Cray-Pas® Lesson Plan: PROUD AS A PEACOCK by Lee-Jean Lin

Motivation: Inspired by decadent beauty of peacock feathers, this drawing project will introduce students to artist, James Whistler’s “Peacock Room” and the history of peacock as a symbol and decoration across various cultures. They will create their own impression of peacock, using oil pastels on sand paper.

GRADE LEVEL: K-4

Objectives

- Students will learn about Whistler’s Peacock Room and the history of peacocks as cultural symbols and ornamental motif.
- Inspired by Whistler’s story, students will draw their own version of peacock, assuming it will be used to decorate their own house, emphasizing the decadent aspect of the bird’s exquisite beauty.
- Students will learn oil pastel techniques on household sand paper.

Historical and Cultural Context

Peacocks are often seen in many areas of Southern California, such as Arcadia and Palos Verdes Peninsula. The male Peacock feathers are stunning, while the female Peacock feathers are in natural brown tones. The natural iridescent Peacock feather eyes are the most well known, that exhibits hues of brilliant blue, green, amber and purple. Their decadent beauty inspires decorative imitations both abstract and literal. But this is no recent trend. Peacocks have been a favorite ornamental motif for millennia. Proud as a Peacock could certainly describe American ex-patriot artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), one of the main Aesthetic artists, and his Peacock Room is a great story. Born in Massachusetts, Whistler went to Paris at the age of twenty-one with the ambition to become an artist. He established his professional life in London and never returned to his native land. Over the years, he became one of the most artistically progressive painters of the nineteenth century. He embraced the philosophy of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” which recognizes beauty as the only justification for art.

Whistler’s desire for an aesthetic that embraced everything was finally realized in the dining room he decorated for the London residence of the British ship-owner, Frederick Richards Leyland. That decoration now is known as the “Peacock Room” (height 13’ 12 “, width 33 ft., depth19’10 “). Leyland himself possessed a large collection of blue and white china, and his dining room had been designed for its display by Thomas Jeckll, an interior designer and architect. It had a lattice of intricately carved shelving and hung antique gilded leather on the wall that provided a beautiful “frame” for each pot. Leyland commissioned Whistler to do some minor touch up to the room and left town. After that, what happened foreshadows Extreme Makeover, Home Edition. To Whistler’s way of thinking, the dining room should complement the frame of the twentieth century. He embraced the philosophy of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” which recognizes beauty as the only justification for art.

The story goes that Whistler excitedly informed his out-of-town patron that he transformed the room into a state of glorious perfection. Then he presented a very large bill. Leyland refused to pay for this extravagant work he had not commissioned. Finally, he settled for half the sum that Whistler had demanded. In retaliation, Whistler coated Leyland’s valuable leather with Prussian-blue paint and huge quantities of silver and gold leaf. He also depicted a pair of peacocks aggressively confronting each other on the wall opposite The Princess. He used two shades of gold for the design and highlighted telling details in silver. Scattered at the feet of the angry bird are the coins (silver shillings) that Leyland refused to pay; the silver feathers on the peacock’s throat allude to the ruffled shirts that Leyland always wore. The poor and affronted peacock has a silver crest feather that resembles the lock of white hair that curled above Whistler’s forehead. To make sure that Leyland understood his point, Whistler called the mural of the fighting peacocks “Art and Money; or, The Story of the Room.” This mural was meant as a cautionary tale with a moral at the end—that riches may be spent, but beauty endures. He even obtained a blue rug to complete the scheme and titled the room Harmony in Blue and Gold.

Supplies: Shared
- 24-color oil pastels (shared per 2 students)
- Line drawings of peacock (three compositions: front view, side view, and tail-down back view)
- Actual peacock feathers (a few in the classroom)

Supplies: Per Student
- 1 medium grain black sandpaper 9”x11” (#220)
- 1 light color crayon to sketch on black sand paper
- Wet wipes to clean hands at the end

Set-up
- Place the sandpaper, light color crayons and the box of oil pastels on the table.
- Instruct them not to open the oil pastels yet. After they finished the sketch, remove the crayons from the table.

Artwork by May Yang

Top: Peacock versions of Whistler and Leyland square off in this mural. Bottom: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain. Right: detail of central shutters of Harmony in Blue and Gold

Set-up
- Wet wipes to clean hands at the end
- 1 light color crayon to sketch on black sand paper
- 1 medium grain black sandpaper 9”x11” (#220)

Supplies: Per Student
- 24-color oil pastels (shared per 2 students)
- Line drawings of peacock (three compositions: front view, side view, and tail-down back view)
- Actual peacock feathers (a few in the classroom)

