

Louise Bryant 1919

# Art for American Children

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**Transcribed:** by Thomas Stern.

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Dusk was settling over the roofs of New York. I picked my way through the untidy East Side and almost stumbled over a very small boy solemnly drawing pictures on the sidewalk with a white crayon. I stopped and watched. Painstakingly he outlined a grotesque figure with twisted feet and when he had finished he looked at me out of black eyes, slanted a little by an enveloping Slavic smile, and exclaimed, "Charlie Chaplin!"

Afterwards, as I went along, I thought about my little East Sider's Russian cousins. I recalled the drawing of Charlie Chaplin made by a seven-year-old Petrograd school-boy and which I carried home with me because I am vastly interested in children's drawings. The picture made by the Russian in Russia was infinitely more interesting and original than the picture made by the Russian in New York. And I began to figure out why this was.

In Russia art is not a luxury like it is in our United States; it is never wholly an amusement, it is a vital part of life, a necessity. It is builded out of the deepest sorrows and the deepest joys. That is why Russia, starving and besieged by the whole world, has every theatre running in Petrograd and Moscow, and why the season, now at its height, is perhaps the most successful season in the history of the Russian theatre.

There is no place in Russia for an artist who works solely for money, for an artist who prostitutes himself. But there is honor and adoration a-plenty for real genius. John Barrymore would never play to poor houses in Russia – not if his whole audience went hungry in order to buy tickets; Boardman Robinson would be known by 180-200,000,000 people as a great cartoonist; Mimi Aguglia, even if she did not speak the language, would nightly receive tremendous ovations instead of being shifted to what is approximate to the Bronx or the Bowery. For such is Russia.

My little friend in Petrograd will never be taught to "draw" like James Montgomery Flagg or like Gibson or like Stanlaws or to aspire to do so. He will never learn to admire the kissing pictures on the covers of our 15c magazines. In order to be noticed at all he will have to develop *himself*. He will have to create something. There will be for him no

terrible effacing pattern to go by. So he has ten chances to one against his American cousin.

Of course I am aware that exclusive, private institutions now employ expensive, highly-trained teachers who work out various Montessori methods of self-development but they, after all, touch but a scarcely noticeable part of our millions of American boys and girls. In order to give a fair chance to our public school children we have first to revolutionize American thought. We have to get rid of some of our cursed Puritanism. That seems to me the principal reason why the Russian produces great literature, great plays, great actors, and we as a nation do not. The Russians are fundamentally a revolutionary people and revolution is by no means confined to politics. Russians allow no barriers – hard work, starvation, unpopularity – to stand between them and artistic achievement.

I can think of no way of better illustrating my point than by an incident which occurred in Petrograd last winter. I was spending the evening at the home of Eugene Zamietan, the novelist, and a number of Russian artists were present. I spoke of some famous book which had been suppressed by our *Society for the Prevention of Vice*. They listened to me with entire incredulity! Finally one of the company said, “Why, Zamietan once wrote a story with such a society in it but, naturally, no society of that kind actually existed – it was purely imaginary.”

And two days later a young poet, who had been present when the discussion took place, asked me very earnestly if I had really meant what I said. When he found that I did he was aghast. “But my dear young lady,” he exclaimed, “don’t you know you can never develop art in your country until you rid yourself of such shackles?”

In Russia even children’s art is taken seriously. In Petrograd was published a monthly magazine called *Our Magazine*. All the stories, poems and illustrations were done by children under twelve years of age. And they were done beautifully! It would be interesting to see how our children would develop if given the same opportunity.