
FEATURE

What do you see, really *see*?

Exploring art styles with children

When you look at a piece of artwork, what do you see? Most of us first see the entire image, be it a painting, sculpture, needlework, or drawing. We are usually able to immediately grasp a landscape, a portrait, a mobile, or an exuberant combination of line and color in paint.

Each piece of art, however, is the result of deliberate choices the artist has made about how to combine elements—some personal

and symbolic and some representational. The choices include the medium—paint, metal, fabric, charcoal, or clay—that the artist believes will reflect a specific image, mood, or idea.

While it's of utmost importance to allow children to explore and discover their own artistic techniques, creative doors can open when children are encouraged to investigate the work of others—including notable artists. Most

school-age children have access to art classes as part of standard curriculum. They learn both technique (how to use paint, clay, and metal) and art history (the evolution of styles over time).

Preschoolers, on the other hand, require sensory stimulation and an invitation to explore tools while developing the hand-eye coordination that makes the tools most effective.

When you explore art with young children, ask lots of questions like “What do you see?” “What does this remind you of?” and “How does this make you feel?” If the children are interested, share some background information about the artists—but keep it hands-on. Provide a historical context with props and stories about the time period in which the artist worked. Encourage children to imitate techniques while reflecting the artist's point of view.

Portraits

A portrait is an image of a person or animal. Before the dominance of photography, artists painted portraits to record the features of the subject, usually an important or wealthy person, for history. Portraits tell us about the dress, posture, furniture, and interests of people in the past. Portraits also



communicate emotion and mood. They reflect the style of the artist and can range from realistic to representational. As an example, examine the differences between John Singleton Copley's portrait *Paul Revere* (1770) and Juan Gris' portrait *Picasso* (1912).

When you explore portraits with children, carefully examine the eyes, eyebrows, and mouths of the subjects. Humans communicate the most powerful emotions—love, rage, hate, frustration, and pleasure—with these facial features. Encourage children to talk about why they might like or dislike the person.

Portraiture aims to tell something about the inner life of the subject—not just a superficial likeness. Invite storytelling—it enriches vocabulary and general literacy—and mimicry. What do you think this person is thinking about? Were the clothes comfortable?

Subjects generally posed for the artist, sitting still in the same position, in the same clothes, for many hours over many days. How long can you sit without moving so that someone can paint your picture?

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926)

Cassatt was born in America but lived most of her life in France. Her family was wealthy and she decided at a young age to study to be an artist. Much of her art depicts women, especially women at work with children. She painted in the Impressionist style.

Share an image of Mary Cassatt's *The Child's Bath* (1893). This portrait shows a woman bathing a young child. Invite children into the picture by asking

how the image differs from how they bathe. Is the child pleased with the attention of her mother? Is the mother happy to be helping her child?



Compare *The Child's Bath* with Cassatt's *The Boating Party* (1893-94) and *Children on the Beach* (1884). Are the people having fun? Are these activities you might enjoy?

Introduce the concept of *perspective* in art: what's in the distance, what's closer, and where is the artist standing? Examine each portrait closely and count—how many hats, how many hands? What can you see and what do you assume?

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)

Sargent was an American painter who lived in Europe and seldom visited the United States. He was a contemporary of Cassatt's but painted in a different style. His portraits reflect a realism that con-

trasts with Cassatt's softer, more emotional paintings.



Share and compare three Sargent portraits: *Bedouins* (1905-06), *Theodore Roosevelt* (1903), and *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885-86). The subjects of these portraits are vastly different—a president, two children in a garden, and two men in the desert. Challenge children to find common features and encourage conversation about differences (color, lines, clothing, and mood). Sargent is known for his ability to reflect the personalities of his subjects.

Exploring textures

Here's what you need:

- fabric scraps
- scissors and ruler
- paper or fabric bag
- sheets of newsprint
- colored chalk

1. Collect (and ask for donations of) differently textured fabric scraps including twill, damask,

- lace, satin, corduroy, wool, embroidery, knits, and fleece. Cut two 4-inch squares from each scrap.
- Place all the fabric scraps into a bag and shake.
 - Invite children to try to match scraps by touch—no peeking.
 - Help children describe the textures of the different fabrics and invite them to match the fabrics to the textures of clothing in the portraits.
 - Further explore the textures by placing the squares on a table in a grid—three across and three down. Cover with newsprint and rub the chalk (held horizontally) over the paper to transfer the textures.
 - Talk with the children about why texture matters. Ask questions about whether a particular texture makes you feel hot or cool, whether you like it next to your skin, and whether it's strong enough to wear while playing on the playground without tearing, for example.

