

IT'S ALL IN THE VASE

by Karen Skophammer

Creativity—where does it come from? When nurturing creativity, it is necessary to have an open mind. Many times my students look at an artist's work—such as Salvador Dalí or Jasper Johns—and say, “What's *that*?” or “*Anybody* could do that!”

By nurturing a creative mind, we find that artists' ideas flow freely, so students need to look deeper into the artworks, the artists' lives and what was behind the inspiration for the work.

To start this process, I set a vase on the table in the front of the room and asked, “What would you paint on this vase? Why? What inspires you to draw what you draw?”

The students had many answers. Events that take place in a child's life, such as weddings, first dental visits and holidays, inspire some. Family vacations, sports and music were common answers. One student said he paints what makes him feel good at the time. Another said he really likes cats, so he draws lots about cats.

I then asked the students to think about all the vases and flower containers they'd seen. I asked them to sketch one of the containers they envisioned on their paper. “What are vases used for? Do they have to be used to hold flowers? Could they be used for anything else? Could they be just for decoration?”

I asked the students to think of a theme that could be drawn on the outside of their vase, in

Vincent van Gogh: Ode to “The Starry Night” (1889) & “Sunflowers” (1888/89).

Gustav Klimt: Ode to “Tree of Life” (1909) and “Portrait of Eugenia Primavesi” (1913–14).

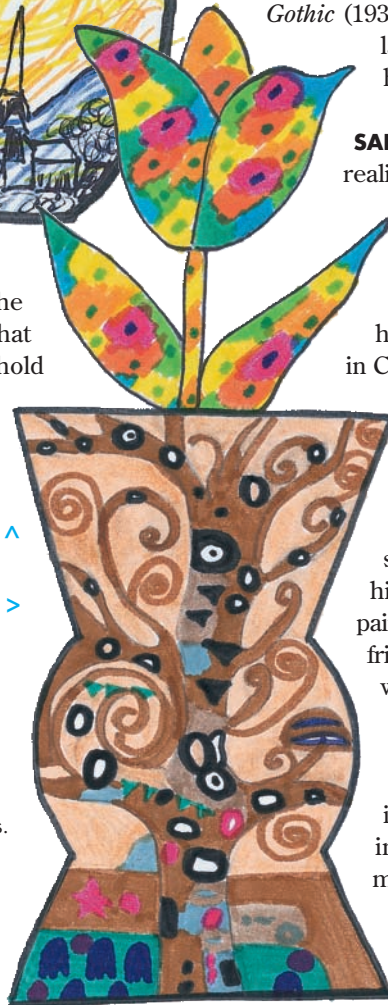
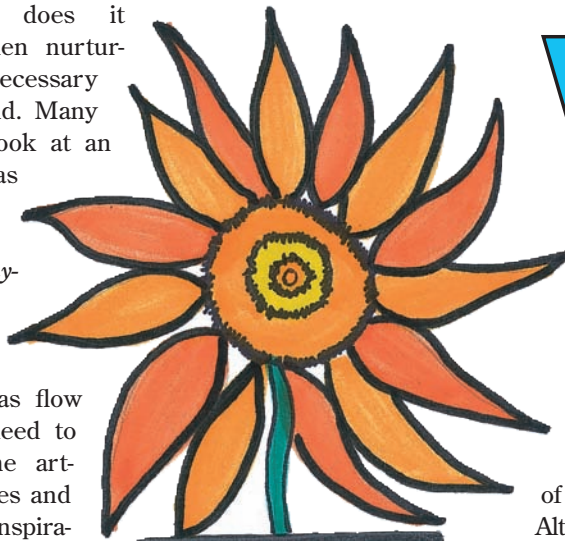
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upper-elementary and middle-school students will ...

- understand the motivations behind artists' works.
- learn what inspired many artists' famous works.
- draw vases inspired by themselves and by famous artists.

MATERIALS

- Colored pencils, pastels, crayons, etc.
- Resource materials, including examples of famous artworks
- Black and white drawing paper



addition to something that could be put inside the vase that would fit with that design theme. For instance, a student could draw a dog on the outside of the vase and place bones on stems inside the vase. Alternatively, maybe an outdoor scene could be drawn and plants could be coming out of the top of the vase.

