992—a 50-year leap in time. They didn't know it, but they were beginning to notice artifacts of a culture gone by and to ask questions about urban sociology: Who goes into this place? Why? Who is up at that time of night? What kind of person has this kind of job?

After a while, I decided to take one slide and show it to the class and, instead of having a discussion, I'd say, "Write about what you're looking at. Write about it any way you want. You can describe what you're seeing. You can connect what you're seeing to something that you've experienced. You can connect what you're seeing to something that's on your mind." And I started getting compositions from them.

I started doing the same thing with the high school class. The high school kids were stunned, more so than the elementary school kids. I showed them some of the same slides, and again I got cooperation from them, even an eagerness to know more about the paintings and the artists. I'd show them Hopper's *Room in New York*, for instance, and ask them, "What's going on here?"—open-ended Rorschach kind of questions. They'd say, "Well, he's paying attention to the newspaper and she's playing the piano." Eventually someone will say, "They don't look too happy to me." And someone

replies, "Maybe he's just reading. They could be happy, even so." "But if they're happy, they'd be doing things together." Eventually they notice the door. "What kind of door is that? It's so big. It's going all the way up to the ceiling from the floor." It doesn't take too much explanation on my part for the children to begin to get the picture of closeness and yet distance, of how people can be in the same room and yet so far apart personally, emotionally, humanly.

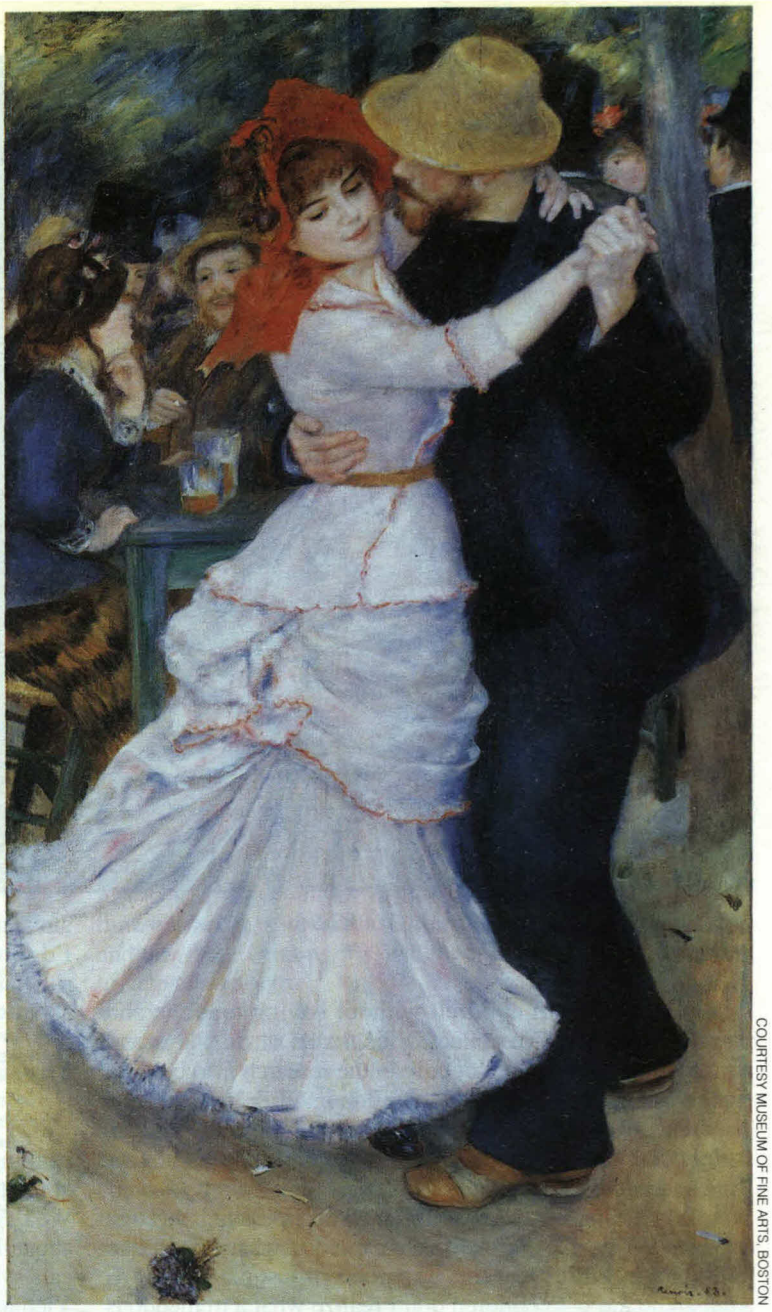
And then I might say, "Have you ever been so wrapped up in yourself that you really don't notice anyone, even the people next to you? Have you ever gotten lost in some train of thought so that you're kind of cut off from everything?" That gets a response from them. They know what it is to daydream. We all do. When I put it that way, personally, they see the painting in a new light. They respond to it out of their own lives.

