

# Providing Rich Art Activities for Young Children

Christine Mulcahey

"That one is scary." "It's an octopus!" "It's a big hand." "It's sliding down the mountain!" These comments came from the 3- and 4-year-olds as I showed them a reproduction of Jean Arp's *Configuration*, a blue, black, and yellow abstract painting. They were clearly transfixed by the colors and shapes of the strange painting, and they had plenty to say about it. I listened as they discussed what these colors and shapes reminded them of.

I thought of the day, years ago, when I was assigned to teach art to preschoolers as part of my teaching duties at the laboratory school of Rhode Island College. I was concerned at first. Although I had worked with students from kindergarten through college age, I had never taught 3- and 4-year-olds. I wondered how I could help the children learn on a developmentally appropriate level the same aesthetic and artistic values that I taught to older students.

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Photos courtesy of the author.



I decided to use the same approach as I did with the older children. I show them examples of works of art from a variety of time periods and cultures as they fit with the curriculum. We discuss the works, not in a didactic manner, but in a conversational and constructivist manner, drawing on the children's experiences. We conjecture, we tell stories, we may use drama to re-create a scene, and then we play, explore, and create using a variety of natural and manmade materials.

The children and their teachers love this approach. The children's enthusiasm, observations, and keen sense of interpretation amaze me. My time with them is the most enjoyable part of the school day.

## Bridging the art gap

Using works of art with young children is a perfect way to bridge the gap between art activities that are too open or too closed. Teachers of young children sometimes try to find a middle ground by allowing free painting time at an easel in addition to recipe-oriented activities such as putting together precut shapes to create a spider or an apple tree. They may assume that the free painting activity is a nice balance with the more step-by-step activity. While these approaches do provide balance, they are at opposite ends of the continuum—one can be too open and one too closed.

## Young children are eager to talk about works of art, whether their own creations or someone else's.

In my teaching I show children a variety of works of art as inspiration for the subsequent art-making activity. This is not a new approach, but it is seldom used in the preschool classroom. Preservice teachers may not have a strong background in using art with children, although art activities are an essential part of the preschool curriculum. Approximately 75 percent of colleges and universities require only one course in the visual arts for preservice teachers of young children, and others require none (Jeffers 1993). Elliot Eisner (1988) asserted 20 years ago, and it still holds true today, that many teachers do what they know how to do. If teachers' early art education was coloring ditto sheets or creating teacher-prepared craft projects, then this practice typically continues until teachers learn about better, more enriching alternatives.

### Teaching with art

Teaching young children ways to look at art, talk about it, and appreciate it is exciting. Young children are eager to talk about works of art, whether their own creations or someone else's. Talking about art strengthens language development at an age when children are quickly developing a language system and vocabulary (Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell 2003). Using reproductions of art in the curriculum is surprisingly easy and provides a broad range of benefits for children. Introducing artworks to young children allows them to construct their own knowledge,

teaches appreciation of diversity, encourages storytelling, and fosters imaginative and critical thinking skills.

### Constructing knowledge

I usually begin an art lesson by showing the children two or three reproductions of exemplary artworks—artworks recognized for their historical, cultural, and artistic value. They usually relate by theme and support the classroom curriculum. For example, if the children are studying birds, we look at paintings or drawings of birds. If the children are learning about families, I use reproductions of art depicting families. I make sure the artwork is diverse: I include realistic and abstract works as well as works from different cultures. This allows the children to become accustomed to seeing a variety of styles. Research shows that although art-making activities are common in most schools, opportunities for viewing diverse art and linking those works to art-making experiences are rare (Epstein & Trimis 2002; Savva 2003).

As we view the works of art, the children and I discuss them. We usually work in small groups of four to six children, and I begin by simply asking the children what they see. They immediately start talking, pointing

out objects in the art or telling stories from their own lives. Children naturally interpret what they see based on their personal experiences and their previous exposure to artworks. It is important to accept their interpretations, even if they are not what the artist intended (Hohmann & Weikart 2002). This helps children feel safe and encourages them to take more risks in sharing their observations and opinions.

