Director’s Corner: Exploring Visual Art

Winter is a wonderful time to focus our attention on the beauty around us. Snow and ice change the landscape outside our windows, and the light reflects in new ways. Spending more time indoors gives us the opportunity to explore our own creativity through art. At the Children’s School, child-friendly, open-ended visual art experiences are central to our approach to cultivating children’s Artistic Expression and Appreciation. For visual arts, our emphasis is on experimenting with art elements in a variety of media to yield increasing representation and expression. Viewing diverse pieces and identifying artists’ styles and techniques fosters appreciation. When fostering children’s expression and appreciation, our educators use the full range of teaching strategies I’ve been emphasizing this year. Sometimes we explain and demonstrate a particular technique, such as using different types of paint tools to generate textured effects. Other times we briefly introduce children to a new medium, such as clay, and let them explore with their hands to see what ideas they have about what to do with it and how. Mostly, we use a combination of these approaches so that the teachers can support the children’s explorations with “just in time” instruction, meaning provision of tools and tips right when they are needed for children to act on the ideas they share. When viewing art created by others, we ask the children what they notice about the piece, what they wonder about, and may then provide some specific information about the artist’s interests, technique, etc. As with any explorations, we balance opportunities to explore deeply within one context with experiences that reveal diverse possibilities. For example, when the kindergarten class studies Textiles this month, they will deeply explore those that children encounter daily in their own clothing and home décor, but they will also collect a wide variety of fabrics and textile arts from around the world to learn about the diverse materials, dyes, weaving patterns, etc. that meet the needs and express the creativity of our global neighbors.

Skills from other domains of our developmental objectives are also strengthened when children explore the visual arts. Regarding Discovery & Exploration, open-ended visual art experiences strengthen children’s senses and build skills of observation, particularly with respect to features of line, shape, color, and texture. These features can then be used for comparing and contrasting, sorting, and counting. Children can experiment with art media and techniques in both 2- and 3-dimensions, as well as generate hypotheses about artists’ intent and methods. Art typically strengthens fine motor, eye-hand coordination and tool use skills, but gross motor skills can also be developed as children work while standing and moving or on large projects, particularly those our educators arrange in outdoor spaces. With respect to Communication, oral expression is central to discussions about art, but the key is to connect the visual representations with their meaning. Skills for using illustrations to help with story understanding and analysis can aid comprehension, and then those skills can transfer to choices children make when illustrating their own writing. Skills related to emotion and empathy are crucial in the arts, as well as skills for confidently describing your own perspectives and identifying with those of family and community (Self-Esteem & Independence). Using art materials appropriately requires following rules and directions, sharing and taking turns, persisting with the task, and then cleaning up, all of which are key skills for Interaction & Cooperation. Similarly, appreciating others’ work requires a respect for differences, the ability to take other perspectives, and the disposition to work together in a productive manner. As we begin a new year, I encourage you to engage with your children in both noticing the artistic beauty around you and in expressing your own creative ideas through the visual arts. Enjoy!