



Schools across Mumbai, regardless of syllabus or ownership model, have begun to take the art class seriously. From special books to new methodologies of teaching the subject, including a general unwillingness to influence the child's imagination by teaching them how to draw, and introducing them to the masters, art's no longer a rote subject

At the BMC School in Oshiwara, the guard is wary when he sees this reporter enter. Lunch is in progress, and perhaps, he's worried we'll write about the state of the mid-day meal (only Pulao was being served that day -- no vegetable side dish, no daal). We assured him we were there to sit in for an art class and had all the permissions in place, at which he curled up his mouth and smirked. Waving us off imperiously, he went back to duty. This attitude isn't uncommon. Generations of students can attest to the lackadaisical manner with which art is treated in educational institutions, whether government, public or private school. Yet, change is afoot.

For IIM-Kolkata graduate and art collector Ritu Khoda, art is nothing less than nutrition for the mind. Last year, she launched Art 1st, an educational programme that aims to revolutionise the way art is taught in schools. Khoda worked with artists Shanti Chandra and Yogesh Rawal, and psychologist Vasant Patri, to create an art syllabus for students from Class 1 to 5, where they will be introduced to indigenous and international folk art, perspectives, landscapes, masters like Dali and Van Gogh. What's more, they won't be taught art the way it's traditionally taught in schools.

Khoda has tied up with Chip, an NGO that has adopted six BMC schools in the city, to impart this education to municipal school students. Besides being taught to exercise their imagination, the students are also encouraged to use different media, including clay. Jaywanti Prabhu Tendulkar, a JJ School of Art graduate, has been teaching art for close to two decades. However, in the past year, says Tendulkar, she has re-learnt art.



*Jaywanti Prabhu Tendulkar, an art teacher for the past 20 years, has been trained to teach the subject differently at the Gundecha Education Academy, Kandivli, by Art 1st, an art education company that gives primacy to the child's imagination over rote.*

*Pic/ Rane Ashish.*

A teacher at Gundecha Education Academy, Kandivli, she underwent a teacher's training workshop conducted by Art 1st, last June. "For me, as a traditional art teacher, not using a blackboard to teach art was revolutionary. I now discuss an idea with my students, and ask them to draw based on their imagination. The traditional method of teaching only focusses on perfecting technique and skill and pays scant regard to a child's imagination," says Tendulkar.

At a class we attend, she reads out poet Prayag Shukla's Phoolon Wali Bel (The vine with flowers), while the Class 4 students listen with their eyes shut. After the poem is over, Tendulkar gives them a choice of medium -- watercolours and crayons, -- and asks them to get to work.

### Isn't technique important?

An earthen vase filled with flowers sits at the front of the classroom that's so silent, it's almost impossible to believe it holds over 20 bright-eyed children in it. You can practically hear every scratch of each busy charcoal pencil here. Children between eight and 17 years are scribbling away, each pair of eyes seeing the still-life subject in a completely different light. The room in which they are working is bedecked with paintings and papier-mâché products. A painted eel frames one window while a peacock put together with handprints and paint-soaked sponges is perched atop a cupboard. In one corner, a couple of girls are absolutely immersed in the painstaking task of outlining ornate Madhubani paintings.



### Recycled art by Purnima Sampat's elementary school students

These kids have a keen appreciation of various artistic styles, having signed up for Room 13, an international art movement born in Scotland and adopted by Aseema Charitable Trust in 2006. The movement encourages children to run their own art studio. "They form a committee, appoint an artist -- this could be a resident artist or even a visiting artist -- outline a theme and work out how to interpret it," explains Deepika Mandrekar, as she leads us around the art-adorned school she supervises, The Pali Chimbai Municipal School in Bandra, which has been adopted by Aseema.

The students here, and those at Santacruz Municipal School and Kherwadi Municipal School where Aseema's project is also instituted are well acquainted with Paul Gauguin, Sandro Botticelli and Claude Monet as they are with



Bose Krishnamachari and Maqbool Fida Husain. "The children studied Australia's aboriginal folk art some time ago," says Sanaa Shaikh, director, Education and Donor Relations, Aseema. "Another artist showed our children how to play with different textures. She had a boxful of assorted materials and knick-knacks that the kids could dip in paint and then dab onto their canvas. Their eclectic mixed-media product was framed," says Shaikh.