And after looking at 10 or 15 Hoppers, they begin to see that this is something he puts in painting after painting. Now they're on to Hopper's vision, and so I mention it's like a signature—and I write the word on the board—a way that an artist has of writing his name through repeated clues in his paintings. And so I've begun a little bit of art history there, without labeling it anything so fancy, of course.

We got some lively discussions going. They wanted more of it. I would tell them personal stories about my mother taking me to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and what it meant for me to go there and see these pictures and hear her talk about them. I ended up bringing in art books from my own collection that I hadn't looked at in a long time and taking them on trips to the museum. I was giving them, in essence, the kind of art history lectures that I used to get when I was taking Benjamin Rowland's course in art history as an undergraduate here at Harvard.

When did this start?

About five years ago. An undergraduate student of mine was writing his thesis on art history and wanted to do a different kind of study. He was interested in how children would respond to certain paintings or drawings through slides. So I went over with him to the King School. As we showed these kids the slides, we were both fascinated by their attentiveness.



COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

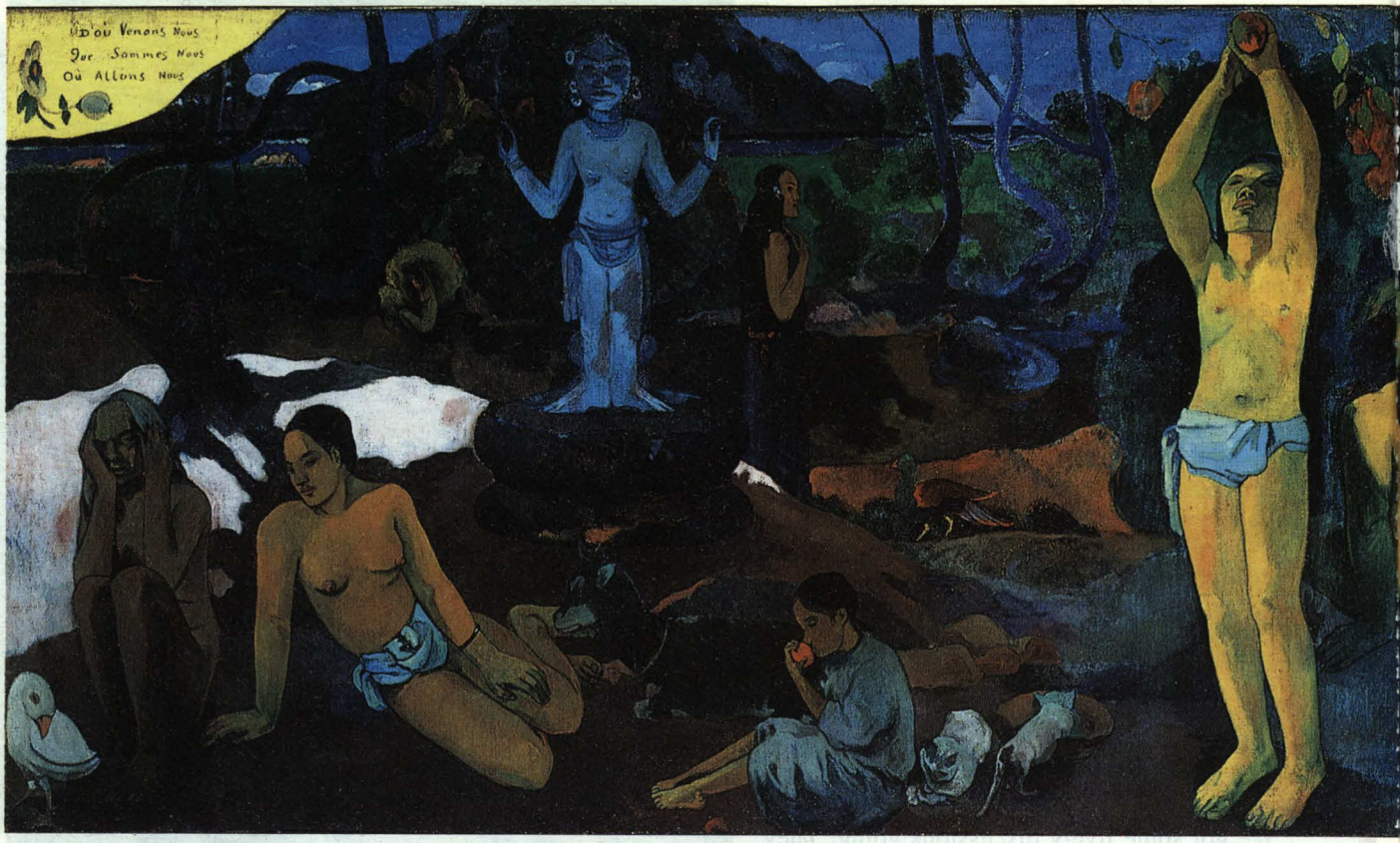
"I've found that painting enables you to cross barriers of class, race, language, and culture," says Coles. Here, Renoir's *Dance at Bougival*, 1883.

