

# Make a Mark

**Saturday 29 June – Sunday 1 September 2013**

We all begin to make marks as young children; marks in the sand, marks on paper, marks with food, water, paint – anything that looks, or feels, interesting. This universal interest in mark making, rather than being a fun, incidental activity, although it is that too, is now recognised as highly significant in human brain development.

‘Scribbles are products of a systematic investigation, rather than haphazard actions’<sup>1</sup>.

This quote is from the current National Strategy<sup>2</sup> on early years mark making, creativity and critical thinking. ‘Young children who are given rich opportunities to explore making marks within an encouraging emotional environment will become confident and competent communicators.’

There is even a Scribble Hypothesis<sup>3</sup> which contains the following tenets.

*Young children’s scribbling stimulates individual cells and clusters of cells in the visual cortex for line and shape.*

*Young children’s scribbles help them practice and organize the shapes or patterns of thought.*

*Young children’s scribbling encourages an affinity for marks, preparing the mind for its determining behaviour, literacy.*

The Scribble Hypothesis argues that human mark making is our defining language instinct. Therefore it’s not unreasonable to suggest that we have an inbuilt facility and need to make marks.



Humans have been making significant marks for a long time. Cave drawings, like this one from Lascaux in France, date back to 17,000BC. The painting is assured and accurate, a sophisticated, believable three-dimensional animal of power and significance.

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<sup>1</sup> John Matthews (1999), *The Art of Childhood and Adolescence: The Construction of Meaning*. London: Falmer (p. 19)

<sup>2</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families publication, 2008

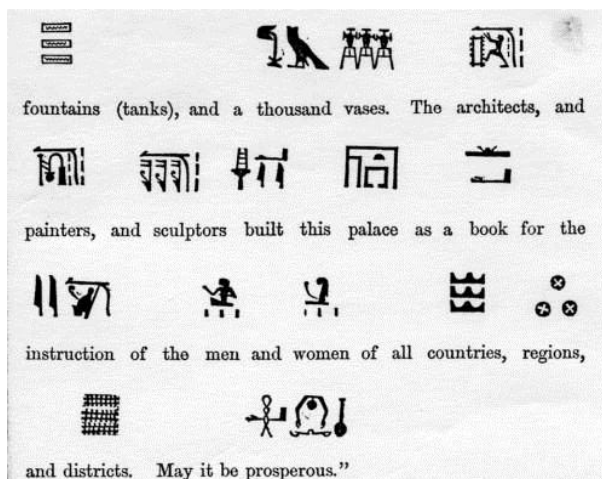
<sup>3</sup> *The Neurological Significance Of Children’s Drawing: The Scribble Hypothesis*  
Susan Rich Sheridan, 1997



This 13 cm long engraved bone fragment found at Le Chaffaud, France, shows a drawing of two female deer and is estimated to be 16,000-14,000 years old<sup>4</sup>. The marks are realistic and in proportion but they don't have the extraordinary presence of the painted bison. This may be down to the materials used, arguably it's more difficult to cut into a hard material than to paint onto a static surface, or it

may be down to the skill of the mark maker. Or perhaps this carving is a small, portable talisman and not a static painting; either way it is an illustrative example of different materials and marks for varying purposes.

So mark making is a fundamental human activity and, if the Scribble Hypothesis can be believed, we scribble as children in order to prepare our brains for more complex mark making activities in the future, activities which include mastery of signs for complex meanings. Which brings us, briefly, to mark making as in writing when the merger between pictures and signs occurred resulting in pictographic writing dating from around 3,000BCE. This was followed by cuneiform writing, a proper alphabet, as shown below, which evolved to look the way it does as it predates the advent of paper (and pen), and was therefore written with the next best thing, a sharp, wedge shaped stick, or reed, in a clay tablet.



Pictographic script



Cuneiform script

'Making your mark' is a phrase loaded with meaning; from pressing an inky finger to a piece of paper to gaining a noted place in history; anything that leaves some sort of human record, physical or anecdotal, is a made mark. We humans make all sorts of marks, architectural, scientific, religious and cultural; these are all evidence of our assertion over our environment and, arguably, our mortality. We are endowed not just

<sup>4</sup> Musée d'Archéologie Nationale Saint- Germain-en-Laye.

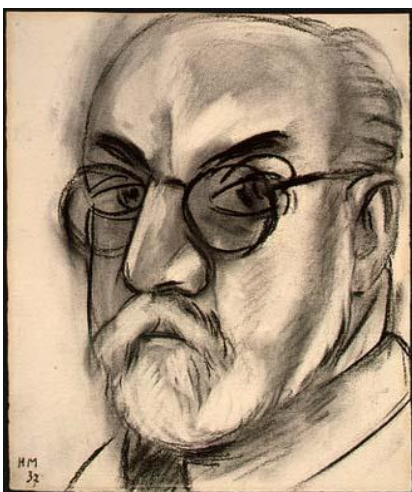
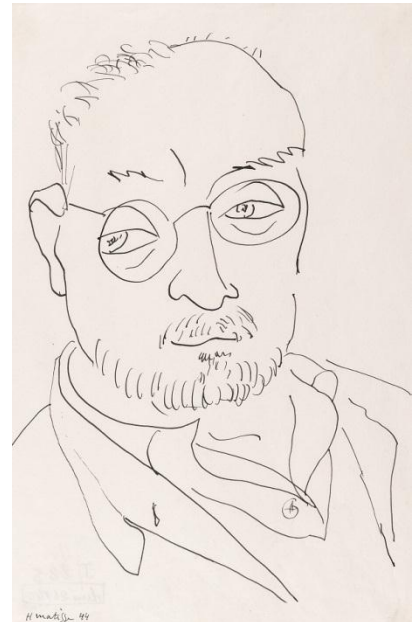
with very good sight and fantastic dexterity but also with a powerful impetus to make marks in order to communicate as well as leaving evidence of our existence.

