

VTS: *Visual Thinking Strategies*

Addison Independent News Article
Thursday, April 9, 2009

“Paintings teach more than just art”

BY JOHN FLOWERS

RIPTON — They filed into the Middlebury College Museum of Art this early spring day, taking positions in front of works they eagerly drank in with their eyes.

Then the floodgates opened. The art enthusiasts, more than a dozen fifth- and sixth-graders from Ripton Elementary School, described in rapid-fire fashion not only what they were looking at, but what might have motivated the artists’ creativity.

“I look at the pictures before-hand and I feel like I have a good handle on the details, but sometimes they bring up things where I said to myself, ‘How did I miss that?’” Ripton Elementary School teacher Steven Lindemann said while marveling at his students’ observational skills.

Lindemann’s young students are actually veterans of art appreciation, thanks to an educational partnership with Middlebury College. The students are in the fourth year of the MiddArts Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) program, through which Ripton Elementary students in grades K-6 have been regularly viewing the college’s bounty of artwork, which they dutifully describe, analyze and attempt to emulate.

It’s an exercise that not only helps them become more appreciative of great artwork, but also hones their learning skills to become better writers, debaters and all-around students.

“Obviously, because we have been doing this for several years, we have seen students grow in their communication skills to a point where they are advancing sooner to the next level of interpretation that the (VTS) program expects,” Ripton Elementary School Principal Jane Phinney said. “Our second graders are able to begin to evaluate and create a story based on what they are observing.”

Phinney added her students’ scores on standardized tests have improved during the three-plus years of the school’s participation in VTS.

VTS was created by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, and is based on Housen’s “theory of aesthetic development.” VTS is a student-centered curriculum and teaching method that uses art to build the capacity to observe, think, listen and communicate.



The lessons consist of carefully researched, open-ended questions that are facilitated by classroom teachers. These questions, designed to decode meanings in works of art, constitute a teaching and learning strategy that can be applied to non-art subject areas and objects.

“Learning to look at art helps them develop critical thinking skills,” said Sandi Olivo, curator of education for the Middlebury College Museum of Art and a VTS Trainer. “We have seen remarkable growth in even one year.”

Olivo and her colleagues carefully select the artwork that students view each month. Middlebury College students, trained in the VTS program, help moderate the students’ viewing sessions.

On this day, the Ripton students focused on three works: a “crayon-and-chisel” on paper, titled “Dreaming,” by John Sloan; a Currier and Ives hand-colored lithograph on paper titled “Husking”; and a painting titled “Birthday Party” by Carmen Lomas Garza.

The “Birthday Party,” as its title implies, features a colorful, celebratory scene depicting a crowd of children and adults playing, taking swipes at a piñata and getting cakes ready for a feast. The Ripton students quickly dissected the painting, noting, among other things, that the artist’s scene probably took place near an ocean (because of an adjacent large body of water) and in an arid spot (because of the lack of grass on which the students were playing). The students speculated the party could be for twins (because of the two cakes and two piñatas in the painting) and that the people depicted were Hispanic, due to their dark hair and tanned skin color.

The students would later draw pictures of aspects of the painting that appealed to them, and would write about their experiences.

Lindemann was pleased with his students’ performance and the impact the program is having on their learning skills.

“When we did it the first couple of years, you had a lot of people talking about the details that they saw in the image,” Lindemann said. “But what I started to notice at the end of last year and the beginning of this year is that there are a few students who, once we get past that phase, they start to build on each other’s comments and they start to create stories of what they see.”

The program has also helped students become more inquisitive and has come in handy with subjects like social studies, where some of the artwork they have viewed has featured historical clues, such as the Liberty Bell or vintage attire/equipment/armaments.

VTS has shown promise for students at all academic levels, Lindemann noted, including those who are generally not vocal in class.

“One of the things I’ve noticed is with the real shy kids — it’s not math, it’s not some subject they feel they have to know a lot about; it’s about using their eyes and their mind,” Lindemann said. “It’s very subjective. They are very open to sharing their ideas.”

Jesse Wulfman, grade 6, is one of the Ripton students enjoying the program this year.

“I really like how you eventually start making a story,” she said of how insights derived from the artwork can lead to composition of a literary tableau. “You get to share ideas about what’s happening.”