

Communicating/Interpreting Nature

A lesson based on the works of art in

Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Form of Nature

At the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University

September 23-December 11, 2005

Marion Mahony Griffin's graphic art is defined by her innovative representations of the natural environment. Botanical forms are woven into her architectural presentation drawings and murals and are also influential to her architectural designs and the subject of her little-known series of Australian flora. This Block-organized exhibition interprets Marion Mahony Griffin's treatment of landscaping as seen in her American domestic architectural commissions and Australian botanical studies.

Age Level: Elementary and Middle School
Estimated Time: 160 minutes (can occur over several class sessions)
Specific Topic: How to convey nature
Subtopic: Creating Prints

Goals of this lesson:

1. To examine how an artist sees nature through color, composition, medium, and method.
2. To realize that color can determine the mood of a piece of artwork and its viewer.
3. To explore by being inspired by real nature to create one's own interpretation.

Illinois Learning Standards fulfilled:

Social Science

State Goal 17: Understand world geography and the effects of geography on society, with an emphasis on the United States.

Fine Arts

State Goal 25: Know the language of arts.

State Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

Key concepts:

- Nature as it's own art
- Interpreting Nature
- Use of Color
- Print-making
- Additive vs. Subtractive Art

Objectives of this lesson:

1. Students will learn how to appreciate the way in which an artist conveys the natural world.
2. Students will use certain colors to express mood and feelings in their artwork.
3. Students will learn to practice their art form and realize the advantages of printing printmaking.
4. Students will see the varying ways in which they are able to portray a single subject.

Suggestions for student assessment:

Evaluate student work using the following criteria. It is advisable to share the criteria with your class before asking students to bring the assignment. Does the student work:

1. Convey an understanding of color and its meaning within the piece?
2. Realize they can make multiple prints with the same object?
3. Acknowledge that objects can either be found or intended for art?

Teaching resources necessary to support this lesson: color wheel, slides or large copies of the works of Marion Mahony Griffin (see examples below) or other nature inspired prints.

Lesson Summary: This lesson contains four distinct projects that work together nicely, but can occur over many different class sessions. The projects are sun prints, botanical rubbing, leaf printing, and Styrofoam block printing. Students will create at least one “finished” print from each exercise, cut it out with craft scissors, and will mount it on nature/natural paper. A second layer to this lesson is the portfolio aspect. Students will create a nature portfolio to hold all of their finished work. The nature portfolio will double as a practice plate for each print, allowing the students to have a place to “warm up” before they create their final works of art. This also makes for an interesting collage of practice prints on the portfolio, offering a glimpse of what will be inside.

Lesson Prep work: Below is a break down of prep work to be completed before each part of the lesson.

Sun Print: Before you begin this exercise, in your classroom, out of direct sunlight, prepare 8-10 shallow trays of water. Also, you’ll need to prepare a place out of direct sunlight where prints can dry. Prints tend to look similar so you might want to lay down one piece of scrap paper per student and write their name on it so prints won’t get confused.

Botanical Rubbings: Purchase, or borrow from the Block Museum, plastic botanical rubbing plates. Before your lesson, you’ll have to cut them into individual pieces.

Leaf Printing: Make sure to have plenty of extra freshly picked leaves on hand for this project. Each student’s work station will have stacks of newsprint and drawing paper. Students can share paint wells with basic colors. Each student should have 4-5 makeup sponges.

Block Prints: Cut Styrofoam into 4x6" pieces, or any desired size. Each student should have 1 piece of Styrofoam. On your supply table set up ink trays with brayers and barons, so inking of the plates is centralized and can be monitored.

Portfolios: To prepare portfolios for students, take 18x24" paper and fold in half. On the open end, hole punch 1" from top and 2" from side on both sides. Reinforce with grommets if possible. When students are ready to complete the portfolios, have extra branches and raffia.

Lesson Plan:

Overall Lesson Introduction:

-Share the *Drawing the Form of Nature* artworks with students or other artworks that depict printmaking and nature.

