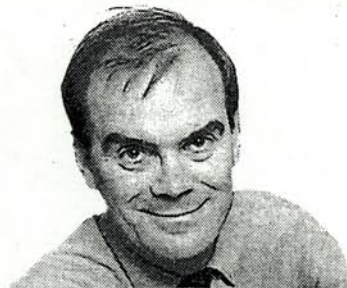


Young offenders find an escape route



Rupert Christiansen
The Arts Column

How can one judge the art produced in a young offenders' institution without emotion and prejudice clouding the critical faculty? That's one of the problems I encountered during a two-hour visit to Feltham, where some 700 boys aged between 15 and 21 are held for crimes committed in London and the South-East.

It didn't seem like a terrible place (no suicides for nearly four years now). There are green open spaces within its formidable walls. The 1980s redbrick buildings are low-lying and thoughtfully designed, housing inmates in units of 30 – juveniles (15-17) being divided from young offenders (18-21). Each boy has his own decently sized cell, with television, lavatory and basin.

Many of the generally friendly staff are female, and, despite the ubiquitous locks and bars, nothing gave me the creeps. As I walked round, there was a fair amount of standard adolescent hullabaloo, but no sense of mass aggression or even misery in the air. There's plenty to do. Except for those on a punishment regime, each boy comes out of his cell all day, every day, to follow an individually structured programme of activities.

For many of these children (which is what they all looked like), this must be the most secure and stable existence they have ever known, and what disturbed me most was the shortness of the average sentence – about six weeks. How much can anyone learn in so limited a period?

A remarkable range of educational opportunities is on offer – from courses in laundry to motor mechanics. Almost all of them can contribute towards a National Vocational Qualification certificate. Cookery is the most popular option, but art follows closely behind.

The facilities and the teachers are terrific: these are art rooms which would be the envy of any secondary school, their walls filled with lively, disciplined and often accomplished work. A mural in Southwark underground station painted by inmates bears public witness to the achievement, and this year Feltham has won seven Koestler Awards in the splendid scheme founded by Arthur Koestler in 1962 to promote art in prisons.

Jane Birch, Feltham's deputy education manager, told me that the children generally start off with a pencil producing "very tight, small-scale representations of what they know" – often sketches of the likes of rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, as well as Bart Simpson and, more poignantly, Winnie-the-Pooh. Within a week (classes are daily), they develop the confidence to use paint and open up their imaginations.

The results are surprising. A little censorship is enforced (the depiction of weapons is banned and graffiti discouraged), but one would have expected more violence and neurosis, more splurges of abstract expressionism. I saw one copy of Munch's *The Scream*, but otherwise the dominant aesthetic mood is oddly cheerful.

There were many lively versions of 19th- and 20th-century masterpieces by Modigliani, Gauguin, Picasso, Millet and Warhol. Others had opted for an exuberant Fauvist use of colour – Hodgkin must be a big influence here. The intricate dots of *pointillisme* and aboriginal art are also very popular.

Large-scale collaborative projects are important too, as in the Southwark mural and a meticulous, sensitive copy of Monet's water-lilies at Giverny.

There are hardly any portraits and noticeably few images of women. Nor did I spot any efforts to render the painful realities of the boys' actual lives, either in or out of prison – idyllic rural landscapes (Turner is a favourite, I was told) and scenes of tropical beaches seem much more appealing. This art is escapist rather than confrontational, which may be no bad thing.

With the emphasis placed firmly on self-esteem and self-expression, the children take great pride in these paintings, and work may be presented to visitors. How good is it? Well, I didn't see any evidence of outstanding talent, but a lot of it would merit high grades at A-level, and I've no doubt that the persistent could earn places at art college.

It is impossible not to be moved, impressed and heartened. But, as with all such educational projects, it is easy to become sentimental about the value of "creativity", and I am left with a large and probably unanswerable question.

Amid the back-patting, the certificates and hopes for a brighter future, is anyone bothering to give these young offenders (many of them deprived by appalling circumstances and a nihilistic culture) something far more urgent than the capacity to paint or draw: a few sharp lessons in the difference between right and wrong?

This year's Koestler Awards are exhibited in St Mary Abbots Hall, Kensington, London W8, from tomorrow. A fund-raising auction for the Koestler Award Trust will be held in the chapel of Wormwood Scrubs, London W12, on Oct 19. Information: 020 8742 9274