

George, Charlie and Pablo
Lesson
K-12 Art
Victor, MT

Middle School Art
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This collage lesson came about as a result of a generous encounter with a local artist during our annual 5th grade art field trip. We traveled from the rural, western Montana town of Victor to Missoula, which offered us a modern dance concert, public library visit, The Missoula Art Museum (MAM) and a look at work by contemporary American Indian artists housed at the University of Montana. All of our stops were exhilarating, giving the students immersion into modes of modern expression not readily available in school.

Thanks to the efforts of Curator of Education, Renee Taaffe, we were honored to be able to have one of the artists featured at the Missoula Art Museum come meet us in the gallery and discuss his work with the students. George Gogas is something of a role model to me, seeing as he had a full career teaching art in the Missoula high school system, and currently enjoys a second successful career as a painter. (He told one boy that he does not plan to retire from this second career)! His willingness to visit with the students, and his positive impression of our 5th graders was gratifying. After our visit we were able to go back to class and bone up on the two artists who serve to inspire him; Charlie and Pablo.

George Gogas is a formalist through and through, but with a sparkle in his eye. He was intrigued several years back by the inspirational (if untrue) notion that the great Pablo Picasso was a friendly contemporary of our own Montana art star, Charlie Russell.

A gifted storyteller, Charlie Russell is a master of action scenes, and his paintings read like a fast paced comic book, with a startling Manga-like ability to tell many stories simultaneously. In Russell's *Bronc to Breakfast*, a cowhand barely hangs on while riding a bucking bronco, which is wildly stomping through the campfire and upsetting various pots and kettles. Cowboys look on in varied amazement or amusement, or scramble out of harm's way while the camp cook, stiff with rage stands with his paring knife outstretched as if to throw down a gauntlet to the untamed horse for increasing the certain hardship of cooking outdoors. Kids love this kind of chaos!

George Gogas has found success and enjoyment by interpreting Russell's complex compositions of the cowboy life via cubism. Gogas painted a modern response to *Bronc at Breakfast*, called *Judith Basin Encounter: When Charlie and Pablo had Breakfast at McDonald's*. In it, Gogas juxtaposes colors and shapes deftly, playing with our depth perception and delighting the eye. He crowds his figures together for a dramatic cropping of Russell's main action, and due to his relatively shallow space smashes those actors flat against the "window" of his canvas stage and the viewer's eyes. The ribs of the cook's Conestoga wagon form golden arches, really the only reference to Mc Donald's other than the bright coloration. His vision differs from the other two artists because of his love of clean color and preference to pattern

rather than a great deal of texture. The story Gogas told my students with his recent MAM exhibit, was that Russell took some time away from the western landscape to tour with Pablo's Three Musicians, and that any vestigial realism perceived by the viewer was strictly brought to the painting by the viewer. The titles of his newest work are all inspired by music. To hear George tell it, George, Charlie and Pablo were out jamming with the (cubist) band! After fielding questions from the 5th graders, George took the students to a hallway gallery in the MAM basement where his studies were displayed under glass. The students could see that his initial ideas were drawn on yellow legal pad and superimposed with a diagonal grid for enlargement on the canvas. In this form, the designs looked very much like something the students might produce while day dreaming in class or talking on the phone. Yep, they were doodles! We had our work cut out for us when we got back to the classroom!

It isn't often that we have a lesson that is a straightforward "A + B = C" event, but it seemed to be a useful and fitting tribute to all three of our artists. I spent some time in the art room with the 5th graders looking at slides of Charlie Russell's work procured from the Montana Historical Society and reading a short biography. The students were interested to know that Russell, a city boy from St. Louis, started his adventure in Montana at age 15. His parents thought he'd get Montana out of his system, but he stayed on, working with animals, living on the range and inventing his cowboy artist persona. We put in a second similar session with Pablo Picasso. I showed whatever consecutive hodge-podge of slides I had of works by Pablo Picasso, then the students settled in to drawing from Three Musicians as I read aloud about Picasso from Kathleen Krull's, *Lives of the Artists: Masterpieces, Messes (and What the Neighbors Thought)*. We noticed that there was a strong contrast between the organic shapes of the cows and horses and the geometric shapes of the three musicians.

Our third day in class, we combined parts of each study into a working drawing, pulling the elements together with Gogas-style shapes and patterns. After the students accomplished a plan, they used the next few days to copy shapes using transfer paper over patterned paper. They cut out and pasted down the main shapes of their composition directly onto their plan or on a separate piece of mat board. They used both wide and thin sharpies to outline and used paint or marker to fill in more textural areas of color. Some students felt that a thin layer of glitter glue brushed over selected areas set off the look of the picture just enough to finish things off. A few students asked for wiggle eyes, which I kept on the down low. Their pieces had the freshness of contemporary work, but the appeal of the western style influence, an outcome which could be appreciated by many kinds of people. Mission accomplished. All in all, one could never convey the kind of learning my students received from George Gogas and from MAM by simply sitting inside the classroom. Their encounter with the actual work, the artist and the discussion of his influences was the real inspiration for their success, focus and enjoyment on this assignment. What a pleasant surprise recently to receive a packet of postcards for each 5th grader from Mr. Gogas in the mail. The students were so appreciative, and lucky, I'd say!