But you've been working with children and art for a long time.

For more than 30 years. Art to me has been a means by which I communicate with children, and it goes back to when I was a resident in pediatrics at the Boston Children's Hospital. Actually, it goes back further, to when I wrote my thesis on William Carlos Williams [the poet and physician]. I accompanied him on some of his rounds to see some of his patients. He used to carry in his black bag a little box of crayons and some paper, which I vividly remember. Sometimes, with children who were particularly difficult—to distract them or quiet their hurts or fears, especially of him—he'd give them some candy and would sometimes ask them to draw. You know, he was an amateur artist. He would draw at the same time they were drawing.

When I started my residency in pediatrics, which was my first try at medicine, the first thing I did was get some crayons and paper. I was working with children with serious illnesses. They were depressed and fearful. We would sit and talk, and sometimes we'd sit and draw pictures together. They taught me a lot through those pictures about what was happening in their minds, and what they were worried about. It was a conversation of sorts—silent conversation—followed by actual conversations, first about what they'd drawn and secondly about why they had drawn it.

When I got involved in the work I'm doing now, so-called field work in the South and now all around the country—with rural, urban, black, white, poor, and well-to-do kids—the crayons, paints, and paper are constant companions of mine. I have done this work in many countries, and I've found that drawing and painting enable you to cross barriers of class, race, language, and culture.



Tell me more about your study of children's drawings and paintings.

I cannot work with children without having crayons and paints beside me. I've collected thousands of drawings and paintings from children, not only in the research I do but as a teacher and as a therapist with children. With these works, children give expression to their troubles, their aspirations, their hopes. The pictures are clues to what's going on in their lives and in their minds, in their hearts.

A lot of this has to do with children inventing through crayons and paints a visual presentation of what they'd like to do in life. I think teachers or parents or just plain all of us adults who are with children don't realize what a tremendous opportunity an interest in the visual presents to us. It's a mode by which children express themselves and help us to understand them, but it also helps them to understand themselves by portraying themselves to the world.

I've discovered over the years that I can tell you where a child comes from by looking at their pictures. American Indian children are interested in drawing the land, the sky, the mountains, the clouds. Eskimo children are interested in trying to figure out how to evoke the snow—not an easy thing to do with crayons and paper. Appalachian children represent mountains as filling the landscape and themselves as diminutive aspects of a large natural world. But urban kids tend to favor self-portraits. Then there are the rich kids, who represent their wealth by putting a lot of the clutter in their lives in their drawings, versus poor kids, who have very little and are left only with themselves, and sometimes a rather melancholy, even impoverished—visually impoverished—presentation of themselves.