“Now, what if someone looked at your vase and said, ‘*Anyone* could do that!’ or ‘What's *that*?’” I asked.

The students were able to “defend” and explain their works of art. It was a creative outpouring of their imaginations, which relayed a message to the onlooker.

Next, we took a further look at different artists' works of art, and why they chose to paint what they did.

GRANT WOOD was a favorite of the students since we live in Iowa. Almost everyone is familiar with his *American Gothic* (1930). Wood painted simple scenes of farmland and people, art that reflected the joy he felt growing up in Iowa.

SALVADOR DALÍ'S style is known as Surrealism. His paintings are filled with objects that may be oddly changed. Students discovered that many of Dalí's paintings came out of his dreams. Many of his ideas were responses to the scenery he saw when his family spent summers in Cadaqués, Spain. When he combined this scenery with his most private dreams and thoughts, he got others to think and look deeper into his paintings.

PABLO PICASSO has always fascinated students. His style changed a lot over his lifetime. When he was in his teens, he painted very realistically. But after Picasso's friend died, he painted with lots of blue, which became known as his Blue Period.

With *Guernica* (1937), Picasso expressed his anger through Cubism and dark, angry expressions. The painting was in a large format to make a big impact on people and make his statement about the destruction felt.

CLAUDE MONET was the incomparable painter of bright daylight—he was the painter of the sky, the snow,

clouds reflected in water, and majestic water lilies.

With *Water Lilies* (1897–98), Monet said he was painting an untouched dream, a happiness that will never be there, holding one’s breath in awe of the apparition. With his brushstrokes and light colors, mainly white and yellow, he created a dreamlike atmosphere.

M.C. ESCHER said he considered his work to be the most beautiful, and also the ugliest. Escher was a mathematician before he was an artist, which was a great influence in his work, as most of it is systematically planned out.

GUSTAV KLIMT was born in Vienna. Artists and intellectuals such as Sigmund Freud, Otto Wagner and Arnold Schonberg were living there at the time, and out of this creative influence, Klimt’s art was born.

NOW WE’RE INSPIRED! After looking at the artists, delving into their lives and “why” they painted what they painted, it was time for the students to demonstrate that they really understood this concept. “Now, imagine you are one of the artists we studied. How would you, as Salvador Dalí or Grant Wood, paint and design a vase?”

Each student drew a second vase on his or her choice of black or white paper, and went to work in the style of the artist they chose to represent. Then, they were to have “flowers” designed in that artist’s style coming out of the vase.

These were colored in the student’s medium of choice. My students grasped the idea of “why” artists create with the images and colors they do, and had a better understanding of why they, themselves, create images the way they do.

I was really excited when a student returned after a weekend out of town and told me that she had explained some paintings at a museum to her parents! The study of art, while seemingly “too deep” for fourth- through sixth-graders to understand, was interesting and rewarding, and reinforced concepts of art history and artists’ styles.

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Karen Skophammer is an art instructor for Manson Northwest Webster School in Barnum and Manson, Iowa.



Student’s self-inspired vase: ▲ Birdhouse and birds.

Edvard Munch: Ode to > “The Scream” (1893).

VINCENT VAN GOGH is another favorite of the students. Van Gogh was a complete failure to his contemporaries in everything that seemed important, such as earning a living and starting a family. Yet, in his paintings, he had his own control of order and the reality around him.

The students couldn’t wait to tell me they’d found van Gogh’s *Vase with Daisies and Anemones* (1887). They loved the blue vase with brightly colored flowers, and thought the background was very “cool.” Also, because we were working with vases, they thought it was great when they found vases famous artists had painted.

EDVARD MUNCH said he painted the lines and color that affected his inner eye. He said he painted from memory without adding anything, without the details that were no longer in front of him. He said that was the reason for the simplicity of his paintings—the obvious emptiness.



▲ Claude Monet: Ode to “Water Lilies” (1897–98).