

*Light as a Feather:
Blind Contour Line Drawing,
Abstract Painting, Bird-Related
Folklore, and Traditional Music*



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Continuous blind contour line drawing involves creating a piece of art whereby one's pencil never leaves the surface of the paper, and one never looks at the paper upon which the artwork is being created. Instead, the artists, with their eyes, must concentrate on following the lines and contours of the subjects to be drawn, while at the same time moving their drawing hands to create the lines and contours they are seeing—again, without actually looking at the paper. This activity forces the participants to slow down and truly observe the shape and details of what they are seeing and drawing. This process helps develop better hand-eye coordination. It is a fun activity that will result in an interesting and beautiful abstract piece of art with the addition of color and even collage. The artistic subject of this particular activity is feathers. To facilitate artistic observations in the creation process, the participants will explore the folklore of birds, the observations of birds represented in folk art, and movement inspired by traditional American Indian flute music that is said to be influenced by the songs of birds in nature.

TIME:

Two to three hours over two sessions. (Time will vary depending on the number of participants.)

MATERIALS - SESSION 1:

- Loose-leaf drawing paper, 8 ½" x 11" or larger (five or more sheets per participant)
- Pencils, pens, markers, and other drawing tools (the more, the better)
- An assortment of feathers of varying sizes, textures, and colors
- Images of an assortment of birds and feathers (The images of feathers should focus on a single feather.)
- A good sound system to play a CD or digital recording
- The CD *On the Edge of the Wind: From the Mythic Landscape of the Dakotas* by Keith Bear
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

MATERIALS - SESSION 2:

- Beginner watercolor sets, watercolor pencils, chalk, and oil pastels
- Cups for water (disposable or washable)
- An assortment of soft-bristled watercolor brushes of various sizes and shapes
- Paper towels
- Scissors
- Stiff paper or card stock, 8 ½" x 11" or larger (one sheet per participant)
- An assortment of old magazines, colored paper, and maps for collage material

- Glue sticks or watered-down glue and foam brushes
- The CD *On the Edge of the Wind: From the Mythic Landscape of the Dakotas* by Keith Bear
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity will provide an opportunity for the participants to visit and share experiences through the discussion of related folklore and through the creation of the artwork itself. At the end of the activity, the participants will share their work and connect with others by showing what they created and by expressing what it means to them. Loneliness will in this way be addressed throughout the course of the activity. Continuous blind contour line drawing is a challenging yet fun exercise in observation and hand-eye coordination that may be new to many participants. As such, the activity provides new mental and visual stimulation that will help to address boredom. With regard to the sense of helplessness, the idea of this plan is to throw “perfection” out the window and instead embrace whatever happens. Music really facilitates the process of cutting loose and moving the hand wherever the eye takes one. If someone has a shaky hand or other mobility issue, the extra bumps and waves in the lines really are just a part of the texture and should thus be embraced. The sense of control over the finalized mark-making, as well as the unique choices the participants will be encouraged to make near the end of the process, also help to address the sense of helplessness.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:

“[The objective was to] observe the real-time muscle activity of bilateral hands while subjects draw circles under 2 conditions: with and without using Ramachandran’s mirror-box. [The study included] a total of 24 healthy volunteers. Subjects drew 4 circles sequentially using their dominant hand with the other hand at rest, both with and without looking at a mirror image. Circles were marked by 8 dots on the paper, which subjects connected up to draw the shape. The activity of the bilateral first dorsal interosseus muscles was recorded using surface electromyography. Muscle activity of the dominant hand remained constant during each task. In contrast, muscle activity of the non-dominant hand increased under the condition of watching the image in the mirror, but was low under the non-watching condition. Furthermore, muscle activity of the non-dominant hand increased over the duration of the task. However, wide variation between subjects was observed under the mirror-image condition. Increased muscle action potential of the non-dominant hand may be induced by the circle drawing task of the dominant hand during Ramachandran’s mirror-box therapy, which supports previous observations of increased brain activity caused by watching a mirror image.” [Abstract]

--Furukawa, K., H. Suzuki, and J. Fukuda. “Motion of the Drawing Hand Induces a Progressive Increase in Muscle Activity of the Non-Dominant Hand in Ramachandran’s Mirror-box Therapy.” Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine 44, no. 11 (November 2012): 939-943.