With some children, I not only asked them to draw and paint. I would take some art books and we would sit and look at pictures—a Renoir painting, some works by van Gogh, and especially Käthe Kollwitz's drawings and lithographs. I'd show them to the children, and they'd construct their stories, and I would learn more both about the children and about what these works of art can say.

Do you use works by these artists in the Boston classrooms?

Yes. I show them Gauguin's Tahitian pictures. There's one painting in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that has, written at the top in French, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" I ask the kids what they think about these questions. I show them a map, and I help them locate where Tahiti is. I show them where Australia is, and Vietnam. A lot of kids don't know where Vietnam is on a map, but they know that they lost an uncle there, or a father or a grandfather. I give them, in a sense, a geography lesson of the Pacific. And I show them where France is, and tell them something about Gauguin's life. The picture and its questions get them going on their thoughts about life and where they'd like to live and why they'd want to move from one part of the world to the next. They draw from those children the rarest phenomena in the fourth grade—namely silence and speculation and reflection.

Sometimes I'll talk about my own youth, about times when I was grumpy and just wanted to be alone. I'd say to the students, "Have you ever gone out in the evening and looked up at the heavens and wondered about yourself and what this life means?" Then I'll show them a van Gogh night scene. I try to indicate that artists, as they draw or paint, are thinking and feeling. "Art" as a subject turns into something else. It becomes part of the human experience.

I encourage the elementary school kids to look for a flower on the way to school in the spring, to look at a tree finally coming out with leaves, and I point out that this is what painters do. The artists notice these aspects of the world, and

COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

they try to render it. I tell them we can become artists ourselves, at least in the sense that we notice the world—its shapes, its colors, its beauty—and respond to it.

I'll bring in pictures from newspapers of people or of an urban scene and try to encourage them to notice that even in the daily newspaper you get something that connects with paintings that have been done by people like Hopper, or John Sloan, or George Bellows.

With some classes, eventually I'll show Picasso's *Guernica*. It's a puzzling picture, and you have to start pointing things out. Picasso was using a lot of symbols, but when kids are "into" this, when they have done it for a number of weeks with you, you can also teach them history. You can tell them what the artist was doing, that he was mourning the destruction of republican Spain. He was commemorating a horrible moment in the civil war, and speaking out against tyranny.

How do the students react?

They want to know more about Spanish history. They didn't know there was a Spanish Civil War.

How do they react to the strange representation of figures in the painting?

I have to explain this to them, but once I explain it, they "get" it. I take the picture and move from one part to the next and point things out, and they begin to say, "Yeah, I see." And they can identify with the rebellious viewpoint of the painter because they themselves have a different viewpoint on the world.

The kids pick up pretty quickly on Käthe Kollwitz's works, of course. The one of a woman leading the masses can be very exciting for them because they pick up the social and political ferment. It connects with some of their own yearnings and some of their own frustrations and even rage. I tap into a lot of social, cultural, and racial matters through an artist like that. We have some good discussion, and then we follow it up with some compositions again. I get them to write what they have seen and felt.

I talk with the youngsters about William Johnson, a black artist who recently had a show that toured several museums. I was excited by the catalogue and I wanted to share it with the kids. I told them about Johnson's life, a very tragic life. He was involved in an interracial marriage. It was a tragic time for him. He had a difficult personal experience, and he struggled with the question of who he was and with his racial identity. It's important for these students to know about this artist, just as it is important for them to know about van Gogh and his troubled but gifted life. The children have troubled lives, and they have certain gifts, and these are the connections I try to help them make.

You seem to make art a takeoff point to talk about everything.

This is what I'm trying to get at. Visual literacy ought to be acknowledged as an important part of cultural literacy. Without visual literacy, I think, a person may know how to use a semicolon, or the name of a state capital, or the height of a mountain. But they may not know how to look at that mountain, or seascape, or cityscape, with some kind of intelligence and

Works such as Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (above) and Kollwitz's *Peasants' War*, 1903 (below), "tap into cultural and racial matters," and drew from fourth-graders "the rarest phenomena—namely silence, speculation, and reflection."

