

# What Can We Learn From Art?

According to Sarah Garner, Beasley Art Teacher, *Everything*

"Art teaches people how to communicate, how to talk, how to be themselves...there are so many things," said **Sarah Garner, Lower School Visual Arts Teacher**. "It's almost infinite. Who we are, how to see the world around us, empathy, and compassion. Art teaches you to look deeper, beyond what you first see. It teaches you to find a way to express yourself."

Garner's enthusiasm for art started when she was a child and has only grown. She now shares that enthusiasm with all of our Beasley students. Her goals for the Lower School art program are two-fold: curricular and developing a love of the arts.

The curriculum covers the Eight Studio Habits of Mind (see sidebar). What young students learn through their work in the art studio transfers to many parts of their lives. For example, they're building fine

motor skills and learning how to manipulate tools to convey a message. These habits develop important life skills, too, such as learning to clean up after yourself. Students make connections in the studio with their other subjects in school and even in their lives at home and in their communities.

Beyond the curriculum, though, Garner strives to ensure her students learn that they are artists and to develop a lifelong love of the arts. "Whether it's visual, performing, vocal, instrumental, I just want them to find a way to express themselves and be true to themselves," she said.

Each year, Beasley artists embark on new adventures. While the concepts they explore are consistent—such as studying color or line, understanding community, learning to express or envision—they're exposed

to new and different projects. "I try not to do the same project from year to year," said Garner. This keeps her students engaged and motivates her creativity and learning as well. She notes that students say working with clay is their favorite and so they regularly explore self-expression through ceramics. Self-portraits are always popular. Garner tries to have her students create them through all their different developmental stages, then have the children look back to see their own growth both as artists and as people. How students explore their own personalities and expressions changes with each project.

Garner is also always looking for new artists to introduce to her students, and new events in the art world of St. Louis. She reads a variety of art magazines, attends art fairs, tracks art education on social media, and follows artists





Levi Dembiec '32, Hayden Dembiec '29, Emma Oesch '29, and Justin Long '31 pose for a photo with Garner in front of a wall of Lower School art.

online. One recent example of a project she was excited to share with her students is the 42 Doors of Hope project through the American Cancer Society. The Society partnered with local artists to create 42 doorways, symbolizing the 42 guest suites available at the new American Cancer Society Hope Lodge St. Louis. The doors represent each patient's unique journey to wellness while being part of a collection—a community.

"If I didn't search for new things, if I got comfortable, our classes would be stagnant," she said. "I want art to be relevant to their lives today, to help them connect to their community, and to promote student engagement." While exploring the work of old masters is always interesting, Garner loves helping connect her students with today's artists who live and create right here in their community. Two popular artists are Cbabi Bayoc and

Mark Borella, also known as the Seeds of Happiness Guy. Both are heavily invested in improving our community and are beloved by our students. Garner tries to introduce one new guest artist each year. This year, with the pandemic limiting options for our usual in-person visits, she partnered with Borella to create a live virtual visit from Borella's studio. Garner is grateful for the support MICDS receives from alumni and parents that allows her students to meet real, working artists. "This community keeps that going," she said.

She's also keenly aware of the opportunities MICDS offers to every Lower School art student. "The resources we have available are amazing," she said. "We have a kiln and a beautiful studio with access to a garden." She carefully stewards her budget to ensure that her students have access to

*continued on page 30 >>*

## Eight Studio Habits of Mind

*By Jillian Hogan, Lois Hetland, Diane B. Jaquith, and Ellen Winner*

- 1 Develop Craft:** Learning to use and take care of tools, materials, art, space, and artistic conventions
- 2 Engage & Persist:** Finding personally meaningful projects and sticking to them
- 3 Envision:** Imagining new artworks and steps to bring them to life
- 4 Express:** Making works that convey personal meaning and interpreting meaning in the works of others
- 5 Observe:** Looking closely and noticing what you may not have observed before
- 6 Reflect:** Talking about one's own art and process
- 7 Stretch & Explore:** Playing, trying new things, making mistakes, and learning from them
- 8 Understanding Community:** Learning about what artists make, learning to collaborate, and understanding that artists often work in groups

These habits are cyclical and can happen throughout the year.



