

# **ARTBOX**

The Eric Robinson Art Trust  
working with Shropshire County Council

## **A treasure chest of original works of art for Shropshire schools**

*'A resource and catalyst for creative activity' - Eric Robinson*

*'...art can transform young people's perceptions of themselves and their world, and can go beyond any curriculum expectations' Sir Nicholas Serota, Tate Director (Artworks 2002)*

Imagine taking the class to an art gallery, it costs you nothing to get there, no risk assessment is required, no entrance costs or guide fees and interpretation and teachers' notes are provided. The children are able to take the pictures off the walls to examine them; they can lay original works of art on the floor and work alongside them. Sounds amazing, but it's not going to happen, is it? ARTBOX gave twelve Shropshire schools such an opportunity over the past year.

### What is ARTBOX?

ARTBOX is a brilliant venture which rose from the vision of Eric Robinson who lived and worked in Shropshire over many years and wished to see his extensive art collection shared with the people of the county. The Eric Robinson Art Trust was set up and a partnership with Shropshire County Council was created. Shropshire County Council Arts Service masterminded the ARTBOX project for schools in the county. Funding, provided by Shropshire County Council, Arts Council England West Midlands and The Walker Trust, enabled the scheme to commission an artist, Andy Hazell, to design and construct a huge treasure chest in which to transport the collection. The selected thirty works include a wide variety of style, genres, subject matter and materials, with methods which included oil painting, lithography, collage and intaglio. The collection reflects Eric's personal tastes and interests rather than the dictates of fashion and value and includes works by Aubrey Beardsley, Jack Vettriano and Terry Frost.

### The Treasure Chest

The treasure box, a huge black chest, guarded by animated metal ravens, became itself, an inspirational art object. It arrived at schools with great drama

and mystery, immediately capturing interest and curiosity. At some venues the box appeared from behind a curtain in a dimmed hall, pushed by a woman in a black cloak (the mad curator!) to Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries'. At Haughton Special School the school hall was turned into an amazing desert island environment with the Curator as resident mermaid! Children entered with torches and bare feet to find out what had been washed ashore. Excitement mounted as the box was opened to reveal the treasures within.

### The aims of the project

The main aim of ARTBOX was to stimulate creativity and interest in art in rural communities throughout Shropshire through the provision of original works of art. It has also been a vehicle for contemporary artists to work with, and respond to the collection, in an educational context. The project sought to provide stimulating encounters with art for schools in areas where visits to art galleries are often difficult to organise and expensive. Having ARTBOX in schools raised the profile of the arts within the curriculum and gave access to the visual arts through stimulating encounters. As well as increasing opportunities for children and young people to be challenged and inspired by art, it was intended also that they would recognise the real working processes involved in making art, breaking through the 'awe' factor often experienced in galleries.

*'Not many lessons – no matter how well planned or delivered – could have had the same effect on our pupils as did ARTBOX - it was unique' (Head of Art, Bridgnorth Endowed Secondary School)*

### Curatorial role

The box was accompanied by Curator, Carol Overs, who provided an art-history background and expert knowledge of the collection. Interpretation sessions invited pupils to interact with the works and to make personal responses, with the assurance that there were no right or wrong answers and that their response to a work of art was unique. Surprising results arose from these sessions, in particular, boys, not known for their expressive responses, found the works a channel for their feelings. Schools were enthusiastic about the idea of 'talking art' as an alternative to always 'doing'. However, pupils were both makers and viewers and used the collection as a springboard for their own works.

*'It has truly been a golden opportunity for our students and has got them thinking and discussing artwork with confidence. The ARTBOX collection has inspired and motivated some of my more disaffected students who are now far more involved and interested in their work, because they were able to select their favourite work and let it lead them into further study, directed by their own*

*interests and ideas, rather than being 'teacher led'". (Head of Creative Studies, Marches School & Technology College).*

### School visits

Each school hosted ARTBOX for two weeks, allowing classes to embrace the arts in many diverse ways, engendering a sense of ownership of the pictures, with time to study and enjoy them. This extended exposure allowed the pupils to revisit individual pieces and gain in-depth knowledge of techniques and approaches to art. A crucial aspect of the visit was that pupils were allowed to handle the pictures, take them back to their classrooms and work alongside them as they produced their own works. During the visit pupils gained confidence as artists and critics of the collection and their own work. As their expectations stretched, so their self-esteem grew. The emphasis was on the intrinsic merit of the process rather than the end product with the benefit of an ever decreasing fear of 'getting it wrong'.

