

Masterpieces IN THE HALLWAYS

Philip Downs and Erin Patton-McFarren

Decorating school walls with great art can impact the entire curriculum.

What do you put on the walls of your school? No matter how many bulletin boards, exit signs, motivational posters, and directional signage you have, there are always wall spaces that cry out for something to cover them. In 2006, when Cedar Canyon Elementary School opened its doors for the first time, the amount of bare wall space was noticeable even after we put up bulletin boards so large that teachers developed the shakes when they realized they would have to fill them.





Our first thought was to have some murals painted on the walls. Many of the schools in our area display spectacular murals of book characters, historical events, or school mascots. While they are beautiful, they are also difficult for custodians to paint around and can be expensive. So we decided to try something different: framed art.

We came up with a three-step plan. The first step was to create a list of seminal paintings that were child-friendly and covered a wide range of genres and cultures. The second step was to find reproductions of these masterpieces and determine how much it would cost to frame and mount them. Finally, we needed to find a way to pay for them.

Getting Started

The first step was easy; in fact, it was too easy. We came up with a list of 50 paintings before we knew it. What we didn't know at first was that the owners of these paintings can control the sizes of the prints, impacting their price. So we met with the owner of a frame store to find out which reproductions were available that fit our size requirements and budget. We decided to pare the list back to the more affordable prints and ended up with 45. The frame-store owner told us that the cost of each print—with ultraviolet-safe glass, acid-free mats, and museum-quality hangers—would be \$200, for a total of \$9,000.

A Gallery of Great Art

We wrestled with how to pay for the art. Then one day, after many months, the principal was looking around his beautiful church during Mass when he noticed that at the bottom of each stained-glass window was a memorial plaque for the person for whom it was donated. That gave us an idea. Would people donate \$200 to have one of our art selections memorialized in someone's name? We set up an account with our PTO and six months later all 45 prints were sold and hanging with a nice "Donated By" box in the matting.

The effect of the art on the appearance of our building was spectacular! This would be a great ending to the story, but what has happened in our school as a result is even more amazing.

Art in the Classroom

The art teacher began incorporating the hallway art into her instruction by developing a featured artist presentation based on the 45 paintings. She introduces an artist through a PowerPoint presentation, focusing on the painting that is part of our collection, and then showing some of the artist's other works. She outlines the artist's life, including facts about his or her younger years. In the process, she also introduces major concepts in art and vocabulary that address the Indiana Academic Standards for Visual Arts and the National Standards for Visual Arts, makes connections to other disciplines, and relates why the artist's work was significant in the time it was produced. A major focus of each presentation is how the artist accomplished something no one had ever thought of before.

The featured artist presentation may not always relate directly to the project the students are working on, but each

Here are the 45 masterpieces displayed on the walls of Cedar Canyon Elementary School:

Andy Warhol: "One Hundred Cans"
Stuart Davis: "Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors"
Richard Diebenkorn: "Seawall"
Jasper Johns: "Three Flags"
Mark Rothko: "Blue, Green and Brown"
Jackson Pollock: "Convergence"
Romare Bearden: "Jammin' at the Savoy"
Jacob Lawrence: "Barber Shop"
Diego Rivera: "The Flower Seller"
Frida Kahlo: "Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky"
Georgia O'Keefe: "Oriental Poppies"
Berthe Morisot: "Reading"
John Singer Sargent: "Out-of-Doors Study"
William Merritt Chase: "The Beach"
Winslow Homer: "On the Beach"
Mary Cassatt: "Children Playing on the Beach"
Andrew Wyeth: "Christina's World"
Charles Demuth: "From the Garden of the Chateau"
Grant Wood: "American Gothic"
Frederic Church: "Rainy Season in the Tropics"
John Copley: "Henry Pelham"
Rene Magritte: "Golconde"
Salvador Dali: "The Persistence of Memory"
M.C. Escher: "Relativity"
Piet Mondrian: "Broadway Boogie Woogie"
Joan Miro: "The Hunter"
Wassily Kandinsky: "Yellow, Red, Blue"
Edvard Munch: "The Scream"
Odilon Redon: "Vase of Flowers, 1914"
Marc Chagall: "I and the Village"
Pablo Picasso: "Three Musicians"
Henri Matisse: "Icarus"
Georges Seurat: "Bathers at Asnieres"
Henri Rousseau: "The Sleeping Gypsy"
Vincent Van Gogh: "Starry Night"
Paul Cezanne: "Hillside in Provence"
Pierre Renoir: "Luncheon of the Boating Party"
Edgar Degas: "Ballet Dancers"
Jan Vermeer: "Girl with a Pearl Earring"
Katshusika Hokusai: "Great Wave off Kanagawa"
Michelangelo Caravaggio: "The Cardsharps"
Raphael: "The School of Athens"
Hubert Van Eyck: "The Arnolfini Portrait"
Leonardo Da Vinci: "Mona Lisa"
John Trumbull: "The Battle of Bunker Hill"

