

Creative Nature

Art

Poetry, music, sculpture, photography. Cutting a maze or sundial into the grass in a children's playground. Weaving a basket. Brightening a concrete wall with paint, or a mosaic of clay tiles. Dancing in a woodland glade. We can all be artists.

Look at art anywhere in the world and you will see references to nature and our relationship with it. Since the art of the cavemen we have represented and interpreted nature, and used nature itself for our tools and materials and pigments.

Artists take inspiration from everything around us and within us – from the steam billowing out of power station cooling towers to the corrosion of iron girders; from light playing on skeletal leaves to the warmth and texture of a piece of wood. From joy to rage and despair.

The wealth of nature in the Scottish countryside provides an infinite stimulus and resource for artists young and old – with its landscapes of sharp contrasts and all the elements at full force – miles of beaches, jagged mountains, fierce winds, clear blue skies. But nature is art itself. It provides the stimulus and the materials, and it can be a potent tool in getting people engaged with nature in every way: inspiration, exploration, understanding, communication.



*A sparkling purple sphere,
Reflections glittering,
Chequered diamonds
Dropping softly.*

*Zooming in, I see
Soft seeds floating elegantly
around.
Tear-drop shapes,
Deep red.*

*Zooming in, I see
A ghostly mucus, moss
Shining - a gloomy outline
Fallen from a height.*

*Stepping back, I see
Just a drop of water -
But I know more!*

**Emily Grainger, P5
Foyers Primary**

There is nothing to compare with experiencing nature first-hand – feeling the wind and sun, discovering green metallic beetles, getting close up to fragile flowers, feeling fur and fibre. Then you can truly recreate nature as you see it, or feel it, or simply as it turns out. Whether art is good and true is really down to the individual and what he or she gets out of it.

We've seen examples of the most beautiful sculptures and photography, and we've seen a wealth of art produced by children – in the course of class-work, for competitions, and in dedicated projects. Take a look at some of this work in the [gallery](#) or follow the links provided there.

There are far more child artists than adults, and this is perhaps a sad reflection of what we grow into, and out of. Children have wonderful uncluttered minds and see the link between art and nature for what it is - an experience – a chance to express as individuals what they see or feel, the vibrant colours of fungi or the movement of water. It's not just a means of engaging them with biodiversity; its part of living.

The pupils of Foyers Primary sketched many of their finds at Loch Bran through the seasons, with wonderful accuracy. The pupils of Royal School of Dunkeld dropped the curriculum for a week in June 2005 to run their 'River of Words' project in a 'celebration of water' through poetry, music and art. The pupils of Falla Hill Primary recall their Forest School activities in mind maps and coloured posters. And there are many more.

Some professional artists have been exceptional in nurturing artistic talent, and their names and work crop up regularly countrywide. This may be for their ability to work sympathetically with children or to create pieces which are of lasting value for a whole community.

Heather Butlin is a silk painter based on the Black Isle in Highland. She produces a wide range of accessories and framed work as well as providing practical workshops for all age groups. Heather's website tells us that her inspiration 'is found in nature and the land, myth and legend'.

We came across Heather at a celebration day on Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve and through some stunning silk painted banners which she developed through working with schools and a Brownie group near Inverness. Each group spent time with Countryside Ranger Katy Martin looking at the local countryside and producing pencil drawings of the plants and animals they either found, or felt were special to their local area. The children then worked with Heather to produce silk versions of their drawings which together made up group banners for exhibition in the new Scottish Natural Heritage buildings in 2006. We had the pleasure of returning one of the banners to Dochgarroch Primary School during our visit there and in witnessing the children remembering the project and delighting in seeing their own artwork again.

Sculptor **Kevin Blackwell** works countrywide from his base in East Neuk, Fife. Originally a graduate in Electro Engineering, Kevin's career change has benefited us all with beautiful sculpture and artworks which leave a lasting legacy for local communities. He is careful to research the background to each project well before starting his work, tying in cultural history and focusing on local nature and wildlife wherever possible.

History inspired the creation of vine leaf castings in bronze during a project at Kippen Primary School. The famous Kippen vine was planted in 1891 and was said to be the largest in the world. Kevin located one of its 'offspring', obtained 104 leaves and worked with P4-6 to make bronze casts which still decorate the outside of the school building today.



