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Where and How Artists Get Ideas

"An idea is our visual reaction to something seen - in real life, in our memory, in our imagination, in our dreams." ~ Anna Held Audette from the book, *The Blank Canvas*

"How artists get ideas" is a theme that should be examined at all grade levels. The importance of gaining the skills to successfully convey the ideas goes hand-in-hand with this theme. Activities should be structured around building skills and also encourage original thinking and imagination. Students will progress at different rates at each grade level. The process of doing and understanding should always be emphasized. Building confidence is also an important goal of any art program.

How do you as a teacher select the artists and cultures you teach? Where do your ideas come from? Marvin Bartel started this as a topic for discussion on Getty TeacherArtExchange. Below is a compilation of ideas from Art Ed List members. Make a poster using your favorite

cultures and artists. Most art works communicate ideas, moods or symbolic meanings. Students should be challenged to discover meaning in the art work they are studying and to use ideas as starting points in their own image-making. Continue to help students examine how artists get ideas and how they use and transform these ideas when creating works of art. (Note from Judy: Substitute your own list of artists for the chart. I have added some that I have "talked" to personally via email). [Read some responses from teachers.](#) | [How Do Art Teachers Get Lesson Ideas?](#)

Source of Ideas

Sounds - from Nature, Music, Songs
Words - Poetry, Literature, Quotes, Phrase
Images - Work of other artists
Pictures - from books, magazines, catalogs
Elements & principles - abstraction
Vignettes of nature - observation
Observation - Realism
Imagination - dreams - fantasy
Expression - emotions
Beliefs and values - Cultural traditions
Events - tragedy - war - life experiences
Symbolism - Culture - Environment
Functional use
The object the materials - an image
"Take an object.
Do something to it.
Do something else to it.

Artists or Cultures

Romare Bearden
Charles Demuth, J. Holzer, B. Kruger
Andy Warhol, Pablo Picasso
Lucinda Durbin - Doll artist, Karen Smith
Frank Stella, Mondrian
Georgia O'Keeffe
Leonardo da Vinci
H. Rousseau, R. Magritte, Selkie Whitebear
Vincent Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock
Native American, West African
Pablo Picasso, Karen Smith - doll artist
Native American, West African, J. Lawrence
West African Art, Native American Pottery
Jasper Johns
Andrea Scholes designs as she goes
Lucinda Durbin - Quilt maker (fabrics)

Do something else to it.
Do something else to it.
Do something else to it."

James Michael Lawrence - digital artist
Louise Spell - artist & dollmaker

Themes in Art

Layering
Nature - Landscape - What is beautiful
Nature - Conflict - Storms - Sun - Stars
Nature - Man and animals - animals
Environment - Interiors
Seascape - Marine life
Time - passage of time - cycles of life
Cityscape - city life
Family - mother and child - family love
Religion - Spirituality - beliefs and values
Still life - observation - realism
Still life - abstraction
Slice of life - people at work - or play
Collections
Fantasy - imagination - inner worlds
Mythology - Folk tales
Figure - portrait
Historical subjects - War - Peace
Narrative - tells a story
Abstraction - Non-objective
Identity (a different kind of portrait)
Power and authority
Social Concerns - Issues

Artists or Cultures

Robert Rauschenberg, J. M. Lawrence
Georgia O'Keeffe, Vincent Van Gogh
Winslow Homer, Vincent Van Gogh
Henri Rousseau, Edward Hicks
Vermeer, Vincent Van Gogh, Renaissance
Winslow Homer
Claude Monet, African Art
Stuart Davis, Georgia O'Keeffe,
Mary Cassatt, Charlene Woeckener
Renaissance Art, African Art
William Harnett
Pablo Picasso, Stuart Davis
Edgar Degas
Joseph Cornell, Louise Nevelson
Henry Rousseau, Rene Magritte
Botticelli
da Vinci, Charlene Woeckener - dollmaker
Pablo Picasso
Edward Hicks, Bruegel, Mary Ann Reed
Frank Stella
Betye Saar, Vincent Van Gogh
African Art - Renaissance portraits
Keith Haring, Sister Corita Kent

