

Abstract paint

Despite all the hoopla about which country has the highest-scoring students, which college majors are most marketable, or which education model is the most effective, art educators have remained consistently dedicated to what they believe is the most fundamental skill needed for successful growth: creative thinking.

Albert Einstein's familiar quote, "*Creativity is more important than knowledge,*" concisely conveys the importance of the thought process required to invent new concepts and discover hidden secrets that will improve our world.

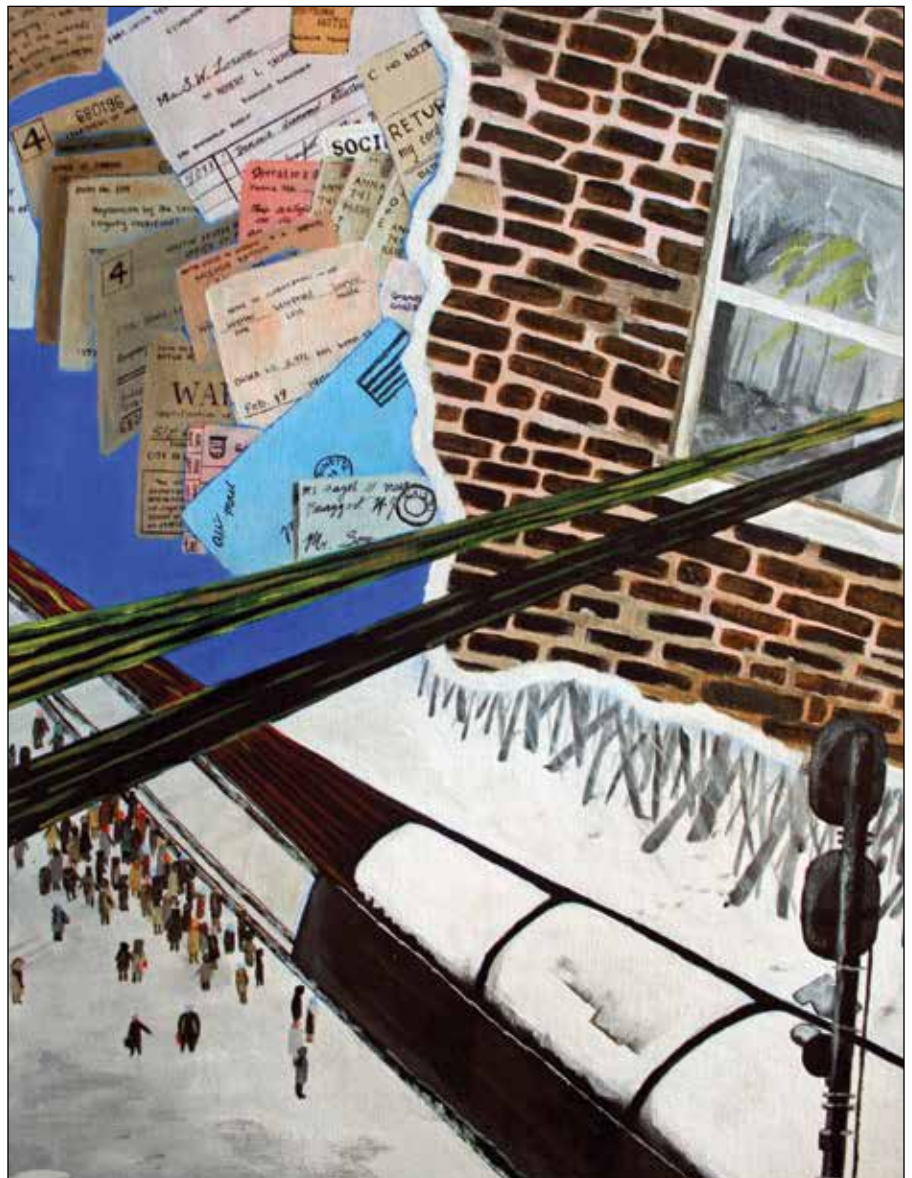
A lesson on abstract art affords students of all ages the opportunity to create art entirely from one's imagination, thus allowing them to choose the direction of their creative path.

Of course, we can argue that certain elements and principles of design should be utilized, but at the core of abstract design is

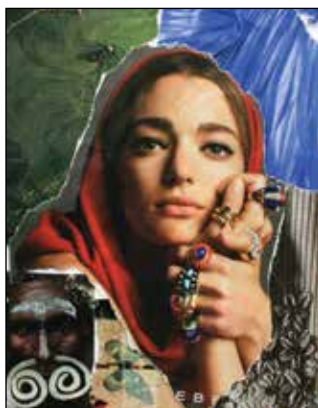
the inherent sense of ignoring all the rules and letting oneself be free to explore and create beyond the limitations imposed with realism. I have yet to meet a student who does not enjoy the opportunity to work on an abstract painting.

