

Still Life Painting



Winter 2011

Representational art

When observing the children in our room and looking at our assessments we began to wonder about the children's skills in representational art, 3-dimensional art, and their connection to fine motor skills. We found it common for many to abandon ideas when confronted with the tasks of representing objects, people, or things on paper. After pondering how to integrate these ideas and concepts of representing objects (three dimension on paper), we decided to paint the glass objects from our atelier. One of our intentions of doing this activity was to provide them with an object that was concrete versus abstract. From here we envisioned they would mix their own paint to create the colors similar to the objects they would be painting.

When introducing this activity for the first time, the instructions were stated, "We are going to paint these vases". When turning back around from gathering more materials it became apparent that the instructions were interpreted literally as the children began to paint the different vases in front of them. When asked why they were painting on the objects many said, "We thought you meant paint on the vase". (The children and teacher were amused by the misleading communication.) This dialogue provoked several questions regarding what new vocabulary needed to be introduced, how to use descriptions that gave meaning to what the children were observing, and

how to give concrete directions about abstract ideas. We began to ask ourselves:

- How can we help them develop better observation skills so they can notice detail?
- What support do they need to understand terminology involving physical dimension and characteristics of 3- dimensional objects?
- How can we do this on a level that is age and developmentally appropriate?

Children's Experience:

As we worked more with the children and slowed them down it became clear that descriptive language, multiple opportunities using the same object, and touching the object helped the children notice and identify details. Below are some of the descriptors they came up with when observing and feeling the objects.



When the green vase was placed on the table the children described it as being: Tall, Shiny, Bumpy, Wide, Glass, Green, Cracked, and "Squares on

top". Many of these descriptors were used to help guide their second and third attempts. With these descriptors the children began to add more detail to their paintings.



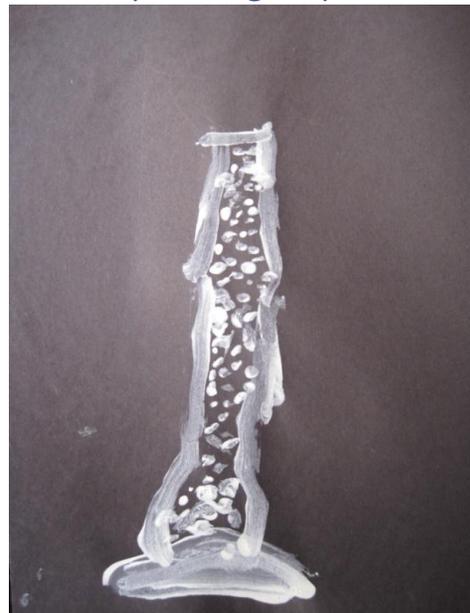
Many described the short purple vase in a variety of different ways as the vase was a shape they were uncertain of. These are the characteristics they were confident of : a Vase, Glass, Short, Wide, Purple, Curvy



When looking at the abalone shell many described it as being: Shiny, Round, Pink, Silver, Blue, Light Purple, Hard, and having "Tiny Holes".

However, attempting to represent the abalone shell proved to be challenging as they were confronted with the task of creating a paint color that matched the inside of the shell as well as painting the depth of the shell.

To isolate the children's focus on dimension, texture, and shape we introduced clear vases from our atelier. Some of the children were asked to help gather these materials and they were very specific about what vases they wanted to select and use for the next painting experience.



Here are examples of the additional vocabulary that emerged to describe this vase :Tall, "Pineapple one", Lines, Bumpy, Skinny, Long, "Bumps like hills"

Teacher Reflection:

While working on these still life paintings we had each child do more than one painting of the object. During their first painting experience we just let them paint what they saw. What we observed from these experiences was the beginning of the object and then the object transformed into something else as they became challenged by certain characteristics. In this case one of those challenges was the height of the object. Many recognized that the bottle was circular so they'd make a circle on their paper. However, from the circle they were unsure how to then make

the object appear tall. After observing this dilemma we started to provide them with words to help describe the characteristics of the object with the intention of helping them notice things such as shape, size, texture, and detail. With this dialogue we began to see more detail in their second and third attempts.

After observing this experience we realized the importance of revisiting art development in regards to representational stages and what it looks like for our children. Developmentally, children at this age are moving from accidental or spontaneous representation to simple intentional representation. While we are not looking for or expecting elaborate representations we are hoping to see (and support through scaffolding) a growth in the development of their observation skills and their ability to notice detail. This can only happen if we purposely help them to slow down and really look at things. These skills must happen first in order for the child to become aware of the characteristics they want to represent. Imagining and/or holding a variety of characteristics in their mind is not something they all are completely capable of doing at this age (Epstein, 2007).

When looking back at their first attempts we became aware of their cognitive limitations. Watching the children first draw circles and then remember that they also wanted to make the object tall is an example of this. By discussing details and characteristics during the activity we were able to introduce them to descriptors, and the importance of becoming observers first. These cognitive and language skills transfer over to a variety of other areas. Providing activities and encouraging children to observe and describe things will increase their attention to detail and will be reflected in their work. "As they engage in the artistic process, children learn they can observe, organize, and interpret their experiences" (As cited in Epstein, 2007, pp.108).

Art has an impact on other areas as well. Specifically, still life painting provides them with the opportunity to experience things such as: fine motor

planning, representational art, curiosity, and engagement with new materials. Children's social-emotional growth is also connected to these experiences. These creative expression activities motivate and engage children in learning, enhance symbolic communication, promote relationships, and provide an avenue for building competence (Epstein, 2007). These skills and the connection to other areas of development are far more important than their ability to elaborately paint an object placed on the table. The skill of becoming observant, describing things in detail, and developing an awareness of detail has the potential to translate into expanding the way they perceive the world. Taking the time to be aware of their surroundings lends the opportunity to gain new perspectives.

While these activities started with the intention of exploring representational art, 3-D art, and fine motor development we observed many other skills developing. Encouraging them to recognize the characteristics they wanted to place in their painting opened the door for observing detail that was at first unnoticed. Each attempt at painting these objects brought forth more detail and a richer dialogue. Hearing the words, "Oh, yeah it is..." and "I'd better add" begin to highlight the way in which they are becoming observers. These experiences have provided us with the opportunity to help and encourage the children to be observant in a variety of settings. It is shown that art provides us with an important outlet to express a concept or idea through a variety of mediums. As we continue to explore representational art new questions will arise and be brought to the group such as:

- Are they internally learning to slow themselves down?
- As they paint new objects are they beginning to identify descriptors on their own?
- How are they manipulating the paint brush as they become more aware of detail and characteristics? (i.e.: holding the brush vertically to create dots)
- Are they more observant and aware of details in other forms of representational art and in their world around them?

Our hope is that we can help them transfer these skills over into a variety of activities in other developmental domains.

Epstein, A. (2007). *The intentional teacher: Choosing the best strategies for young children's learning*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.