Self-portraits

Here's what you need:

- mirrors
- pencils
- fine-tipped markers
- crayons
- watercolors
- art paper

A self-portrait is the artist's own image, drawn, sculpted, or photographed by the artist. Portraiture requires that the artist have some understanding of anatomy—a head has shape and features and sits atop shoulders. Each feature is unique as is the interpretation of the feature by the artist.

- Provide children with mirrors. If the mirror isn't on a stand, use blocks to stabilize them so children can see their own images without holding the mirror.
- Invite children to examine their own features. Focus on eye color, hair texture, and head shape.
- Encourage children to use pencils to roughly sketch the basic features of the head and shoulders. Add marker lines, and finally fill in with paint to complete the self-portrait.

Variations: Look at the faces in portraits and talk with children about the range of emotions expressed. If children are interested in continuing with self-portraits, invite them to complete a series of pictures, each expressing a different emotion. Encourage and help the children label their art.

Landscapes and seascapes

Landscape art explores natural scenery including mountains, deserts, trees, valleys, fields, and woodlands. Seascapes focus on the natural forces of oceans, rivers,

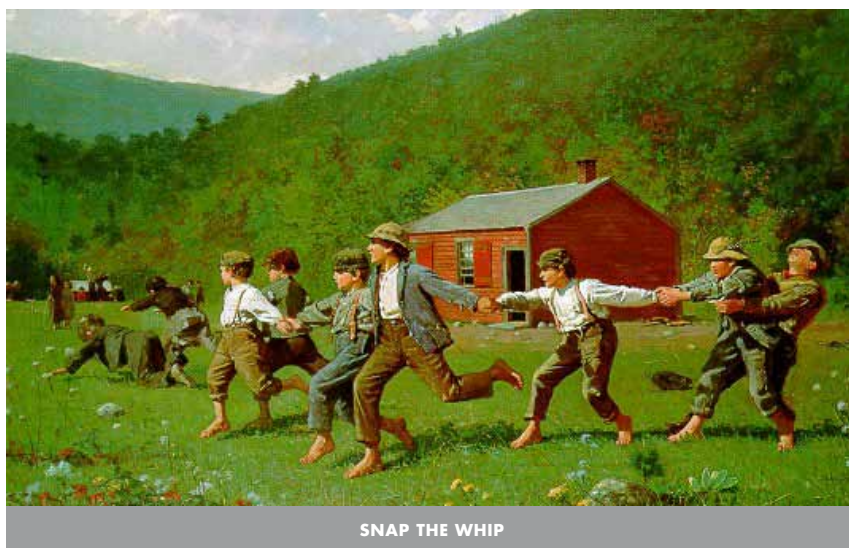
lakes, and streams. Both generally offer the viewer a wide view of the terrain and the impact of weather. Sometimes the landscape or seascape is a background for portraits. In 19th century American art, the landscape or seascape is often a large-scale expression of nationalism and pride in country.

Exploring interpretations of the land and sea by different artists can broaden children's knowledge of geography and terrain. Some landscapes and seascapes are idealized, showing nature as gentle and sustaining, while others depict nature's powerful or destructive forces.

Winslow Homer (1836–1910)

Homer was an American painter and journalist. During the American Civil War, Homer worked for *Harper's Weekly* magazine following troops and describing the challenges of army life for young soldiers. Homer was an outdoorsman and enjoyed hiking and boating in remote areas.

He used paint to create perspective—the feeling that some things



SNAP THE WHIP

in a picture look closer while other things look farther away. He often used watercolors to communicate subtle color and texture changes.

Share an image of *Snap the Whip* (1872). Help children identify the multiple layers in the landscape, from distant sky and trees to children and flowers in the foreground. Explore the picture with questions like the following: How many people do you see? How many hats? What are the colors of the flowers? Have you ever played this game?

How does *The Adirondack Guide* (1894) differ in mood and emotion from *Snap the Whip*? How do the dark colors of the landscape make the picture communicate loneliness, competence, and maybe fear?

