

The Art of Problem Solving

By Beth Lawing

Many of us are quick to thank the doctors, mechanics, and police officers in our community when they solve problems on our behalf. Perhaps we should also thank their elementary school art teachers.

Lower School art teacher Kandise Hayes and her teaching colleague, Sarah Clarke, believe that young artists need to be given the gift of flexibility. “Having the ability to take calculated risks and to see ideas from a broader perspective is crucial in art because it gives our students the freedom to puzzle their way through different ideas as they work to solve problems,” she says.

“Creative thinking is definitely a desired job skill in today’s world,” she continues. “Art provides the opportunity to see that when we’re faced with a problem, there’s more than one right answer for how to solve it. Sometimes in our culture, people have the tendency to get fixated on the notion that there’s only one right answer.”

Our Lower School Fine Arts Department is in good company in their forward-thinking approach and recognition that tomorrow’s careers will demand competency in visual thinking and creative problem-solving skills. For instance, Harvard, Cornell, and Yale Universities have all added graduate-level art classes in recognition that medical students with more “right brain” qualities (traits related to imagery, visual, and drawing skills) are often more successful in their observational and diagnostic skills in today’s digital, image-based world of medicine.

Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. Hayes teach visual-thinking skills to our children through close observation and special questioning techniques. The questioning might sound something like this:

- “Here is a painting by Claude Monet. What do you think the weather is like in this painting?”
- “I don’t see the sun, so what clues in the painting make you think it’s sunny even if there’s no sunshine painted in the picture?”



Jack Sumich, second grade

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“Some children may explain how they notice shadows in the picture. Others might mention how several light colors have been used in the painting,” says Mrs. Hayes. “As art teachers, we further their ‘ah-has’ by introducing new concepts into the discussion, such as contrast or color choice. In this particular case, Monet used lots of yellow and yellow-green color in his painting to convey the idea of a sunny day.”

While young artists at Country Day are given general assignment parameters, they are also given a great deal of freedom to choose how they want their pieces to look from a creative standpoint.

“In our Cityscape project, second graders designed a layered city skyline. They chose whether it’s a real city or an imaginary one, and whether it’s daytime or nighttime,” Mrs. Hayes explains. “All of the second



Emma Grace Hefner, second grade

graders designed, drew, colored, cut, glued, painted, and sprinkled glitter for this project. But they got to use their own artistic interpretation for how to create a harmonious picture.”

The result? One second grader drew the Charlotte skyline at night using Carolina Panthers colors while another traveled through time and created a skyline with space portals. Yet another second grader who had been following current events in the news imagines what a city skyline would look like during a hurricane.

“The best part of my job at Country Day is that I present art lessons to five different sections of children, and they end up bringing me 120 different solutions,” Mrs. Hayes attests. “It’s truly inspiring to see how young children see the world and then create their own meaning artistically.”