COURTESY COLLECTION ROBERT COLES

COURTESY HOUGHTON MIFFLIN

In Tunisia a boy meticulously composed an ideal vision of his town, saying, "It is my duty to show it to you the best way I can."

thought, to look at the world and try to make sense of it, even make sense of something larger than the earth itself. All this is of a piece in my mind and, I think, in the minds of these kids.

I think there's educational significance in this. This is a tool, this is a means of instruction and amplification of communication between teacher and student and among students. It's also a tool for a discussion about all sorts of matters—environment and sociology, esthetics, the nature of working-class life, personal experience, and on and on, depending on what you want to do with it as a teacher.

What a waste that we have all this available to us, in slides and art books, and museums, and we don't use it in our classrooms, whether it be elementary school or high school—and, I might even add, in college or medical school.

You use this approach at the college level also?

Yes, in an undergraduate seminar I teach at Harvard.

How does that work?

In the seminar, I'm connecting art and literature. That Gauguin painting I mentioned earlier was the artist's effort to encompass all of life. I use that in connection with writers such as Walker Percy or even John Cheever, who deal with what you might call the existential questions of life. Hopper's works I tie into the short stories and poems of Raymond Carver. The way Carver's fiction and Hopper's paintings connect is as if they were kindred spirits talking to one another and shedding light on American life.

There's a lot of things we can do in teaching students at every level, from postgraduate through college down to high school and into elementary school. I wish sometimes that paintings would be used regularly in courses in sociology and psychology, in social history, even in science. If you look at Munch's paintings, they are an extraordinary window on the mind for those of us who are interested in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and the 20th-century predicament of a lot of so-called civilized societies. If I were teaching a class in psychoanalysis, for instance, to college students—or for that matter to psychiatric residents—I'd love to have artists such as Munch available as we contemplate the human mind.

To some extent, we are educated *out* of an interest in the visual. Starting in the third and fourth grades, they're taught to concentrate on numbers, letters, and increasingly, punctuation, spelling, words, sentences—which is fine. But they're not taught with an equal kind of insistence to concentrate on the visual and to learn how to look. In fact, if we're lucky in school, we might have something called an "art class," where we're encouraged to draw or do anything we want with crayons or paintings. In a more structured school of a more traditional kind, maybe we're taught how to draw the human body, be accurate and responsive to the realist traditions.

And that's it. That's called art, sort of like there's art and there might be a little bit of gymnastics.