Children's initial responses and experiences based on their observations are very important. They allow children to construct their own knowledge about what they see, a developmentally appropriate approach (Durant 1996; Savva 2003). Children become active participants in the learning process, rather than passive ones. I sometimes add factual information, if it does not interfere with the free flow of ideas and contributes to a greater understanding of the artist, the work of art, or another child's perspective (Burnham 1994). Such information is usually in the form of a story or a quick statement or question. For example, I might mention that Kandinsky liked music and wanted his artwork to look like music sounded, or that Picasso felt sad and so he used "sad" colors. But the primary emphasis is on the children's construction of knowledge.

### Appreciating diversity

The children also learn that others' thoughts and feelings may differ from their own. Looking at art from a variety of perspectives helps children become more open-minded and accepting of diverse ways of thinking (Greene 1995). Everyone has a different way of perceiving the world, and by looking at the works of different artists and cultures, children and adults can see that there are multiple per-



spectives, and that differences can be good and exciting.

Educators and parents need to provide “increasing numbers of opportunities for tapping into long unheard frequencies, for opening new perspectives on a world increasingly shared” (Greene 2001, 189). In our global society, we need to help children understand that there are many ways of doing things and many ways of seeing the world. Looking at art from different cultures helps children do this.

In one conversation, third-graders and I were looking at a self-portrait by Frieda Kahlo. Some children giggled at her “unibrow” and her dark moustache. One child defended the painting by saying that she thought it was beautiful, and that if they lived in that culture, they would think it was beautiful too. The other children accepted this explanation and later were more respectful of differences in cultural beliefs. By talking about their values and beliefs, children can communicate the similarities among us as well as the differences.

### Encouraging storytelling

Looking at artworks, children learn to tell stories as they relate their own experiences to what they see. Storytelling encourages active participation, higher-level thinking, creative thought, and expression of emotions (Wellhausen 1993). It also enhances linguistic fluency and builds self-esteem (Colbert 1995). When children view artwork, they immediately begin to tell stories. The stories may relate to a real event in their lives or an imaginary one. One child may begin the story and another child may pick up the thread and continue it.

Children are eager to participate in conversations that revolve around their own experiences (Kolbe 2002).



Through storytelling, they learn about their peers, about artists and artworks, and about possibilities and events. Using artworks as an impetus for sharing personal experiences coincides with Freire’s (1970) beliefs that education is not neutral, that we bring our backgrounds, values, and beliefs to the classroom and share them in the act of communication

### Fostering imaginative and critical thinking skills

When children look at works of art, they may imagine what is happening in the picture or sculpture or what happened before or after. They can put themselves in the work of art and talk about how they would feel or what they might do. Describing what they see, beginning to interpret images, and discussing why an artist would paint in a certain manner uses imagination and critical-thinking skills. Imagination is a cognitive capacity that is often neglected in education, and yet it is fundamental to learning (Greene 2001). With imagination come

wonder, inventions, and discoveries—not just in art but also in life. Dewey ([1934] 1980) speaks of imagination as the capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise. Imagination opens new worlds, discloses new vistas, and makes life enjoyable.

Children develop their skills of visual perception as they look at, reflect upon, create, and experience art. These all require thought and involve critical thinking, which adults should foster in children at an early age (Eglinton 2003).

### “I see trains!”

In one preschool classroom, the children were learning about trains and preparing to take an actual train ride. They learned about different kinds of trains, what they looked like, what they sounded like, and who traveled on them. As the visiting art specialist, I showed the children two reproductions of paintings depicting trains—a surreal Magritte, *Time Transfixed*, and a slightly more realistic Paul Delvaux, *Trains du Soir*. The Magritte depicts a locomotive emerging from the upper portion of a fireplace, floating within the space. In the Delvaux it is nighttime, and a train is depicted from the front, with a city in the background. A little girl is in the

**Imagination opens new worlds, discloses new vistas, and makes life enjoyable.**



lower right corner. The children and I talked briefly about the paintings:

**CM:** Let's look at these paintings. What do you see?

**M:** I see trains! And a little girl here [pointing to the lower right corner of the painting].

**CM:** What do you think the little girl is doing?

**M:** She's going to get on the train! Yes, she's going to visit her grandma!

**D:** [Interjects] The train is coming out of the fireplace! It's coming into the house! I think Santa is bringing the train!

