IMAGES, IDEAS, AND TEACHING ART FOR THE LONG RUN

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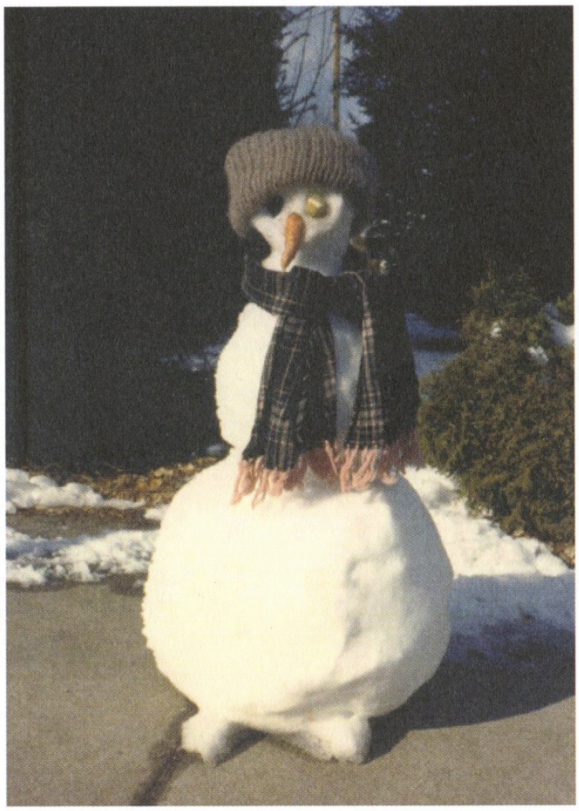
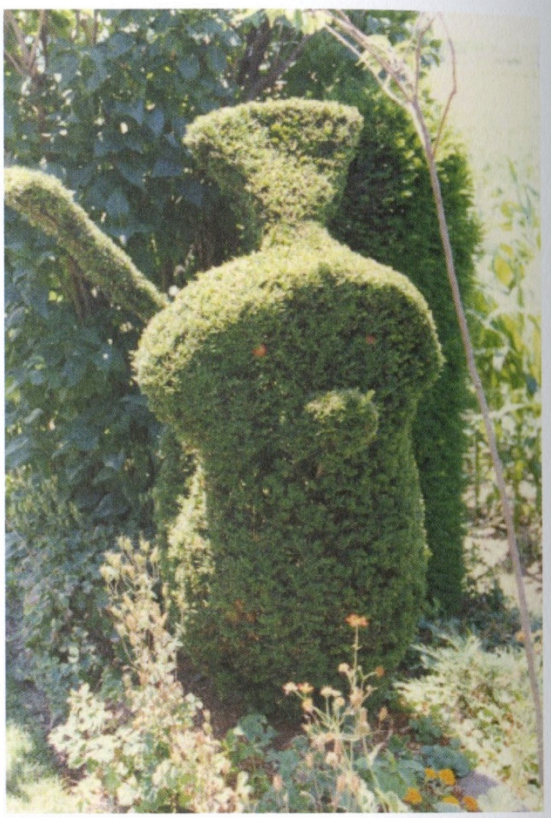
Good evening. I am honored to be here and very glad to have this opportunity to speak with you about a great passion of mine—the planning and implementation of curriculum in art. As someone who has this passion, I'm guessing that I'm not alone in this room filled with art educators. Art educators think about curriculum a lot. I believe we do so because we really do care about what our students learn. For most of us, it's a matter of wanting our students to love art as much as we do. We want our students to understand how important art is in our lives as human beings. We generally have broad definitions of art, extending our interest toward things that human beings make and have made for hundreds of years, for lots of different uses. We get excited when we see something that another person has created, whether it is polished and sophisticated or raw and untutored.

