Adventures in SPACE a la Rousseau

One goal for primary grade students is that they move beyond base-line organization. To help them do this, we look at Grandma Moses landscapes early in the year and talk about the way she organized space. Later on, when the children are studying zoo animals, they are introduced to Henri Rousseau’s jungle paintings.

We begin by naming everything we can see in Rousseau’s pictures. We observe large areas of green and small areas of sky showing above and through the leaves. We talk about some of the similarities between Grandma Moses’s and Rousseau’s methods of showing space. I ask the children to name the nearest thing in the jungle, then, the farthest. I question: “Is the tall grass in front of the tiger or behind?” “Is the tiger in front of the trees?” “How can we tell?” “What did Rousseau do that made his pictures look different from Grandma Moses’s (other than subject matter, of course)?” It is natural to talk about overlap at this point. The children see that an artist can show space by overlapping. Now, they are ready to try it.

Collage is an ideal medium. One last consideration: “Would it be better to start with ‘far-away’ or ‘close-up’ things?” The sensible thing to do is start with the farthest part of the jungle and simply pile up parts while working toward the foreground. Although this seems obvious, it is important that the children think about it.

At first, I encourage everyone to tear into green paper and assemble some large, floppy leaves. I urge them to cover a large portion of blue construction paper background. The week preceding this lesson, the children practice drawing jungle animals. Having done this, they can now create an animal with some degree of confidence. Some choose to draw the animal first, then cut it out. Others prefer to cut out the parts and assemble their animals one piece at a time.

The examples, by first-grade children, took two fifty-minute sessions to complete. The first was spent in discussion, establishing a background, and working on an animal. The second began with a review of the term overlap and a short demonstration of cutting on the fold. To alleviate some technical problems, strips of paper (1", 1 ½", and 2") were pre-cut in different shades of green. By folding a strip in half twice and cutting zig-zags from fold to fold, a child could achieve instant jungle grass. Some children, intrigued with the method, used single folds to cut bushes and exotic flowers. By the end of the second session, all of the trees, animals, grasses, and flowers were in place, with a few scraps off the table added for good measure.

The first-graders learned: (1) that Henri Rousseau was a painter of jungle scenes, (2) that overlapping is a way of showing space, and (3) that they could consciously use artistic methods and make delightful pictures.