**A:** It's nighttime. I can see the moon! I don't like to go out at nighttime.

The children chattered among themselves and continued to talk enthusiastically about the trains. Each had a different perspective: M was interested in what the little girl was doing; D thought Santa was bringing him a gift; and A was concerned that it was nighttime, and he continued to talk about the dark.

Our conversation turned into storytelling and an imaginative romp through the children's lives. They were exploring their imaginations and were eager to share their experiences with me and with each other.

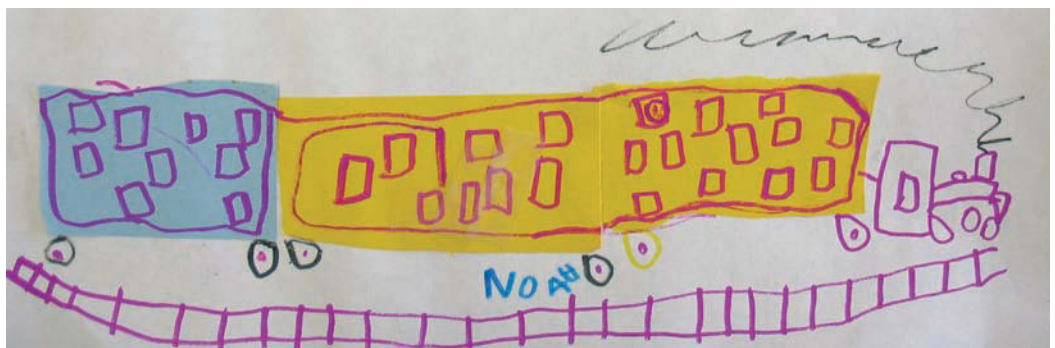
After the discussion, the children collected

paper, glue, markers, and other materials. They created their own trains, or they created pictures of the dark nighttime—it was their choice. As they worked, the conversation extended to more stories about nighttime, visiting grandparents, or traveling to different places. Some children made train sounds and banged their markers on the table along with their chanting. They were having a wonderful time.

### What is a rich art activity?

After viewing and talking about different artworks with children, I follow with what I call a *rich art activity*, which

- asks what the children will learn rather than what the children will do
- connects to the larger art world
- allows the children to make choices
- provides for a variety of outcomes



### Learning

Many art activities revolve around what children will *do*. However, the important idea is what the children will *learn* and how they will learn. Just as in math or any other subject, the focus is on the learning that is taking place rather than the doing. How do you distinguish between the two? Here is a simple example involving a student teacher.

In a kindergarten lesson, a student teacher wanted the children to paint pictures of animals, since the children were studying different animals. He felt that children really like animals and would have fun painting them. I asked him what the children would *learn*, and he had a hard time answering, so we sat for a while and brainstormed.

He decided to focus on the artwork of Andy Warhol, and he concentrated on Warhol's animal prints, which are colorful renditions of endangered animals created in rich, unrealistic colors (for example, an elephant is pink). The children and he talked about the prints for several minutes, bringing in their own experiences with animals, what animals look like, what *endangered* means, and why Andy Warhol used such bright colors. Then the children each created an animal using a variety of materials.

What did the children learn from this activity? They learned about a twentieth century artist, Andy Warhol, and they learned about endangered species. They learned about animals from their peers and their teacher and about materials, colors, mixing paint, and making choices. The learning from this activity was much richer than just painting animals would have been.

In a later sculpture lesson, the children viewed reproductions of paintings and photographs of sculptures of animals from a variety of artists. Franz Marc's *Blue Horses*, Alexander Calder's *Cow*, Jean Dallaire's *Birdy*, and animal prints by Aboriginal artists in Australia provided a range of realistic and abstract works from different times and cultures. By looking at the art of several artists, the children learned that people have different perspectives and that each perspective is valid. Just as different artists produce different results, so do children.

### Connecting to the larger art world

These lessons connected to the larger art world because they introduced children to the different ways artists think, make choices, and paint or sculpt. In the Warhol lesson, the discussion focused on why the artist painted in that style. The children were perceptive about Warhol's painting the animals in unrealistic colors. When asked why the artist wanted to do that, there were several responses: "Because he wanted us to really look at his paintings," "He wanted to use his imagination," "Maybe the sun was shining on the animals." Without disclosing a lot of information about the artists, the teacher allowed the children to construct their own knowledge about artists and animals, an enriching experience for everyone.

