



The Iraqi Children's Art Exchange is a project that uses art and photographs to connect children, on both sides of the exchange, an opportunity to express themselves and tell a personal story about their particular moment in history. It is an active, and ever expanding collection of art made especially for this project, and documenting photographs by project founder, and coordinator, Claudia Lefko.

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Alladin and Iron Man  
 by  
 Mohammed Showeka,  
 Al-Haddad, 2001. "I want  
 to (let me) get out of this  
 hospital."

## Iraqi Children's Art

## Exchange Project



## ART GIVES CHILDREN A VOICE.

As someone who works with images--children's art and photographs documenting an art exchange project between children in Iraq and children in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts where I live--I was immediately struck by the language in Article 12 of the CRC. I am referring specifically to the term "view": States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Clearly this is meant as opinion--a child who forms and expresses an opinion will be given consideration. But, when I consider "view", in the context of the question before us: how to include children as active participants in society, I come up with another, broader definition.

A child begins forming a view the moment she or he enters the world, and, as the British art and cultural critic Jon Berger points out:

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."



The point is clear, I think; all children, even very young children have a point of view--a feeling, even opinion about their life and the world around them. What they need is an audience of adults, willing and able to listen and/or respond to them with "...due weight." Children are expressing themselves in relation to their views all the time --through their interactions with other people, with their environment, with materials and toys, found objects, pets and other "stuff" of childhood. The question for us, as adults, is how to be constructive listeners, how to develop a social/political framework that enables us to bring children and their views into our discussions. How to include them as active and important actors in their lives, as participants in the decision making processes of family, school and community. How can we give children "...due weight..." I enter this conversation as an educator; the focus of my work with children is art.



Every day, all around the world-- in the global south and in the north; in the east and in the west-- parents, teachers, therapists, social and humanitarian aid workers give children art materials, with no particular instructions. We encourage children to paint and draw, cut, paste and sculpt for the sheer pleasure of it. But beyond that, we recognize art as an important, powerful and expressive language of childhood that gives children another way of organizing and understanding the oftentimes baffling world around them. Some would say that children can express themselves and their ideas more fully, and with more meaningful details using pencil, crayon, paint and paper than they can in conversation. If you want a window onto a child's life, offer them art materials.

### An art exchange project.

This is what I do in the classroom, and this is what I did in my community as I prepared, in January, 2001, to join a humanitarian delegation taking medicines to Iraqis, suffering under stringent UN Sanctions. I wanted to take something more personal, something that would resonate with a child. So, I engaged the help of children; I met with them, explained where I was going, and why; I invited them to make a picture I could take to a child in Baghdad. Once there, I took the art supplies I brought with me, along with the American children's pictures to Al-Mansour Pediatric hospital. There I went from bed to bed with the doctor, giving out the pictures and inviting children to make a picture for a child in the United States. I documented this exchange on both sides, with photographs. This was the beginning of the Iraqi Children's Art Exchange Project. The exhibits created from this ongoing project bring faces and "views" of children into the public arena for our contemplation and consideration. They enable children to participate in a wide-ranging and extremely important conversation about human kindness, understanding, empathy, love and peace.



"The artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history," said Robert Rauschenberg, and so it is with our young artists. I invite them to offer a public comment on their particular moment in history, and themselves in that moment. This may be the very "art of the past" that Jon Berger talks about, and even longs for, in *Ways of Seeing*: a "work of art" that is not meant to be judged by some arbitrary artistic standard for beauty, form or genius. Children's art is basic, I would argue... closer to the bone. I see it as an authentic expression --unedited documentation -- of the world around them and their personal experience in that world.

### Art is an important language of childhood.

"Seeing comes before words." We see children in the aftermath of natural disasters, eyes staring --disoriented and sober-- at the camera absorbing the scene around them. Imagine the long, wide-eyed hours of childhood in some of the most troubled areas of the world--in Darfur, Palestine, or in Baghdad. Imagine the tension, worry and preoccupation in the faces of the adults in the homes, schools and community gathering places; imagine the looks on the faces of the soldiers who may be patrolling the streets, or searching homes. Imagine the hundreds upon hundreds of confusing, frightening even terrifying scenes, that could and do play out in front of children living in war zones. It isn't easy to explain this world with words, and often no one is available to listen. That's why we offer them pens, pencils, paint and paper. When they finally take that pen or brush in hand, we see their "view" clearly; art give substance to their thoughts, it's solid, concrete and lasting. Something we can look at over time and share with others.

On the other side of this exchange is a child in a much different circumstance, but a child with a view nonetheless. We want to hear this view as well, and we want to bring this child into the wide-ranging, important conversation mentioned above. Because these view should also be given "due weight" as we navigate the political/social mine fields that clutter our adult world.

We need the voices of children and beyond that, we are required by the CRC to include them in the conversations and debates--big and small, local and international -- of our time. Article 12 recognizes this and assures their right to be heard. We must let their truth into our hearts and minds, and let it shape our personal, political and social ideology. To do anything less is to deny the importance and significance of children as the future of our planet.

Article 13 affirms that participation needn't be verbal; it broadens our options. We can move forward, by taking advantage of these options, recognizing that children are always "talking" to us, always expressing their views. We cannot depend on them--especially young children-- to attend conferences, and engage in adult meetings. We must be creative about how we include their "views". Art is only one avenue, there a many others to explore.

