

## CHAPTER 18

# A Guided, Exploration-Based Visual Arts Program for Preschoolers

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Interpreting and reimagining widely known works of art is a thought-provoking process. Prior to each session, teachers break down an aspect of each focal piece of artwork, in this case *The Starry Night*, and continually scaffold children's learning about both the painting's contents and the artist's techniques.

Here, we share our outlines for the six sessions we developed on *The Starry Night*. Our hope is that teachers will find our ideas useful for creating their own guided explorations of artwork and artists. By basing your explorations on the children's interests and drawing connections with other aspects of your curriculum, you'll boost children's learning and creativity.

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### Session 1: Introduction to the Night Sky

#### Observe the sky during the day and at night

This activity helps children develop observation skills and probes their prior knowledge. While we looked outside the window at the day sky, we had to rely on photos on our classroom computer for the night sky. We then compared the day and the night on a Venn diagram, titling one side, "What do we see in the day?," and the other side, "What do we see at night?" It's important to look at real (not altered or enhanced) photos of the daytime and the nighttime, and facilitate discussion with questions such as

- › What colors do we see?
- › What is in the sky?
- › What do we do during this time?

Objectives: Children make observations of both the day and night skies while observing the outdoors and/or referring to real photos regarding colors, shapes, and objects. (Whole group for 5–10 minutes)

#### Introduce the painting and the artist

We looked at the painting *The Starry Night* as a whole group. We used a Vincent van Gogh puppet to make connections to the night sky, saying that Vincent (represented by the puppet) was really impressed by the night sky, so he chose to paint it. Children then had time to discuss the painting as we asked them a variety of questions, including

- › What do you see?
- › What do you notice in Vincent's interpretation of the night sky?
- › Does the painting look the same as or different from the photos we looked at? Why?

Objective: Children discuss, using both statements and questions, van Gogh's painting. (Whole group for 5–10 minutes)

### Model and explore artistic techniques

We first modeled, using a large sponge brush, making back and forth strokes to create a background on the entire canvas. Next, we modeled how to use a paper towel to soak up the watercolor paint to create clouds. (Crinkle the paper towel and place it in a cup of water. Wring it out and hold it down on selected places in the painting for five seconds, each time counting 1-2-3-4-5 aloud.) Finally, we engaged the children in exploring these materials and techniques.

Objective: Children observe artistic techniques and then use the techniques to create their own artworks inspired by the night sky. (Small groups at the tables for 5–10 minutes)

### Paint the sky

Children chose from several paint colors—different shades of blue and black—to create their own skies. While the children painted, we discussed with them which colors they chose and why. We encouraged children to use black and/or white paint to make shades and tints of the colors they chose.

Objective: Children mix in black and/or white paint to create shades and tints for their representations of the night sky. (Small groups at the tables for 20 minutes, or as long as the children need)

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## Session 2: The Stars

### Stars read-aloud

We read *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, by Iza Trapani. Throughout this read-aloud, we paid specific attention to the illustrations of the stars to make comparisons with van Gogh's representation of stars. We also asked questions throughout the read-aloud, such as

- › What do you notice around the star?
- › What colors do you see on or near the stars?
- › Where do you see the stars?
- › Who can see the stars?

Objective: Children discuss the illustrations of stars in the book and compare them with van Gogh's stars using vocabulary referring to color and shape. (Whole group for 15 minutes)

### Let's use our telescopes!

We talked about what a telescope is and its purpose. We showed the children the telescope they would then pretend to use, modelling what to do with it and how to talk about what they see. We gave each child a cardboard cylinder from a paper towel roll and encouraged them to lie down on their backs. While they were lying down, we sang a lullaby and engaged in a discussion with the children using several prompts:

- › Whoa! Did you see that shooting star?
- › I see a constellation—the Big Dipper!
- › Where is the moon? Does anyone see the moon?

(*Pointing to the ceiling*) Wow! There is a cluster of stars right there!