Internet Resources

- [Conversation Game: Learning to Develop Individual Self Lists of Ideas for Artwork](#) by Marvin Bartel.
- [The Secrets of Generating Art Ideas: An Inside Out Art Curriculum](#) by Marvin Bartel
- [Block Busters for Artists](#) by Nita Leland
- [How to Think Like an Artist](#) [Archive] - "@rtrageous Thinking" from @rt Room, by [Dr. Craig Roland](#). (See [PowerPoint presentation](#))
- [Lesson Plan: How Do Artists Get Their Ideas?](#) Culture and Environment as Sources of Ideas - by Diane Pressler. Lesson uses the work of Jacob Lawrence.
- [Brainstorm Web](#) [Archive] -  have your students make their own chart how artist get ideas. Print off PDF file.
- [Themes in Art](#) from ArtsConnected - found out how the artists listed get their ideas.
- [Common themes in Education](#) - Interdisciplinary (Chart by Patty Knott)
- [BBC Creative Blueprint Blast](#). Brainstorm ideas - choosing the best idea.
- [Purposes for Art](#). Often the idea stems from the purpose for the art. More on [Purposes of Art](#).

Books to get you thinking and inspired:

[Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils](#) David Bayles and Ted Orland, The Image Continuum 1993. This book comes highly recommended by Woody Duncan and Kathy Douglas, two talented art teachers.

[Creating Creativity: 101 Definitions](#) - Paul Torrence and others

[Teaching Meaning in Artmaking](#) - Sydney R. Walker - Davis Publications

[Talking About Student Art](#) - Terry Barrett - Davis Publications

[Thinking Through Aesthetics](#) - Marilyn Stewart - Davis Publications

[Assessment in Art Education](#) - Donna Kay Beattie - Davis Publications

[The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art](#) - David N. Perkins 1994

[The Creative Artist: A Fine Artist's Guide to Expanding Your Creativity and Achieving Your Artistic Potential](#) by Nita Leland.

[Talking with Artists, Vol. 1, Vol. 2, Vol. 3](#) (many illustrators)

[The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life](#) ([See review](#))

Videos:

[Inspirations](#), from award-winning director Michael Apte, is a 100-minute exploration of the creative process that takes off from the essential question, "how do artists get ideas?" and soars into the fascinating worlds inhabited by seven diverse artists--including David Bowie and Roy Lichtenstein--who discuss, sometimes freely, sometimes shyly, just how and why they work the way they do. 100 minutes.

[Why Man Creates](#) - Comments on the creativity of Saul Bass - Organized into eight major sections, the Edifice, Fooling Around, the Process, Judgment, a Parable, Digression, the Search, and the Mark. Appropriate wherever creative problem-solving is the goal. 25 minutes.

Art Video World (division of Crystal Productions) - has videos for many individual artists and cultures. Each one goes into what inspires the artist or culture. Order the videos for your favorite artists and preview before showing to students. (for a free catalog 1-800-644-3429)

Responses from Teachers on Generating Ideas

This discussion was started by Marvin Bartel:

"It is hard to think about our thinking habits, but what if we would start an e-mail thread that lists the methods that we think certain artists use to come up with their ideas? How many artists and methods of generating ideas do you suppose our creative group of art teachers could generate? Could we have the Secrets of How Artists Get Ideas poster ready for next year's classroom?" (TeacherArtExchange, Friday, May 07, 2004)

From Kathy Douglas (Choice Based Teacher):

...the idea, the meaning, comes from the artist. If we wish for our students to behave as artists we must offer them the opportunity to behave as artists. (TeacherArtExchange Fri, 7 May 2004)

From Diane Newton (A Choice Based Teacher):

In our choice-based art room, we discuss art ideas daily. Students ask each other how they got an idea for their artwork, students share ideas, students understand that ideas may come from something they've seen or experienced. An idea may come directly out of using art materials. Some students are known as "idea people" because they have a wealth of ideas and others will go to them for suggestions. Often the idea person pairs up with artists whose skills match their plan. Kind of like the real world of business!

A long time ago, we generated a bulletin board which reads "Where do Art Ideas Come From?" Students from various grades listed where their ideas come from, where they believed that ideas of adult artists may have come from, etc. The list collapsed into some very basic groupings: nature, beliefs, family, traditions, culture, art materials, history, knowledge, other artists, personal interests, etc. When a student can't come up with an art idea, I walk her/him to this board and we look at the categories. It usually helps to get them started. We also have a file of art postcards, to which students refer when they are stuck.