artist demonstrates principles and elements of art that can relate to any project. Art tutorials, or introductions to selected paintings from the collection, give students an additional knowledge base to build on. Eventually, they will learn about all 45 paintings and have many opportunities to review and revisit the artists.

The art tutorial has become a resource that classroom teachers also can use. They receive e-mails about the featured artist that provide brief histories of the artists and include cross-curricular suggestions. The teachers are then able to make connections to what they are teaching in class. The art tutorial has become so popular that it is now subscribed to by teachers and librarians outside of our school and by other individuals in the community. The format has been adapted by the music teacher, who posts a featured song, and the physical education teacher, who sends out fitness tips and information about an inspirational, non-mainstream athlete.

The art teacher also has developed a virtual field trip called the Cedar Canyon Art Institute. Students walk through the hallways to look at the art they have been studying throughout the year, while learning about art museums, the people who work in them, and the appropriate etiquette for visiting a museum or gallery.

Making Cross-Curricular Connections

Here are some of the cross-curricular connections inspired by our featured artist presentations and art tutorials:

Math. Teachers prompt students to recognize repeated geometric shapes in Grant

Wood's "American Gothic" and mosaic patterns in M.C. Escher's "Relativity." Andy Warhol's "One Hundred Cans" is conveniently located by the first-grade classrooms for the 100 Day observance.

History. Each artist is introduced in historical context. For example, students are asked to consider how Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot illustrate

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the limitations placed on 19th century women in society and as artists, and to note that Jasper Johns’ “Three Flags” only has 48 stars because Hawaii and Alaska weren’t admitted to the Union until 1959.

Science. Teachers explain Georges Seurat’s method of using small dots to demonstrate how our eyes see color.

Literature. Students connect Michelangelo Caravaggio’s realistic style and Henri Matisse’s “Icarus” to figures from Greek mythology.

Pop culture. Students are asked to reflect on Jasper Johns, who was one of the first artists to think about the design of everyday objects around us. Students are also asked to recognize how Caravaggio’s lifestyle and Warhol’s celebra-

tion of the celebrity have much in common with our contemporary culture.

The students’ enthusiasm for the masterpieces on our walls has been insightful and exhilarating. Stories trickle down from classroom teachers about students recognizing paintings in textbooks or books from the library, or making connections to their math class. The exciting aspect of introducing great art to our students is not only what they are capable of absorbing, but how they

make connections and apply that information in multiple contexts. Isn’t that what education is supposed to do? 

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List as of November 17, 2008

WEB RESOURCES

On the National Gallery of Art Web site, teachers and students can find art resources that cover a variety of disciplines, topics, and artists. The site also features interactive lesson plans. www.nga.gov/education/classroom

This Metropolitan Museum of Art Web page features online exhibits such as the Art of Ancient Egypt and the Glory of Byzantium. www.metmuseum.org/explore/classroom.asp

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