

Jungle Paintings

Inspired by Rousseau

by Carrie Keene

Underdog stories seem to have such a positive impact on my high school students. Whenever possible, I include narratives about artists' struggles to highlight the perseverance required to keep fighting for success.

One such story involving Henri Rousseau, a self-taught French artist, is used in the middle of my painting unit with advanced students. At this point, students have roughly a year of experience with paint, yet they are often frustrated because they recognize that their paintings lack believable depth.

Rousseau knew this problem well as he was often ridiculed for his paintings having a flat, almost childlike style. I show students Henri



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Rousseau's jungle-themed paintings, including *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)*, *In a Tropical Forest Combat of a Tiger and a Buffalo*, and *The Equatorial Jungle*.

These paintings represent a peculiar choice in subject matter, considering Rousseau never left France. To find suitable reference material to fuel his creativity, he relied on his drawings from visits to the botanical gardens of Paris.

TO BEGIN OUR PAINTING with similar references, I created a still life of large cuttings from our Florida landscape. The selection included 2- to 3-foot palm fronds and long bamboo branches, which served as the "jungle aesthetic" found in Rousseau's work. Inspired by the sight and smell of the foliage, students were ready to paint!

For this lesson, I chose to employ "Color" as the most influential element of design to give the illusion of three-dimensional space. Using a 15" x 20" sheet of thick watercolor paper, we started with a light-valued background of blue that had been neutralized with yellow ochre and white.



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Recalling our atmospheric perspective lessons that stressed that colors become cool and gray as they recede, our first layer of shapes was drawn with white chalk and painted with a bluish monochromatic scheme, slightly darker than the background. This was a departure for most students, as they typically want to jump in directly to the most colorful and dynamic sections of their painting. To paint layers that progress from muted to saturated colors requires patience and delayed gratification.

WE THEN ADDED the middle-ground layer using more shapes from our still life. Here, the colors needed to be analogous in a range of blues, blue-greens and greens. Knowing cool colors recede, the greens were “cooled down” with blue or purple so they would not compete with the brighter colors in the upcoming foreground. We usually have two layers of middle-ground leaves, which provides the opportunity to experiment with variations of color and leaf shapes. Some students bring in clippings from their own yards to add variety to our “jungle.”

After drawing in our final layers with white chalk, students use a mixture of their darkest blue and red to fill in negative spaces between leaves in the foreground. Black can be added, if necessary. This creates a dark space that the foreground colors can contrast with to their fullest potential.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

High school students will ...

- use warm and cool colors to create believable three-dimensional space.
- use layered shapes to create background, middle ground, and foreground.
- use contrast to create focal point(s).

NATIONAL ART STANDARDS

- CREATING: Refining and completing artistic work.
- RESPONDING: Perceiving and analyzing artistic work.
- RESPONDING: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

MATERIALS

- 15" x 20" watercolor paper (thick)
- Acrylic paint (white, blue, red, yellow ochre, green, purple, yellow, orange, black)
- Assortment of paintbrushes
- Containers for water, paper towels
- White chalk
- Variety of foliage clippings for still life
- Henri Rousseau painting examples

VOCABULARY

- Analogous colors
- Atmospheric perspective
- Background, middle ground, foreground
- Contrast
- Monochromatic colors
- Saturated colors
- Warm/cool colors

FOR THE FOREGROUND LAYERS, students are finally free to use the saturated colors they like so much. Because they’ve built a layered background of cool colors, the bright yellow-greens and warm colors pop with eye-catching contrast. They continue to use the still life for reference in regard to shape, but are encouraged to play with the use of color, as Rousseau did.

Because these shapes are near the viewer, details such as leaf veins and color striations that were omitted in the previous layers were now welcome. Some students used reference photos of bromeliads and other exotic plants, such as a Venus fly trap, to paint in their focal points.

When the painting was nearly finished, we assessed our paintings from a distance of at least 8 feet. Looking at their work from a distance, students immediately saw when layers blended together or lacked contrast. Usually a simple addition of highlights and cast shadows made the layers stand out from each other.

This lesson has proved successful in showing the power of simple color-theory concepts, such as warm/cool colors, monochromatic and analogous. I have adapted this high-school level lesson to use with third- to seventh-graders many times, just by simplifying the leaf shapes. ■

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