

An Ordinary Lesson

An extraordinary teacher knows how to take advantage of that special "Ah-ha!" moment when it unexpectedly occurs in the classroom.

Nobody groaned. Mrs. Wainner didn't give them a chance. She had no sooner announced the selection—"Looking at Paintings," *Widening Circles*, pages 95-102—than she began to pull real paintings out of a bag. The first, an oil, she called a "still life." It was a single rose and a wisp of baby's breath in a vase, off-center against a pale blue ground. The children, 13 third-graders crowded around a U-shaped table, were all eyes.

Moving quickly, she showed a batik print of an archetypal house, primitive and colorful, made by one of her own children, she said. She talked about lines, shapes, colors, and the artist's message.

Then she pulled out an intarsia of a cockfight. This piece was stained and lacquered on a board, with clear outlines and shapes. The children's comments picked up speed and intensity. They liked it. "I like it best," said one child.

"Something is sticking out," said another. Indeed, the artist had created three-dimensional feathers with inserts along the rooster tails. What was the artist's message? I wasn't sure. Why did the artist render such a bloody



At Ball Camp Elementary School (Knoxville, Tennessee) Zenith Wainner began her lesson on "Looking at Paintings" by showing a still life painting to the students.

Photographs by Vaughn Williams

subject in a medium so precise and clean? Whatever his reason, the kids loved his work. "He looks like he'd be a real one," said Brandon.

"He is a real artist," Mrs. Wainner assured.

"I mean a great one," Brandon explained.

Definitely, Mrs. Wainner put away the three examples. She lifted up a print of N. C. Wyeth's *The Giant*, a fanciful beach scene with children at play at the feet of a cloud giant. "I see a man!" exclaimed a child. Heads nodded, all eyes on the poster.

"What made you look up there?" asked Mrs. Wainner. She swept the lines with her hand, drawing their eyes up to the giant in the clouds. She talked about the artist's name and the whole famous family of artists.

Then she turned everyone's attention to the Winslow Homer print on the bulletin board, the one with the children playing Red Rover in front of a mountain schoolhouse. Moving her hand to emphasize the lines, she talked about the line of mountains, the line of arms, and the way the lines draw your eyes to the red schoolhouse. One of the boys pointed out the line of shadow at the feet of the children. Mrs. Wainner's ideas were catching on.

Then she moved on to the other poster, "People and Dog in Sun" by Joan Miró. As soon as their eyes rested on it, the children burst into laughter. What a response! Just as they were getting the hang of how lines focus the viewer's gaze, their teacher springs a Miró. There was nothing to do but laugh.

"It's upside down," judged one student. So Mrs. Wainner turned the print over. But that made the sun upside down, so she righted it. The children commented on the sun, the dog, trying to construct an explanation for the design. Mrs. Wainner posed questions about repetition, the color yellow, and imagination. Together, they tried to figure out just what Miró's message was, just what his painting was about. There were no conclusive answers.

Quickly, Mrs. Wainner moved to the textbook. This selection is a sketchy

"An electric charge could not have changed the expressions of the children more. Their faces shone with new understanding."

framework of words surrounding seven color reproductions of paintings. The first six pictures are paired to show different treatments of similar subjects. The children opened their books.

Mrs. Wainner directed the silent reading of page 95 and asked questions about how artists send messages. Then she moved to the comparison of *Evening at Kuerners* (Andrew Wyeth) to *The Old Oaken Bucket* (Grandma Moses). The Wyeth shows a dusky rural dwelling with a lighted window; the Moses, a cheerful primitive farm-escape. Something exciting began to happen.

Mrs. Wainner began by posing a question about the colors used by the two artists. "These are quiet colors," said one child, of the Wyeth.

Another added, "It looks like a farm; the sun's going down."

And another, "It gives me a muddy feeling, like it's just finished raining."

"There's a light on in the house," Ben observed.

Mrs. Wainner moved on to the Grandma Moses farm, asking what kinds of colors these were and whether it looked like a real farm. Then Ben, his mind still on the Wyeth, told about going into his house and opening the curtains to make the house light. He was feeling emotions generated by light, the sweet security and aesthetic pleasure of coming home and letting in the light. I thought of Rembrandt's reply to the question about the most important person he had ever painted: "The most important person in any painting is *light*." I thought Ben had recognized intuitively the importance of the lighted window.

Mrs. Wainner guided them on to *Amateur Musicians* (Winslow Homer) on the left and to *Three Musicians* (Pablo Picasso) on the right. Looking at the Homer, dark and shadowy, she posed the question, "Is it real or not real?"

