

Helping Children Understand Art by George Bennett Village School 4th-6th grade teacher

Art can play an important part in a child's education, and children enjoy expressing themselves in a wide variety of art forms, from pottery to pastels. In the right teaching environment, every child's artistic endeavors can be both developed and celebrated.

At the Village School, an independent elementary school in Royalston, art plays an important part in the curriculum at every stage, from preschool to 6th grade, alongside more academic subjects such as math, language arts and science. And in the combined 4th-6th grade class, weekly practical art lessons are supported by 'Painting of the Week'.

Each week a large art poster is displayed on the classroom wall, and half an hour is set aside in which the children and their teachers can discuss the painting. Painting of the Week – long since abbreviated by the children to PoTW (pronounced 'Potwah') - has become a class institution over the past fifteen years.

In the course of their three years in the class, the children see over a hundred different paintings, spanning at least six centuries, from late medieval to recent modern. Painters studied vary from the Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca (CORRECT) to 20th century American abstract expressionists such as Mark Rothko, or pop artist Roy Lichtenstein.

Each painting is displayed accompanied by a brief account of the artist, and of the particular painting. Some artists – such as Monet, Kandinsky, Georgia O'Keeffe, or the English painter J.M.W. Turner – become quite familiar, through a variety of their works, while others may be represented by a single poster.

The children begin to learn that art has a history, and that a painting we now think of as a classic may have been seen as revolutionary when it was painted. They also discover that painters learn from each other, and that, for example, some of the founders of Impressionism were taught by the earlier and more classic French painter Camille Corot, who was himself regarded in his time as pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable in art.

Before the class discusses the week's painting, it will have been displayed for two or three days, so that the children can look at it informally and become familiar with it. Often teachers overhear them making comments about a new painting among themselves. In mid-week, the class gathers in front of the poster for a more formal discussion. This typically begins with everyone sitting in silence and simply looking at the painting for a minute or two. In the ensuing discussion, students make observations and comments on the way the painting is composed, the use of color etc, and often make links to works the class has seen earlier.

Through repeated exposure to paintings of all kinds, children begin to understand that painters have a reason for what they put on the canvas. A recent discussion of a work by the English painter John Constable was a good example. The picture was of Salisbury Cathedral in England. It shows the cathedral towering over the landscape, but Constable included a number of small human figures along the banks of the river in the foreground. When asked what their role in the painting was, one child commented that the people gave an image of movement in an otherwise static landscape. Another student noted that they gave Constable an excuse to add some bright reds to the otherwise somber colors, while a third suggested that the small figures gave a sense of great height of the cathedral itself.

This ability to analyze a work of art makes it more interesting, and helps the children to move beyond simple comments about whether they like a painting or not. Sometimes they see that a painting has virtues even though they don't particularly like it at all.

Another recent PoTW subject was ‘Men of the Docks’, by the American, George Bellows. Painted in the early 20th century, this large work shows a group of longshoremen waiting for work on a Brooklyn pier. Based on what they had learned earlier, the children were able to see how Bellows used small splashes of reds and blues to lead the viewer’s eye around the painting. They also learned some of the social background, in the rapidly expanding city of New York a hundred years ago. The students will enjoy viewing the original painting at the National Gallery in London in mid February (why they are in England is another story for the next article).

Painting of the Week has a range of benefits. Understanding how professional artists work helps the children in their own painting, both in terms of composition and in the use of color. They learn that it can be very effective to paint sky, for example, using all sorts of colors, and not simply as a plain blue. They see that the subject of a painting does not have to be placed in the centre of the picture, or even have to be the largest element in it.

Seeing the range of techniques employed by great painters also helps children to be more confident in their own work. They are much less likely to say that their painting is no good because it does not look realistic, when they have seen, for example, a Cubist portrait by Picasso, in which a face is shown in distorted geometrical shapes.

As well as informing the children’s own art, PoTW also helps students learn about mythical and biblical stories from classical works of art – particularly from the 15th to 17th centuries – and about social history, as they did with the Bellows painting, as well as the history of art itself. They learn how to look at paintings and appreciate them, which pays dividends when the Village School 4th-6th-graders visit art museums, typically twice a year, and see the originals of many of the posters they have studied.

The class makes regular trips to the MFA in Boston, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown. One year, in response to the children’s surprisingly strong interest in Kandinsky, the class trekked to the Guggenheim Museum in New York to see a major retrospective of the artist’s work.

Examining paintings, and commenting on them, also helps children develop the essential skills of discussion. Students grow in confidence about having their own opinions, and expressing them. They learn that there are many different ways of looking at a subject and learn to value each other’s contributions. Perhaps most encouraging is that children who may be reticent about discussing literature or math find that they are more willing to express themselves about art.

At the Village School, both students and teachers find a lot of enjoyment in discussing the weekly paintings, and benefits that go well beyond the subject of art itself. And for the teachers it is very satisfying to hear from parents that their children have asked to visit art museums at weekends or during vacations. It suggests that learning to understand and enjoy art at school gives children something to enjoy for the rest of their lives.