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>> continued from page 29

the tools and supplies for anything they want to create. “We have the resources to explore and express ourselves with so many different media, which we are lucky to have,” she said.

Access to materials is instrumental in fostering a love of art. Garner credits her parents with always having art supplies out and accessible. “I knew very young that I loved art,” she said. She remembers all of her art teachers from elementary through high school, and it was a high school ceramics teacher who inspired her to become an educator. Her teacher had created a safe place for all students to gather and create. “It was a place you could be yourself, where it was safe to be who you were,” Garner shared.

“You knew you always had a friend there, no matter how different they are, because you all love art and have that same connection.” That teacher made her realize that she could combine her love of art with her enjoyment of working with children, which she experienced through summer jobs throughout high school and college. She majored in the Visual Art Education program at the University of Kansas through its five-year program, one of the few of its kind at the time, and she earned a Master’s degree from Webster University as a reading specialist.

Garner evokes the spirit of her high school ceramics teacher today for her students, and they inspire her, too. “I feel love and joy when they come in,” she said. Under her guidance, the Beasley art studio is a place that combines passion for art with the ability for students to find their voices and their stories. In the six years she has taught at MICDS, hundreds of students have discovered their ability to express themselves. Though she once thought she’d teach high school students,

Garner has learned that she finds meaning and connection with younger students. “They’re so excited about everything,” she explained. “There’s no filter, which is good because it comes out visually on paper and it’s really beautiful. They have no inhibitions, and no one has told them that what they’re doing is right or wrong. They’re excited to make marks and be themselves; they’re free and expressing themselves.”

Her own children are experiencing art much the same way. Claire, in 4th grade, and Catherine, in 1st grade, enjoy access to a variety of art materials. Even her husband, Patrick, a mechanical engineer, enjoys photography. Garner and her children made some fun videos during the pandemic, to share their how-to expertise with others who are looking for new things to try at home. “They are intended to spark joy and creativity and provide ways for families to have fun together,” said Garner. “They’re great for artists of all ages from younger students just learning to manipulate art tools to the advanced artists who are looking for something fun to do.” The videos differ from experiences in





01

the Beasley studio where students are challenged with new concepts, self-expression, and sharing their visual stories.

Want to encourage an artistic mindset with the children in your life? Garner says to create a space with a variety of art materials always at the ready. Let kids be the leader in their artmaking—or any type of making; don't guide them. Have conversations about their art, and let them lead the discussion. Encourage activities like visiting museums and talking about art. Garner also stresses that children should be exposed to all types of art, not just visual. Going to the symphony is a great way to share music. Go through their school art portfolios at home, and together, choose one piece they feel proud of to display for everyone to enjoy.

"Let them make a mess," Garner said, and then hesitated before admitting, "It's hard even for me." She knows that in the art studio at Beasley, students understand they are a part of an art community that is responsible for taking care of the space and one another so everyone is able to create, as part of the Eight Studio Habits of Mind.

She loves that even the littlest learners take pride in caring for each other and the art studio. At home, it can be a little harder for Mom to resist asking, "How long are we going to keep that cardboard contraption?"

Garner said these are great tips for adults, too. As you remind the children in your life that they're artists and will always be artists, remember that goes for you, too. Art, like much of life, is learning that it's okay to do something you didn't originally plan, and then problem-solving ways to do it differently or a way you like it better. Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." George Bernard Shaw suggested, "We don't stop playing because we grow old...we grow old because we stop playing." Garner posits that these makers remind us that as we grow older, we often replace our internal desire to create with our adult responsibilities.

"Artists are always looking for ways to connect with people visually," Garner said. "Artists are always people who are growing."



02

01. Guest artist Shevare' Perry works with Beasley students in the art studio.

02. Kate Griffith Moore talks with Catherine Cai '27 about three-dimensional paper art design.

**Need more inspiration?**

Visit [www.magazine.micds.org](http://www.magazine.micds.org) to read a recent piece Garner wrote to motivate her teaching peers at MICDS.