For even more contrast, look at *The Gulf Stream* (1899). Here a solitary man in a boat is surrounded by sharks, the raging sea, and a looming waterspout. How does Homer use paint to convey desperation, strength, perseverance, and terror? Encourage the children to examine the facial expressions on the man as well as the fish.

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)

Frederic Church, an American landscape painter, traveled widely as an adult and was inspired by the spiritual aspects of the cultures of South America and the Middle East.

Church was an important member of the Hudson River School of painters in the late 19th century. The group was named for the river in upstate New York that carves a deep path between two mountain ranges. Artists, including Church, were inspired by the



natural color play in the area and reflected this in moody, romantic images.

Compare two of Church's paintings, *Niagara Falls* (1857) and *New England Scenery* (1851). Each is epic in size and continues to remind viewers of the untamed wilderness in much of America. With children, ask, "What's going on here?" Be attentive to whether the children can tell stories that don't involve people—only nature. Encourage them to describe colors, lines, and movement in water and clouds.

Another member of the Hudson River School was Albert Bierstadt. He was born in Germany and came to America as an infant. He is recognized for his landscapes of



the American West. Compare Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863) with the other landscape paintings. Notice the glowing light (the painting technique is called *luminism*) and the deep shadows. Challenge children to identify waterfalls (3), dogs (5), campfire (1), and teepees (5).

David Hockney (1937–)

Hockney is a contemporary British landscape painter. His color palate is bold; the lines are so refined as to be architectural. In addition to painting, Hockney has designed stage sets for ballets and operas. He has created dozens of paintings—still lifes and landscapes—using the Brushes Mobile Painting app for iPhone and iPad.

Share two important Hockney pieces, *A Bigger Splash* (1967) and *A Bigger Grand Canyon* (1998). Talk with children about why these pieces are described as landscapes. What can we see that tells us about weather, terrain, and plant life? Are there animals in either picture? How do the pictures make you feel? Do you think people live in either place? How do these images compare to the art of Church and Homer?

Finding the horizon

Here's what you need:

- images of the art described above
- watercolor paper
- pencils
- fine-tipped markers
- watercolors

1. In each of the images, identify the horizon line—the line that separates the land or sea from the sky. Talk with the children about how this widens the viewer's understanding of what's going on in the picture. Usually what's happening in the sky—wind, rain, or sunshine—is reflected on what's happening below—waves, calm water, blowing trees, or wet pavement, for example.
2. Invite children to create their own landscapes or seascapes, starting with the horizon.
3. Encourage the children to follow the motion of the weather. Is the water quiet as in *The Adirondack Guide* or stormy as in *The Gulf Stream*? Invite children to sketch their ideas in pencil and then fill in with shades of watercolor paint. Outlining prominent features after the watercolor is dry will make those features pop.
4. Consider playing music during this art activity—calm, bombastic, melodic, and jazzy—to encourage different movement effects.

Still life

A still life is an artwork that features inanimate objects—natural things like flowers, fruit, and vegetables or manufactured objects like coins, jewelry, musical instruments, and bottles and glasses, for

example. Examples of still life paintings go back to antiquity in Egyptian tombs and on Grecian urns and vases.

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, still life paintings often reflected spiritual values and gifts from the Almighty. Images of flowers and insects carried symbolic meanings including lilies (purity), tulips (nobility), sunflowers (faithfulness), violets (humility), and poppies (sleep or death). Butterflies represented transformation, and bees hard work and cooperation.

Still lifes went in and out of favor throughout European history as artists adapted styles and responded to social events. The rise of Impressionism in the 19th century brought the still life back to prominence as technique, color harmony, and the artist's interpretation of nature were prized above subject matter.

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)

Van Gogh was a Dutch painter known for his coarse interpretation of nature through a bold color palette. He began drawing



STILL LIFE: VASE WITH TWELVE SUNFLOWERS

as a young child but did not begin painting until his late 20's. His best-known works were completed in the last two years of his short life. He was prolific in the production of watercolors, oil paintings, sketches, and drawings that include landscapes, still lifes, portraits, and self-portraits.

Van Gogh was a Post-Impressionist artist who, like his friend Paul Cézanne, relied on vivid colors, thick paint applied in distinctive brush strokes, and natural subject matter. He often chose to distort natural forms and use unnatural colors to communicate strong emotion.