From Patty Knott

How do artist's get ideas? Indeed this is the course missing from art education.

Sometimes I think it is much more important to be a student of history than it is to be a master of techniques. I have always believed the technique is easy it's the IDEA that prevents the growth to being and becoming artist.

Artists create a representation of the world they perceive and in a fashion that gives a better understanding than written or spoken language can do. I have spent a lot of time this week on the images coming from Iraq. Anyone could spend hours "reading" about these images but it is the image itself that is so powerful.

Artists ideas have always dealt with birth, love, death, beliefs, rituals, heredity and what it means to be human. The themes don't change. What changes is the society, the technology, the issues, the controversies. The artist observes and offers a less literal view.

If you teach historical artists, then I believe it imperative to present the whole history of the time in which the artist was creating. The ideas followed the "time." It's only recently that the artist has the luxury of personal obsessions and of course, the benefits of all the history that proceeds. I think we are truly on the verge of a Renaissance-like era where science and art truly merge and inform each other. Are there secrets to ideas? Gosh, everybody has ideas. The secret is to not inhibit the ideas -- the secret is to not stifle the ideas.

I have 2 ways for generating ideas. Sometimes I only present a theme and the solution can be any method. Sometimes I present a technique and the solution can have any idea. No matter if it's theme or method my procedure is:

Present the problem.

Class brainstorm the theme.

Is the theme relevant? How does the student react to the theme? (and if the theme generates no enthusiasm then chuck it and get a better theme)

Make word associations to the theme.

Research the theme.

Collect visuals related to the theme.

Make selections.

Allow each child's choice and teach technique from the choice.

Have frequent "peer" evaluations throughout the process --- kids listen to each other and often see things the "artist" doesn't that may take an idea to another direction. Recognize that kids are very used to "group" work. Allow for group collaborations. (I try to "recreate" the historical models all the "isms" in art history since Impressionism. These artists communed and dialogued --- I'm not sure that happens in the art world so much today. Certainly there are no "isms" and maybe why the art being produced is so illusive, obsessive, and offensive... at least my classroom can be an "ism")

Grow the ideas - let the technique follow. Teach-- the idea is paramount and teach the best way to communicate the idea.

I'm just now doing an "in the style of" lesson. The lesson is about both idea and technique. I presented Jim Dine. My lesson is not about hearts or bathrobes, but why did Dine choose these objects and how did he treat them? I gave a web quest to search Dine and asked questions:

Why the common object? How is the object treated?

What is the most important principle in the compositions?

List the materials and techniques.

How can you make a common object a metaphor/symbol for you?

I required the materials- Mylar, [Vellum](#), any drawing media ([Graphite Sticks](#), [Crayons](#), [Chalk](#), [Conté Crayons](#), [India ink](#)) and limited use of color. I gave each a small piece of Mylar to experiment with and required a full size plan before they could get the final materials. They reveled in the materials and simple ideas are finding "life" in the materials. They are taking ideas to levels I didn't expect... Each idea is valid and there is little "Dine like" about most of them but an idea has grown.

We have to be careful about expectations---- I always try to leave my expected outcome open to the variety of solutions I intentionally expect, and then not expect what I intended. That may sound convoluted but it's the only way I know to allow their ideas supercede my ideas.

Ideas come from what has always been ideas and ideas come from play and experimentation allowing the place to fail and still giving joy to the experimenting. I somehow feel that we will never make artists if we don't make play

Kids need help with ideas; they need to know how to collect and recognize why they make choices in their collections-- They need to know know what they collect is valid --- and we need to know how to turn those collections into ideas.

When we force technique, they want to know how to use the technique for their thoughts and observations. They have lots to say. We have to help them say it.

From Iris - A Choice Based Teacher - "Wheel of Creating"

....Now the part about the negotiating through to the end of a project when the child wants to walk away... for me, this is the trickiest part of TAB teaching. One thing I've learned along the way and am still trying to implement better, is to tell students ahead of time, or even as part of the menu, after you create three to five origami pieces you must do something with them, (other wise they'll make 10 or more puppy heads the easiest thing and after seeing too many of these from several children I either start to doubt myself and TAB or get crazy). I advise children to put their origami pieces in an environment, create a kinetic or stable sculpture, jewelry or what ever, (I hate the word should) but, the work should interesting to look at, put together as carefully and well crafted as you can and answer artist questions. Again Kathy Douglas has talked about artist questions with me at great length. What is it that a cartoonist does, (switching the medium) how do they communicate their story? What techniques do they use? A cartoonist shows a story over time how do they do this? What kinds of marks & lines do they use to show shading, expression, space?