“The goals of a post-stroke rehabilitation plan are very specific to each patient. The side of the body affected by hemiplegia can influence the rehabilitation plan, as people with right-sided hemiplegia may also have difficulties with speech and language (aphasia). Because of the aphasia, drawing may remain a crucial instrument of creative expression and the clinical case presented highlights how this goal may also be successfully achieved in the elderly by using the left hand.” [Abstract]

--Cervoni, E. "A Man Paints with His Brains and Not with His Hands' (Michelangelo)." Gerontology 57, no. 6: 572. Published electronically July 27, 2011. doi: 10.1159/000329859.

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

1. The person directing this activity plan should explain that the individuals in attendance will share observations and folklore related to birds, afterwards creating abstract artwork featuring feathers.

Let the participants know that first they will listen to an American Indian flute tune. Read “‘The Sacred Branch that Sings’: The American Indian Flute Tradition,” on page 252 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Walk around the room and show the participants the picture on page 252. State that an American Indian flute tune will now be played as an example for them to hear. Encourage them to listen for the different sounds of birds, both coming from the flute and from the background sounds of nature. Ask them to sit back, relax, and close their eyes. Guide them in taking four deep breaths, both inwards and outwards. Begin playing Track 1, “Mourning Dove Melancholy,” from the CD *On the Edge of the Wind*. (Use a good quality sound system.) As it begins playing, remind them to listen for birds. Encourage the listeners to keep their eyes closed, and guide them in raising their arms and hands while moving to the sound of the music. They can move in whatever way feels comfortable; whether it is like a bird flying or grass swaying in the wind. This gentle exercise will loosen tight and sore muscles in preparation for the physical act of drawing.

As the tune ends, tell the participants to keep their eyes closed,

to take in and let out four deep breaths, and to slowly open their eyes. Then ask the participants if they heard the sound of birds. What kind of birds were heard? A mourning dove, a woodpecker, a crow? Ask what people felt like or what they saw in their minds as they had their eyes closed, listening to the music. The person directing the activity should first share his or her own experiences to help initiate discourse.

2. Arrange the participants in small groups (no larger than five) around work tables. Have at least one volunteer, care facility activity coordinator, or artist at each table, if possible, to help direct activities with the participants. Groupings of participants should be arranged in a way to encourage both discussion and sharing. The person leading the discussion at each table should begin by asking if anyone present is a bird-watcher. If there is a bird-watcher present, ask what he or she notices about the birds and why he or she likes to watch them. What birds have you seen or do you know about? Peacocks, crows, geese, meadowlarks, robins? Describe what they look like or what colors they have. Explain that close observation is very important in art.

Explain that birds often are represented in very colorful and stylized ways in folk art. Ask the individuals at the table if they know about the mythical phoenix. If someone does, engage him or her in discourse. Then show the picture of the beaded phoenix artwork on page 136 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Read the caption aloud.

