



AMANDA THOMPSON Coni Preacher helps a student with his Van Gogh-inspired painting.

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"The Starry Night" art room door reinforces the theme. CONI PREACHER



Kayla Godwin and her classmate create paintings inspired by Van Gogh's "Irises." AMANDA THOMPSON

Channeling Van Gogh

PINEVIEW STUDENTS EMBRACE THE ARTIST AND ARTISTIC PROCESS

AMANDA KARIOOTH THOMPSON
COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Though his work was almost entirely ignored during his lifetime, Vincent van Gogh is undoubtedly one of the most iconic figures in Western art. Much of what we know about his artistic process and personal struggles comes from his writings, excerpted here.

Even still, there remains much myth and mystery surrounding his turbulent story, and his paintings, drawings and prints have been widely examined and debated. Each multi-million-dollar auction sale, stolen masterpiece and uncovered forgery has added to his fame. Largely self-taught, Van Gogh credited his artistic development to his intense study and faithful reproduction of works by other master artists.

"It interests me enormously to make copies ... I set myself to it by chance, and I find that it teaches."

Coni Preacher, art teacher at Pineview Elementary School, has challenged her students to become scholars of Van Gogh by re-creating some of his most beloved works. Using art supplies purchased with an art education grant from the Council on Culture & Arts, students were able to explore Van Gogh's world. Kindergartners and first-graders focused on his sunflowers, second- and third-graders dove into "The Starry Night," fourth-graders concentra-

ed on "Irises," and fifth-graders studied his self-portraits and chair still life.

"Each artist paints differently, and there's a reason why they paint that way," Preacher said. "If you want to understand the way an artist paints, re-create what he was doing. You also need to know a little bit about what he was going through."

"As we advance in life it becomes more and more difficult, but in fighting the difficulties the inmost strength of the heart is developed."

Van Gogh famously struggled with mental illness, and Preacher showed extreme sensitivity when broaching the subject with her students. "Some classes picked up on it quickly. Some classes, that part went right over their heads. I told them, 'Everybody gets sad sometimes, for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes people are sad for weeks and go to the doctor. They need help to overcome being sad. Sometimes people turn to art, like Van Gogh did. It's really important to find what makes you happy and that's what you need to do.'"

"In my view, I am often immensely rich, not in money, but because I have found my metier, something I can devote myself to heart and soul and that gives inspiration and meaning to my life."

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Van Gogh

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Art making provides a source of joy for fourth-grader Akaria Owens, and she dedicated her full attention to the Van Gogh project. "I love doing art and I love making pictures. I stay focused and I don't talk to my partners or anything. I take my time so it's not messy. When I was painting, I was like, 'Wow, this is a very good picture, so far.'"

"I'm doing my very best to put all my energy into it, for I long so much to make beautiful things. But beautiful things require effort — and disappointment and perseverance."

Fourth-grader Kayla Godwin shared similar sentiments and said, "Art is the subject I like the best. I've tried it and tried it and I get better and better." While working on her Van Gogh-inspired painting of irises, Kayla paid close attention to the artist's choices. She took some artistic license, though, and incorporated tulips, her favorite flower. "To be able to create art, it means you're expressing your feelings and you can change it up and make it your own."

"I try more and more to be myself, caring relatively little whether people approve or disapprove."

In order to capture and retain her students' attention over the weeks of study, Preacher employed a variety of strategies, and some of them required considerable personal commitment. "My niece dyed my hair blue and I doused it with glitter so it looks like 'Starry Night.' I painted my shoes with sunflowers, I wear a Van Gogh T-shirt and socks, I even had my nails done with 'Starry Night.'"

"What would be of life if we didn't have the courage of doing something new?"



Preacher went above and beyond the traditional instructional conventions because she feels it's important for her students to be familiar with art history's masters, Van Gogh in particular. "These are important cultural things to know," she said. "These things are out there' and you're seeing them and you just don't know it. Everything is so merchandised, it's everywhere, it has affected everything and it's going to get in your head whether you realize it or not. That artist has some importance' and you need to know why."

"What am I in the eyes of most people — a non-entity, an eccentric, or an unpleasant person — somebody who has no position in society and will never have; in short, the lowest of the low. All right, then — even if that were absolutely true, then I should one day like to show by my work what such an eccentric, such a nobody, has in his heart."

Van Gogh was a prolific writer, and more than 800 of his letters were published in 1914, 24 years after his death. Widely recognized for their literary merit, they clearly highlight his poetic sensibilities. As a culminating activity, Preacher asked her students to reflect, in writing, on what they learned and created. In response to her recreation of Van Gogh's "Chair," one fifth-grader penned her own poetic analysis. "An empty house; one room has creaks and one colorful chair to sit in. A clock, still working. Nobody's home; just a chair and a clock, sitting there, alone."

"It's as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint it. There is the art of lines and colors, but the art of words exists too, and will never be less important."

However her students choose to express themselves, Preacher embraces each individual's unique qualities. "It is your artwork and your artwork is different from somebody else's artwork, and that's OK because that's what was inside of you." Van Gogh was unapologetic about expressing himself creatively. It took a while for the world to catch up but now, more than a century later, we recognize the bravery in his artwork, which serves to inspire and connect us all.

"I want to touch people with my art. I want them to say 'he feels deeply, he feels tenderly.'"

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