*'Some boys, previously only interested in footy produced work in pastels and now they think they are experts, actually bragging about it!' (Teacher, The Meadows Primary School, Oswestry).*

### Primary and Special Schools

Central to the success of the visits was the willingness and enthusiasm of schools and, in particular, the art co-ordinators. The two-week period was often a stimulus for Heads to turn the whole school into an arts centre, embracing other curriculum subjects. Pictures were used to stimulate drama, creative writing, music, dance, design and technology, large three-dimensional work and ICT. Halls and corridors buzzed with creativity, leaving resource cupboards bare! There was time enough for children to make connections, engage with their imaginations, time for reflection and sharing observations. With so much activity going on for such lengths of time, it was fascinating to see young children helping and encouraging each other with their work, suggesting other possibilities and making constructive criticisms.

*'.....how much Sophie and Tyler enjoyed ARTBOX. Not only at school but at home too. They came home buzzing with ideas, eager to put them into practice. Our kitchen table hasn't seen the light of day for well over a week, as it's been covered in art materials' (Parent, Worthen CE Primary School).*

*'I don't want to give up, those artists didn't, did they?' (Pupil, St Laurence's Primary School).*

## Secondary Schools

The collection was an invaluable resource to Key Stage 4 students to develop their understanding of the work of professional artists, directly connecting with their own art practice. At Bishop's Castle Community College, Frans Wesselman, a print artist, worked with students on landscapes. They used an intaglio print, a scraperboard image and a textile piece from the collection as inspiration. They produced their own landscapes in intaglio, experiencing etching and acid bath methods.

Pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 spent their hourly art lessons analysing and responding to the paintings. Experience was gained during these periods in using analytical techniques and vocabulary, sessions were a mixture of structure and individual self-expression. After a few days, pupils were confidently discussing mood, perspective, materials, artists' styles and symbolism, areas which supported their course and examination work.

*'The wealth of knowledge and understanding that took place was immeasurable. Pupils suddenly developed a much deeper realisation of the power art has in our lives' (Head of Art, Bridgnorth Endowed Secondary School).*

## The Teacher's Role

With the luxury of an extended timescale for art and a knowledgeable curator, teachers were able to test new ideas, take risks and develop ambitious and inventive teaching in art and design. The works challenged teachers to stretch their own creativity which would then feed back into the classroom. This creative partnership extended teachers' own artistic development, encouraging exploration and developing the building blocks for creating and understanding art. Time and again, teachers who had worried beforehand about how they would engage with the collection, expressed how valuable the visit had been.

*'The whole experience will live in all our minds, both adults and children, for ever. Not only did it increase our understanding and appreciation of art, it also gave us a springboard for teaching'. (Teacher, Claverley CE Primary School).*

## Artist in Residency

A major aspect of ARTBOX was the provision of a professional artist to work with the pupils over a two day residency. Some schools managed to find funding to extend these days which added value to the project. Residencies gave pupils an

insight into artists' own practice and how they make a living, as well as elevating the role of the artist. Pupils were given the opportunity to learn new techniques working alongside the artist, and in some cases producing collaborative large-scale pieces which remained as permanent enhancements to the school environment. As you enter Claverley Primary School you are confronted by two huge animated metal robot sculptures, a legacy of their ARTBOX involvement with artist Johnny White. Johnny's sessions were very much pupil-led and encouraged masses of design and problem-solving ideas. They learnt that art is often labour-intensive as Johnny assisted them to bend iron pipes, demonstrated the soldering process and made intestines out of scrap metal. They produced a 'voice-box' with a recording of their shouts of welcome for one of the robots; this now greets visitors to the school.

