The Cave of Lascaux Revisited: A Grade 7 Art Lesson

Don Elliot

Don Elliot has been teaching and transforming his students’ lives for 33 years. He is currently teaching art to over 700 students at Senator Patrick Burns Junior High School in Calgary. He is a fount of knowledge, ideas and lessons, and is always willing to share and to mentor any teacher fortunate enough to cross his path.

Motivation/Theme

Using a remote probe that has been exploring Earth since its destruction, scientists have made a remarkable discovery. A huge cave has been located, hidden in the Rocky Mountains. On entering the cave, the lights of the probe revealed drawings that scientists believe were done by school children at the start of the second millennium.

“They’re remarkable,” replied one scientist.

“These drawings will give us a real understanding of what life was like before Earth’s tragic end,” remarked another.

Students following the probe’s mission on virtual tour were fascinated to discover that many of the animals they were familiar with lived on Earth at that time. These students were trying to interpret the cave drawings and learn what kids their age did thousands of years before.

Around 2,000 B.C.E., ancient hunters drew and painted important life events on cave walls. One such cave was discovered in France during the 1940s by a group of young students. We are able to understand more of the ancient world of prehistoric man through the visual legacy left for us.

Cave Painting Project

Focus

If you knew that our world as we know it was about to end, what message about you and your family would you want to leave? Where would you put this message so that it would likely go untouched and unnoticed for thousands of years? Would your message be discovered by another race sometime in the future?
Curriculum Links

- Humanities: Marooned, symbols as language, storytelling and oral history (recording the events of a civilization).
- Science: study of caves and messages found in caves.

Curriculum Concepts

- Different cultural groups use different materials to create images or artifacts.
- Symbolic meanings are expressed in different ways by different cultural groups.
- Power and authority can be symbolized in various ways.
- Visual symbols are used for identification and status by people in groups.
- Two-dimensional materials can be used to make compositions demonstrating simple pictorial space.
- Texture, as the character of a surface, can be depicted in drawing by the arrangement of line and marks.
- Value in drawing is affected by the quality of surfaces and line.
- Recording change and movement of figures is one of the purposes of drawing.
- Color schemes create certain moods in images.
- Characteristic qualities of a person or object can be emphasized by the quality of line used in an image.
- The skill of describing materials and techniques used in creating an image is part of learning to talk about art.
- Discussing one’s response to one’s own drawing and images is part of learning to talk about art.

Materials

- Rolls of butcher paper, cut into pieces approximately 18 by 24 inches
- Coloured chalk, charcoal, manila tag (five-by-five-inch pieces), conte crayon, sponges, blocks of tempera paint, India ink, red and grey clay slip, brushes
- story planning worksheet
- video: Lascaux Revisited, images of pictograms and pictographs from Lascaux
  This is a site devoted to the discovery in southern France of a vast underground network of caves decorated with paintings and engravings from the Paleolithic age.

Process

- Look at examples of pictograms and pictographs. Interpret their meaning. How do we understand the image? Talk about stylization, such as simplifying and exaggerating the image to capture the essence of the source.
- Examine images in caves. How were they discovered? Why were they hidden? Who were they hidden from?
- Explain how the cave of Lascaux was discovered. Use reproductions, video and websites. What were the artists trying to tell us in their stories? What can you recognize? What similarities do our worlds share? Discuss.
- Use a planning sheet to identify significant or memorable stories of animals, people, places or things in your own life. Summarize or make a simple sketch of each story. Choose the best three stories and draw a simple cartoon of each story. The stipulation is that a story needs an important animal or person.
- Explain a simulation project in which an imaginary cave would contain the three most important stories about the student and his or her family. Share the motivation/theme of the project with the students.
- To create the cave wall, take one piece of butcher paper and crumple it up tightly. Unfold and recrumple, and repeat seven times. Use colored chalk and cover the entire paper in sections of color. Explain drifts, fracture and faults found in caves. Note how the colors in the reproductions fill the cave wall. Decide where to put the crack or fissure lines. Color in these lines using charcoal. Blend one side of the charcoal so that it fades into the background and creates the illusion of being three-dimensional.
- Add the first storyline—Materials: white chalk, charcoal, brown chalk or conte. Tape
Teacher to Teacher

Examples of students’ artwork.

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the paper underneath a desk, on the wall and around a corner to create the feeling the early artists might have experienced when they created their pictures. Draw a story that flows across the cave surface. Look at visuals of cave art and note the drawing techniques (dark lines and empty shapes, dark lines with colored shapes, textures added inside shapes and so on).

- Add the second storyline—Materials: red and grey clay slip (or thick paint or mud), charcoal and/or branches dipped in India ink. Choose the most important person, thing or animal in your second story. Draw that image very large on the page. Fill with clay, ink and mud. Once it is dry, add details, textures, patterns and the rest of the story elements around this central image.

- Add the third storyline—Materials: manila tag, scissors or exacto knife, sponges tied to sticks to act as stomps and blenders, and black tempera paint. Choose an animal or person from the last story. Draw a silhouette of the animal on the manila tag. Cut out the image and keep both the shape and the background piece. Demonstrate stenciling using a sponge and tempera paint. Apply the color so that it has more pigment with little water. Use both the positive and negative stencils. Look at visuals of cave art. Notice the way colors are blended, added on top of each other and repeated in part or as a whole image. Stencil the last story onto the cave wall. Use a variety of earth-tone colors and stenciling techniques. Once dry, details can be added using charcoal, white chalk or conte.

- Stand back and look at the finished cave picture. Add any last minute details that enhance the stories. Have students dip a hand in the paint and then apply that hand to the painting. This becomes the artist’s signature.

- Arrange the pictures end to end so they look like a real wall. A circle or oval grouping works well. Have students sit around the images as if they were sitting at a campfire. Talk about the work. Have students identify favorite textures, animals, images, colors and so on. Have students make up questions about the images. The story inventors can answer or explain these questions.

**Fun Variations for Looking at the Artwork**

1. Display images on the wall, end to end and stacked. Turn off the lights and make the room as dark as possible. Students can view the images using flashlights. They can discover the stories much like the students who found the Lascaux caves.

2. While seated around the images, drink hot chocolate and listen as each student shares a favorite story, just like the storytellers of old.

3. Have students hold the sides of their pictures and stand in a circle so that all the pictures touch and there are no spaces. This way, everyone can see each other’s work and play “cave I spy” (“I see a brown dog looking like it is chasing a cat”). Students identify whose picture contained the clue. Students then do a one-sentence summary of the story.

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**Art is a technique of communication. The image is the most complete technique of all communication.**

—Claes Oldenburg

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Cave of Lascaux
Student Worksheet
Name: ___________________________________

Animals: mammals, birds, fish, reptiles

Geographic features: special locations, climate. List and describe.

Cultural events: activities

Natural phenomenon: disasters

Name and describe people: roles, jobs, clothing, activities
Pictographs and pictograms: symbols and images.

An example of student artwork.