Discuss each asking the following questions:

- What kind of colors do you see?
- If you were standing in the artwork, how warm or cold do you think you would be?
- We are not looking at paintings, so could anyone tell me some other kinds of artworks there are? (If no one comes up with printmaking lead them to the answer by asking if anyone has ever used stamps before and what the benefits they allow) [10 minutes]

Sun Prints:

I. Start by walking the students outside and asking them to pay special attention to different kinds of leaves, bark, etc...Have your students pick up several different kinds of leaves (different shapes, etc..) and two sticks to make both sun, inkprint, and portfolios with later.

II. In an area that is not exposed to direct sunlight hand out 1 folder to each student. Folders should contain 1 sun print sheet and 1 piece of acrylic. Hand out 1 piece of sun print paper to each student. Demonstrate the process of making a sun print before you instruct your students. Show examples and explain how quickly they will have to work. Instruct the students to arrange their leaves they collected on the solar paper *in* their folder, making sure to work quickly and to not be in direct sunlight. After they are happy with their arrangement, instruct them to place the acrylic over the paper to hold the leaves in place and close their folder.

III. Assuming it's a sunny day take the students outside to expose their paper. Make sure students do not cast shadows on anyone's work. Once the paper has turned light blue have them close their folders and proceed inside (if manufactures' directions are different, follow them).

Supply List

- ✓ Folders
- ✓ Sun Print Paper
- ✓ Pieces of Acrylic (slightly larger than the Sun Print paper)
- ✓ Shallow trays for water
- ✓ Molds for Rubbings (Nasco number: 9716415J)
- ✓ Colored Pencils
- ✓ Drawing Paper
- ✓ Scissors (both straight and various edges)
- ✓ Glue
- ✓ Nature Paper/Natural Paper to mount finished work
- ✓ Makeup Sponges
- ✓ Nature Paint (washable paint)
- ✓ Newsprint
- ✓ Large Drawing Paper (18x24")
- ✓ Styrofoam Plates/trays
- ✓ Pencils
- ✓ Printing Ink and Rollers
- ✓ Raffia
- ✓ Grommets and Grommet Maker
- ✓ Ziploc Bags
- ✓ Paint Wells
- ✓ Masking Tape

IV. Once inside, use your sun print as an example and show your students how to quickly, gently, and thoroughly rinse paper. Have students rinse their sun print paper in water in trays to finish the print. Have them place their wet prints to dry, and store their leaves in a partially open Ziploc bag with a damp paper towel. In exchange give them a large piece of drawing paper folded in half with four grommet holes on top. This is the start of the nature portfolio. **[20 minutes]**

Botanical Rubbing:

I. On your supply table, layout drawing paper, colored pencils, craft scissors, nature paper, and a large supply of plastic molded rubbing plates (Nasco #9716415CJ), or contact the Block Museum Education Department at (847.491.4852 to borrow).

II. Demo techniques before asking students to create. Start by using masking tape to affix plastic rubbing to the desk. Take a piece of drawing paper and, using 1 piece of masking tape, affix the paper on top of the rubbing. Using different colored pencils, show students how gently coloring over molding makes a nice print. Show how the best prints will use lots of colors and textures. Encourage students to practice a few examples on their portfolio, making sure to get comfortable with pressure applied and mixing/overlapping colors.

III. Once students feel comfortable, they should create their own full image on a piece of drawing paper. Once they feel their piece is complete, they should cut it out with craft scissors, mount it on nature paper, and place it in their portfolio. **[30-40 minutes]**

Leaf Printing:

I. Ask your students to take out their Ziploc bags with their collected leaves (if too much time has lapsed and leaves are dried, have students find new leaves for this activity).

II. Demo the process of printing a leaf from nature. Take a leaf and place it on newsprint with the vein side facing up. Using a makeup sponge, dab a bit of paint from the paint well and apply it to the leaf. When showing an example, illustrate that too much paint will not adequately show veins and encourage students to work with a thin layer of paint. Once the leaf is completely colored, pick it up by the stem, carefully place the leaf, ink side down, on a piece of good paper. Place a piece of newsprint over the leaf, and gently but firmly press down, being careful not to move the leaf. Lift the newsprint, then leaf for the result.