Over several years, I have developed two basic lessons for introducing students to abstract painting. As it is with most lessons, I had to kiss a lot of frogs before I found my prince projects.

THE FIRST LESSON is relatively simple and will allow students at any age to gain valuable skills in mixing colors, creating textures and devising balanced compositions. Through trial and error, students are largely engaged in the process and techniques required to become a skillful painter. I prefer to implement this "hidden square" lesson first, before moving



Taylor. Clockwise from bottom left: collage, underpainting, final artwork.



Nicole. From the left: collage, underpainting, final artwork.



on to the second lesson described below. The size of this painting, as well as the paper or canvas used, can be determined by what time and budget will allow.

PROVIDE STUDENTS with 2-inch squares cut from magazine images. The squares should contain unidentifiable segments of colors, shapes and textures. You should have at least twice as many squares as you have students so you can provide everyone with an ample selection to choose from.

Students securely glue their chosen square anywhere on their canvas. Be sure the glue is applied thoroughly so the paper will not bubble or curl up on the edges.

Mix paint to match the magazine square and begin building a composition from the edges of the square. Experiment with a variety of techniques, such as dry brushing, pointillism or underpainting, to attain desired textures. Do not cover more than an eighth of an inch of the edge of the magazine square with paint. The goal is to make the magazine square undetectable because the painting is matched precisely in color, value and texture.

THE SECOND LESSON was inspired by Professor Jim Cogswell of the University of Michigan's Stamps School of Art & Design. In a video filmed in his college art class, Cogswell interacts with students as they create abstract paintings on huge canvases. The students in the video provide nearly as much insight as does the skillful professor, as they make inquiries and comments about their evolving work.

What intrigued me the most was how each student followed a unique path as they navigated their way through a sea of creative possibilities. I knew I had to try this with my students!

I made some modifications to suit the experience level and materials available in my classroom and ended up with a lesson that has proven to be a winner. I was so excited with the results I sent several images of student work to Prof. Cogswell along with my gratitude, and asked for his permission to share this video with others.

In a nutshell, students will create an abstract painting that
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

High-school students will ...

- compare and contrast Abstract and Realist art.
- explore options to invent imagery.
- learn to mix paint to specific colors.
- practice new techniques to achieve various textures.
- discuss and apply the elements and principles of design.
- evaluate and modify their composition to seek balance and unity.

NATIONAL ART STANDARDS

- **CREATE:** Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- **PRESENT:** Develop and refine artistic work for presentation.
- **RESPOND:** Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- **CONNECT:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

MATERIALS

- Magazine images
- Scissors, glue sticks
- Copier paper
- Canvas or bristol board
- Acrylic paint, paintbrushes, water containers.



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Andrea. Clockwise from above: underpainting, collage, final artwork.

will require a preliminary “sketch” comprising colors, textures and images torn or cut from magazine pages and glued to a sheet of paper to create a collage. This collage will serve as the rough draft and visual reference for creating the abstract painting on canvas.

FIRST, INSPIRE STUDENTS by showing them Prof. Cogswell’s video (youtu.be/vG9MSAfOK7g). Because my high-school students are at an introductory level, I amended the process described in the video to provide more direction for students who lack painting experience.

Students establish a color scheme as they go about the task of tearing out images from magazines. They sort and organize them according to the shapes and textures that inspire them. Usually, a focal point emerges as they hone in on their creative destination. After a period or two of creative decision-making, a bona fide collage emerges.

To give the painting an added sense of meaning, students define a broad symbolic theme or mood they wish to invoke, such as “fluid,” “broken” or “summer garden.” The method of defining a theme is a circular process. Students consider various options as their collage evolves, which in turn requires them to think about how art makes them feel.

WE USE CANVAS BOARD for our painting, and acrylics allow students to easily paint over areas they are not pleased with. Students apply a background color to the entire canvas before using a pencil to lightly sketch in any simple lines or shapes that will help them begin building a composition.

Underpainting is a process that is usually unknown to students, thus providing instant intrigue. I show them examples of abstract paintings that demonstrate the use of under-color to promote a sense of warmth, coolness, value range, etc. They realize acrylic paint is very forgiving



because its opacity allows the artist to cover up any part of their painting they wish to reinvent. In fact, their painting gets better with each new layer of paint that is added. When students discover their mistakes will lend more character to their painting, they relinquish their fear of failure.

The painting process usually takes about 8 to 10 hours of class time, during which students will invent, reinvent, explore, discover, fail and succeed many times. At first, the collage will dictate what the painting should look like, but eventually the painting takes on a life of its own and dictates what needs to be done to make it balanced and complete.

Some students will vehemently adhere to their collage design and others will focus on selected textures and shapes. In the end, students will undoubtedly experience a sense of confidence that comes from following their inner voice on an exploration from the unknown to the known. They cannot fail. They are the captains of their own creativity. ■

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