

The Mural

In September of 1980, work began on a mural to cover the east wall of the gymnasium.

Sean Paschke, eighth grade student at St. Agnes School is justifiably proud of the 2,500 square foot painting covering the front wall of their gymnasium. The mural is the result of a 21-day residency of Caryl Yasko, artist in residence of the Wisconsin Arts Board who approved and partially funded this project.

Since September 15th, she spent three days a week at the school, involving the entire parish community as well as the school children. The cement wall now gleams with the swirling blues of waves and water, golds and bronzes of flame, and a whirling galaxy, brown and rusts of an earth figure, and the pale haze of a sky.

The painting represents the four elements – earth, air, fire and water – but figures representing each element have added symbolism intended by the children themselves who planned, drew and painted the mural. The earth represents support, the sky is courage, the fire means strength and the water suggests perseverance; all figures are in motion, striving toward a personalized golden ball – the sun, perhaps – symbolizing the dream of one's life.

A frame-like suggestion of a white structure is central to the painting, forming a design around the basketball hoop in front of it. It indicates for some children the structures of life encountered as one struggles to realize one's dream.

How does one mobilize an entire school in 21 days? "With lots of surprises," she explained. "One of the biggest surprises is the thinking involved," she said.

Starting with an all-school meeting in which she explained and showed slides of a mural, Ms. Yasko next held class sessions brainstorming with the children, while building the ideas and visual images on which to construct the painting.

From kindergarten to eighth grade, she evoked ideas of life in this century, this world, this town, how one makes a dream come true.

Drawing sessions took place in the room behind the gym. With charcoal sticks, the children drew lines on great sheets of paper fastened to the walls. Short lines, thin lines, thick lines, curved lines – then they studied these lines and found configurations within them which they developed into objects and figures.

“Another surprise came in this stage of our work.” the artist commented. “The children discovered that an artist can tear up a drawing that’s not satisfactory. That shocked them at first!”

Preparing for the next phase, getting the figures on the wall, brought the next surprise. An artist uses math!

The students had to measure the wall, figure the scale, find square footage, use T-squares, check and recheck measurements. Mathematical preparations took three days.

Putting the drawings on the wall developed some concentrated teamwork. Ground crews had to call directions up to those on the scaffold (the wall was 21½ feet high!) and unless students didn’t mind developing sore throats, the directions had to be concise.

The concrete blocks of the wall surface provided a natural grid. Students set down plumb lines. To simplify directions, they gave names to the vertical and horizontal lines.

They learned to memorize lines, shapes and curves on a paper before mounting the scaffold to transpose these to the wall surface. They learned of convex, concave curves and how to measure them. They learned to mix oil paints.

“I didn’t do it for them. They were working on professional equipment and were responsible for their own tools. They learned color values and nuances. “Is it white?” someone would ask me. I would look up and answer “I don’t know. Is it?” Ms. Yasko explained.

In white bib overalls and a paint-splattered turtleneck sweater, she obviously enjoyed her enterprise. Her last day with her pupils included touching up here and there, cleaning up drips, doing whatever an artist does at the completion of a work.

*By Joanne T. Asperheim,
Special to the Herald Citizen.*