### Making choices

In these lessons the children made several choices. They chose the animal they would create, the size and color of the paper, the colors of paint or crayons or markers, and how to portray the animal. Some children chose to create birds or fish; others, imaginary creatures. They decided what else to include in the painting or sculpture. The NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (NAEYC 2008) indicate that young children should have opportunities to plan and make choices. Creating art is an opportu-

nity to give them the freedom to do so. Children, if allowed, are extremely creative and revel in the opportunity to choose materials.

Seemingly simple choices for teachers become major decision-making opportunities for children: paper color, crayons or paint, which way to orient their artwork on the paper are all options children should have. They may require more time to work if there are many decisions to make, but it is time well spent. In choosing, children will select different combinations of materials and gradually learn more about those materials' properties as well as the effect one material has on another.

### Providing a variety of outcomes

The children's works were all different. Some children painted or sculpted several animals, while others created only one. Some included themselves in the picture. There were different backgrounds, different paper sizes, and different paint colors. Each child's approach to painting or sculpting was unique; there was no right or wrong way.

### "What do you see?"

When I show children works of art, I usually ask, "What do you see?" Most children can answer this question. The answers vary, depending on how the child constructs meaning and the child's developmental stage. Any other questions I ask are in response to what the children say. If Katia thinks a person looks sad in a painting, I might ask her why she thinks the person is sad or what the artist does to make the person look sad.

I like to make a connection between the work of art and the artist. Asking the children why Andy Warhol used unusual colors in his endangered species prints helps them realize that a real person created the work and that that person had a choice. Sometimes

I show children a picture of the artist, and they ask questions about where the artist lives or whether he or she has children.

We discuss the titles of artworks, and the children guess what the title might be. This becomes an engaging guessing game. There are no rules for talking about art with children. As long as your questions are cued by the children's conversations and are open ended, children will eagerly continue to talk.



### Conclusion

Providing open-ended experiences based on well-known artwork gives children rich exposure to art and to art experiences. Looking at examples of works of art that inspire them nurtures children's visual perception skills. Research suggests that children's interest in making art is increased if adults encourage them to talk about art and artists, who the artists are, and how they make things. Preschoolers are at the stage when language and vocabulary are developing rapidly, and it is the perfect time

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to introduce simple art terms and beginning art knowledge (Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell 2003).

In the well-known Reggio Emilia schools in Italy, children produce artwork of amazing quality. Teachers use rich language before and while the children create, stimulating feelings and imagination (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Children are often more imaginative and pictorial than adults, and rich language feeds their thinking, resulting in a diverse array of high-quality art.

Giving children choices in materials and ideas stimulates the imagination and allows them to think more inventively. A child's personality and viewpoint are reflected in her artwork, and teachers can show respect for the child by encouraging her in pursuing her own way of working with art materials (Colbert 1995). Looking, talking, and creating together turns an art activity into a social activity in which children can learn from each other. This approach provides rich conversation, introduces social and cultural factors, and recognizes the significance of scaffolding and teaching as proposed by Vygotsky ([1930–1935] 1978).

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## Collecting Art Reproductions

Although you can buy high-quality reproductions from many sources, there are other ways to collect prints. Out-of-date calendars are a good and inexpensive way to view artwork. Oversize art books borrowed from local libraries provide variety. The important idea is to have a rich, varied collection from different time periods and different cultures. Try to make selections from beyond the artists or kinds of artwork you like.

There are several good Web sites for images: [www.barewalls.com](http://www.barewalls.com) allows you to search by artist or style. In searching by style, you get a good overview of movements and periods in art history. The images are somewhat small, but they can be used with a small group of children. Art Resource, at [www.artres.com/c/html/Home.aspx](http://www.artres.com/c/html/Home.aspx), has over 250,000 keyword-searchable, fine art images. You can store images in your lightbox and quickly retrieve them for viewing. Also see [www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com) and [www.museumsyndicate.com/index.php](http://www.museumsyndicate.com/index.php) for other fine art imagery.

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