



# Sculpting Portraits of Character

**Deborah Johnson**

**A**s an artist and educator, I am passionate about the importance of the arts in schools. Experiences in the arts give students an opportunity to discover and share who they are and create a stronger sense of community. When offered an opportunity to be the art docent at Terrace Park School in the Edmonds School District, it was my goal to employ Elliot Eisner's idea of "a community of learners" within the context of arts education. We took it one step further by giving students an opportunity to reflect upon their school culture and the positive impact they, as individu-

als, are able to have upon the larger community.

Terrace Park has a school-wide character education program with specific character traits that are discussed every month, such as: responsibility, diligence, encouragement, respect, and integrity. It was a natural connection to discuss these character traits as the frame for our theme: self within the community.

## **Motivation**

As I visited classrooms, I encouraged students to reflect upon ways they had demonstrated actions that embodied these traits or other traits

that have a positive impact on their community. I had students share with each other these stories about times when they had been exemplary community members and encouraged students to express their feelings about these accomplishments through the creation of self-portraits.

## **Clay Self-Portraits**

Students sculpted self-portraits out of clay, incorporating the art concepts of proportion, line, color, symmetry, and providing themselves with a foundation in sculpting techniques. I tied in a discussion of art history by displaying examples of portraits done by artists from various artistic

movements. Students then drew their self-portraits on paper and later built them with clay.

### First and Second Grade

First- and second-grade students were asked to create a wall-relief piece. I began the lesson by showing examples of wall-relief from around the world. They drew their self-portraits on a medallion-shaped paper and transferred the lines onto a ¼" (.625 cm) slab of clay with a pencil or clay tool. They built up, carved away and, later, glazed as they saw fit. The end results were dynamic, three-dimensional, wall-relief self-portraits.

### Third and Fourth Grade

Third- and fourth-graders worked on self-portraits done in the tradition of the face jugs sculpted by slave potters. They connected this to prior knowledge of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. We discussed images found on the Smithsonian website, noting the use of proportion and how the potters often exaggerated certain features. I encouraged them to implement these techniques as they constructed their portraits, conveying their feelings about their experience as community members. These pieces started as coil pots onto which students sculpted a face. After they were fired, students applied brightly colored glazes, which really brought their portraits to life.

### Fifth and Sixth Grade

Fifth- and sixth-graders sculpted storytellers in the tradition of the Pueblo tribes of the Southwestern United States. The larger figure was a self-portrait and was to represent some aspect of themselves, while the smaller figures could be anyone with whom they were sharing their stories. The idea behind this was to give them an opportunity to reflect upon their own status as role models in the school culture and encourage them to celebrate times when they have been exceptional community members.

### Reflections

Upon the completion of their pieces, I took an informal poll, asking students if they felt they'd been thinking about the school character traits more often since they began this self-portrait project, and if they could give specific examples of how they'd shown these character traits in their daily endeavors. I also asked how

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they felt about their experience with this project in general. Interestingly enough, about seventy-two percent said that they had given more thought to the character traits, fifty percent listed specific ways they had demonstrated these traits, and ninety-five percent of students indicated that this project was a positive experience.

The culmination of this project was a school-wide art walk. Students' self-portraits were put on display in the school library. The pride with which they showed and explained the meanings behind their self-portraits to their family and friends was exciting to observe. My hope is that this project has positively influenced

the way in which these students view themselves within the context of their community, and that they will remember this project for years to come. ☺

*Deborah Johnson taught this lesson at Terrace Park Elementary in Mountlake Terrace, Washington.*

### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students select and use subject matter, symbols, and ideas to communicate meaning.*

### WEB LINK

[www.infed.org/thinkers/eisner.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/eisner.htm)  
[www.american-indian-art.com/storytellers.html](http://www.american-indian-art.com/storytellers.html)

[www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/elem/storyteller.html](http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/elem/storyteller.html)  
[www.si.edu/Encyclopedia\\_SI/nmah/facevess.htm](http://www.si.edu/Encyclopedia_SI/nmah/facevess.htm)

[www.chapelhillnews.com/community/schools/story/11590.html](http://www.chapelhillnews.com/community/schools/story/11590.html)

[www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu/objectdescription.cfm?ID=209](http://www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu/objectdescription.cfm?ID=209)  
[www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/3781](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/3781)