I'm especially fond of "raw and untutored," but probably like many art teachers, love all kinds of art. I spend a lot of time looking around my world. As it turns out, much of what captures my interest has been hand crafted by someone. Here are some images of things I've found as I've roamed around the streets of Kutztown, Pennsylvania, or the beautiful rural roadways surrounding the borough:





I don't know who made the snow people. I spotted them in town one day as the snow was beginning to melt. Bill Fox, a local retired mailman, created the bird topiary and a whole lot more of its kind, along with many other forms of "yard art" on the grounds of the one-room schoolhouse that he and his wife, Dorothy, have restored.

This interest of mine goes way back. As a child, I would wait for my father to come home from work and use his fountain pen to draw a picture on my hand. I would rush to the home of an elderly neighbor and watch in awe as he made a fancy calligraphic drawing of a bird holding a scroll in its beak, inscribed with my name, on the front inside cover of every one of my brand new books. Similarly, I sat for hours watching my grandmother who, using the most delicate of threads, crocheted rows of lace that would later be sewn to the open ends of pillowcases that I still own today. I was especially enthralled when I had the chance to watch and learn from my great uncle, who I believed was a *true* artist because he made paintings. He showed me how he created these artworks, layering paint on the canvas in spaces corresponding to the number of the color he was using at the time. I still have some of his "paint-by-number" paintings.

As an adult, I continue to go out of my way to see what people make. Once, while in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, my car came to a stop when I spotted a yard full of colorfully painted creatures behind a chain-link fence. The property belonging to Sam McMillan, known as Sam the Dot Man, was adjacent his studio, which was next to his home. In addition to creating and painting these yard animals, Sam has covered every surface in his studio and home with brightly colored imagery and, most importantly, dots.

When it comes to curriculum, I start here—with ordinary people making things, and in the process, revealing the human spirit. I am so curious, though, about their reasons, invariably asking the question, **"Why do people make these things?"** For Bill and Dorothy Fox, like with so many other folks, it's a matter of wanting to "make things look nice," or "fancy" "beautiful." We humans tend to decorate our environments. Sometimes we work within traditions—like the topiary tradition, for example, that goes back to at least the time of the ancient Romans. Other times, as with Sam,

we simply wish to work with what we have on hand to embellish or personalize our surroundings.

People make things for other purposes, as well. While traveling after a family reunion in Lancaster, Kentucky, once again my car came to a dramatic stop when I looked across the road and saw acre upon acre of decorated gravestones.

I've been told that throughout the Midwest, there is a tradition of decorating gravestones in this way. I was struck by how carefully the decoration of each monument was planned in terms of color and placement of the plastic flowers. This practice is part of a long human tradition of honoring those who have gone before us.

We often see evidence of this tradition in roadside memorials—private expressions in public places, often emerging on or around the place where someone was killed in a traffic accident. Ordinary people family, friends and neighbors of the deceased—typically decorate graves or create roadside memorials. Some memorials, though, are designed by artists and architects who have spent years studying and perfecting their skills. The recently completed National September 11 Memorial, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are examples designed by artists and architects, and each continues a long tradition of people in communities creating public memorials.

When I consider what is important for our students to understand about art and the human experience, this is one of the ideas to which I point. I want to underscore and explore this significant purpose for art making. I want students to understand that, throughout the world and for thousands of years, people have practiced the tradition of creating artworks, images and objects in memory of those who have gone before them. To embellish or enhance our surroundings and to honor those who have gone before us—these are just two roles for art in our lives. By looking around our world, we find additional evidence of the human spirit, purposes for art, and, consequently, enduring ideas about art and the human experience. These ideas turn out to be important ideas for grounding curriculum in art.

Whenever I talk about curriculum, I introduce what I call "The 20-Year Test." Here's how it goes: Imagine that you are in the produce section of your local market, twenty years from now.

Another shopper sees you and comes over to speak, saying, "I remember you! You were my art teacher twenty years ago." This actually happens, by the way.

Okay, so I want you think about what you want to **know for certain**—when you smile back at this student of yours from long ago—what you want to know that this now-adult-person ***understands*** as a result of her or his time with you and your art program. This adult shopper—your ex-student—is not likely to be working as an artist when you meet. However, regardless of what your student from the past is doing with her or his life, think about what you would want this person to **understand, deeply,** about art. I ask art teachers to write their answers, following the prompt, "Twenty years from now, I want my students to ***understand that*** _____."

