WINTER BIRCH

by Debra Sweeney and Judy Rounds

Trees are great inspiration for artists! As art teachers, many of us find ourselves inspired and maybe somewhat obsessed with the natural beauty and elegance of the lofty tree, and how it changes through the seasons. One such tree that grows in several regions and always looks magnificent, regardless of the time of year, is the birch. This was the inspiration for the "Winter Birch Trees" lesson.

With a little research and much enthusiasm, we began to develop a project that would be easy and successful for even the youngest students. We started by creating a PowerPoint slideshow with information, paintings and photos of beautiful birch trees. Our school was new, so many of our supplies had not yet come in from our vendor. This situation made us rethink techniques and materials, and the results were surprising!

We decided to use pastels for the background. We grouped the pastels into cool, warm and complementary colors to help the students choose what color scheme they wanted for their backgrounds, and discussed color combinations. We demonstrated warm backgrounds, cool backgrounds and complementary backgrounds.

We also showed students how to protect the bottom of the paper. A piece of 6" x 12" manila paper should be cut out to resemble the snowy ground, and this can be taped gently to the bottom of the paper. If some of the students are not able to keep the bottom of the paper clean, it is easy to fix. Just have them cut a clean piece of 6" x 12" white paper in the shape of the snowdrift, and glue it on top to create clean snow.

After demonstrating the choices of pastel colors, background blending techniques and how to keep the bottom part of their paper clean, we let the students create their own unique backgrounds.

During the next class, we demonstrated how to design the trees using cardboard strips and a small amount of

Students dipped cardboard strips in black paint to create their tree trunks.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Elementary students will ...

- list warm, cool and complementary colors.
- become aware and appreciate the natural beauty of trees in their environment.
- use and gain experience with different media, techniques and processes.
- observe line, shape and color relationships.
- create a successful piece of art with good composition.

MATERIALS

- 12" x 18" white paper
- 6" x 12" manila paper or newsprint
- Assorted pastels
- Scissors, glue, erasers and black crayons
- Black tempera
- 2" x 3" cardboard pieces
- Masking tape
- Prints, photos and books with tree images

TREES

black tempera. Starting at the top of a separate sheet of white paper, students dipped the cardboard lightly into the paint, holding the cardboard almost perpendicular. They used a dry-brush technique to stroke small amounts of paint to form the tree trunk. Don't use too much paint—remember, less is more! Although it took some practice, the students got the technique and created several beautiful and realistic birch trees.

For the final step, we first observed the artwork of Bev Doolittle and several other artists to discuss placement and organization in their work. We were then ready to cut out and glue our trees to the pastel background. We removed the tape holding the snowdrifts in place, positioned the trees on the snow background and glued them down.

A discussion about light and shadow was explained and demonstrated. The final step was adding the shadows with black crayons and lightly misting snow over the entire picture. The snow was created by taking an empty spray bottle and filling it with a 50/50 mixture of white tempera paint and water.

The results were so impressive that we decided to hang every student's winter birch tree masterpiece up for display for our new school dedication. The faculty was amazed. The parents couldn't wait until we sent the pictures home so they could have them framed, and the students were so proud! ■

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RESOURCES

- *The Art of Bev Doolittle*, by Elise MacLay, Doolittle and Betty Ballantine. Greenwich Workshop Press; 2001.
- *Ortho's All About Trees*, by Jan Johnsen and John C. Fech. Meredith Books; 1999.
- www.terragalleria.com/pictures-subjects/birch-trees/
- www.betterphoto.com/gallery/dynoGall2.asp?catID=1208
- forestry.about.com/library/weekly/aa070902a.htm

The children's paintings were so impressive, parents couldn't wait to frame them.