

No Boundaries: Painting Flowers and Landscapes with Watercolor



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Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

This activity heightens awareness of flower blossom shapes and landscapes and involves painting them with watercolor paint. The paint is very fluid and invites spontaneous color application for the beginner to pick up and apply with a brush or sponge. Minimal drawing of simple shapes is incorporated into the activity using color crayons and permanent markers. The person directing this activity will begin with a group conversation about flowers and landscapes. A step-by-step procedure is provided to guide staff and participants through the process. The work of each participant should be given a title and a signature upon completion. A display area for the finished paintings should be provided so that the paintings can be enjoyed by family members and friends.

TIME:

Two hours over two sessions. (One hour for Session 1, which entails the painting of flowers. One hour for Session 2, which introduces a follow-up landscape with flowers painting activity. It is recommended that these two separate sessions be held over the course of the same week, as carry-over information and conversation will help stimulate the capacity of individual participants.)

MATERIALS:

- 90 lb. watercolor paper, 11" x 15" (at least three pieces per participant)
- Masking tape
- PRANG eight color watercolor paint and brush sets (one per participant)
- 1" wide soft-bristle pastry brushes (one per participant)
- A box of tissue to use as blotters
- Small sponges (pieces measuring from between 1.5" and 2" cut from a larger sponge, one for each participant)
- Wax crayons
- Pencils
- Permanent markers
- A variety of fresh-cut (or artificial) flowers to stimulate conversation and for use as a visual reference
- Pictures of birds and insects to serve as visual references for the participants
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

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

This activity is designed to address all three plagues. As it is a group activity involving staff, residents, and the family members of residents, loneliness and boredom will be replaced by the exchange of opinions and memories shared through conversation—both during the activity and later on with family members as the finished works are enjoyed on display. As the participants will be making individual selections of which flowers/trees to paint and which colors to use, they will experience a sense of being in control. The opportunity to make independent decisions helps to remove feelings of helplessness. Staff members should encourage the participants to make such personal decisions throughout the activity. Helplessness is addressed also, especially for people with motor skills issues, because watercolor painting does not have to rely on exact, steady brush strokes or “staying within the lines” to create beautiful images.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

“This article reports the initial findings from the evaluation of four creative arts projects involving groups of older people living in a rural community. The purpose of the projects was to reduce social isolation among participants through providing direct access to arts and social activities. The view was that these activities would improve life skills and independence, increase levels of activity, and improve the health, well-being, and quality of life of participants. Evaluation of these projects demonstrated increased levels of self-worth and self-esteem among participants. Many of the older people involved agreed that they had made new friends while having the opportunity to try out a new activity.” [Abstract]

*--Pearce, R., and S. Lillyman. “Reducing Social Isolation in a Rural Community through Participation in Creative Arts Projects.” *Nursing Older People* 27, no. 10 (December 2015): 33-38.*

Activity Plan

SESSION I (1 HOUR):

1. This activity involves an introduction to and painting of flowers. It is a good activity to do around Mother's Day.

Gather participants in a well-lit room with seating space around large tables. Push tables together so that a sense of "group" is established for ease of conversation and for seeing each others' work. Set flowers out on the tables. The person directing this activity can start off by reading the following selections from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- folklore items 84, 87, and 88 on page 156
- folklore items 9 and 10 on page 260
- the description of sunflowers on page 278

The person directing this activity can show also how flowers are represented in other types of folk art by showing the following selections from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- show the sunflower images on the cover and back of the book
- the *slamenky* on page 119
- the yarrow on page 175
- the flower and beadwork on page 182
- the Fraktur designs on page 339

Continue talking about flowers and gradually encourage the participants to share personal thoughts about their favorite flowers, favorite flower colors, flowers they have grown in their gardens, and events when flowers are used to add special meaning to our lives. During this time, take a close look at flower blossoms of different kinds, real or artificial, pointing out different colors and shapes.

Note: If the care facility has a flower garden, it is encouraged that the collection of fresh flowers by the participants be incorporated into this activity. This will encourage the participants to move around and go outside to enjoy a few moments in the sun. They can be encouraged to pick some flowers that they like. Once they are back inside, the flowers selected can be placed in vases and used as models for the painting activity.