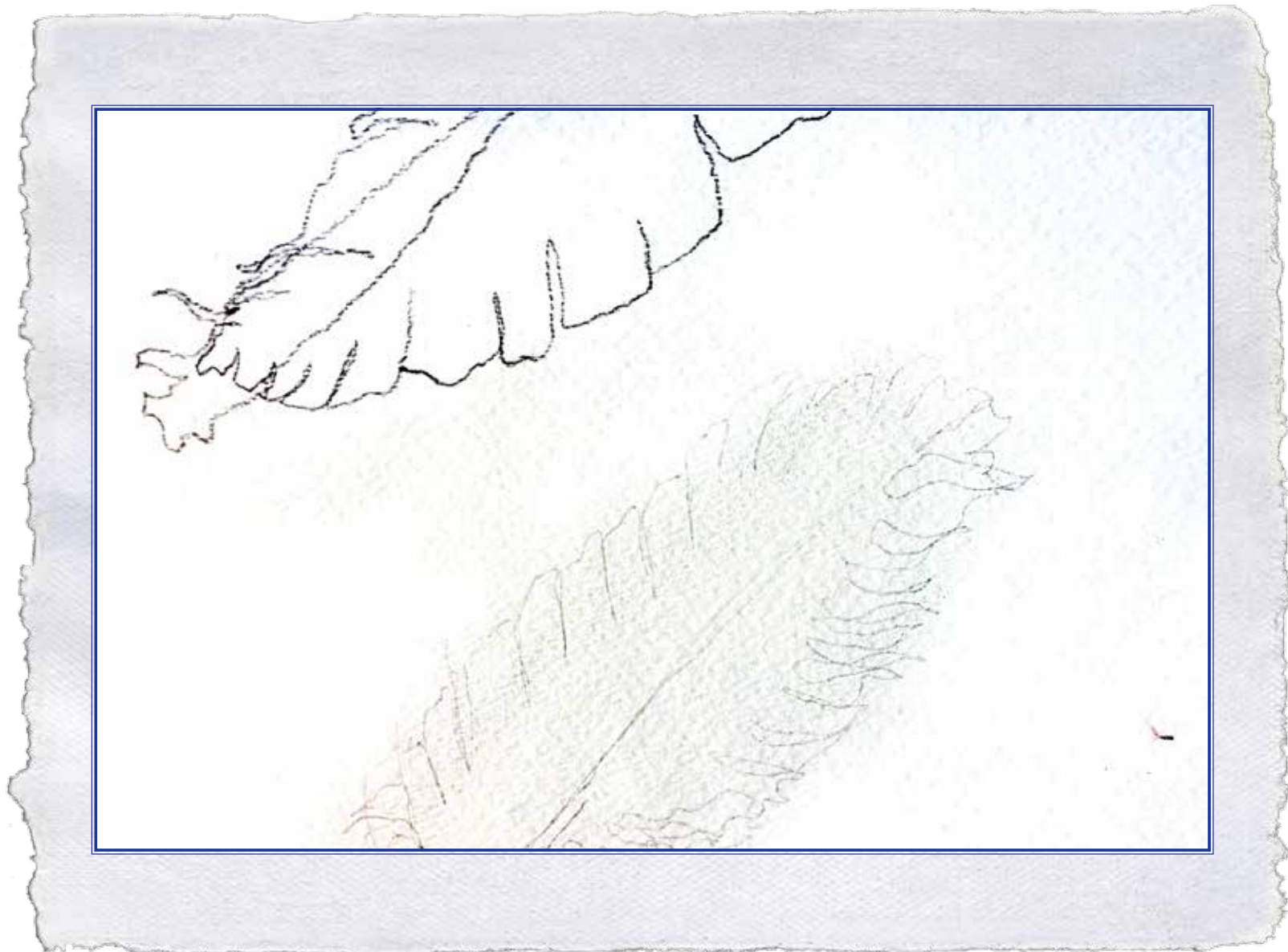
(If the picture is too small to be seen clearly by everyone, enlarged photocopies may be made and distributed for use only in association with this activity plan. In addition, the material from the book is copyrighted, so any photocopies must be properly and fully cited with the name of the book, page number, and author identification.) Ask the participants to very closely observe and point out the shape, flow, and color of the phoenix. Is it flowing, smooth, or brightly colored? Are there many colors, or just a few? Is it stylized or realistic?

Ask participants if they are familiar with the Polish folk art of *wycinanki*. Show the picture on page 146 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* and read the caption as well as the folklore entries next to it. Ask if anyone has heard of similar beliefs regarding roosters. Ask him or her to elaborate, if someone has. (As before, if the picture is too small to be seen clearly by everyone, enlarged photocopies may be made and distributed for use with this activity plan provided that they are fully cited with the name of the *Sundogs and Sunflowers* book, page number, and author identification.) Ask the participants to very closely observe and point out the shape, flow, and color of the roosters. Is it flowing or sharp? Are there many colors, or just a few? What kind of shapes are in it? Is it stylized or realistic? How does it differ from the folk art piece of the phoenix?