Objective: Children pretend to use a telescope and practice using their new star-related vocabulary. (Whole group for 10 minutes)

### How does Vincent see the stars?

Looking at the painting, we encouraged children to identify Vincent's stars. We prompted children to discuss the colors and shapes he used to create the stars.

Objective: Children appreciate art through discussions about van Gogh's stars. (Small groups at the tables for 5 minutes)

### Introduce circle technique to model painting the stars

We modeled using either a Q-tip or a dowel to paint small circles. While modeling, we discussed the uniqueness of each child's painting—many chose to invent their own constellations.

Objective: Children use a pincer grasp with either artistic tool (the Q-tip or the wooden dowel). (Small groups at the tables for 5–10 minutes)

### **Paint the stars**

Children chose from several paint colors—black, white, and several shades of yellow—to create their stars. While the children painted, we discussed with them which colors they chose and why. We encouraged children to use black and/or white paint to make shades and tints of the colors they chose.

Objective: Children mix in black and/or white paint to create shades and tints for their representations of the stars. (Small groups at tables for 20 minutes, or as long as children need)

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## **Session 3: The Moon**

### **Look closely at the moon**

We showed children several real photos of the moon, beginning with a faraway perspective (how children see the moon from the ground), and then gradually moving to closer and closer images. As the photos got closer, we pretended we were riding on a spaceship and landed right on the moon. We guided children to identify craters, asking the following questions:

- › What color is the moon?
- › What shape is the moon? Show a sphere/ball.
- › What do you notice about the moon?
- › What is a crater?

Objective: Children make observations about the moon, identifying and discussing it in various real pictures that contain distant and close perspectives. (Whole group at the computer for 15 minutes)

### **Explore craters using clay**

We modeled making a moon with craters (using clay and rocks) and the children explored playing with the materials. They made a sphere with the clay to represent the moon and then used real rocks (as examples of asteroids or comets) to hit the clay, creating craters. All of us discussed what happened when the rocks hit the clay.

Objective: Children understand how the moon's craters formed. (Small groups at tables for 15 minutes)

### **How does Vincent van Gogh interpret and paint the moon? How have illustrators interpreted and painted the moon?**

We looked closely at van Gogh's moon, discussing the colors and shapes that he chose to use. Next, we compared that to how different illustrators in children's books have represented the moon. Finally, children discussed and decided how they would represent their moons.

Objective: Children compare van Gogh's representation of the moon to book illustrators' moons. (Whole group for 15 minutes)

### **Painting the moon**

Children chose from several paint colors—black, white, and several shades of yellow—to create their moons. While the children painted, we discussed with them which colors they chose and why. We encouraged children to use black and/or white paint to make shades and tints of the colors they chose.

Objective: Children mix in black and/or white paint to create shades and tints for their representations of the moon. (Small groups at tables for 20 minutes)

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## Session 4: Movement and Swirls

### Movement read-aloud

We read *Katie and the Starry Night*, by James Mayhew. Throughout this read-aloud, we invited children to join in by demonstrating the movement described. For example, when Katie jumps into the painting, we encouraged children to jump with her. When Katie jumps to catch the stars, we invited children to jump and reach! When Katie runs, the children ran in place. We asked a few guiding questions throughout the read-aloud:

- › How can we catch the stars?
- › What should we do? Even if we can't jump up to catch the stars, do our paintings capture the stars?
- › Why are the stars moving?

Objective: Children describe and enact the movements taking place in the story. (Whole group for 15 minutes)

### Watch an interactive *The Starry Night* clip

We showed children this video, which animates van Gogh's painting: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCHFAsXYHGA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCHFAsXYHGA). The clip demonstrates the movement within the painting—the sky, the swirls. It also urges children to consider who is in charge. We stressed that each individual child, as an artist, decides how their sky moves and swirls; they are in control of these

Objective: Children describe what a silhouette is and identify it in van Gogh's painting. (Whole group for 5–10 minutes)

aesthetic decisions. We encouraged children to move their hands, arms, and bodies like the hand in the video.

