

# Christmas: pictures by children, 1922

Special Collections featured item for December 2006  
by Ruth Gooding, Cataloguer

***Christmas: pictures by children* / with an introduction by Edmund Dulac. London: J.M. Dent; Vienna: Burgverlag, 1922.**

**Item held in the Children's Collection, University of Reading Library Special Collections**

*Christmas: pictures by children* reproduces children's paintings, produced by members of Professor Franz Cizek's Juvenile Art Class in Vienna in the 1920s. The book contains fourteen colour lithograph plates, with captioned tissue guards. The original colour pictorial paper-covered boards and decorative endpapers also feature the children's artwork. The plates are accompanied by a preface by Francesca M. Wilson, and an introduction by Edmund Dulac (1882-1953), a book illustrator who is well-known for his illustrated books of fairy tales. The plates depict a variety of Christmas scenes, including this image [right] of churchgoers gathered around a nativity by Steffi Krauss.



The giving and receiving of presents is a key theme, such as in this painting [below] by Bella Vichon of children opening presents beneath a Christmas tree.



This painting [below] by H. Zuckermann depicts a group of carol singers, dressed as the Three Kings.





Cizek was the founder of the idea that art produced by children up to the age of about fourteen was a special branch of art. He believed children's art to be autonomous and subject to its own laws. His stated aim was "To allow the children to grow, develop, and mature." He said, "The child comes into the world as creator and creates everything out of his imagination," and "The child is born with creative power, but at a certain age this power begins to decline. Either mannerism or naturalism appears, as a substitute for creative power."



*A painting by Trautl Conrad of children opening stockings on Christmas morning*

Cizek regarded himself as a man liberating children from slavery to copying. Adult influences were banned from the Juvenile Art Class; Cizek considered that these were actually harmful. He did not allow pictures by adults although pictures by children were constantly displayed. His pupils were expected to rely only on their own memory and imagination. Cizek taught them to visualize their subjects in their mind, to paint what they saw when their eyes were closed. The students were not necessarily talented, but they were creative and highly motivated. Uncreative children normally stayed in the classes only a short time, as they did not feel at home there. Interestingly, Cizek felt that poor children were generally more "original and creative" than those from richer families, as they had not been corrupted by contact with high culture. He claimed that "too many pictures, books, visits to the theatre, cinema, etc., are bad for the child. The child is so strong and rich in his own imaginative world that he needs little else."

The artworks shown in this book are colourful, bold and aesthetically astounding, often displaying skilful design and composition techniques, such as in this unsigned image [below] of children asleep under a Christmas tree. It is often difficult to believe that some of artists were only about fourteen years old.



Regarding Cizek's teaching style, his former pupil Ruth Kalmar Wilson recounted: "When Cizek, himself, came around, the procedure was that you were encouraged to draw something or he would tell a story, or ask some questions or say "draw whatever you want." That was always in a small format. Then you would draw and make several drawings. Then when Cizek came through after about half an hour, he would go around and look at what people did. When he found something he liked, he asked us to make it big. What was used to work on was white wrapping paper stretched over frames. There were squares three feet by three feet or rectangles three feet by four feet or more."

However, Cizek did give a number of guidelines. Wilson remembered: "Figures should be big, at least three quarters of the height of the paper. Pencil or charcoal lines had to remain visible; the paint had to be applied very carefully within or around them. Colours were opaque and flat. A quarter inch border line, painted in a colour of one's choice was to serve the picture as a natural frame."

In a number of the paintings, the figures are quite large and form the main part of the image, such as in this painting [below] by Steffi Krauss.



Students did not necessarily only do drawing and painting, but also crafts such as paper cutting, clay modelling and embroidery. In fact, Cizek helped to popularize linocut as a technique particularly suitable for children, as the material was both cheap and easy to work. In *Christmas: pictures by children*, the illustrations are original lithographs, a medium the artists had never used before. The children drew their pictures on the lithograph stone themselves, and the lithographer Herr Berger completed the rest of the work, taking care to faithfully reproduce the colouring of the original paintings.

A definite Cizek style did emerge, reminiscent of Austrian folk art with an emphasis on flat decorative surfaces and the repetition of motifs such as Tyrolean peasants, details of popular festivals such as Christmas and simple Catholic devotional images.

Cizek died in 1946, his health having weakened partly as a result of malnutrition and his eyesight having deteriorated badly. In 1989, Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood hosted the exhibition *Some creative children and what became of them: Franz Cizek and his art classes*, commemorating his work. Much of the work done by the children is housed in the Historisches Museum der Stadt in Vienna.



*A painting of Santa Claus by Trautl Conrad [above]*

*A painting of the Christ-child appearing to two peasant children by Bretl Hanus [below]*



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