3. Now distribute pictures of a variety of birds and a variety of actual feathers. Have each of the participants at the table hold a feather. Encourage them to feel it and observe it closely. Going around the table, ask each person to describe his or her feather. Even the smallest or most nuanced description is encouraged. Is it soft or stiff? What

colors can be seen in it? Is the edge of the feather straight or ragged? Is there a plume on the feather? What does the rib or quill of the feather look and feel like? Explain that close observation is very important in art. Discuss how different feathers have different lines and textures.

4. To start, hand out at least one sheet of drawing paper per participant, as well as a variety of drawing utensils from which the participants can choose. Discuss the different marks that each utensil would make. How is the line of graphite or charcoal going to be different than a marker or crayon? What if you press harder or softer? Then demonstrate the effect as shown on the following page.



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5. Explain that the participants will now try their hands at drawing a feather using an artistic technique called continuous blind contour line drawing. Ask each participant to select a feather and place it near them. Then describe the process to the participants as being one whereby, in the creation of the artwork, one's pencil never leaves the surface of the paper, and one never looks at the paper upon which the artwork is being created. Instead, the artists, with their eyes, must focus and concentrate on following the lines and contours of the subjects to be drawn, while at the same time moving their drawing hands to create the lines and contours they are seeing—again, without actually looking at the paper. Remind the participants to pay attention to the detail of the subject to be drawn. Elaborate that if anyone needs to go back and draw more texture or detail, they can do so, but not to raise their pencil from the surface of the paper. Rather, a line going back to the detail spot will have to be made. Reiterate that the line is to remain at all times unbroken and continuous.

It might help for participants to think of the process this way: Imagine that your eye is like an ant, walking along the edge of a feather. Go slowly and draw the path of that ant. The “blind” part of this activity means that you do not look at your paper, pencil, or hand until you are done! If this is too hard to remember, you can poke a hole in the center of a paper plate and put it on top of the participant's pencil, so it will rest above his or her hand and block his or her view. Reassure the participants that the point of this technique is not to make a realistic drawing, but rather to observe lines and textures that are generally not noticed unless one slows down and truly studies the contours of the artistic subject. State how the technique will allow

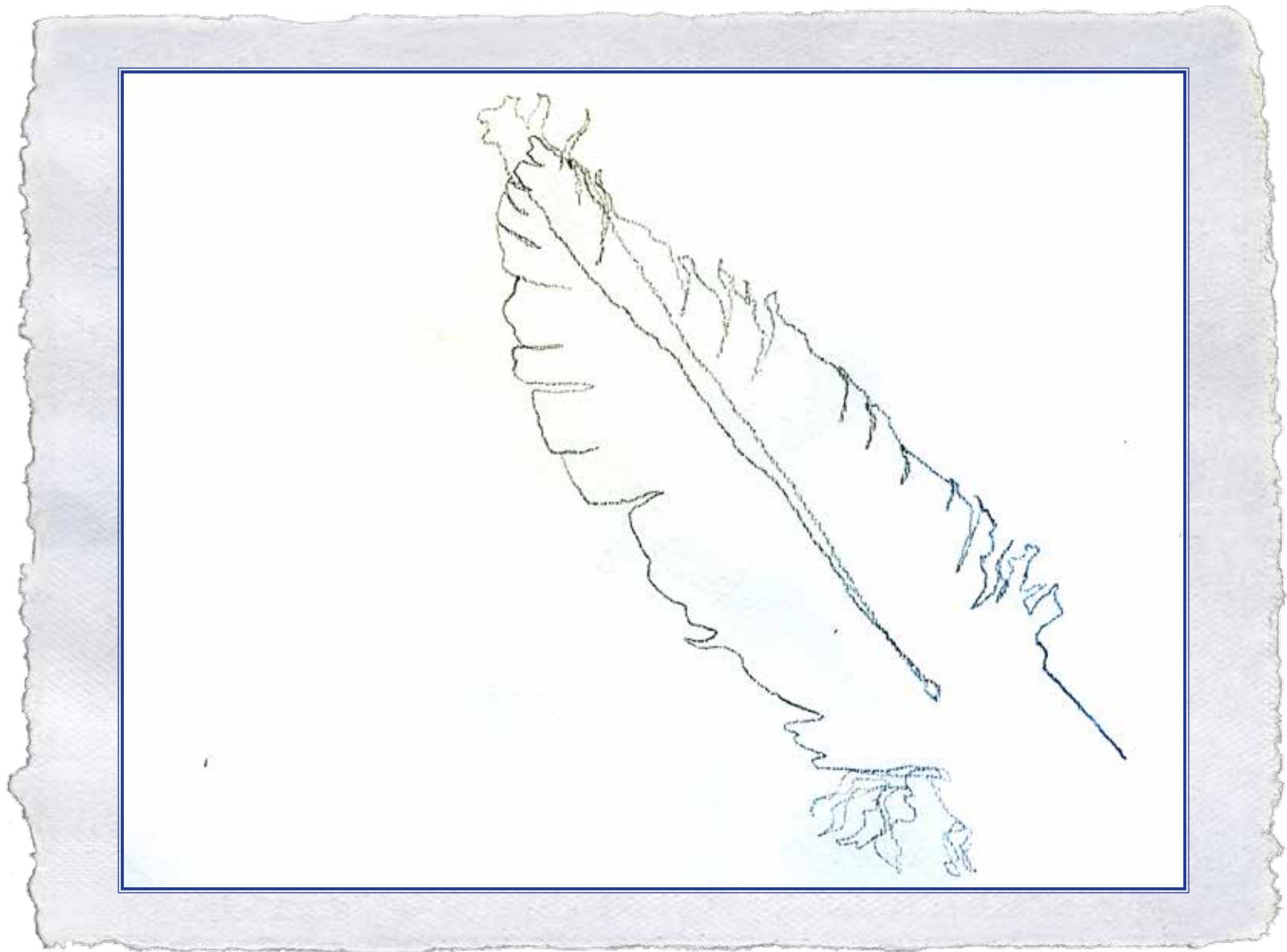
the participants to create a truly beautiful, abstract piece of art.