Set-up
- Place the sandpaper, light color crayons and the box of oil pastels on the table.
- Instruct them not to open the oil pastels yet. After they finished the sketch, remove the crayons from the table.
The story goes that Whistler excitedly informed his out-of-town patron that he transformed the room into a state of glorious perfection. Then he presented a very large bill. Leyland refused to pay for this extravagant work he had not commissioned. Finally, he settled for half the sum that Whistler had demanded. In retaliation, Whistler coated Leyland’s valuable leather with Prussian-blue paint and huge quantities of silver and gold leaf. He also depicted a pair of peacocks aggressively confronting each other on the wall opposite The Princess. He used two shades of gold for the design and highlighted telling details in silver. Scattered at the feet of the angry bird are the coins (silver shillings) that Leyland refused to pay; the silver feathers on the peacock’s throat allude to the ruffled shirts that Leyland always wore. The poor and affronted peacock has a silver crest feather that resembles the lock of white hair that curled above Whistler’s forehead. To make sure that Leyland understood his point, Whistler called the mural of the fighting peacocks “Art and Money; or, The Story of the Room.” This mural was meant as a cautionary tale with a moral at the end—that riches may be spent, but beauty endures. He even obtained a blue rug to complete the scheme and titled the room Harmony in Blue and Gold.

After concluding his work in March 1877, the artist never saw the Peacock Room again.

Twelve years after Leyland’s death, the Peacock Room was removed from the house and exhibited in a London art gallery. Having recently acquired The Princess from the Land of Porcelain, Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919), who later founded the Freer Gallery of Art, purchased the Peacock Room in 1904. The room was again taken apart, and reinstalled in an addition to Freer’s house in Detroit, where it was used for the display of his own collection of ceramics. Freer recognized the importance of the Peacock Room in understanding Whistler’s style, and he also believed it to exemplify the spirit of universal beauty that informed his philosophy of collecting and united his holdings of Asian and American art. After Freer’s death in 1919, the Peacock Room was transported to Washington, D.C., restored and installed in the new Freer Gallery of Art, as part of Smithsonian.

Procedures
1. Briefly introduce Whistler, his peacock room, and the history and cultural context of peacocks.
2. Have students observe the feathers of peacocks. Hold up the feather and explain the location and colors of the eyes on the feather. Pay attention to its arrangement of iridescent colors and striking “eye” pattern, starting with brilliant blue, green, amber and purple.
3. Select one of the three views for the project and do a quick contour drawing on the sand paper with pencil or crayon. Show them how to draw the body, starting with an oval as the head and a long and larger oval as the body. Draw the neck by connecting two ovals.
4. Draw long lines radiating from the tail to indicate the direction of the long tail. Have the tail extend beyond the edge of the paper. Draw many ovals on the tail to represent “eyes”. No details at this point.
   **Note:** Make sure the eyes are not too small. It takes time to color several dozens of eyes.
5. Use blue or green pastels (or any color they want) to color the body and head. Lay down a layer of a basic color, start incorporating darker shadow tones and add the highlights at the end. For example, use lighter blue or white to make the top of the head and one side of the body lighter than the other side to imply light source.
6. Draw the small tail feathers (in scallop pattern) if the front or back view is used.
7. Draw all “eyes” on the long tail feathers, starting from the center with dark blue/purple, light blue, light brown, yellow, and green. Students can also pick their own cool and warm color combination to show the contrast and the pattern.
8. Follow the “stem” of the feather; draw all side feathers until the gaps are filled in.
9. Draw the crown of the peacock.
10. Draw the eye with black.
11. Draw the “eye liner” and beaks with white and add in the shine in the eye.

Art Vocabulary

- **Contour drawing** - Contour means “outline”, and presents exterior edges of objects. A plain contour has a clean, connected line, no shading and emphasizes an open “shell” of the subject.

- **Texture** - Texture is the surface quality of a shape or form, i.e., rough, smooth, soft, hard, etc. Texture can be physical (tactile) or visual. Sandpapers with different grits offer different texture.

- **Harmony** - The principle of design that combines elements in a work of art to emphasize the similarities of separate but related parts. A musical term, Whistler often incorporated it into the titles of his work.

- **Contrast** - Contrast is the occurrence of differing elements, such as color, value, size, etc. It creates interest and pulls the viewer’s attention toward the focal point.

- **Pattern** - Pattern can be produced by the repetition of motifs, colors, shapes, or lines in a work of art. The layers of pattern on the peacock’s plumage are good examples.

- **Japonisme** – A general term for the nineteenth century influence of Japanese art on the West.

Presenting Artist: Lee-Jean Lin

Lee-Jean is the founder of Art Experience, a children art enrichment program in Torrance, CA that she has established since 2002. She uses art to guide children through the creative process so that they always have tools to express and empower their own lives. In addition to her studio programs, she also runs after school art programs on several Torrance school sites, and collaborates with local psychologists to teach art projects to kids with special needs.

Books:
The Peacocks of Palos Verdes by Mary Jo Hazard
The Princess and the Peacocks by Linda Merrill and Sarah Ridley