

In the Artist's Studio

By Maria Katzman and Mark Sunderwirth

Strike a pose! An Egyptian pose!” Voices giggle with curiosity and excitement at the strange command of their teacher. “What’s that?” One student asks. “Like this, of course!” Another student takes a stereotypical ancient Egyptian stance, elbows bent into corners and hands flat like pancakes. The teacher responds, “Good! Is that the way we normally stand or walk around? How does that compare to our pictures of Greek figures? Does one seem more stylized than the other?”

This initial playful question and answer session is carefully designed to introduce a deeper level of investigation that inspires students’ imaginations and begins a rigorous process of inquiry. In this article, we will look at the artis-

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tic practices of our students, in “The Artist’s Studio” and at how persistent, deep investigation forms the basis for acquiring knowledge and understanding, developing skills, and learning how to reflect on the artistic experience. In the art rooms, pottery room, and woodshop of Saint David’s School, it is this combination of intense inquiry and acquisition of skills that forms the foundation of a vibrant and creative art program.

Artists must possess at least three things to create successful art. First, they must know something about their chosen topic in a way that fosters intellectual curiosity and sparks their imagination to plan their project. Second, they must have the artistic skills necessary to create the images or objects they have planned. Third, they need the critical thinking capacity to analyze and reflect on what they have done in order to not only grow and learn, but to trust their intuition. In the case of young artists, fostering curiosity is crucial.

The first discipline of the three is the acquisition of knowledge, specifically knowledge of the cultures, artists, styles, and themes relevant to their assignment. Inquiry is the key that opens the door to this information. Teachers

both model modes of questioning and encourage students to develop their own investigations. This process involves a series of sequential steps that spurs their curiosity and desire to dig deeper.

For example, in Fourth Grade art and pottery, students create sculptures and paintings of traditional and imaginary Egyptian gods. The project begins with group discussions that introduce a series of questions comparing Egyptian and Western art. Boys then break up into pairs and generate lists of similarities and differences between Greek and Egyptian figures. By comparing and contrasting the poses, clothing, style, color, and backgrounds of these cultures, a discussion develops about conventions and why the Egyptian figure is portrayed in such a stylized fashion. In this way, the boys’ inquiries lead to a greater understanding and appreciation for the art they are studying and the art they are planning to make.

This understanding produces enthusiasm and mastery of the subject matter that propels the student forward into the process of sculpting or painting his own artwork. The spark that gets ignited has everything to do with inspiration and personal identification. This excitement helps the student to build a trust in his own experience that is truly authentic.

The eagerness that comes out of the boys’ connection with the subject matter leads the fourth graders to the next stage of the project, which is to plan their design. In this case, inquiry leads to a preparatory sketch, as the students ask themselves which gods they are interested in reproducing or how they could combine various attributes and aspects into a new, imaginary deity. The questioning continues with how they might combine different patterns to reproduce the pageantry of royal attire.

Once the boys have designed their Egyptian god, they need to be able to make it. Skills are a natural outgrowth of the inquiring mind, but need to be honed. At Saint David’s, the project is the vehicle for developing strong artistic technique. Here, much of the acquiring is through practice. It is the repetitious process of shaping clay and applying paint that strengthens students’ artistic fluency. Yet still, inquiry plays a vital role in gaining expertise.

After the fourth graders have finalized their sketches, they meet to discuss the nuts and bolts of how they will create their masterpiece. The first question that gets asked is, “How was this made?” By guessing at the artist’s materials and techniques, the boys attain insights into how they will proceed.



Boys in pottery discuss what kinds of tools and materials were used in ancient Egypt and how they were different from the ones they will use. Students also brainstorm about how to make the shapes and forms needed to build a figure. They then experiment with balancing clay shapes to understand how to make their deity stand on just two legs. Finally, diving into the “stamp box” allows the boys to try out different approaches to creating texture.

In art, questions center around how to properly hold a paintbrush so that they can paint crisp, clean edges. The boys

In Maria Katzman's Fourth Grade painting class, the boys experiment with color as they paint large scale Egyptian gods.

also investigate the skill of proportion and how to enlarge their sketches into three-foot-tall paintings (scaling). And, of course, they continually experiment with color mixing, which is the process of asking, “What color do I get when I mix . . . ?” and “How can I create visual contrast in my picture?”

Finally, when the last daub of paint is applied, and the last coil of clay smoothed, the third step of analysis and reflection begins. This allows the young artists to gain insight into their strengths and challenges and hones their ability to make finer aesthetic decisions and choices.

Again, these discoveries are reached through inquiry. Students first look at their work individually with a critical eye and fill out a skills rubric that asks them, “How did I do?” As they complete these sheets, opinions form and questions arise about the assessment of their work and how to improve upon their skills the next time.

Students then gather back together in their respective classes for formal critiques that begin with, “What was the goal of the assignment? What were the skills that we had to incorporate?” In this manner, the young artists are asked to reflect on the project as a whole. Did they complete the assignment successfully? What were the most important aspects of the project? What did I learn? From there, the



In Mark Sunderwirth's Fourth Grade pottery class the boys create pottery Egyptian gods.

questioning leads them into comparing and contrasting the technical aspects of their own work with those of their peers. The student has come full circle and can now apply the same comparison skills that he used with the Greeks and Egyptians to his own work and that of others.

This is one of the phases most relished by artists, as it celebrates the triumphs of their creativity and fosters appreciation of the subtler spiritual/emotional benefits of making something with their own hands. Having rigorously pursued their art, students feel a sense of accomplishment and empowerment when they finish their work. These powerful feelings are amplified when their work is proudly displayed in the halls and cabinets of the school during the spring and winter art shows.

In the Saint David's art department, this process of inquiry is repeated countless times throughout the curriculum, and over the years. It teaches the boys not only how to use their curiosity to discover deeper truths and dream up richer ideas, but how to trust those skills to produce art that is truly expressive. ■

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