III. Ask students to print their leaves. Encourage them to mix colors and use leaves more than one time. Remember to have them practice on their portfolio. Once students have several good prints, have them cut them out with craft scissors and mount on nature paper. Once dried, place in portfolio. **[30-40 minutes]**

Block Printing:

I. Distribute Styrofoam sheet to each student. Demo using pencil to create an indentation in the Styrofoam. Remind students that since we will be printing from this “plate” the image will print in reverse.

II. Ask students to draw a nature image in pencil on the Styrofoam plate. They should look back to the work of Marion Mahony for inspiration.

III. Once all students have finished their plates, demo using the roller, applying the ink, and applying pressure, making sure to emphasize the correct amount of ink. Remind them that too much ink will clog up indentations.

IV. Ask students to practice on portfolio and compile finished prints on good paper. They can mount finished work to nature paper and store plate in portfolio.

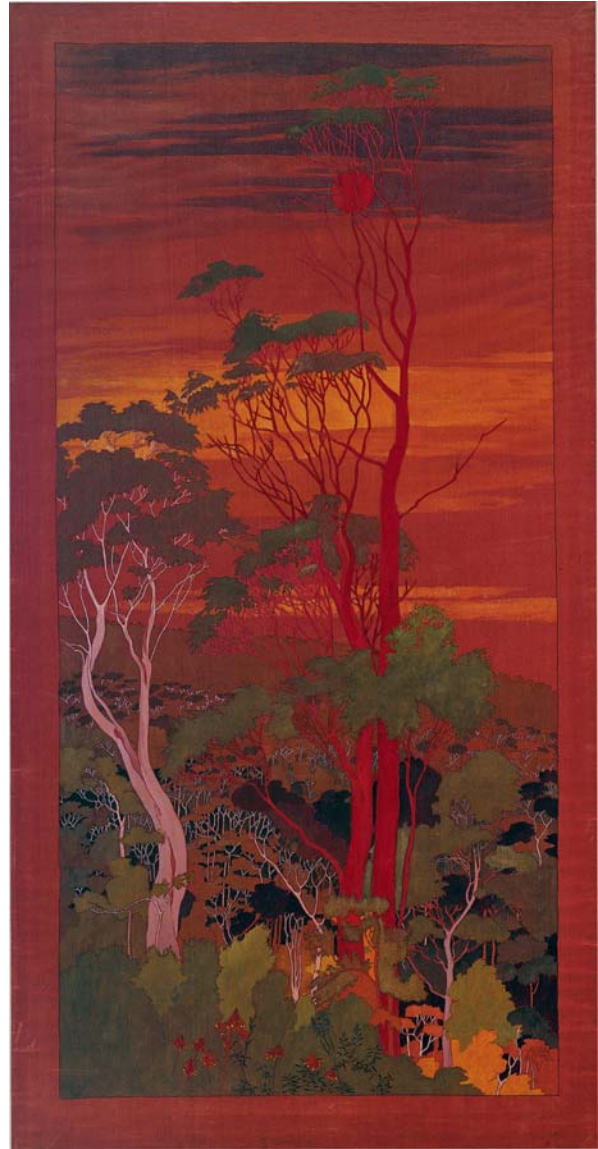
[30-40 minutes]

Finishing the Portfolios: Have your students take their 2 sticks and attach the sticks to portfolio by threading raffia through holes and tying it to the sticks. Have your students place their dried works inside the portfolio. **[20 minutes]**

(Images used in this lesson come from the *Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Form of Nature* exhibition organized by the Block Museum of Art. Lessons and color images are available on the museums website at www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu under the education section.)



Marion Mahony Griffin, *Tree Fern Gully*, ca. 1919, watercolor and ink on silk. Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Gift of Marion Mahony Griffin, 1985.1.88. Photo by James Prinz.



Marion Mahony Griffin, *Eucalyptus Urnigera, Tasmania / Scarlet Bark, Sunset*, ca. 1919, colored inks and dyes on red silk. Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Gift of Marion Mahony Griffin, 1985.1.117.



Completed sunprint from
Communicating/Interpreting Nature lesson plan



Completed botanical rubbings
from *Communicating/Interpreting Nature* lesson plan



**Completed leaf printing from
*Communicating/Interpreting
Nature* lesson plan**



**Completed block print from
*Communicating/Interpreting
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**Completed portfolio from
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Nature* lesson plan**