Allow me to share how most art teachers have completed the prompt. In one way or another, they have said that they want students to understand that:

- Art is for all of us.
- All over the world and throughout history, humans have used art to express their values and beliefs.
- People can communicate moods, feelings, and ideas through artworks they make.
- Objects can reveal what people believe and care about.
- The arts engage and celebrate who we are as humans.
- Images have power and meaning.

Notice that these are **"Big" ideas**—what many people refer to as "enduring" ideas, or the kinds of understandings that we want our students to take with them into adulthood. We want them to have these and other understandings so that they will have the tendency to participate in the arts as adults—as makers and/or as responders—and receive all of the benefits that an arts-filled life has to offer. Over and over, all around the country, when given the prompt, art teachers respond with ideas similar to those above.

Considering this, you might say, "It sounds like we're all on the same page. We all seem to agree about what's important, so what's the problem?" And in reply, I say, "Alignment. I think that's the problem!" Let me explain. A concern I have is that while these ideas are important to ***us,*** we rarely actually share them with our students. In my experience, I've found that we teachers tend to think that students will come to understand these things ***automatically,*** if only they are exposed to a lot of art teaching. According to this view, as students see and talk about artworks, as they use a variety of materials and techniques, as they draw, paint, make collages, sculpture, prints, and more; they will come to understand the enduring ideas about art that undergird our teaching.

Not so. We have come to realize that this simply is not enough. We cannot expect students to understand these ideas without letting them in on the plan. We need to articulate the idea, post it, repeat it, and bring it to life with planned experiences through which students investigate and explore it. Alignment means that if we want our students to ***understand,*** for example, that "Images have power and meaning" (one of the ideas listed above), then we need to ***align*** our instruction—how we engage our students in inquiry and investigation—with that idea. We need to be purposeful and teach in a way that students will come to understand what we intend for them to understand.

"Right!" you say. "Easy enough!"

Actually, I *don't* think it's all that easy. I think it takes a lot of *work,* at least initially, to make sure that, first of all, as we plan curriculum, we plan it around "enduring" or "Big" ideas that we want our students to integrate into their lives as they move into adulthood. It means that we need to figure out a way to have such ideas *come alive* for our students. We need to make choices about the artworks, objects, artifacts, and images that we will introduce in order to *animate* enduring ideas. We need to figure out age-appropriate ways for students to grapple with the ideas so that they integrate them into the way they think about the world. We also need to construct ways (and even invite them to assist in constructing ways) for students to demonstrate their understanding of these ideas.

This is all very challenging, but I believe it's worth it. How often have you been introduced as an art teacher in a group only to have at least one of the group members come to you and tell you something negative about her or his experiences in art class? How often do people say to us, "I can't draw a straight line, " as if getting people to draw well (which usually means realistically) is the only thing that an art program aims to do? When this happens to me, I get sad, realizing that the person probably has not been helped to see how art is so integral to our experience as humans. I realize that she or he will probably not be inclined to look around and find evidence of the human spirit expressed through things that people have made.

