On Halloween night, ordinary shapes take on a mysterious, eerie look. Trees become demons, mountains appear as gargoyles, clouds look like apparitions and houses seem to howl against the moonlit sky.

Halloween is a favorite holiday of children, a time of fantasy and delight. Rather than discuss the stereotyped symbols of black cats and pumpkins, I encouraged my fifth-grade art classes to remember a Halloween night when common, everyday objects suddenly became scary. A lively discussion provoked many spooky images such as fences that turned into dancing skeletons, lighted windows that appeared as glowing eyes and open doorways that seemed to become mouths that screamed.

This motivation period continued with a look at Charles Burchfield’s painting, The East Wind. While viewing this painting, students could see and talk about how mood is created through the use of compositional devices. The center of interest—the house—was pointed out first. Space and the use of background, middleground and foreground was discussed.

Rhythm through lines and colors could make a painting more effective.

Color became an important element in their anticipated tempera paintings as students listed symbolic Halloween colors. Black and gray paper provided immediate backgrounds. Palettes were limited to orange, black, white and yellow. The students were happy to discover that by mixing these colors on their paper, gray, yellow-orange, brown (orange and black) and a type of yellow-green (yellow and black) could be made. By demonstrating several brush techniques—dry brush,
stipple and wash—various effects could be created.

Emphasis was placed on creating a scary Halloween mood without the use of traditional symbols. A “Howling House” was to be the center of interest. The painting should show a background, middleground and foreground. Rhythm was to be achieved by lines and colors.

Everyone started by drawing his or her major shapes with white chalk which encouraged large, simple shapes. Changes could be wiped away quickly with a finger. Since the house was the center of interest, it was usually drawn first.

Once the composition was sketched in, painting began with bristle brushes, encouraging students to block in their major shapes and colors. When this part of the painting had dried, smaller brushes were used to create details as brush techniques were again emphasized.

As the compositions developed, students became excited and delighted as their Halloween paintings seemed to spring to life. Combining the real and the imaginary proved to be a success.

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