Objective: Children move their hands and bodies to represent movement in their artwork. (Whole group at the computer for 10 minutes)

### Introduce a swirling technique and model painting movement

We modeled creating circular strokes with a paintbrush, since the night sky is never perfectly still, while talking about the movements we were representing.

Objective: Children use large arm motions to create circular painting strokes. (Small groups at tables for 5–10 minutes)

### Painting movement

Children chose from several paint colors—black, white, and several shades of blue and purple—to create their own swirls. While the children painted, we discussed with them which colors they chose and why. We encouraged children to use black and/or white paint to make shades and tints of the colors they chose.

Objective: Children mix in black and/or white paint to create shades and tints for their swirls. (Small groups at the tables for 20 minutes, or as long as children needed)

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## Session 5: Trees, Buildings, and Nocturnal Animals

### Silhouettes

The class looked at Vincent's painting closely, and we asked the children what they thought was depicted along the bottom of the painting. Introducing the children to silhouettes, we said "Does anyone know what a silhouette is? When it's dark outside and it is hard to see colors, we call the dark outline of an object a silhouette." To get the children thinking about adding something special to their paintings (like trees, buildings, or even animals), we asked, "What do you want to represent in your night sky?"

Objective: Children describe what a silhouette is and identify it in van Gogh's painting. (Whole group for 5–10 minutes)

### Take a walk to identify objects around us

This activity gave children time to consider and plan what they wanted to represent in their paintings. As children walked and identified trees, buildings, and other objects, we consisted even my friend them that their paintings show the view at night, posing questions like "What would these objects look like in the dark?" and "How would the colors be different or the same?"

Objective: Children identify objects that they later represent in their paintings. (Whole group outside for 15–20 minutes)

### What else would we see in the dark?

#### Sort diurnal and nocturnal animals

We began by probing children’s prior knowledge—“What do the words *diurnal* and *nocturnal* mean?” Providing printed photos of animals that lived in the area, we encouraged the children to sort the images into two groups: animals that are active during the day and those active at night. The activity also provided additional planning time. If children really liked specific animals, we suggested that they consider painting those animals into their landscapes.

Objective: Children sort animals by category: diurnal or nocturnal. (Whole group at the rug for 5–10 minutes)

#### Creating darker colors by adding black

Announcing that “We will be using darker colors—grays, dark greens, browns—to represent what we would see at night,” we mixed colors in front of the children to model creating darker shades. For

example, before mixing a small amount of black with green, we asked, “What do you think will happen to the green?” The children then tried their own color mixing.

Objective: Children represent silhouettes by mixing colors to produce dark shades. (Small groups at the tables for 5–10 minutes)

#### Painting silhouettes

Children chose from several paint colors—black, white, and several shades of green—to create their own silhouettes. While the children painted, we discussed with them which colors they chose and why. We encouraged children to use black and/or white paint to make shades and tints of the colors they chose.

Objective: Children mix in black and/or white paint to create shades and tints for their representations of silhouettes. (Small groups at the tables for 20 minutes, or as long as children needed)

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## Session 6: Titles, Authors, and Artists

### What is a title?

We showed the children a few pieces of Vincent’s artwork (*The Starry Night*, *Sunflowers*, *Self-Portrait*) and discussed why he gave each work of art its title. Then we asked, “Can you think of another title that you would give this artwork?”

Next, we showed them some familiar or favorite classroom books—*Llama*, *Llama Mad at Mama*, *David Gets in Trouble*, and *Pete the Cat*. To get the children thinking about the titles of these works, we asked, “Where is the title?” “What is the title?” “Can you think of another title that you would give this book?”

Objective: Children identify and describe what a title is. (Whole group at the circle for 5–10 minutes)

### Title and sign artwork

We invited children, working in groups of two or three, to create titles for their artworks. The children had the option of writing their own titles or dictating them to us. Then, we encouraged the children to write their own names, signing their works like an artist.

Objective: Children recall and apply what they learned about titles and write their names on their artwork. (Small group at the tables for 10–15 minutes)