



TO THE RESCUE

Mary Coy

Sometimes behavior at the middle-school level can be downright mean. Kids tease and bully each other, making school unbearable for some, and impulsive behaviors such as pushing, hitting, and name-calling can get out of hand quickly despite a school's efforts to promote character building initiatives. It's hard not to worry a bit about what future generations will be like, seeing that so much of our society, government, and media seem so mean-spirited.

Yet, what is it about being around an animal that brings out the tender, nurturing side of us? In some schools, animals serve as quiet listeners for

students who can pet and practice their reading skills at the same time.

Feathered Artroom Visitors

During a recent painting unit focusing on John James Audubon, I invited a parent to come in with a variety of birds to explain how she rescues them from abusive living conditions and nurses them back to good health. Some birds are featherless when found; others are aggressive. Yet, due to her compassion, the birds are now healthy and able to be handled by students.

What is it about being around an animal that brings out the tender, nurturing side of us?

Every student had a chance to hold the birds, which included cockatiels and Quaker parrots, and observe them up close. I asked students to notice the overlapping and coloration of feathers, the texture in the legs, and the high-

lights in the eyes and claws. I reminded students that seeing how the claw wraps around one's finger is similar to how one paints it on a branch. How the

feathers lay atop a cockatiel's head indicates whether the bird is anxious or not. Noticing details is key.



Left: The background in Drew's painting shows one of the requirements: a transition of color. Middle: Lizzie's use of value helps details look realistic.

First Things First

After learning about Audubon and his work and being introduced to the National Audubon Society website, students each chose a photograph of a bird from which to work. Students each sketched the bird on a 10 x 14" (25 x 36 cm) piece of paper, refined it, and then transferred the drawing to a canvas board. To keep photos organized, they were mounted and laminated on different colored backgrounds and placed in similar colored folders. Students labeled the back of their work with the color of folder they are working from as a reminder.

Scumbling

Prior to painting, students practiced *scumbling*, a painting technique where a thin or broken layer of color is brushed over another layer so that patches of the color beneath show through. On a simple worksheet I created, students practiced painting bark, various leaves and, of course, a bird.

Using student-grade acrylics and fine brushes, students scumbled the background of the painting first, then progressed to the next largest object in

the photo. Once students thought they were finished, I asked them to look at their photos and identify five more details to add. Enhancing the contrast in the values helped their paintings "pop."

Bring on the Birds

It was halfway through the project that the birds paid a visit. The timing provided incentive for maintaining proper behavior and motivation, and allowed students to paint enough on the canvas so that they could immediately apply some of the newly seen details to their work. Feet became clearer; beaks sharper.

Our bird rescuer gave a short presentation and then showed students how to hold the birds properly. Occasionally a bird would fly across the room and perch somewhere, but overall, things went smoothly. The birds remained with us the entire day. Behavior was great, and those students who I was a little worried about surprised me by their tenderness toward the birds.

A transformation definitely occurred with some students: The

normally aggressive boy suddenly became timid at the thought of holding something so delicate, and the quiet girl who rarely spoke shined with confidence and ease when the bird hopped on her finger.

As I took photographs of the experience, I was able to greet students the next day with a slide-show presentation of them holding the birds. The quality of the painting, though still important, took second place that day to the need to help students develop into quality human beings. ☺

Mary Coy teaches at Spry Middle School in Webster, New York, and is a contributing editor for SchoolArts.

NATIONAL STANDARD

Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas.

WEB LINKS

www.audubon.org

www.avianweb.com