*'It was awesome, especially working with an artist' (Pupil, Haughton Special School).*

### Community Involvement

Partnerships were put into place between pupils, teachers, parents and local residents whereby the collection was shared, exhibitions mounted and collaborative workshops held. It was great to see lines of tables filled with materials, with children and members of the community seated around working together on joint pieces. Children acted as curators of their own exhibitions and were able to share their acquired knowledge of the pictures with their visitors. This opportunity for the appraisal of an audience increased pupils' sense of ownership and pride in their work. Gaining an audience acted as a significant stimulus to the development of their further work. Local art and craft groups were able to access the collection and to take away with them inspirational ideas for their own work.

*'I feel ARTBOX has had a deeper, longer lasting effect on pupils and, therefore, will show its influence in months, perhaps years to come'.*  
*(Teacher, Bridgnorth Endowed Secondary School).*

### Outcomes

A vital element of these tours was that the works were original. Pupils could observe first-hand the processes, materials, mark-making, true-colours, effects of paint, etching, collage, etc – the actual marks made by artists. As pupils' familiarity with the works increased so did their sense of ownership. The collection proved to be a valuable tool in enriching pupils' visual awareness as they discussed, analysed, handled and interpreted the works, using them as a catalyst for their own creativity. For many teachers ARTBOX rejuvenated the arts within their schools, supporting, encouraging and enhancing creative

practice. As the tour progressed a huge bank of ideas for activities and for engaging with the pictures developed, this became an invaluable resource for forthcoming schools and for future use in school.

Artbox provided a perfect link with the National Curriculum Programmes of Study throughout the Key Stages. Knowledge and understanding of the differences and similarities in the work of artists, both contemporary and past was gained through looking at the visual and tactile elements, materials and processes used in the making of art. Links with ICT were achieved using digital cameras to record activities and finished work. Pupils could manipulate and interpret digital images according to their own responses.

*'The visit helped us with our kinaesthetic teaching, our children learn best by looking, touching, thinking – because of the timescale this was better for us than visiting a gallery or museum. The whole thing was a magical experience.'*  
(Teacher, Haughton Special School).

*'ARTBOX freed staff up to go beyond the National Curriculum, to start thinking outside 'the frame'. We will be picking up the idea of 'gallery' and hope to visit New Art Gallery in Walsall' (Teacher, St Mary's Bluecoat Primary School).*

The pictures were supported by substantial teachers' notes to help with the development of ideas. Initial focus involved looking at the content of the pictures and making individual responses through specific lines of questioning. Children and teachers were able to give their own personal response to the work. By analysing form, content and process used by artists they were able to increase their powers of self-assessment within their own art-making. Learning about art processes was made more meaningful through the sustained level of activities, from initial idea to realised form - they were able to return to their work time and again over the two week period.

### Activities and techniques

Using the 2-D aspect of the pictures, classes developed their own work in 3-D, a variety of scale and an amazing spectrum of materials. 'Man in Bath', a work by Robbie Bushe in charcoal and crayon, was interpreted into a 3-D diorama using Modroc and clay to create a bathroom scene. Pupils looked closely at the perspective and scale of Bushe's work but produced their own colour and decorative variations.

An exploration of abstract art was made through Terry Frost's 'Illustration to a poem by Lorca'. Pupils were asked to think about this work as they would a piece of music, ie how did it make them feel, did it have harmony and rhythm, was there a comfortable mood to it or a disturbing one? They were asked to

resist looking for recognisable objects and to look, instead, at shape, balance, colour, movement, etc. They divided the work up into shapes, copied and enlarged these onto card, cut them out and painted them. The shapes were then suspended in the school hall forming a huge mobile, the movement of which mirrored the conceptual movement in Frost's work. This work was developed further by looking at poetry and pupils created their own written response to an abstract piece.

Music, dance and drama were embraced by many schools to ensure a complete focus on the Arts.

### The Future

The ARTBOX is the first of a growing number of projects taking art out to communities, organised by Shropshire County Council Arts Service in partnership with the Eric Robinson Art Trust. ARTNOW is a tour of single pictures to branch libraries proving equally successful and has been a trigger for story-telling sessions.

It is envisaged that ARTBOX will begin a new journey this year, visiting venues such as community centres, nurseries and care homes. New audiences will be creatively stimulated as the ARTBOX sets off again to challenge and delight.

Article by Carol Overs and Sarah Yates

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