2. Give each participant a set of paints including at least one brush, a sponge, a tissue, one dark and one light-colored wax crayon, a pencil, a permanent marker, a coffee cup or small bowl three-quarters full of water, and one piece of watercolor paper that has masking tape around all four edges to create a nice border. It's best to have the tape applied to the paper ahead of time.



3. Show the participants how to use a colored crayon or pencil (their choice) to draw one or more enlarged flower outlines on their individual pieces of paper. Ask that the flower blossoms be about the size of the participants' hands. Next, draw the stems and leaves. See example in photo at right.



4. Staff members will demonstrate how to use watercolor paint by dipping the brush first in water and then stirring it around on the selected paint color to create a colored liquid. Point out that a lot of water will give a pale color, referred to as a “wash.” Less water yields a stronger color. The tendency is to use too much water, so encourage using just a little. Avoid puddles on the paper. If these occur, use a tissue to mop them up.

5. Invite participants to wet the paint color they want to use as the background, or the area around the flower. Explain that of course more than one color can be used. Pale color washes are best for the background. Encourage the participants to use large brush strokes, moving their arms back and forth across the page. It is okay to paint over the flower drawing at this stage, as pale watercolor is transparent and the drawing will still show through. It is especially important to explain this for participants who are unsure of painting and who may be a little shaky in their movements. Explain that it is not so important to stay within the lines because those are just general guides in watercolor painting.

6. To allow a few minutes for the background to dry, discuss what color paint will be selected and wet it to paint the flower. This time, use less water so that a vivid color is achieved. Of course, more than one color can be used however the participant wishes. Explain to the participants that it is okay to leave some white space in their paintings; that they should not worry about having to cover everything. Sometimes leaving a little white space, as shown in the image of the flower petals below, creates a more interesting picture. Feel free to show the participants the images in this activity plan step-by-step if it will help them to create their own paintings.



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7. Paint in the stems and use the sponge, dipped in paint, in a stamping motion to add texture for the leaves.



8. When the painting is a little dry, remove the tape. In the white space at the bottom, invite the participants to write their names and the date. A title also can be written in this space, if the participant so wishes. The person directing the activity may need to assist the participants with the writing. Blot the parts of the finished painting that are puddled from too much water.



9. When the paint is dry, the permanent marker can be used to outline the flower(s) and leaves to add emphasis as seen in the image of the completed work on the next page. The lines do not need to be used everywhere. The lines also do not need to be straight and perfectly lining the colors. Again, the person directing the activity should very much emphasize that their paintings do not have to be “perfect” and within the lines to be beautiful. This will reassure and encourage those participants who may have shaky hands that they, too, can create beautiful artwork.



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IO. To close out Session 1, invite the participants to hold up their work and say a few comments. To encourage this give-and-take, ask individuals to point out which parts of the paintings, either their own paintings or someone else's, are their favorites. Staff members should offer words of encouragement and praise. Staff members also could put the paintings up for display and encourage the participants to show them to their family members and friends.

Finally, tell the participants that they will have a second painting experience to look forward to, next time involving landscapes. This will give them something new to think about and to anticipate, which will in turn help to alleviate boredom.

Note for Participants with Limited Motor Skills and Dexterity: Participants will be using both large arm muscles and fine motor control in their fingers during this activity. Staff members can remind the participants that both large and small brush strokes, as well as the finger-controlled drawing of lines, should be used. Larger crayons, sponge pieces, and wide pastry brushes should be available for use by those individuals with limited finger dexterity. As an additional help, securely tape a paint brush to the handle of a large spoon, which can then be more easily held while painting.

SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

1. This is a follow-up to Session 1 and involves an introduction to and painting of landscapes. This session is written to repeat some of the same experiences from the previous session. It is suggested that this activity follow a few days after Session 1, and that the finished

works from that first session be looked at prior to starting Session 2. As the activity in Session 2 is repetitious of the painting of flowers session in both medium and process, it will present an opportunity for exercising recollection or memory through seeing, hearing, and talking about what was accomplished in the participants' original paintings. Looking at their first paintings of flower blossoms will help the participants to recall what it was all about and how it was done. Invite the participants to describe how they painted the flowers in Session 1.