I think when we encourage responsiveness to looking,

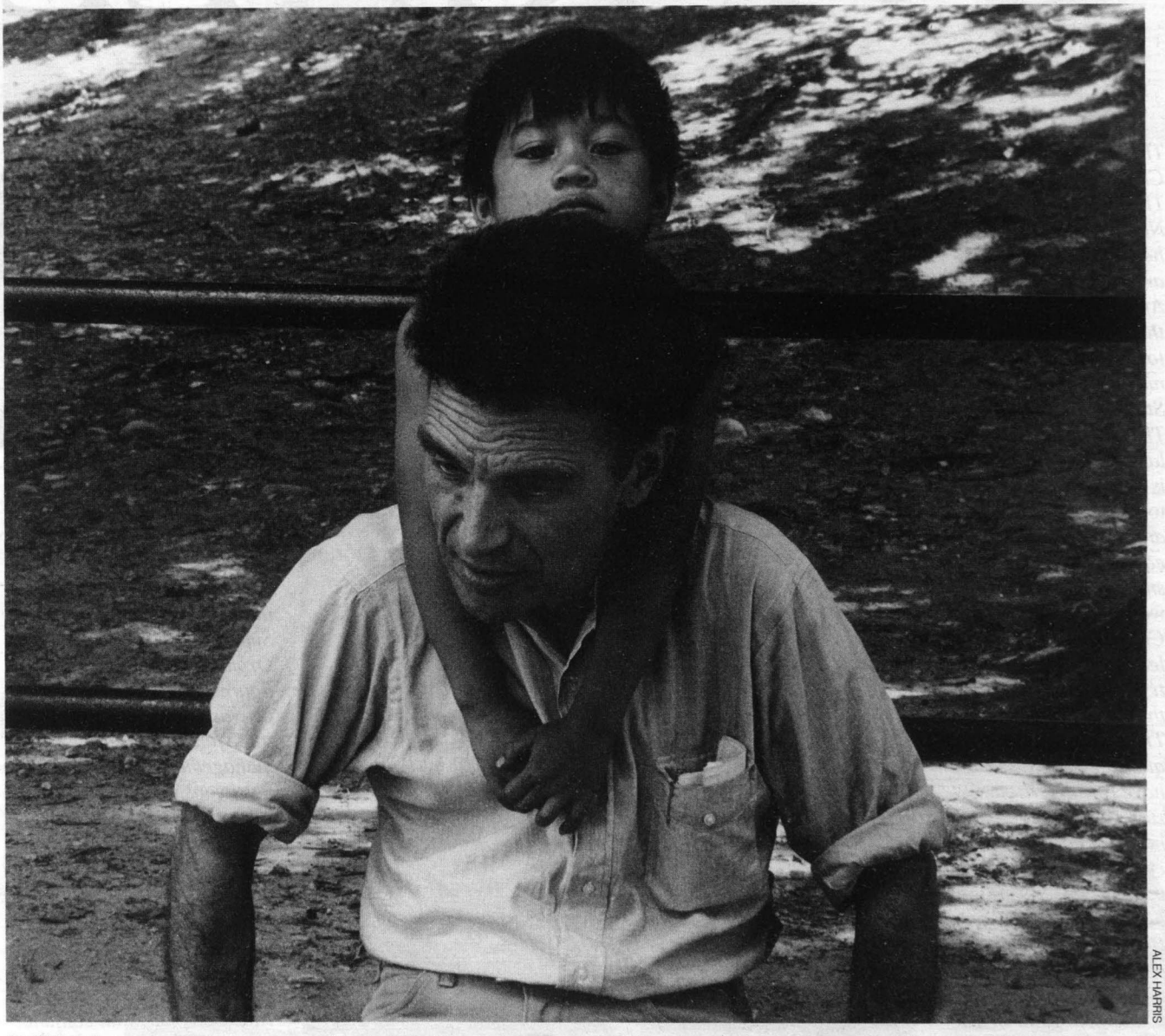
we're encouraging responsiveness in general. I've taken kids to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and taught them American history through history paintings. I show them a painting of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. I show them photographs of Lincoln—the young Lincoln and the older Lincoln. We get into a discussion of the Civil War, and this leads into the nature of an American presidency, which I couldn't do as well without the visual assistance.

These museum visits are targeted to connect with something we've been discussing in the class, something that the students can connect with in their lives, whether it be their educational lives or the lives they live outside school. I'm against these onetime trips, in which the kids are raced through the museum in a token gesture toward exposing them to "culture." I'm in favor of bringing them to the museum for a specific purpose, maybe even to have them meet just one painting and spend some time with it. Sometimes, I select the painting in my mind, and I have a talk with myself in advance about why I'm bringing them to that work of art. If they don't understand, we're going to come back, and we'll come back again and again. I want them to know that this place and that art is there for *them*.

Have you seen any of this make any change in the youngsters?

Well, it makes for more seriousness in the classrooms, moral as well as academic, at times. It's very hard to hold the attention of these children. When I do, it's usually because I've connected the painting to a story that in turn connects with their own stories. Then I can sometimes work in something else—say, the idea of the dedication of an artist and the compulsion to give of himself. I try, in a way, to take on the tremendous riddle of boredom and hostility, indifference, hurt and suffering, and all the other words we use to describe children from backgrounds that do not lend themselves to a kind of academic interest that some of us teachers have.

But by the time these classes end each year, these children have been regular visitors to a university and are now familiar with a major art museum. Some of my original students are now in junior high school. They have not dropped out, and show every evidence of wanting to continue their education. And who knows what this will all come to mean in the long run. We have to wait for 10 or 15 years to see whether this has made any mark on their lives. But I think it is a good beginning. ■



ALEX HARRIS

"I think when we encourage responsiveness to looking," says Coles, "we're encouraging responsiveness in general."