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Gargoyles galore

[Arts & Activities, May, 2005 by Gary Kohl](#)

What could go better with a medieval unit than gargoyles? During our study of the Middle Ages, students showed an interest in the figures that they saw on castles and other "old buildings." Most of the grades in our school have worked with clay before, and we felt that our sixth-grade students would be able to create the intricate lines and curves that make the gargoyles so unique and interesting.

We began this lesson with a brief background-history about gargoyles. The grotesque and fearsome creatures immediately fascinated the students. They learned that the pulled open or wide mouths were used to devour giants. They also warded off evil and protected those who dwelled behind their guarded walls.

The students examined images of gargoyles from a stack of pictures and collected examples, as well as an old poster that contained a splendid array of gargoyles. We discussed the characteristics that are noticeable on most of the figures and also the differences that made each unique: the pointed ears, the bat-like wings, and the paw-shaped hands and feet.

The class used only their hands and wooden craft sticks to shape their creations from self-hardening clay. When they made some initial attempts at designing the wings, we realized that a review of the way that clay dries was

necessary. The problem was that some students had stretched the wings too thin. Once dried, the wings might have broken off.

When the clay loses its moisture, it shrinks about 10 percent so, at this stage, we emphasized that limbs should be thicker to accommodate the shrinkage, and that extras added on had to be securely fastened using slip when pieces got too dry.

To prevent excessive drying, the clay was wrapped in plastic and allowed to sit overnight. This ensured that the basic shapes the students had made would be ready for details and smoothening once the clay semi-hardened.

The following day we removed the plastic. The students polished the corners using their fingers and some water, then put in toes, wrinkles and other details (details not carved into the clay were secured with slip). The gargoyles were then left to air-dry over the weekend to ensure thorough drying throughout the thicker parts.

When school resumed Monday, the figures were taken outside and the stone-textured spray paint was added. The paint gave the gargoyles a realistic look that earned numerous compliments when the display was set up in the hallway.

All of the students, even those who doubted their ability to complete something as complex looking as these, were thrilled with their results. It's definitely an activity worth repeating.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will ...

- * create their own distinct sculptures.
- * create three-dimensional art.
- * use their sculpture and its history to better understand the past.
- * better understand the properties of clay.
- * learn about medieval architecture.

MATERIAL

- * Self-hardening clay
- * Krylon[R] stone-textured spray paint
- * Wooden craft sticks
- * Plastic bags/sheeting to cover tables
- * Clear plastic to wrap sculptures

WEB SITES

- * ils.unc.edu/garg/3tooth.html
- * www.angelsandearthlythings.com/sg147.html
- * www.geocities.com/area51/Dungeon/5051/Gargoyles/garmon5.jpg

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