In adding a landscape component, a horizon line (where the sky and the land come together) is added, as well as a painted sky with clouds. A crayon is used to draw in trees and other details the participants may wish to add, and a background "wash" is also applied. Large flower shapes are drawn across the bottom of the paper. As in Session 1, the paper is framed through the use of masking tape prior to painting.

Much like Session 1, this is a group activity and conversation about the activity is very strongly encouraged. The finished paintings should be displayed in a prominent area alongside the paintings from Session 1. Staff members should encourage family members and friends to talk with the "artists" about their works.

2. Gather the participants around large tables in a well-lit room. Set out the flowers that were used in Session 1. Explain that this activity will build upon the first session and that participants will now paint a landscape.

To the participants, show pictures of landscapes as depicted in *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Some beautiful landscapes can be found on pages 10, 30, 48, 95, 103, 151, and 296.

Staff members should select images that are large enough for all the participants to see and to talk about. Point out that they are called “landscapes” because they are pictures of the land that also includes the sky. Discuss what seems to be the most important element of each image (e.g., hills, a lake, a roadway, a tree, a field, an animal, some flowers . . . or whatever else is included).

These images provide wonderfully dramatic skies and horizon lines that can spark the memories of places previously visited by the participants. Allow time for comments and stories that the participants might like to share. Also, old calendars often have beautiful color photos that would be perfect for this particular activity.

3. Having talked about the horizon line as seen in the images, invite the participants to use a wax crayon or pencil to draw a horizon line about three or four inches from the top of the paper. The horizon line may be flat or hilly, however the participants prefer. Explain to the participants each step one by one as it occurs.

4. Review how to dip the brush in water and wet the paint colors that will be used for the sky. Announce that after the sky is painted, a tissue will be used as a blotter to remove some of the sky color so that the sky appears to have clouds in it. Demonstrate blotting a color so that the white of the paper shows through. Invite participants to

paint their sky and then blot out areas for clouds.



5. While the sky area dries, use a light-colored wax crayon or pencil to demonstrate drawing flowers and leaves along the bottom three to four inches of the paper. Remind participants of the flowers they drew for their paintings in Session 1, and encourage them to look at the flowers on the table for ideas.

6. Select a darker wax crayon and demonstrate drawing tree trunks and branches as thickened lines in the space above the flowers. A few branches can go up into the sky!



7. Wet the green paint and add extra water, stirring both together in the lid of the paint set to form a transparent “wash.” With a large

brush, demonstrate how to move the brush back and forth horizontally across the paper from the horizon line to the drawn flowers.



8. Wetting the desired colors of paint and using a smaller brush, paint the flowers on the lower part of the picture. Leaves can be painted with either a sponge or a smaller brush. Use less water for the flowers so that the colors will be more vivid. Again, explain to the participants each step one by one as it occurs.

9. Use a sponge dipped in paint to add in the texture of the leaves on the trees. Use a stamping motion with the sponge.



IO. When the painting is dry, the permanent marker can be used as individuals like to outline and add further details to their pictures (like insects, animals, fruit on trees, etc.).

II. Remove the tape from the edges of each participant's painting and use the lower space to write the name of the artist, the date, and a title if desired.



Note: Display these landscape paintings with the flower paintings from Session 1 of this activity. If time is short, set aside another time to compare the two paintings done by each individual in a group discussion. Encourage conversation that recalls the processes used in both sessions. They are similar yet different.

AUTHOR • LILA HAUGE-STOFFEL:

Lila is a retired professor of art education who has taught watercolor painting to students of all ages. Currently living at Lake Lida, Minnesota, she is an artist who enjoys working in mixed media, and exhibits both colored pencil drawings and watercolor paintings. She is also a traditional folk artist who weaves with yarn she has dyed with plants and makes willow baskets, a skill she learned from LeRoy Graber, an elderly Mennonite traditional basket weaver. She has worked with the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Art for Life Program* since 2001, when it first began as a pilot project at Pioneer House in Fargo. Lila taught watercolor painting to the elderly residents and family members at that site and observed that painting activities were very much enjoyed by the participants. The process also helped to improve the quality of life for the residents.

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