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Young Rembrandts program helps students expand creativity

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Once a week, elementary-age students get an opportunity to try their hand at being an artist through an after-school program called Young Rembrandts.

Children ages 5 through 12 learn to draw and expand their creativity through Young Rembrandts by following an easy, see-touch-do method developed in 1988 by an artist and educator.

At a recent class at Troy Heritage Trail Elementary School, 16 young, budding artists were trying their hands at drawing an owl. Instructor Molly Babyak first drew each shape to make the owl's outline on a grid on the white board; students followed along step-by-step on their own paper.

This week's lesson was a little different, Babyak told the students. They wouldn't be coloring in their owls; they would use just a black Sharpie to outline the owl and then fill it in with their choice of shapes and patterns.

Through their lesson, students were learning to see the effect of the stark black against the white paper and create their own designs.

"This is where you guys get to use your imaginations," said Babyak. "This is your project, your masterpiece, so you get to be creative."

Young Rembrandts is an international program that partners with pre-school and elementary schools. The drawing lessons help to increase attention to detail, persistence, patience and improved fine motor skills.

For the children, it's a chance to try out or nurture a talent ... or just have a lot of fun.

"I think it's very nice and fun," said Nick, a second grader. "I hope more kids join this class."

Fourth grade students Greg and Griselda both love to draw. They like learning new techniques to add to their skills, they each said.

"It's taught me new ways of coloring with different patterns," said Greg. "It kind of expands my options."

Babyak began teaching the program last fall at three area schools, Heritage Trail, Troy Crossroads and Pioneer Path in Channahon. The first four-week session had six students enrolled. Now the attendance has nearly tripled.

"It's been neat to see that kids are excited about it. Every week we do something different," she said.

The previous week, students drew the famous "American Gothic" portrait by Grant Wood. Babyak thought it might be a little intimidating, so students had the option of making the faces realistic or silly. Most of the students opted to try the realistic faces.

"I was worried (the lesson) would be too hard, but they rose to the occasion," Babyak said. "Some of them do phenomenally well. It's quite remarkable what some of the kids can do."

Babyak is not an art teacher, but she loved to draw as a child. Each week, she studies the lesson plan provided by Young Rembrandts and practices her own techniques before she brings them to the students.

Along with the weekly drawing lesson, students get a lesson in art history once each session. So far, they've covered Native American art, Mexican Sugar Skulls and American Gothic.

They also learn techniques like shading, symmetry and perspective.

Sometimes the lessons are simple like a mouse chef, a birthday cake or palm trees. Other times, they are more difficult like American Gothic. But they always begin with basic shapes on a grid that pull together to make a work of art for each student.

"They definitely learn something each class," said Babyak. "They actually walk away with a little knowledge about styles and artists."

"I love it," she added, "It's really fun."



Young Rembrandts