Compare the image *Still Life: Vase With Twelve Sunflowers* (1888) with *Irises* (1889). Help children see the busy brush strokes, the color choices, and the heavy layers of paint—and the passion both communicate.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986)

O'Keeffe was an American artist who magnified nature into abstract paintings that focus on color and shape without accurate representation of the object. Her great skill was in transforming everyday flowers, plants, and terrain into large-format paintings that are intensely expressive.

Much of O'Keeffe's most celebrated work captures images of the American Southwest where she spent much of her life.

Share images of O'Keeffe's *Oriental Poppies* (1927) and *A Sunflower From Maggie* (1927). Notice how the paint covers almost all the canvas, making the flowers more prominent. Talk with the children about the colors and scale of the pictures that look

magnified from nature. Compare *A Sunflower From Maggie* to van Gogh's *Still Life: Vase With Twelve Sunflowers*. Are the colors the same? Do 12 flowers have more impact than O'Keeffe's single flower?

Read *Sunflower House* by Eve Bunting and discuss the ways in which the painted images are alike and different from actual sunflowers.

Still life in chalk

Here's what you need:

- live flowers
- vases
- pencils
- erasers
- fine-tipped markers
- colored chalk
- toothy art paper—that is, paper with a rough surface

Examine again the O'Keeffe images and point out how the entire canvas is filled with flower. Challenge the children to create their still lifes in the style of O'Keeffe.

1. Provide several live flowers—those with simple structure and bright colors are best. Talk with the children about the flowers—shape, number of petals, color and shades of color, other prominent structures. Place a single flower in a vase. Two children can work from a single flower.
2. Guide the children as they lightly sketch their still lifes; draw what you see. Encourage the children to repeat the shapes of the petals, sketch the stem, and notice the position of the stem in the vase. Demonstrate the most effective way to erase an unwanted line.
3. When the sketch is complete, show how outlining the shapes with a marker can make the design more prominent and lively.
4. Invite the children to explore chalk as an art medium. Hold the chalk horizontally and fill in color. Help the children vary pressure on the chalk to make

heavier and lighter marks.

Encourage them to combine colors to create shades.

Impasto painting

Here's what you need:

- tempera paint
- brushes in different widths
- additives to thicken the paint like white flour, laundry starch, crushed egg shells, fine sand, powdered cornstarch, and laundry powder
- heavy art paper or poster board
- containers for paint
- craft stick stirrers
- plastic fruit

Impasto is a technique in which paint is laid on a surface so thickly that each brush stroke remains visible.

1. Put about a half cup of tempera in a container and add about a tablespoon of additive to thicken the paint.
2. Invite children to investigate the textures of the thickened paint. Refer to the van Gogh and O'Keeffe prints and ask children to describe how they might highlight particular features of their art in the impasto technique.
3. Arrange a few pieces of plastic fruit on a plate and invite children to paint still life pictures of the fruit in the style of van Gogh or O'Keeffe.

Primitive

Primitive art, sometimes called naïve art, generally describes the work of artists without any formal training. It is characterized by an innocent, simple, and child-like quality, often combining fantasy with activities of daily life.



ORIENTAL POPPIES

Early examples of American primitive art include Edward Hicks' *Noah's Ark* (1846) and *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1826) and Joshua Johnson's *Grace Allison McCurdy and Her Daughters, Mary Jane and Letitia Grace* (1804).

Henri Rousseau (1844–1910)

Rousseau was born in France, the son of poor parents. He worked as a tinsmith as a boy, completed little schooling as an undistinguished student, and joined the French army when he was fired from a job as a law clerk. He didn't start painting seriously until he was in his early 40s and claimed "no teacher other than nature." Although he never left France, he is known for his exotic, fanciful depictions of tropical jungles in which lions, tigers, and buffalo are surrounded by lush vegetation.

Share these images: *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1897), *Exotic Landscape* (1908), and *The Equatorial Jungle* (1909). Invite children to tell stories about the paintings, encouraging

lavish and fanciful detail in keeping with the images.

Anna Mary Robynson Moses (1860–1961)

Known as the artist Grandma Moses, Anna Mary Robynson was one of 10 children in her family. At the age of 12, she became a hired girl to help another family; she had little formal schooling. As an adult, she married and worked as a farmer. Grandma Moses was in her 70s before she began painting seriously.

Her paintings are of simple, common themes: church, community, and family reflecting her New England life and the values of tenacity, honesty, and perseverance. Before becoming famous, Grandma Moses charged \$2 or \$3 for a painting. In 2006 her work *Sugaring Off* (1943) sold for \$1.2 million. In 1969 a U.S. postage stamp was issued in her honor.

