



The Leftover Eighth-Grade

Circus

Maggie Tucker

Each school year, my art closet reveals snippets and bits of art supplies not used, and which I won't replenish until the next school year. And, at the end of each school year, my eighth-grade classes want to celebrate the end of their work in our yearlong class. Last year, the two factors came together with our Leftover Eighth-Grade Circus.

Because I was mentoring a student-teacher last spring, I had the relative luxury of time to clean out that supply closet as she taught my classes. I found

five packages of sculpture wire, a package of aluminum foil, beads, some wood strips from an old cassette tape display, one package of plastic clay, as well as some leftover tissue paper. How could I stretch this over two classes with more than sixty students?

Providing Materials and Assignments

Remembering how much fun I had as a kid with odds and ends, I divided the materials into eight different boxes, one box per table of three eighth graders. In each box, I placed rubrics and assigned subjects: circus personnel

(ringmaster, ticket-takers), acrobats, the Big Top itself, tigers and lions, and organ grinders and monkeys.

Knowing that limitations often open imagination's doors, students were limited to those materials found in their bins, along with anything found in the artroom that was in our recycling bins each day. I also placed source materials found in the school library for students to use in their preliminary sketching and planning.

Because I wanted the circus to be viewed as a whole, each group assignment was also given specific sizes: the ringmaster had to be at least 6" (15 cm) high, while horses had to be at least 9" (23 cm) high. Compounding the limi-



tation, students from one eighth-grade class had to work with another class, using the same materials. That meant they had to communicate with each other via notes and sketches, collaborating with student artists outside of the classroom.

Alexander Calder's Circus

Before I gave out the supply boxes and topics, I introduced the classes to Alexander Calder's circus stables, using the video *Mobile*, produced by the National Gallery of Art. We talked about the various circuses we'd seen, and then students were given their boxes and assignments. After complaining about the assignment limitations (it is middle school, after all), students began to catch on that if something looked discarded, it was fair game to use.

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Creating Our Circus

After the Big Top creators assembled the wooden framework for the tent, they wrapped the framework with leftover paper towel found in the recycled bins. Acrobats advanced over a "wire" stretched across two supports, and a crazed lion ate an unfortunate bystander. The flame-eater was appropriately made of aluminum foil, with twisted orange tissue flames shooting out of his mouth. And the monkey made of pipe cleaners was given a striped cap made from paper found under a desk.

Our school librarian graciously agreed to host our exhibit. The artists decided to make it

a three-ring circus, and so placed three round tables next to each other. After assembling the Big Top, we placed the various acts. Circus posters invited the school to the celebration.

Kasey, one of the student artists, described the circus as the perfect way to end our sculpture studies and the school year. I agreed: this year, I've been collecting the empty oval plastic pans from watercolor brushes, destroyed brushes, and 2" (5 cm) long pencils for our next step in leftover magic. 🐘

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks.

WEB LINK

www.nga.gov/education/classroom/counting_on_art/popups/pop_calder_1.htm