Immediately Andy observed, "It looks like they're playing in the attic."

"Or in a cabin with no windows," added another child.

Mrs. Wainner laughed, "Someone sent them to the attic, huh?" She hinted about those who play so badly they have to go to the attic. She went on, "Are they playing jazz or rock and roll?"

"No," said Casey. "It's violins for classical music." Mrs. Wainner nodded.

Then she directed their attention to the Picasso, a cubist caricature with improbable colors, and asked, "Andy, what's the difference in these two?"

He looked carefully at the Picasso. "It looks like something a little kid would paint," he said. Picasso would have been pleased, I thought.

"Which looks more real? ... Do the colors have anything to do with that feeling? ... Would you want to look like that? ..." She was zeroing in on the objectives.

Then she said, "Let's go on to page 100," the page showing *Mrs. Mayer and Daughter* (Ammi Phillips), a stiff and stylized painting of a prim woman holding a prim baby, the colors flat, the outlines sharp. Facing this was *Mother and Child* (Mary Cassatt), the



When Mrs. Wainner emphasized Winslow Homer's use of lines in *Snap the Whip*, one of her third-graders pointed out the line of shadow at the feet of the children.

colors soft and luscious and light-driven, the mother cuddling the baby, the baby's hand under the mother's chin. Mrs. Wainner began to draw out the children's responses: "What do you notice first? ... Which do you like best? ... Is the mother close to the baby? ... Which one looks realistic? ..."

Agog with excitement, the children clamored to respond. Mrs. Wainner said she would give each a turn to say which he or she liked best and why. Child by child around the makeshift table, each identified the prim and formal painting as his or her favorite. Of the Cassatt, they said, "They're sad" ... "It looks kinda blurry" ... "It looks dusty" ... giving these descriptions as negatives, as reasons they didn't choose the Cassatt.

"Oh," said their teacher, "you guys like this one (the Phillips) because it has clear lines ... You like it best because it looks as if it's out of a camera ... It looks more real ..." I remembered how they had liked the distinct lines of the intarsia, too. I wondered if their standard for judging was based on their efforts to be neat, to stay within the lines in their own work.

Child by child, that was the way it went, until the last boy, Ben, who said quietly that he liked the Cassatt best. That soft-voiced admission broke the tension of the crescendo in favor of the Phillips. Mrs. Wainner, at last, agreed that she liked the Cassatt, too. She explained how the Phillips mother and baby looked stiff and hard while the Cassatt mother and baby looked loving and soft. She said when she looked at the Cassatt, she got the feeling that the mother and baby loved each other.

Ah ha! An electric charge could not have changed the expressions of the children more. Their faces shone with new understanding. They had been so sure of the Phillips, so sure of their reasons for rejecting the Cassatt. But now, suddenly, as their teacher spoke, they saw things differently. I saw a trace of surprise that they had not seen this earlier; it was so clear now.

Mrs. Wainner went on to talk about the lines entwining the baby and the mother, the soft light falling on them, the subtle colors. This attention to the objectives underscored what had just happened, but it was not nearly as powerful as her gentle explanation of her preference for the Cassatt.

She went on to the last page of the selection, *Hunters in the Snow* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. She questioned the children about the campfire, the cold, and the artist's message. Time was running out. Quickly, she gave directions for the art activity by which the children were to demonstrate their understanding of the uses of color, line, and shape. She told them to leave their books on the table. It was time for lunch. They skittered down the hall.

Slowly I gathered up my observation forms. I felt exalted ... but why? It was only an ordinary lesson on an ordinary day in an ordinary school. Nothing to get excited about. Happening all across the nation every day.

True enough, but what about those children and their extraordinary responses to art? What about their un-schooled views—laughing at the Miró, Ben telling about opening the curtains at home, Andy seeing the Picasso as childlike—all so fresh, so apt?

And what about Mrs. Wainner's extraordinary teaching? Do you see what she accomplished in the comparisons? In the crescendo sequence about the mothers and babies?

When she planned the lesson, she had no idea that any "Ah-ha!" moment was about to occur. But one did, so simply and naturally that it seemed ordinary. And she was equal to the opportunity, simply and naturally, to open the eyes of her students, to let them see and see more and see yet more in the world around them. Maybe not one of them will ever thank Mrs. Wainner for an expanded inner vision, but they'll be using that vision the rest of their lives, and I'm thanking her for them. □

Author's note: Zenith Wainner teaches third grade at Ball Camp Elementary School, 9801 Middlebrook Pike, Knoxville, TN 37931. This lesson took place 23 October 1986.

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