I'm getting better at knowing when it's okay for a child to walk a way from a work or not ,but I have a saying which is, to try to turn a mess-up into a non-mess-up, see where the mess up takes you. That's how penicillin was discovered. Since the movie "Super Size It", I've come up with another saying, "the world doesn't need anymore fast food art!" Artists for the most part work with integrity, (what is integrity, we go through that for a bit and we talk about the merits of fast food, too) so have integrity, think about what you are doing, have a plan, be open to it changing I also have at least one menu on the thinking process..."Where are you on the wheel of creating? Thinking, get an idea, get excited, try it out, get involved, yikes what is this, want to give up, take a breath, regroup, get back involved"....It helps because when a student wants to give up I can say, "Hey, your right here on the wheel of creating, this happens all the time to creators, don't worry about it, take a breathe and continue because the last step is usually loving it!"

From Linda in North Carolina

For me, some idea generators are music, poetry, vignettes of nature, or a theme, such as "layering".

(TeacherArtExchange - Friday, May 07 2004

What Do Artists Do? Responses from TAB Choice Yahoo list

"Wall of Inspiration" from Libby (TAB Choice list serve)

What do artists do?

Remember
Create
Imagine
Feel
Observe
Distort
Experiment
Invent
Play
Repeat
Transform
Plan
Investigate
Analyze
Symbolize

Posted by Clark Fralick:

What do artists do?

Transformation, Fragment, Metamorphosize, hybridize, Symbolize, Transfer, Repeat, Distort, Fantasize, analyze.

Posted by Cindy Erickson:

HOW TO MAKE ART in elementary language

CREATE A SYMBOL = DRAW A SYMBOL OF SOMETHING THAT IS MEANINGFUL TO YOU

TRANSFORM = TAKE AN ART MATERIAL AND MAKE IT (TRANSFORM IT) INTO SOMETHING

VARY = TAKE AN OBJECT AND SEE HOW MANY WAYS YOU CAN CHANGE IT, ADD TO IT, DO IT DIFFERENTLY

USE IMAGINATION = USE YOUR BRAIN TO IMAGINE A PERSON, AN ANIMAL, A PLACE, A THING

INVENT = THINK UP SOMETHING NO ONE ELSE HAS EVER THOUGHT OF OR A BETTER WAY TO DO SOMETHING

FRAGMENT = TAKE A PICTURE AND REDRAW ONLY A PART OF IT

METAMORPH IT = TAKE AN IDEA OR A PERSON OR AN OBJECTS AND MAKE THEM ALIVE OR NOT ALIVE, OR IN A DIFFERENT SPACE OR IN A DIFFERENT TIME

HYBRIDIZE IT = TAKE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS OR TWO DIFFERENT IDEAS AND FUSE THEM TOGETHER

REPEAT = TAKE AN OBJECT OR A DESIGN AND REPEAT IT OVER AND OVER

DISTORT = TAKE A PERSON OR AN OBJECT AND MAKE PART OF IT MUCH SMALLER OR MUCH LARGER OR MUCH FATTER OR MUCH SKINNER OR MUCH ???

FANTASIZE = USE IMAGINATION BUT ADD SOMETHING REALLY UNREALISTIC OR UNUSUAL

ANALYZE = REDO SOMETHING YOU HAVE DONE BEFORE BUT MAKE IT BETTER BY RETHINKING IT

Developing Ideas - From Robert Genn - [The Painters Key](#) Newsletter August 6, 2004

Advice to a college student for developing her portfolio

Here are a few ideas that might give you a few ideas:

You need to do some "web-thinking." Using large sheets of paper and starting in the middle, jot down some random ideas and potential projects. Start with your current interests and add fantasies, secret passions and ambitions. Let one idea lead to another and connect them with lines like a spider's web so they begin to "breed." Let your thoughts range from simple exploratory sets of works to complex mind-bending installations. You need clear time to take this task seriously so that the process becomes natural to you. Evolved artists habitually and actively bounce ideas between hemispheres. Natural to some, the art of yin-yanging can also be learned. Don't share with anyone. Live for a while in the embrace of your imagination, no matter how outrageous. Mind-test and envision but don't give in to early rejection. Associate freely. Anything goes.

