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Middle schoolers ahead in the arts

Civic Arts Education Visiting Artist program is diversifying WCI students

By Elisabeth Nardi, Staff writer

In this social studies class, painting is part of the lesson about the western expansion.

Eighth-graders at Walnut Creek Intermediate School (WCI) recently spent three days learning the art of "en plein art" or landscape portraits and how they were used throughout history, including during the days of Lewis and Clark.

The three days were part of the Civic Arts Education Visiting Artist program, in which local artists come to the school and teach an art lesson to complement what students are learning. Soon seventh graders at the school will make African masks and sixth graders will create Roman coins.

In its fifth year, the visiting artist program costs \$23,000 a year with sixth and seventh graders doing two projects a year and eighth graders doing one. The program is funded by the Walnut Creek Education Foundation K-12.

The program means even those students who don't choose art as an elective are not left out, said Chris Giotta, a teacher and program organizer.

"This assures that every student at WCI does get some art," Giotta said. "Studies show that learning art makes better students and improves test scores."

Lou Grantham, an artist for 40 years and Civic Arts Education teacher, has been teaching the program at WCI for more than five years.

For the eighth grade project, Grantham had students do two drawings on the first day, one from their imagination or copying an artist from Manifest Destiny time. The other portrait was drawn outside in the wood-chipped tree grove in front of their classroom as part of the "plein air" lesson, she said.

On the second day, students picked one of the two drawings for the painting and learned about background and foreground. On the last day they added the details. Some students went for a color pallet of greens and browns while others had a more fiery backdrop with red and orange.

The lessons allow students to learn new rules and try them out, make mistakes and experience history, Grantham said.

They get to "use both sides of the brain at the same time, the creative and the analytical," she said. They "learn to see with their own eyes, separate from what the brain thinks it should be, or what they have been taught and then (they interpret) what they see."

Reach Elisabeth Nardi at 952-2617 or enardi@bayareanewsgroup.com.