*Students immersed in the painstaking task of outlining ornate Madhubani paintings. They are part of an international art movement that was born in Scotland and adopted by Aseema Charitable Trust in 2006 called Room 13, which encourages children to run their own art studio. Pic/Pradeep Dhivar*

"The skill isn't important to me," says Purnima Sampat, who has been teaching Art at JB Petit High School for the last 26 years and conducts art classes at Marine Drive and Prabhadevi. "Skill can be developed. But if you keep quashing creativity, it'll disappear." "I don't teach drawing," Sampat says, "I teach art. There's a difference." Part of Sampat's process involves introducing children to works of the masters and discussing their artistic style and technique.

Sometimes children are encouraged to create a painting by employing a certain style, at other times, Sampat will spend a whole day collecting scrap such as old magnets and batteries, and get her students to use them in sculptures. Sampat believes that to find the artists within them, children must be given complete freedom to express themselves. "I've seen children who've been exposed to the traditional manner in which art is taught.

They hesitate to even put a single brush stroke on paper. It's obvious they've been reprimanded in the past. A parent may have said how can you draw a tree like that, or a teacher may have mocked them saying what kind of man looks like that. In my class, if someone doesn't want to work, it's perfectly acceptable. We're happy to sit and discuss an artist or a subject. We wouldn't push a child to create until she or he wants to," says Sampat. The works created by

her students have been exhibited and sold, and the proceeds have been gifted to charitable organisations.

### Art helps learning other subjects



At present, Sampat is working with the National Council of Education Research and Training to develop a curriculum that introduces other subjects through Art. Trial rounds are already in progress in Shillong and Mysore, Sampat tells us. "Everything from English, Science, Maths and Social Studies may be taught partly through art and craft soon," she says. We ask her to give us an example of how this would work, and Sampat, a member of the International Society of Education through Art says, "A weaving project that uses one-inch strips could help a child understand the concept of 'area' as could the creation of a three-dimensional zoo."

The Avehi Public Charitable Education Trust, too, recognises the way in which art can help students internalise what they're learning. Art doesn't feature as a separate subject in the Abacus programme, the interdisciplinary curriculum that Avehi has introduced in 905 municipal schools across the country, but it's an integral component of their comprehensive educational kits. Simantini Duru who heads the Avehi Abacus Programme at the KK Marg Municipal School says, "Exam papers limit a child's expression and so we've incorporated art, music and discussions in our programme," the materials for which, we find, are impressively up to date.

### Relating it to real life

Manisha Jain, one of the teachers at the Municipal School, shows us a kite made by a student, whose tail lays out a timeline of current events. "Our goal is to make school education more meaningful and to provide children with a fresh perspective. Art is therefore essential, as it helps students interpret the world around them and make connections between their experiences and what they learn at school," says Jain. Nowhere is this more visible than at the BMC school in Oshiwara, where a clay class run by artist Palak Raval of Art 1st, has a group of Class 1 students sitting in a circle, pounding fists on red earth.



Aaliya, a chatty six-year-old, is flanked by her sister Alisha and brother Aayan. Together the three of them make all the items in their house. Aaliya makes a vessel, and when asked what it is, she says, "It's a vessel with Kheer that my father feeds us." When asked where the Kheer was, she replies, "I've eaten it." Children's author Shamim Padamsee would be delighted to meet Aaliya, for Padamsee has always been an advocate of relating art for children to their real surroundings. Her picture-book *Dancing On Walls*, a Tulika publication, was an attempt to get kids to appreciate Warli art. Padamsee keeps a website, [www.youngindiabooks.com](http://www.youngindiabooks.com) that aims to promote children's books on folk art.

"When my children were in school, one of them had drawn a house in art class. It was a pretty cottage with a smoke-blowing chimney. The sort you'd find in story books. But, look around -- how many houses do you see around you with sloping roofs and chimneys?" asks Padamsee. Telling us that she felt it was about time we moved past this remnant of colonial India, Padamsee stresses on the need to expose kids to all kinds of art forms that they should be able to relate to. "Art is a means of expression and we shouldn't limit its boundaries. There's so much communication in folk-art, for instance, where typical themes would include peacocks, parakeets and cows -- the world around us -- so it's crucial for a teacher to introduce kids to this medium." Turns out, at least some of them are.