

# Paying Attention to Art

**Research tells us that the creative arts help to improve the attention spans of the adolescent brain, as well as hone problem-solving, collaboration, and critical-thinking skills. On Bissell Campus, caring teachers give students opportunities in and out of the classroom to flex their artistic muscles.**

By **Beth Lawing**

It's lunchtime for seventh graders, and Anna Stevens, along with several more students, can be found in art teacher Dwayne Wilson's classroom. Anna has been personally motivated to come to the art room during her lunch break for three time-consuming weeks to work on her 'Pop-Art Project' that's based freely on the work of artist Burton Morris. This scene, where orange slices live peaceably with orange paint, is replicated on a regular basis in the art classrooms of Mike Hennessey and Stacy Utley, as well.

Beyond the joy that any teacher feels in accommodating students who want to spend extra time honing their skills, these art teachers know that this gift of space and time can also increase the overall attention spans of their Middle School students. Medical research suggests that the human brain is made up of a system of neural pathways which are dedicated to attention. Training these networks through increased practice improves general measures of intelligence in children. Current research at Johns Hopkins suggests that learning how to create art—be it music, visual arts, or drama—activates the attention networks inside the teenage brain. In other words, the virtue of diligence appears to impact the overall hard-wiring of their brains.







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—Mr. Utley

That persistence can be seen in Anna’s description of her lunchtime work: “I started with thumbnail sketches, then bigger copies of my ideas, then a rough draft. At first, I planned on using paint, but then I changed my mind because I knew that Sharpies would give my work more ‘Pop!’ And when I thought of ‘Pop,’ I thought of ‘Pop Tarts! I love the comical look of my piece and how it has my own twist of colors. I’m really proud of how cartoony my cherry illustrations came out on the Pop-Tart box.”



### Developing Creative Thinkers

“The best way to teach art to anyone of any age,” explains Mr. Utley, “is to make it relatable. The use of color, texture, rhythm, and movement will always capture people’s attentions. When I teach the material in such a way that the art is relatable, I can see the wheels in my students’ heads begin to turn as they incorporate the new ideas I present to them into their previous understandings of the world.”

“After we teach our fifth graders the art history behind the oldest cave paintings in Lascaux, France,” says Mr. Wilson, “I like to transform my art room so that it is like a cave. I turn out the lights, I turn up the AC, and I have my students paint in cramped quarters with only rudimentary materials—just like early humans did. Recreating the surroundings helps the students mimic the methods and the styles of the early cave artists. Basically, we want our art rooms to be a safe environment that is non-judgmental so that everyone feels welcome and can discover new means of self-expression.”

“That is what art is,” agrees Mr. Utley. “Art is experimentation and exploration. We give our students room to explore for themselves after providing

them with a strong foundation in art history.”

Just as history is interwoven with art, art is interwoven into other academic disciplines. “Art is history,” explains Latin teacher John Feliciano. “Every chapter we examine starts with a discussion of a painting to put the stories that we are about to translate into a historical context.”

Since many ancient societies had high levels of illiteracy, people shared information through art forms. “For centuries artists have turned to Greek and Roman mythology for inspiration. In the same vein, I have my students create mosaics based on stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” explains Mr. Feliciano. “Mosaic is a great medium for instilling confidence in students as it is a relatively simple art form that people have been using for thousands of years.”

The end result is a lovely new gallery of mosaics outside Mr. Feliciano’s room depicting tales like Minerva and Arachne, Jupiter and Calista, and Romulus and Remus to name a few.

### Becoming More Resourceful

When fifth-grade artists arrive on the Bissell Campus, they learn pretty quickly that their art teachers are building them up to think for themselves (a teaching practice known as modeling *metacognition*). “For example, if students want to make 20 perfect circles for their art pieces and come to me for assistance,” explains Mr. Wilson, “I’ll say, ‘Well, can you find anything circular in the art room to trace?’ In no time, they’ve found the lid to a spray-top can and are creating the artwork themselves without my help. I joke with them that anything’s fair game to use in my art room—except my laptop!”

## SURROUNDED BY Art

"I've noticed that art at Country Day is not confined to the work our students make in the studios," observes art teacher Stacy Utley, who joined the faculty in August. "You see it around campus in the murals and artwork of teachers, and in the framed works of notable artists. Art is in our library, cafeteria, gathering spaces, and green spaces. The pieces are as diverse as art can be and they are interwoven into every aspect of this campus. You can't help but notice and appreciate it."

The Artist in Residence Program is key to this intentional approach to community art. Middle School Head Warren Sepkowitz notes, "The Artist in Residence Program exposes our students to different mediums to help them more fully appreciate art while we simultaneously beautify our campus."

This year, Country Day parent and internationally recognized artist Chas Fagan is working with our eighth-grade art students on the design of a sculpture. Past Artists in Residence include:

- 2010-11: Mosaic with Pam Goode
- 2011-12: Mural by Lauren and William Puckett
- 2012-13: Videography with David Johnson
- 2013-14: Musical Composition with Alan Kaufman
- 2014-15: Theater Production with Flying By Foy
- 2015-16 Acapella Singing with Catch 22
- 2016-17: Quilting with Linda Pelletier

**Art teachers Dwayne Wilson, Stacy Utley, and Mike Hennessey care deeply about developing the adolescent mind and heart.**



"We're definitely not Sotherby's," jokes Mr. Hennessey. "I reassure them by saying, 'Don't be afraid to fail! Don't be afraid to make a mess!' I especially like helping my students focus on the trial-and-error parts of the artistic process. In Middle School art, we research, we brainstorm, and we create several drafts of our work. Students also collaborate on each other's art by politely offering suggestions for improvement."

"And by the time they are eighth graders, I've taught them a lot about how the brain works," says Mr. Hennessey. "My students know that the left side of the brain is where their 'filing cabinet' is for managing the order and logic that helps them with their daily routines. They also know that the right side of their brains is the experiential side that wants to try new things. We encourage our students to let the right side of their brains create without the left

side being too critical. To accomplish this lofty goal, I teach my students about contour drawing. Drawing without looking at one's work allows the left side of the brain to 'go to sleep' while the right-hand side gets creative."

Research funded by the National Endowment for the Arts also suggests that adolescents who take visual art courses feel a greater sense of attachment to their schools than their peers. Other positive skills associated with participating in visual arts during adolescence include persistence, collaboration, creative thinking, problem solving, and overall motivation.

"That's what I love about Country Day. Our children have such a distinct advantage because they can take art from the time they start kindergarten all the way through their senior year," says Mr. Hennessey. "In my 30 years of teaching adolescents about art, I know first-hand that our approach, which focuses on teaching children how to think more deeply and more critically for themselves, will help them in the future as they learn to become even more adaptable in their ever-changing world."

