



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The students will ...

- paint a picture of sunflowers, inspired by the work of Vincent van Gogh and Emile Nolde.
- study the work of van Gogh and other post-Impressionist and Expressionist artists.
- learn various painting techniques.
- mount and present their work to their peers.

## MATERIALS

- Real/artificial sunflowers in vases
- Pencils and 6" x 11" sketch paper
- 11" x 14" white watercolor paper
- Fine-point permanent black markers
- Oil-free erasers
- Watercolor sets, paintbrushes and water containers
- Facial tissues, paper towels or soft rags

## WATERCOLOR TECHNIQUES

**Wet on Dry:** Here, the paper absorbs the wet paint, giving students the most control so they can determine exactly how far the color will go. The tendency here is to paint with a hard edge, so show them how to feather together the edges of two colors.

**Dry on Wet:** Done on wet paper with moist paint on a damp brush with all excess water squeezed out. With this application, there's general control over the edges. Exact shape not a concern. Students will get nice diffusion of color.

**Wet on Wet:** The brush and paper are very wet. Used when soft diffusions are required and retaining a particular shape is not a concern. All edges will be lost. Paint will go where it pleases, making for "happy accidents."

# Psychedelic SUNFLOWERS

by Maryanna Rudecki

**M**y elementary students always enjoy seeing the works of Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). They are fascinated by the fact that, although van Gogh lived only a short time, he painted approximately 2,000 paintings. They particularly like his many interpretations of sunflowers.

I explain to them that sunflowers were special to van Gogh and he painted them many times because he liked their bright colors and spiky shapes. We talk about Vincent's dream to live and work in the tiny French town of Arles. Once there, he would rise at

dawn to paint the sunflowers that edged the railroad tracks near where he lived.

To begin our watercolor unit, I show the students pictures of van Gogh's sunflowers, including his early sketches made in the French town of Auvers. I also share parts of several books with them, to help them understand van Gogh's personality and career as an artist. I then place vases of real and artificial sunflowers around the classroom. The students start to sketch the flowers on 6" x 12" manila paper, paying special attention to petal placement and the shapes of



stems and leaves.

We talk about overlapping petals and varying the size and placement of the flowers on their papers. We discuss adding visual interest by showing only a portion of a bloom, such as near the edge of the paper. We also practice drawing buds and flowers drooping from a side view.

When the students feel confident with their pictures, we sketch a new picture onto white 11" x 14" student-grade watercolor paper. At this time I stress holding the pencil lightly near the bottom to sketch, as an artist would. Once they have placed their blossoms on the

paper, we add leaves and stems.

The next step is to place tiny dots along their pencil lines using a fine-point Sharpie® marker. Although this step is time consuming, as soon as the students start to see the results, they really concentrate to get the job done carefully. It helps here to show work from previous classes, which excites the students and encourages them to persevere. This step usually takes an entire 50-minute class period. When the students have finished with their dots, we use oil-free erasers, such as Eberhard Faber's Magic Rub®, to erase leftover pencil lines.

To begin our watercolor lesson, I



This project is a student favorite. Many of their cheerful paintings have won local awards.



To begin, real and artificial sunflowers are sketched on 6" x 12" paper.



start out with a history and technique. I tell the students that, in its broadest sense, watercolor paint is any paint that is water-based, as opposed to oil-based. When painting on paper, the paint is thinned with water before being applied.

We talk about the history of watercolor, such as its use on early maps and architectural and garden plans. I show the students samples of these early watercolors from books, posters and the Internet. I share with them the vivid watercolors of flowers by the Expressionist artist Emile Nolde.

We then review watercolor technique and color theory. Simply put, that color can be transparent or opaque. Next, I demonstrate the three main ways to apply watercolor paint to paper (see sidebar).

We set up our watercolors in the following manner: I use one water container per child, a folded paper towel, brush and the watercolor set. The students put three to five drops of water in the well of the set to moisten their brush if neces-

sary. This keeps the water in the container clean. The students change colors by dipping the brush in the water container quietly, no tapping or swooshing. Also, before starting, they squeeze one drop of the clean water onto the paints in order to moisten them. We discuss the meaning of semi-moist before doing this. The water in the cup is replaced only if it becomes very cloudy. The paper towel is used at the end to clean the lid and table if necessary.

