

# Duplin native pointed way for school art

Most American schoolchildren have smeared finger paints to make a picture at some time in their lives.

Few people, however, realize that a teacher from Duplin County invented modern finger painting almost single-handedly.

Ruth Faison Shaw is not a household name, but few people have had greater impact on art education for young people around the world.

Miss Shaw died in 1969 at the age of 80. Now, many of her admirers are searching for examples of her original finger paintings.

"We want to emphasize that we are not trying to acquire them, but to learn the people who own them," said Martha Whittinghill of Chapel Hill, chairman of the Ruth Faison Shaw Memorial Committee.

The committee wants to compile a register of Miss Shaw's works for use by scholars, Mrs. Whittinghill said. Members are also collecting anecdotes and reminiscences about Miss Shaw for a possible biography.

The inspiration for finger painting came while Miss Shaw was operating a school for English-speaking children in Rome. Most of her pupils were children of American diplomats and businessmen living in Italy. In 1926, however, a young Italian prince was enrolled there.

"His parents wanted him to have some experience with commoners," Mrs. Whittinghill said.

Apparently, the prince was a trial from the start. One day, while playing with some of the other children, he cut his finger.

"Royal blood had been spilled, and he was crying his head off," Mrs. Whittinghill said.

"To calm him down, Miss Shaw let him go to the bathroom by himself and put some iodine on the cut. This was a big thing for him; he may never have been to the bathroom by himself in his life.

"Well, he stayed and he stayed and he stayed. When she finally went to see what had happened, he had smeared iodine all over the tile walls as far as he could reach."

That incident gave Miss Shaw an idea. "Of course, children love to smear," Mrs. Whittinghill said. What if that natural inclination could be harnessed? What if smearing with fingers could be made into something constructive?

The idea was not new. Finger painting was used in murals on the walls of Etruscan tombs and ancient Chinese manuscripts.

Miss Shaw, however, is generally recognized as the first artist to make the paints safe for children, using non-toxic ingredients suggested by artists she met in Rome.

Success was almost immediate. Within a year, she was conducting lecture-demonstrations in finger painting full-time. For several years, she lived in Paris, lecturing at the Sorbonne and leading workshops at the Trocadero School.

Returning to the United States in 1932, she taught her techniques for

a year at the prestigious Dalton School before opening her own institution, the Shaw Finger-Painting Studio, in 1933 in New York.

She patented her finger paint formula, wrote a book, *Finger Painting: A Perfect Method of Self-Expression* (1934), and began to experiment with new ways to use her technique.

One way was as a device to aid psychotherapy. "People who were disturbed could paint things they could not express," Mrs. Whittinghill said.

Miss Shaw spent three years studying personality analysis at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kan., then worked with delinquents and the elderly in New York and Massachusetts.

Born on a farm in Duplin County on Oct. 15, 1889, she was the daughter of the Rev. William Mitchell Shaw, a Presbyterian minister. She was the only girl in a family of four boys, with four male cousins living nearby.

"She once told me, 'By the time I grew up, I knew enough about boys — I didn't want to marry one,'" Mrs. Whittinghill recalled.

Miss Shaw became a teacher, working in Wilmington for many years.

During World War I, she served with the YWCA in France. After the war, she was a tour guide in Istanbul. She opened the Shaw School in Rome in 1923.

In 1956, she "retired" to Chapel Hill, where she served as a consultant with the Murdoch Center for children in Butner and with the Department of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina Medical School.

She continued to work with patients in "South Wing," the psychiatric ward of N.C. Memorial Hospital, and in Gravelly Sanitarium. At the same time, she taught and exhibited finger painting in her home.

"She was one of the most precious friends I ever had," said Mrs. Whittinghill, the wife of a retired professor. "We had many beautiful times together."

Miss Shaw died on Dec. 3, 1969, in Fayetteville. (Her brother, William M. Shaw, served as that city's postmaster for many years.) She is buried in Oakdale Cemetery in Wilmington, where several of her nieces and nephews lived.

Her papers and almost 200 of her paintings were left to UNC-Chapel Hill.

The memorial committee, made up of former friends and colleagues, has organized exhibits of her work at UNC's Morehead Planetarium.

People who own paintings by Miss Shaw or who have stories or information about her are urged to contact Mrs. Whittinghill in care of the Ruth Faison Shaw Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 3701, Chapel Hill 27514.



Ruth Faison Shaw displays an example of her finger painting which she used to teach children art.



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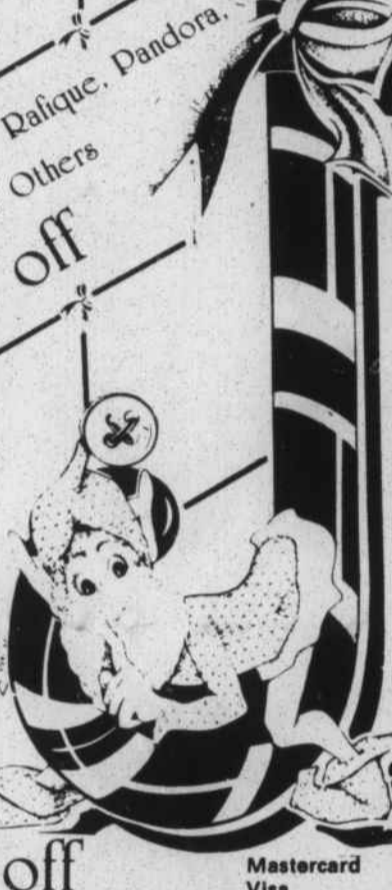
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