Explore *Thanksgiving Turkey* (1943). This oil painting is done on a plank of wood. Ask the children what they think is happening. Is this like a Thanksgiving holiday



they've experienced? Challenge them to identify—to really look and see—a dog, house chimneys, a saw, a boy running, the number of hats on heads, and the number of turkeys. Point out the name *Moses*, the artist's signature.

Compare *Thanksgiving Turkey* with *The Quilting Bee* (1950) and *Halloween* (1955). Ask the children if they can imagine these events happening in the same family. How are the features of the paintings different? Can you imagine participating in each event? What lets you know that each painting was completed by the same artist?

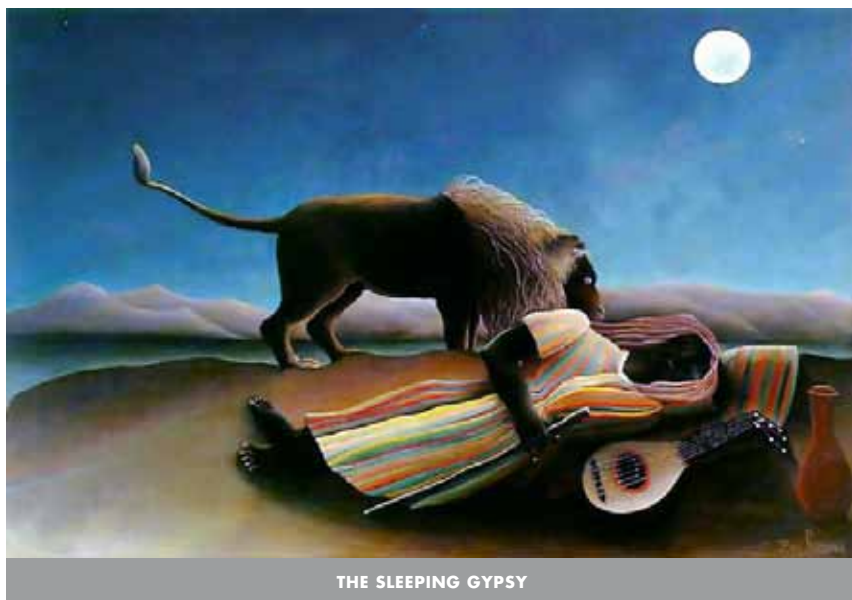
Layered landscapes

Here's what you need:

- watercolor paint and brushes
- heavy watercolor paper
- construction paper
- markers
- scissors
- old magazines
- glue sticks
- paper and pen for dictations

Use landscapes, seascapes, and the primitive images described above. Review perspective and talk with the children about how each artist reflected close and distant objects.

1. Invite children to create an



THE SLEEPING GYPSY

imaginative landscape or seascape with watercolors and markers, filling the entire paper. If children need a prompt, use words like *towering mountains*, *wheat fields*, *snowy peaks*, *white-capped waves*, *rippling stream*, *dense jungle*, *weedy garden*, and *parched desert*. Remind children about horizon lines.

2. When the background is complete, invite children to cut out magazine pictures of people, animals, and objects to glue onto their backgrounds. Some children might prefer to draw and cut out portraits of people to use.
3. When complete, invite children to use their artwork to tell stories about the landscape, seascape, and other images in their pieces. Transcribe these stories and invite children to attach the notes to the backs of their work.

Variation: In *Discovering Great Artists* (1997), MaryAnn Kohl and Kim Solga suggest making leaf prints as background for Rousseau-like jungle images.

Abstract art

Abstract art moves away from paintings that are representational—images of people, places, and things. Instead it relies on line, form, and color to express the artist's concept and to provoke an emotional response from a viewer. Abstract style evolved slowly. Henri Matisse's *The Yellow Curtain* (1915), for example, shows hints of both representation and abstraction. The viewer may identify the yellow shape as a curtain—but maybe not. Why do you imagine Fernand Léger called his 1919 work *Railway Crossing*?

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Kandinsky was a Russian painter whose own work exemplifies the transition from representational art to abstract forms. Compare *Der Blaue Reiter* (*The Blue Rider*) (1903), a landscape with horse and rider, to *Composition X* (1939) with small squares and bands of color against a black background. Many of his transitional pieces were destroyed by the Nazis in 1930; the regime described the images as “degenerate.”