We use all three techniques described for our paintings. For each individual part of the flower or background, the students are instructed to use at least two colors of paint and I demonstrate how to apply the watercolor and how to blend it. This involves mixing the color and water with a brush and applying it to the paper, then cleaning the brush and blending one or both sides of the first brush stroke letting the edge feather out or soften.

There are a number of ways to lift  
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## FLOWERS

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excess color off of the wet paper. We remove excess moisture from a brush with a towel or blotter and then drag the brush over the area we wish to lift or lighten. This will not remove all the color, but will lighten the area dramatically. Wet color can be lifted from the paper with a facial tissue, paper towel or a soft rag.

After the teacher demonstration, the students begin by painting the centers of our flowers. I find this controlled area is a good place for the students to experiment and build their confidence. If the students finish this area, they may continue on to the stems and leaves. The next class, we go on to the petals. Again I demonstrate first to review and to remind the students of the different techniques. If the students finish an area, we use the blow dryer if necessary to dry their work before they proceed onto adjacent areas. This eliminates blending of colors where unwanted.

Finally, we paint our backgrounds. At this point, the students make color selections using their knowledge of complementary and contrasting colors. Once again, they must use two different colors or values of a single color to complete their backgrounds. On the final day, with great ceremony, we mount and sign our work.

After completion of this project, to help assess their work, my students pre-

sent their artworks to their classmates. Appropriate vocabulary for presenting has been taught. Students listen for and use vocabulary presented during the unit. The following skills are emphasized for the presenter and audience:

**Presenter:** Good posture; hold picture to the side; sit still, speak out clearly and loudly; discuss the thought process and/or the technical process of making the artwork, use art terms as learned in the lesson and in previous lessons; engage the audience through eye contact and asking questions, taking two or three comments or questions as time allows before choosing the next presenter.

**Audience:** Good posture; attentive; asking questions and making comments that incorporate art terms or exhibit thoughtful insights.

This project is one of the favorites of both the students and staff at our school. Comments about the cheerfulness of the flowers are heard in the halls, along with the requests from parents to commission a student to paint “just one more,” to hang in someone else’s home. Many of these paintings have won awards at local art shows, and some have gone on to hang at Texas Children’s Hospital as part of their permanent collection. ■

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## RESOURCES

### VIDEOS

- *Experimental Watercolor Media and Watercolor Methods.* (Crystal Productions)

### BOOKS

#### ABOUT VINCENT VAN GOGH

- Aigner-Clark, Julie, *Baby van Gogh* (Baby Einstein Press, 2000)
- Anholt, Laurence, *Camille and the Sunflowers* (Barron’s Educational Series, 1994)
- Bernard, Bruce, *Van Gogh: An Eyewitness Book* (Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 2000)
- Breunese, Caroline, *Visiting Vincent van Gogh* (Prestel, 1997)
- Isom, Joan Shaddox, *The First Starry Night* (Charlesbridge Publishing, 2001)
- Muhlberger, Richard, *What Makes a van Gogh a van Gogh* (Viking Books, 2002)
- Waldman, Neil, *The Starry Night* (Boyd’s Mills Press, 1999)

#### ABOUT COLOR AND WATERCOLOR

- Heller, Ruth, *Color.* (Putnam Publishing

Group, 1995)

- Johnson, Cathy, *Painting Watercolors: First Steps Series.* (North Light Books, 1995)
- Smith, Ray, et al, *DK Art School: An Introduction to Art Techniques.* (Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 2000)
- Quiller, S. and Whipple, B., *Water Media Techniques.* (Watson-Guptill, 1983)

### WEB SITES

#### ABOUT VINCENT VAN GOGH

- [www.allposters.com/gallery.asp?aid=85097&c=c&search=7519](http://www.allposters.com/gallery.asp?aid=85097&c=c&search=7519)

#### ABOUT WATERCOLORS

- [www.handprint.com/HP/WCL/water.html](http://www.handprint.com/HP/WCL/water.html)

#### ABOUT WARM AND COOL COLORS

- [www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQz](http://www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQz)
- [www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQ1](http://www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQ1)
- [www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQw](http://www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQw)
- [www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQ0](http://www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDQ0)
- [www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDU4](http://www.umfa.utah.edu/index.php?id=NDU4)