Think about your web-thinking at night, while you dream, while putting out the cat. If you are drawing a blank, check out the cat, or the wall behind the cat. Also, think how your ideas might move people, mountains, nations. When you have several sheets filled start evaluating and modifying with a pen of a different colour. Pick out a selection of ten or more and rewrite as if you were proposing film-treatments. Make them short and punchy. If they run from the practical to the impossible, so much the better. As part of your application, present this material using the heading: "Ideas I am currently developing."

PS: "Stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places--you may find marvelous ideas." (Leonardo da Vinci)

Esoterica: Give value to your best ideas forged alone. Charles Brewer, the founder of MindSpring, said: "The good ideas are all hammered out in agony by individuals, not spewed out by groups." What an artist does with her own web may be the most valuable exercise of her creative life. Web-thinking teaches personal creativity and individualist vision. "I suppose it is because nearly all children go to school nowadays and have things arranged for them that they seem so forlornly unable to produce their own ideas." (Agatha Christie) Art teachers know this.

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HOW DO ART TEACHERS GET LESSON IDEAS?

Art teachers get ideas from a number of sources. Some go for BIG IDEAS... some are inspired by an image or technique they have seen. Here are some "brainstorming" on where the ideas come from.

From Cindy Erickson - Elementary

I was brainstorming this morning about creating elementary lesson plans and started this list---it is just for fun---this is just a brainstorming list

How to generate a lesson plan from thin air:

- Pick a favorite children's literature book and design a lesson around it (Eric Carle etc.)
- Plan a lesson around a famous artist (Van, Gogh, Monet...)
- Pick a culture and develop a lesson plan by studying their specific style of artwork (Australian aboriginal...)
- Brainstorm a list of themes that children enjoy (swimming, circus, pets)

- Combine 2 seemingly unconnected objects (apple and a Frisbee)
- Teach a concept (abstraction etc.)
- Paint to music (Mozart, Raffi, Blue-grass, Jazz)
- Give each child a found object and have them design around it (juice can lids are fun)
- Make a list of fun still-life objects for elementary and plan one (toy still life, fruit, flowers, sports equipment)
- Think of an idea that your students have trouble with and figure out a lesson plan to teach it (overlapping or drawing ellipses)
- Bring in a pile of interesting junk and just let kids draw (shells, necklaces, small baskets)
- Figure out a correlation idea with math, social studies or other subject
- Find a fun elementary "crafty" idea and stretch yourself to figure out how to make it broader and more creative - turn craft into fine art
- Start with the cheapest material you can think of and design a lesson around it (toilet paper rolls)
- Think of something you have never done and design a "trial" lesson (puppetry or ??)
- Seasonal (fall leaves or spring animals and babies or...)

Now think about what media to use:

- [Drawing Pencils](#), [Colored Pencils](#), [AquaMarkers](#), [Oil Pastels](#) or [Chalk](#), [Tempera Paint](#), [Watercolor Paint](#), printmaking, collage, cut-paper, torn-paper, wood/wire/clay/soft sculpture, clay pottery or sculpture crayon or crayon resist,

Now add in technique you want them to master:

- learning to draw, learning to cut, learning to glue, neatness, perspective, overlapping, composition, shading, shadows, patterning Now how about: expressiveness, freedom of expression, self-awareness, self-expression

Now incorporate information or teaching about the elements of art and the principles of design:

- line, color, value, texture, shape, form, space balance, rhythm and movement, proportion, variety and emphasis, harmony and unity

Voila! Now you have so many lesson plan ideas - the problem is you have to decide which ones to do!

From Judy: Think about Character Education. What artists had character traits you want the students to emulate? What famous people? Think about lessons around Heroes.

Think about world issues - some BIG IDAES . What is it that you really want the students to care about? Peace - hunger - poverty. Even younger kids can deal with social comment.

Keep on adding to the "Lesson Plan Brainstorming - How Teachers get Ideas." Keep in mind the students have good ideas of their own, too.

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