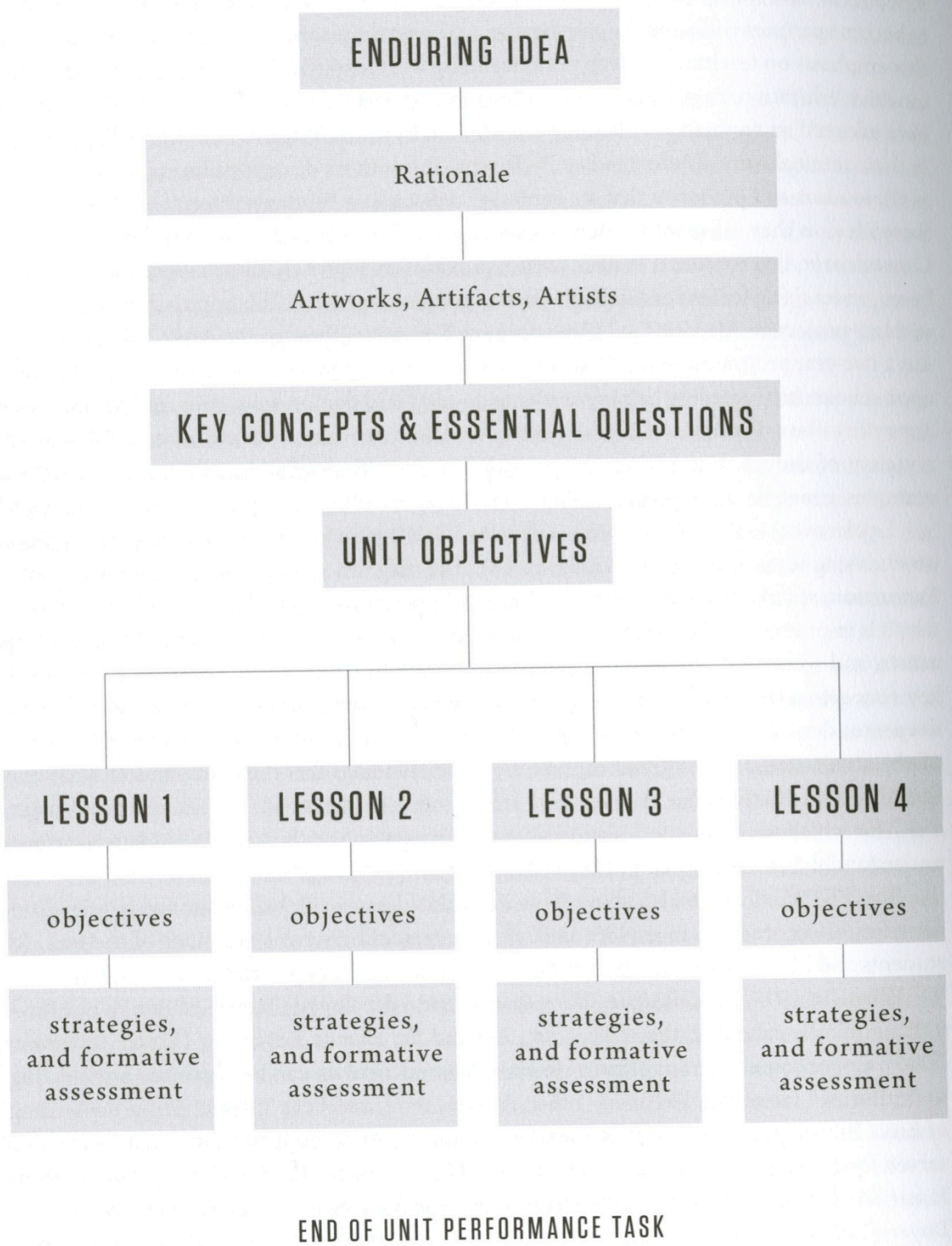
The 20-Year Test reminds us that as we plan day-to-day experiences for our students, we need to keep an eye on why we will do whatever it is we are planning to do. We need to ask how the activities we plan will connect to and bring to life the enduring ideas that we want our students to have for the long run. This planning needs to be purposeful, and our students need to become partners with us in the investigative, and even the planning, process. You may recognize this emphasis on teaching for deep understanding with "enduring" or "Big" ideas as a direction in which education, in general, and art education, in particular, has been going. Many schools have adopted an approach to planning put forward by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) in their seminal work, *Understanding By Design*. The authors discuss enduring understandings as those ideas and processes that are central to a discipline. Students integrate, refine and keep these ideas as they move into adulthood. In our own field of art education, the book, *Rethinking Curriculum in Art* (Stewart & Walker, 2005), provides an approach for developing arts curricula based on teaching for understanding with enduring or big ideas. This approach was developed within a project entitled TETAC (Transforming Education Through the Arts Challenge), which was a five-year project involving 35 schools school in six national sites. The TETAC project drew upon scholarship regarding helping students develop and demonstrate deep understandings of important ideas. Perkins and Blythe (1994) explain that when students understand, they "do a variety of thought-demanding things with a topic—like explaining, finding evidence and examples, generalizing, applying, analogizing and representing the topic in a new way" (pp 5-6).

