



# Take Hart

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**Tony Hart** talks about television, children and art.

When you win a Swap Shop Star of the Year award two years running as **Tony Hart** has done, there's no doubt about your popularity with children.

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To gain that popularity while proving that television can and does encourage people to be creative is something special.

**Pat Triggs** went to talk to **Tony Hart** on the **Take Hart** set in Bristol.

We arrived at lunch time. The morning, they told us, had gone well and a lot of **Flight**, one of the new series of fifteen **Take Hart** programmes was safely 'in the can'. Tony Hart, bright, warm and welcoming in spite of recently diagnosed diabetes and a temporarily mislaid apple (part of a carefully controlled diet), took us around the set. There it all was: the rough 'brick' walls, the view over the docks, the sink, the paint pots, the cosy sitting room, the Gallery. All there, but all in bits; spread around a vast studio, yet looking so substantial it was difficult to believe it would all be gone next day to reappear the next week for another session of recording. 'Marvellous, isn't it,' said Tony. 'People really believe we do this in an old warehouse.'

There were signs of the good morning: paint spattered on the floor, a large bird painted on the wall, a newly-created picture of a gloomy Dracula's castle, bats hovering around the tower. 'Come and look,' - the castle was a piece of bark, the bats, holly leaves. So simple!

**Take Hart** began in 1978 when Patrick Dowling, producer of the international award-winning **Vision On** asked Tony Hart if he would like to have his own programme. He accepted. 'I'm enjoying it tremendously now. But in the beginning I was very scared, very frightened, and not very good either. I couldn't see myself coping with twenty-five minutes all on my own. But that was sheer conceit. I'm not on my own; we're a marvellous team.'

The team though does rely on Tony Hart to have the ideas. Every series he makes what he calls a hymn sheet: a complete outline for fifteen programmes each with a theme. There are little postage stamp size pictures of each piece of art work, notes on method. This goes to Christopher Pilkington (the present producer) for his comments and eventually becomes the basis for the series.

'But we actually make changes in the programme as we do it. Christopher Pilkington is very clever. This morning he said, "Why don't we cut that, and go straight into this? O.K.?" It was just right. Two or three years ago if someone had said, "I want to make a change," my heart would have started thumping, my hands sweating. I'd have thought, I've

learned it; we can't make a change now. But of course you can.'

This professionalism about which he clearly feels a modest pride has been earned through years of willingness to have a go, in spite of beating heart and sweating hands. The sort of qualities, one guesses, that make for survival in television. He is clearly also fascinated by the whole business and loves performing.

He got onto the BBC because of a chance meeting with a children's television producer at a party. At the time he was working in a display studio, providing window dressing for a Regent Street store, and looking for the next move. He followed up a casual invitation to 'come and see me' with some determination; 'auditioned' by drawing a fish blowing bubbles - on a paper napkin that came with the coffee, the only material to hand - and was engaged because he could draw fast.

He worked on a design team and literally inched his way on to the screen from behind the camera. It was on a children's programme, **Playbox**. 'I used to draw pictures for quiz questions. They were all done in advance, but I used to hang around the studio. One day they wanted a change and they said, "How quickly can you do it?"

"About this fast," I said, doing it on the spot. "If you can do it that fast, you can do it on the screen," they said.' So Tony Hart's right hand appeared in every programme until the day a cameraman's mistake caught him grinning. The producer liked it and a bit more of Hart came regularly into view.

With **Vision On** he became an established 'personality' and we saw the first of that amazing fund of ideas for 'making' art. But for Tony Hart *what* is done is not as important as *how* it is done.

'We have bits on the programme we call 'Pretties'. We go fairly slowly with some nice background music so everyone can relax and think "Cor, isn't he clever." Well he's *not*; but the way it's shown it looks quite clever - but never so clever they don't think, "Well, I could do that."'

That morning he'd recorded a demonstration of how to make your own carbon paper and use it to make a butterfly.

'What I hope is that some child will say, "Well if he can use black chalk and was crayon, what will happen if I use colours." I haven't told them; but...'

That is the philosophy: 'suggest, show by example, but always try to stop before there's a finish. Always leave them space to say I can carry that a bit further.'

The roots of that philosophy lie way back in Tony Hart's own school days - where he was only any good at art and English - and in his three years at Maidstone College of Art where he went when he left the Indian Army after partition. In his final year at college he taught in a public school, a technical college, a mental hospital and a prison. These experiences, especially of the hospital and the prison were obviously important.

Art, for him, is an important part of education in its widest sense. What children are capable of in art, he believes, depends largely on the attitudes and approaches of teachers and head teachers. 'It all depends on what they think they are going to do with their children's lives.'

For a teacher, the keynote must be enthusiasm. 'Enthusiasm is contagious, if you don't allow your enthusiasm to be conceit and only for something *you* want to do. Enthuse about *a method* rather than the aesthetics, the subject of what you are doing. Give children something you know will work. Leave them room to deviate, experiment.

A teacher who is a realist and simply keeps changing things so that there's a lot going on all the time, and isn't worried thinking, "Oh this will make a terrible mess" or, "I've got to clear all this up at the end of the day" - a teacher like that can spark children off. Some teachers are so uninspiring the children don't produce anything of merit or interest.'

For those long on enthusiasm but short on ideas, Tony Hart has produced his definitive work **The Tony Hart Art Factory**. He's put into it everything he wanted to see in a book like that. All the sorts of things he does on television

where you don't have to be an artist to get an interesting, exciting end result. 'There's nothing in the book I haven't done, so I know it works,' he says. He took all the photographs himself, and is clearly delighted with it - as well he might be. It's smashing. And so is he.

**Take Hart** is on your screens on BBC now.

'Art work can raise a little pomposity,' said Tony Hart. Morph, created by Patrick Dowling and animated by David Sproxton and Peter Lord was invented for **Take Hart** to replace people like Sylvester Mc Coy who did such a good job of de-bunking Hart's art in **Vision On**.

Morph now has a series of his own, narrated by Tony Hart, and two books written by Patrick Dowling, **The Birthday Party** and **The Swimming Pool**. (These are in hardback from Heinemann, £2.95 and in paperback from Piccolo, 90p, in April.)

**The Tony Hart Art Factory**, Kaye and Ward, 07182 1262 2, £6.25 (or in four paperback editions at £1.50 each, 0 7182 1263 0/1264 9/1265 7/1266 5.

**Make it with Hart**, Piccolo, 0 330 26328 5, £1.95 is all about making things. 'It's the sort of book I would have loved as a child,' says Tony Hart.

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