If the person drawing needs to stop or accidentally picks up his or her pencil, still encourage the participant not to look, as it adds to the spontaneity of the activity. If someone is having doubts, motivate the participant to just try it, and remind him or her that he or she can always try again. Express that they will be able to trace over lines they really like and cut away or paint over lines they do not like. In this way, the participants do have some editing power over their finished artwork. If someone needs to take a peek at where his or her hand is or needs to start over a few times, that is fine. Communicate that the idea is to throw “perfection” out the window and instead embrace whatever happens. If someone has a shaky hand or other such issue, reassure the participant by saying the extra bumps and waves in the lines add to the texture of abstract art and should thus be embraced.

Music can really help the process of cutting loose and just moving your hands wherever your eyes take you. As long as it is not too much stimulation, softly play tunes from *On the Edge of the Wind*. The most important thing is for the person directing the activity at each table to demonstrate the technique for everyone to observe. And once again, to have fun with it.

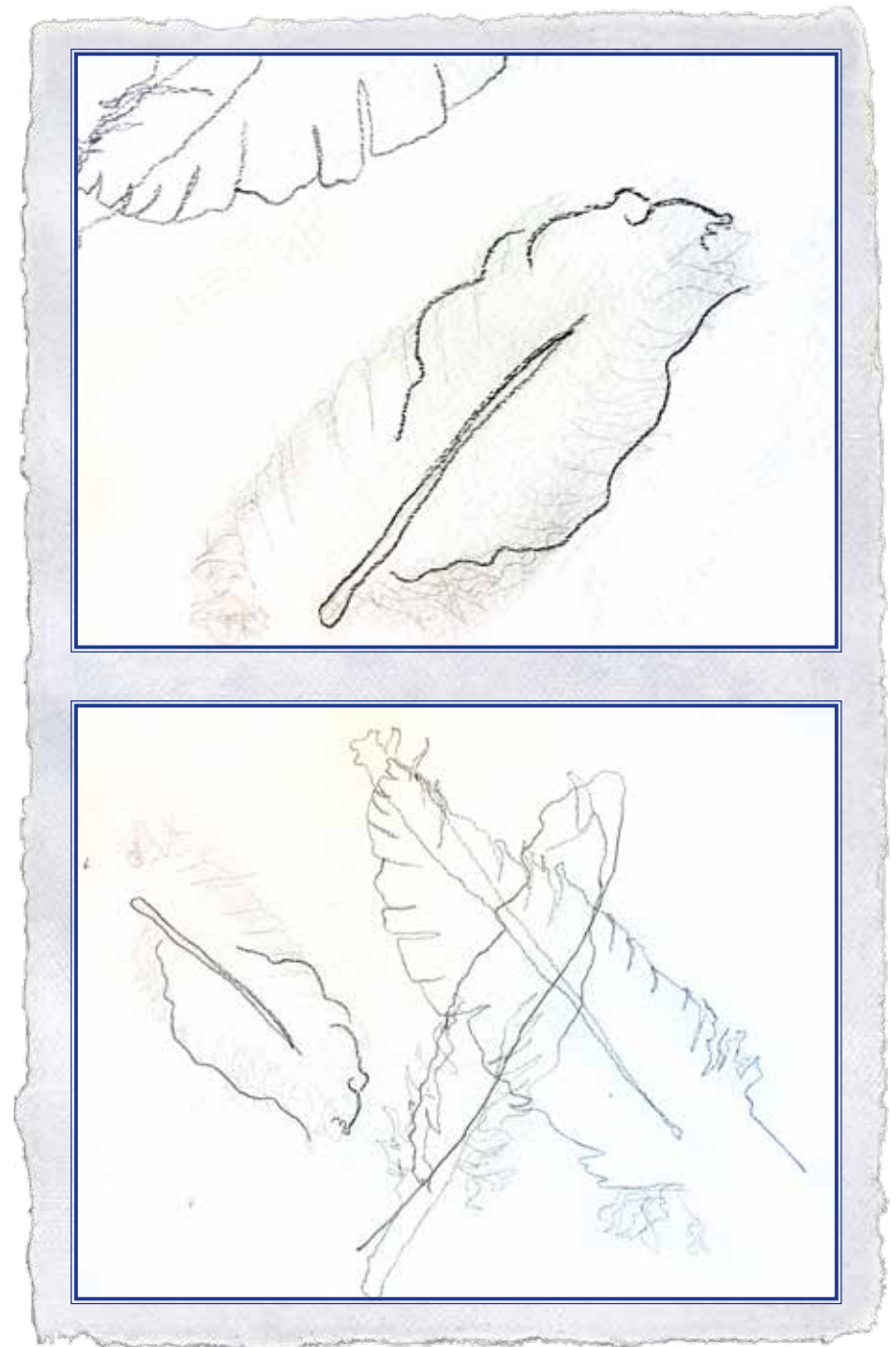
6. After the first round of blind contour line drawings have been made, the participants will be very curious to see what their drawings look like. Encourage them to share, look at, and discuss one another's artwork. Have fun with the spontaneity and talk about the experience.

What part turned out different than expected? Can you tell where you sped up or slowed down? How did this affect the finished piece?



7. Continue practicing this technique. Either set a time limit on drawings or let participants take as long as they would like to, depending on their own individual needs and desires. Encourage them to try different feathers, different drawing tools, and even different hands! If you are listening to music while participants draw, changing the music speed or style can also have an effect on the finished drawings. Continue to chat about these differences as they occur. Participants can use the same sheet of paper for multiple drawings, develop a layered technique, or they can use different sheets of paper for each drawing, depending on their preferences. Encourage them to try at least two drawings on the same sheet of paper, as a few overlapping feathers will make a lot of neat lines that will give lots of options for the abstract painting that will occur the next day.

After the drawing has been made and people look at their work, they can choose to trace over finished lines to darken them or change the texture, if they so desire. At the end of the hour, have everyone write their names on their work (or store it in a folder labeled with their names), so they can continue to use these same drawings at the next session.



SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

1. Begin this second session the same way as the first. Ask the participants to sit back, relax, and close their eyes. Guide them in taking four deep breaths, both inwards and outwards. Begin playing Track 2, “Sacred Stone Observes,” from *On the Edge of the Wind*. (Use a good quality sound system.) As the tune begins playing, ask the participants to listen for the sounds of birds. Encourage them to keep their eyes closed, and guide them in raising their arms and hands and moving slowly to the sound of the music. This gentle exercise will loosen tight and sore muscles in preparation for the physical act of painting.

As the tune ends, tell the participants to keep their eyes closed, to take in and let out four deep breaths, and to slowly open their eyes. Ask the participants if they heard the sound of birds. What kind of birds were heard? Inquire as to what people felt like or what they saw in their minds as they had their eyes closed, listening to the music. The person directing the activity should first share his or her own experiences to help initiate responses.

2. Recap what was created in the first session. As before, keep the groups of people small. Discuss the drawings that were made, as well as the stories that were remembered, imagined, or shared. Explain that the participants will now enhance the artwork they created in the first session. Again, show the folk art images of birds on pages 136 and 146 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Discuss the stylization of the designs and the boldness of the various colors as a source of artistic inspiration. Participants also should discuss the pictures of

birds and the feathers they looked at, in this way considering what elements they would like to incorporate into their art. Think of color, movement, and other words that come to mind when you see the feathers, pictures, and images of folk art. Are there other ways to show those words?

3. Hand out the drawings from the first session to their owners. Ask each participant to select a watercolor kit, brushes, and paper towels. Water in cups should be made available to dip brushes in. If someone wants to use chalk or oil pastels instead of watercolor, they should most certainly be given that option. The person directing the activity at each table should demonstrate how to use watercolor to fill various spaces between some lines in their drawing. Illustrate how darker colors are made by using less water, and how lighter colors are made by using more water. Remind the participants to clean and dry their brushes with each change in color use. Enlarged images of the artwork below can be distributed, with proper citation and credit, to better illustrate what is to be done.



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4. Explain that if there are areas of the drawings one wishes to emphasize, one can draw over certain lines or use a wax or chalk pastel to color over them. Demonstrate how to use the oil pastel (or a

white crayon) to block out an area that you would like to leave free of watercolor, which is called a resist. Encourage participants to paint and mark on all sheets of paper as much as they would like to.





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5. A final, optional step is to use the continuous blind contour line drawings and/or the abstract paintings that have been created as part of a collage as shown on the following page.

Distribute card stock paper and glue sticks or watered-down glue and foam brushes. Also have available various old magazines, colored paper, old maps, or any other type of paper that can be torn and used as part of a collage. After the watercolor has dried on the abstract paintings, cut out the painted feathers or rip the paper around the painted feathers to add a different texture. Arrange torn pieces of magazines, maps, other paper, and the painted feathers as collage elements on the card stock. Play around with where the different colors and shapes might look good. Then brush glue onto the card stock and the back of the collage material and painted feathers to secure them in place. The entire card stock does not need to be filled in completely. In fact, drawing or painting back over the top of the collage is a great way to tie everything together!

6. After the collages are finished, display them outside the doors of their respective makers. Allow other people to admire the work and foster discussion among the artists, their families, and other residents.



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AUTHOR • NICOLE GAGNER:

Nicole is an artist who lives and works in Bismarck, North Dakota. Nicole's career in art instruction began immediately after college with VSAND, an organization that brings art classes to groups of individuals of all ages with physical and intellectual disabilities. She then moved to California and began working with Options Family of Services, where she continued to work in group homes and day programs for the intellectually disabled and traumatic brain injury community. Her work teaching art to students with a range of physical and cognitive disabilities solidified her idea that any person of any age can be an artist, if given the appropriate tools, opportunity, and encouragement. That concept always has been at the center of Nicole's personal artistic mission. Nicole brought chunky, adaptive tools, such as large-handled paintbrushes or a mahl stick to steady a shaky hand, into her classroom. The use of forgiving mediums, like pastels, acrylics, or water-mixable oils, are another one of the many ways that Nicole has helped her students unleash their inner artist, regardless of their ability levels. Engagement in the arts provides lifelong enrichment and can begin at any time.

AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell's palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer's disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the "Three Plagues" (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.

(Artwork and images provided by Nicole Gagner.)