Leaders within the TETAC project developed a diagram to map curriculum planning based on enduring ideas (Stewart & Walker, p. 18). The diagram shows how, in planning a unit of instruction, we identify the idea that will ground the unit, along with a rationale that explains why it is important to understand the enduring idea. We also identify a list of artworks, artifacts, artists, and so on that will serve to animate or "bring to life" the idea. We note three or four key concepts related to the enduring idea, and three or four questions that are related to and deepen understanding of the enduring idea. It is important to construct unit objectives—a list of objectives, stated broadly, that capture the understandings that the entire unit of study aims to teach. Note that we also plan what we refer to in the chart as an "end of unit performance task," for which we designate a plan to assess the extent to which students ultimately come to understand the enduring idea and key concepts.

The TETAC diagram also shows how individual lessons, including various inquiry-based activities, allow students to explore the key concepts and essential questions of the unit. My students and I have found this chart to be very helpful in planning curriculum.

When, in 1998, my colleague, Eldon Katter, and I developed the first edition of our three-volume middle school textbook program, *Art and the Human Experience* (Katter & Stewart, 2000), we welcomed the opportunity to show how curriculum can be organized around "Big" or "enduring" ideas. We, like many other art educators, had been influenced by the writings of Ernst Boyer, who served as Commissioner of Education under President Jimmy Carter and served for 16 years as President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In various lectures, but significantly in his book, *The Basic School: A Community for Learning*, Boyer (1995) presented what he called "Human Commonalities," a list of eight experiences

THE CIRRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



that humans from all over the globe and throughout history have in common. We determined that these commonalities would serve as springboards for the enduring understandings around which we would construct the curriculum for our textbook series. The Human Commonalities are as follows:

- The Life Cycle (we all celebrate important life events)
- Language (we all communicate with the use of symbols)
- Aesthetics (we all respond to the aesthetic)
- History (we all recall the past and look to the future)
- Groups/Institutions (we all engage in some form of social bonding)
- Work (we all produce and consume)
- Search for Meaning (we all seek to live with meaning and purpose)
- The Natural World (we all are connected to the ecology of the planet)

These commonalities provided the basis for our thematic curriculum in the middle school and then, later, for our elementary textbook series, *Explorations in Art* (Stewart & Katter, 2008). We also referred to the work of F. Graeme Chalmers (1996) who, in his work, *Celebrating Pluralism: Art, Education, and Cultural Diversity*, helps the reader understand art through an anthropological lens, proposing broad themes found in art across cultures as well as suggesting roles that makers play in their social groups. Chalmers reminds us that art makers can be seen as our storytellers, magicians, recorders, decorators, teachers and the like. An anthropological approach to art suggests that we consider the roles that art and artists play within the cultural group. As I have always been curious about why people make the things they make, seeking the purposes for which art is made within cultural groups makes perfect sense to me.

As we planned our textbook program, we referred to Boyer's ideas about those things that all humans had in common, and then considered how art and artists, in their various cultural roles, are associated with these commonalities. Thus, with the commonality, "We all communicate with the use of symbols," we considered the important way that artists use symbols to tell stories, how artists send messages with the art that they make, and how visual symbols are important in our world. With, "We all seek to live with meaning and purpose," we considered the way that people make art to teach important lessons about living, and that artists often assume the role of teacher. We continued in this way until we had constructed a framework that would eventually guide our curriculum development for grades 1 through 8. At each grade level, we focus on the eight Human Commonalities and their connections with objects, artworks, and artifacts made by humans. Each of these is stated as an enduring, or "Big," idea and provides the focus for a unit of study. The ideas at each grade level are put forward in such a way as to be developmentally appropriate. At Grade 1, for example, with "We all celebrate important life events," and the art-related idea, "Artists help us celebrate important life events," we constructed a unit entitled, "Special Times: Art to Remember," in which first graders see and discuss two paintings by William H. Johnson, "Children Playing London Bridge," and "Going to Church." They read, "We all remember and celebrate special times. Artists help us to remember. They make artworks

about the past." The students consider artworks made by others and then make their own that show special family times, memories of pets, plus party cakes, hats and masks for special celebrations.