It is curious that complex and detailed mark making may be hailed as the ultimate expression of skill by a particular culture while, in another culture, the simplest marks that convey the most meaning are the ones that are elevated to the highest status. Two of the most highly rated mark makers of the European twentieth century, Picasso and Matisse, spent a great deal of their careers working towards simplifying their mark making language.



This engraved and painted earthenware owl, 1951 is by Pablo Picasso. Never one to cloak his achievements in modesty while at the same time disarmingly honest, Picasso is quoted as saying, *'it took me four years to paint like Raphael but a lifetime to paint like a child'*.

The expression in this 1944 self-portrait (right) by Henri Matisse has been described as 'watchful, hungry and intelligent'. With a few lines he expresses his careful but distant attention to something. In the self-portrait below, done in 1937, the artist is a few years younger but the heavier lines and shading make him look older.



The intent, concentrating sideways gaze is present in both drawings and both show, in the hands of a master, how a simple drawing can express a world of meaning. Like Picasso, Matisse looked to find meaning in simplicity particularly towards the end of his life when his eyesight began to fail and he responded by using simpler materials, colour and shape, as a means of expression.



This is the interior of the dome of the Imam Mosque (formerly the Shah Mosque) in Isfahan, Iran. Construction began in 1611 and the interior of the mosque is said to contain 475,000 tiles – mark making on a truly vast scale. This dome, representing a view of heaven, is made up of seven-coloured ceramic tiles and calligraphic inscriptions.

The detail (right) shows the Quranic calligraphy used throughout the Mosque.

Painted approximately one hundred years earlier, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is said to represent the creation narrative from the Book of Genesis. The detail (below) shows God breathing life into Adam, the first man, made in God's image.



Michelangelo painted 1,100 m<sup>2</sup> (12,000 sq. ft) of the chapel ceiling between 1508 and 1512. The Imam Mosque and the Sistine Chapel<sup>5</sup>, entirely different in style, were made to fulfill exactly the same function. Spectacular, awe inspiring buildings dedicated to the glory

of God but, on a more pragmatic level, an expression of the advanced cultural civilisation that the rulers wished to project. The architects, artists and craftsmen made the marks but they were paid and directed by powerful men.

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The works in this exhibition are not commissioned or directed by anyone other than the maker. They are free expressions of the makers' intention and, although the maker may be looking to their own influences, the work is personal and wholly self-directed. There is an exhibition brief but the only instruction was to produce some evidence of the process and a handling piece so that visitors, on this occasion, could experience the *feel* of the work.

For the purpose of the exhibition we are looking at mark making as the descriptive language of the pencil, pen, brush, engraver, chisel, stitch, colour and texture in

<sup>5</sup> Both these buildings are UNESCO World Heritage sites.

combination with the wide variety of making processes represented in this show. Will Shakespeare's glass is entirely different to Fabrizia Bazzo's, for example, yet they are both working with the same material. A mixed-media show, with a number of exhibitors, as in this one, gives an idea of the versatility of materials as well as the language of mark making available to the makers. Yuli Somme's wonderfully named piece, *My Mother's Mantle* is made of felt as is the piece by Liz Clay. They are both quite different in concept as well as appearance and show us that a natural, simple material, manipulated by different hands, has many possibilities.

Some of our exhibitors have explained exactly how their exhibition piece, or pieces, came into being.

'I've got this idea  
To make a quilt  
containing snippets of narrative  
from years of my diaries.'

Helen Edwards' quilt and her accompanying handling piece are light and silvery; her words, fragments of her recorded days, give it weight and meaning. Meticulous and thoughtful, this is personal experience made into an expressive work.

Trudie Timlin Brown has recorded the dyeing and weaving processes of her work in a way that shows her attention to detail and perfectly illustrates the skill and patience employed in her making techniques.

Devon Guild printmakers are well represented in this exhibition. There are etchings, collagraphs, linocuts, monoprints, a mezzotint, a lithograph and a drypoint print. Their makers have also provided a lovely array of supporting material which documents their creative and technical process. Rosie Sanders' steel etching plate is a thing of beauty in its own right and, in combination with her book, explains exactly how the marks are transferred to the paper.

The Summer Exhibition is selected by a panel of Guild Members and is the only event in the year which is solely for Guild Members. Sometimes it is 'open' as in no theme or additional requirements, and sometimes it has a theme or title which submissions are requested to respond to. Guild Members debate whether this exhibition should be themed or not but, this year, we hope you agree that the handling pieces and supporting material add to the understanding of the making processes employed. It also means that virtually all the work on show has been made for this exhibition in particular; none of it has been exhibited anywhere else.

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