Kandinsky linked musical harmony and color in his art, associating color tone with timbre, hue with pitch, and color saturation with sound volume. He claimed that he saw color when he heard music.

Compare *Squares with Concentric Circles* (1913) with *Color Studies* (1913). Notice how the colored squares blend with each other and how the contrast in colors invites tranquility in some places and energy in others. Invite children to use *Color Studies* as inspiration for their art.

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Paul Jackson Pollock was an American painter known best for his dripping paint technique. He was born in Wyoming and spent most of his short life in California and then New York.

He developed his drip technique after an experimental workshop and tended to use house paint rather than artist's paints because they were less expensive. He used brushes, sticks, trowels, and cooking basters to apply and spread the paint. Instead of a hanging canvas, his canvases were on the floor so that he could view his work from all sides.

Pollock created some semi-representational art including *Blue* (*Moby Dick*) (1943) and *The Moon-Woman* (1942). Notice how these images have elements of both representational art—with concrete reference to people and animals—and abstract art in which line, color, and emotion are the powerful communicators.

Characteristic of the drip technique is *Number 8, 1949* (1949).



DER BLAUE REITER (THE BLUE RIDER)

Share this image and challenge the children to identify specific colors, follow single lines with their eyes and fingers, and talk about how the painting makes them feel. Ask the children to imagine why Pollock chose to drip the paint, layering it in what looks like a random pattern. In *Full Fathom Five* (1947) Pollock embedded objects like coins, keys, and buttons in the paint. These are almost invisible but challenge yourself, and the children, to find them.

Play with color

Here's what you need:

- print of Kandinsky's *Squares and Concentric Circles* (1913)
- heavy white paper
- glue stick
- scissors
- watercolor paints
- crayons

1. Prepare the activity by cutting the paper into 4-inch squares,

- one for each child.
2. Share *Squares and Concentric Circles* with the group. Talk with the children about the color choices—the color contrasts and ranges of hues and values—and how the shapes, circles inside squares, impact a person's emotional response to the painting.
 3. Provide some basic instruction as the children begin to work. Give each child a square of paper and ask that they draw a large circle within the square and then to draw a few smaller and smaller circles inside. The crayon wax forms a barrier so the watercolors don't spread from circle to circle.
 4. Invite the children to fill in the circles with color. As they work, talk about warm (reds and yellows) and cool (blues and greens) colors, and color intensity (determined by how much water goes into the paint).
 5. After the squares are dry, invite

children to move them around on the table. Are some configurations more aesthetically pleasing? When the children are settled on the best combinations, glue them to a large sheet of paper for display.

Variation: Use the same techniques described above but help the children paint while listening to music. Talk with them about how Kandinsky saw color in what he heard.

Floor paint

Use Pollock as a model when you invite children to be *in* this painting. Plan for a messy, outdoor experience. Use long tent spikes or plastic pegs to hold the sheet taut on the ground. Provide smocks and make sure there's an easy way to wash up after the activity.

Here's what you need:

- white bed sheet
- liquid tempera
- paint trays
- spray bottles
- brushes

1. Share images of Pollock's drip technique paintings. Talk with the children about Pollock's interest in making his paintings a full body experience—in contrast to the more delicate brush-in-hand technique of other artists.
2. Establish some guidelines for the activity. You might want to limit the number of children adding to the work at one time (three or four) and establish a work perimeter so children aren't accidentally splashed with paint.
3. Show how to flick paint from the end of a brush (with one



NUMBER 8, 1949

hand, hold the end of the paint-loaded brush; snap that hand against the other forearm pointing at the sheet).

4. Prepare spray bottles with diluted tempera in the same colors as that in the paint trays.
5. Invite children to flick, drip, or spray color onto the sheet, working from all four sides of the canvas. If possible, leave the sheet in place for several playground sessions so that children can add to the painting at will.

Variation: When dry, use the canvas as a wall hanging or divider or ask that someone cut it to make curtains, placemats, or dress-up clothes for the classroom.

Resources

Finger, Brad. 2010. *13 American Artists Children Should Know*. New York: Prestel.

National Gallery of Art. www.nga.gov/kids. This website offers interactive activities and ideas for art projects as well as a searchable database for background information on artists, styles, and specific works of art. ■