We found his work in Allie's Garden, Stirling in the form of a seedcatcher sculpture at the entrance produced from local sycamore, and as the wooden carved seats of the outdoor storytelling circle. He was another of the artists at the Creag Meagaidh 'Grand Day Out' where he also worked with local school children for a week before the event, to create sculptures of eagles and red deer made from natural materials.

Kevin stresses the importance of capturing the imagination of children early on in a project – 'once you've got their attention, then their own originality will kick in'. Local research allows him to make the subject matter more meaningful for his audience and gives him a better chance of gaining their attention. Combine this with making certain the activity will succeed and you have guaranteed enjoyment as well.

Art in Education

The Forest Education Initiative Lanarkshire's Musical Tree Tours gave several primary schools and community groups the opportunity to make their own instruments, play them and try their hand at song writing techniques. Around 10 groups of primary school children and 4 community groups worked with Kenny Grieve, a green woodworker and Gameli Tordzro, a Ghanaian musician during the Musical Tree Tour project making xylophones from green wood and learning to play them, playing Ghanaian xylophones and drums and making up rhythms and tunes.

Xylophonics, as a follow-up project worked with 4 of these groups to explore woodland biodiversity through creative song writing techniques and hands-on environmental activities. The aim was for each group to write a song inspired by one of the four seasons. The songs were then compiled and presented to the group in a wooden book. A papermaker worked with participants to hand-make the book's divider pages using fibre from local plants, while Countryside Rangers explored the importance of trees and woodlands with the groups before the song writing sessions. Participants also made their own wooden percussion instruments to accompany the xylophones.

Community art

Templeton Woods in Dundee has had a visitor centre since 1980 but in recent years, has undergone a transformation both in its accessibility and reputation. Perhaps best remembered for a murder mystery of over 20 years ago, the woods are now becoming better known as a location for recreation and Countryside Ranger-led events including guided walks and outdoor workshops.

The wildlife of Templeton Woods had provided the inspiration for local children to design and produce hundreds of clay tiles which have been used to cover an otherwise bare concrete wall at the entrance to the visitor centre. The centre has recently been decorated with murals representing the four seasons and the wood itself has a short arts trail which leads the walker past a wooden xylophone, a totem pole and several wooden sculptures. Funding allowing, this trail will soon be upgraded to full All Abilities level, part of which is already in place and for those less confident on their feet, even the resting places are creatively designed.

Art is just great to lead people along and give them a reason to move on, link a route, and give a walk a purpose.

The art of Templeton Woods



Film and animation

Film is different. The Freeflow Arts project challenged secondary school children throughout Scotland to engage with and understand nature through photography, film, sound and animation. If you look at some of their work you can see how they have used nature itself to tell its own stories. Animation in particular has the magic of transforming dead inanimate objects into something living – a spectacular reversal of natural logic. Take a look at “Winters Last Dance” produced by Arran High School. (<http://culture.st-and.ac.uk/artsci/cavan/freeflow/edward.html>)

From the perspective of engaging people with nature, film and animation are fundamentally different from, say, painting. The latter is individualistic – exploring structure, form, representation; blending personal ideas with sensory experience. Film making, and especially animation, involves technology, discussions, developing ideas and storylines. Thinking about how to communicate. It can be a remarkably effective way of stimulating an exchange of views, and making practical sense of some of the drier but important ideas about the environment (sustainable development for example, or historical change). And of course it requires team work and planning.

What all of these examples show, is that there is something for everyone here. Art can be used to heighten the senses and the powers of observation, and in this sense “explore” nature. It can be used to capture and share or keep a moment of sensory pleasure. It can be used as a framework for thought, debate and communication about the environment. It can be used quite simply to get a message across. But it’s not just about these, it does not have to be a *tool*. As Irene Watson says: *“its not about knowledge and information. There is no end, no starting point. Its about the individual”*.

Whatever your interpretation, one thing is clear. Art plays a central role in our relationship with nature.

Take a look at the gallery

Links to project and artist websites

Jan Kilpatrick

Freeflow <http://culture.st-and.ac.uk/artsci/cavan/freeflow/intro.html>

www.heatherbutlinsilks.co.uk