By the time the students are in Grade 8, they encounter a unit of study that is also grounded in,"We all celebrate important life events." At this level, however, they are considering the work of Red Grooms and how he created the actual carousel, "Tennessee Fox Trot," that, with his characteristic fiberglass sculptures, celebrates important people and events from Tennessee's history. They learn about the Oklahoma Bombing Memorial and create their own plans for an artwork to remember an important event in their community's history. The artworks they consider and the artworks that they make are considerably more sophisticated at this level.

The important point is that the student moves through the art program with increasingly sophisticated examples and projects, encounters the same enduring idea about the roles of art and artists in helping humans celebrate important life events, and develops deep understanding of this important idea. When, as an adult, she or he recognizes instances or examples of this idea in the world, as if to say, "Oh, there is yet another example of how artists help humans celebrate important life events," we have achieved the goal of having the student develop a deep understanding of a concept that is central to our discipline. We would assume that the enduring idea has been integrated into the adult's larger understanding of the world, and that it has been and continues to be refined as the individual encounters more and diverse examples.

I especially like the way we have developed curriculum around the Boyer commonality, "We all participate in the ecology of the planet," and the art-related idea, "Artists help us understand our relationships with the natural world." To develop our series of units, Grade 1 through Grade 8, we first brainstormed the various ways that artists do this—artists show us the natural world, use materials from the natural world, reinforce our ideas about the natural world (nature as… powerful, calming, etc.), help us celebrate the beauty of the natural world, and so on. Our unit titles reveal the way we eventually constructed the strand. Grade 1, "Art and Nature: Getting Ideas," focuses on how we can look at nature close-up and from far away to get ideas for art making. Grade 2, "Nature's Beauty: Looking and Seeing," highlights the ways that as artists, we can look for and show the beauty of the natural world. Grade 3, "Forces of Nature," focuses on the ways that artists feature the power and gentleness of nature. Grade 4, "Nature's Gifts: Making Choices," has students explore the materials that nature provides for art making. The artworks featured and the artworks made by the students are increasingly sophisticated from Grade 1 to Grade 8, eventually exploring site-specific works and creating artworks with an ecological message. By Grade 8, students are considering ephemeral works such as those made by Andy Goldsworthy and Jim Denevan.

I refer to these examples in our *Explorations in Art* (2008) textbooks to show how this notion of teaching for deep understanding can be implemented when developing art curriculum. I am not necessarily promoting the use of Boyer's Commonalities, although I will admit that I am partial to their use because of the wonderful connections among the human spirit, what we humans make, and why we make things. The "Big" ideas pulled from art teachers and the 20-Year Test would certainly work to ground substantive curriculum in art. Those who create curriculum, of course, must consider the interests, needs and abilities of their learners.

Obviously, in this regard, developing a textbook series is very different from working within a specific community with particular students and the passions of individual teachers. Accordingly, curriculum must also be adapted to the varied configurations of art programs. Teaching for understanding requires work—hard work—with consistent checks to ensure that what we say we want students to understand for the long run is actually what we introduce and reinforce throughout our time with them.

What I hope to have provided here is a case for planning curriculum that aims for deep understanding of important ideas—ideas that will endure throughout a student's time in school and be carried into adulthood. I hope, also, to have shown how, in an art program that spans several grade levels, such ideas can be approached and returned to through varied lenses and levels of sophistication. In the best scenarios, students are made aware of the enduring ideas and are encouraged to discover their own instances of them in the objects, artworks and artifacts they encounter. Surely, the student who is able to do so provides evidence of having integrated the important concept and, in so doing, delivers hope for the possibility of a world filled with people who deeply understand the importance of art in the lives of all humans. This is, of course, our hope for the long run.

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