

A Feminine Perspective

ARTIST: Martha Rasmussen Harding (1933-) Provo, Utah

TITLE: *Becoming as a Little Child* 1994

MEDIA: Oil on canvas

SIZE: 41-1/2" x 29-1/2"

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Martha Rasmussen Harding was born in Provo, Utah. During the depression, her family moved to Salt Lake City, where her father started his own business as a meat cutter. Her mother was an artist (she had taken art in college) and hung a few paintings in the family home. However, as soon as Martha's mother had children, she quit painting. Martha had one brother and two sisters. As a child, she was always drawing and doodling. When she was six, she entered a patriotic poster contest and won. The prize was an ever-sharp pencil. Martha remembers taking art classes in the summer recreation program and making things out of clay and leather. These artistic experiences were a great joy to Martha, but she has wondered why her mother didn't encourage her to be an artist.

Martha Harding married soon after graduating from high school, and her interest in art had to be put on the back burner until her first child entered kindergarten. Then one day her son brought home a flier offering adult-education classes in art, and she and a neighbor decided to go to some of the art classes together. These classes heightened her interest in art as well as teaching her art skills. She started teaching oil painting classes in her home and did this for 16 years. During this period, Harding mostly painted landscapes.

Harding remembers that she organized her house with the specific purpose of allowing herself time to paint. One day she said to one daughter, "Chris, your name should be Chris Play Harding," to which her daughter promptly replied, "Your name should be Martha Paint Harding!"

In 1984, after all of her children were attending school, she decided to attend Brigham Young University. She wanted to gain more skills to share with her students. Soon, taking art classes wasn't enough, she wanted to get her Bachelor of Fine Arts. In 1990, Martha received her BFA, and in the spring of 1995, she earned a Master of Fine Arts in painting from Brigham Young University.

Martha Harding is the mother of 7 children and grandmother of 15, and she tries to express in her art that the time invested in the family pays off. She admires Minerva Teichert as an artist and as a mother. Harding feels that even though their paintings don't look anything alike, a strong parallel exists between their art. Teichert talked of her children as her jewels and expressed that her painting seemed to call to her --she felt her art and family were intertwined. Martha Harding talks of two goals in her painting: " The first, which is more important to me, is to reveal the fact that family can be a blessing in spite of the burden, and second, is to allow the viewer to re-experience the emotions felt toward the family from a child's point of view."

Recently, Harding received a letter from her daughter-in-law telling about an incident with Harding's granddaughter Kellie. Kellie had told her mother she was having a hard time trying to decide if she wanted to be an artist or a mommy. Her mother told Kellie that her grandmother was proof she could successfully do both. Kellie was thrilled, and said she wants to be an artist like her grandma because "I love to paint and draw like grandma, and also, we both like to eat."

Martha Harding's present direction in art grew out of several wonderful drawings sent to her by her grandchildren. One of these drawings was of a house, which inspired her to create paintings that display her own spontaneous drawings and the children's drawings together. She approaches the serious subject of families in a playful way. Harding describes her artistic process by explaining,

As I work on these canvases, I use collage, children's drawings, and my own intuitive drawings. I enjoy the integration of the unexpected, the abstract, and the concrete, which allows me to create a world of imagination. I am constantly surprised at how my intuitive drawings always seemed to fit in with the theme of the painting. They start with doodles while I am listening to music. I then expand the doodles with drawing and painting. It is evident that cadmium red light paint is my favorite color, and a painting does not seem to be complete without a dash of it here and there.

Martha Harding creates a new visual language free from the academic world of realism-- a language filled with symbols from the heart. In February of 1994, her husband Ray woke her up to tell her a dream he had about her paintings. He suggested that the backs of children (often included in her paintings), are symbolic of a child's view, "we watch them observing their world."

These and many other symbols are present in Harding's paintings such as the following: double doors on a house are the double standards of the world, vertical lines are symbols of stability created by parents, floating figures are symbols of the child's imaginary

world, bright colors are symbols of the happiness of families, the colored underpaintings allowed to show through in areas are symbols of the unexpected happenings in life and the family, and her imagery-filled canvases are due to her desire to please everyone--like a hostess at a family reunion trying to help everyone have a good time--she is the hostess of the canvas. A graduate student visited her studio and said, " I really like your work. When I look at it, it makes me happy." Martha says, " that is exactly what I want to portray!"

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

What style of art is this painting? (Realism, Abstract Expressionism, Fantasy, Symbolism, and Expressionism are all possibilities, but Harding does not really fit any of these categories. Allow the students to discuss and to give reasons for their choices but do not encourage a specific finding.) If the students have any exposure to artists like Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, or Pablo Picasso, they may be able to draw comparisons between art works by these artists and Martha Harding. If you have examples, you may want to show the class some pieces by these other artists and discuss where their art fits in relationship to other styles of art. For younger classes, you may want to focus on what the art is like without worrying about styles names.

After learning about Martha Harding from the **Biographical Information**, describe the qualities of her artwork. Or, ask the students to respond to the work, and then read the **Biographical Information** to them and see if their response to her artwork changes. What are the effects of Harding's color choices? Would the painting have the same feeling if it were done in subtle, earth tones like Ella Peacock's paintings? (See *In Nephi* also on CD-Rom.) Why? What tells you that this piece of art was done by an adult artist and not by a child? What symbols and meaning can you find in this piece?

What is the difference between Harding's artwork and the children's pieces she uses as inspiration? Does making a conscious choice to use child-like imagery make the art good or bad? Why? Do you like this piece? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

1. Visual Arts-making

Objective: The students will increase their understanding of the variety of creative processes by utilizing an incorporating, intuitive approach in a drawing or painting.

Show the class the image of *Becoming as a Little Child* and discuss with the students some of the information from the Biographical section about Harding's artistic process, how she uses an approach that incorporates children's drawings with intuitive responses of her own. She also talks to her grandchildren about the meaning and stories behind their drawings and uses that information in her paintings. You may want to contrast her approach with that of artists who spend hours and hours in their studios, painstakingly building up layer upon layer of paint in carefully constructed compositions. (For example-Jan Vermeer, Rembrandt, Michelangelo.) You may also want to briefly show the students a selection of artworks that demonstrate a broad range of creative approaches and discuss the variety.

Then assign the students to do a quick sketch of something important to them. When the sketches are finished, have the students exchange sketches with someone else in the class. Ask each student to talk briefly with the student whose sketch he or she now has and to find out what the meaning or importance of the pictured image or event is. The students should then take a few minutes to look at the sketches and make some connections between the drawings and their own feelings. Each student will now incorporate a classmate's sketch in a larger, finished drawing or painting of his or her own. Although the students should use an intuitive approach to their pieces, you may want to remind them part way through to check for balance, proportion, rhythm, or whatever art principles you have worked on in class.

Display the finished works and discuss the results and the children's responses to this particular creative approach.

Extension: Have the students do the above activity and then do a very careful, sustained drawing of an interesting object or still-life arrangement, trying to make as realistic a rendering as possible. Display finished pieces from both activities and discuss the contrasting experiences. Which assignment was the most fun? Which assignment produced the best art? Have the students defend their answers. Does personality play a role in which activity you prefer? Does culture play a role? How and why?

2. Visual Arts-expressing

Objective: The students will demonstrate an understanding of expressive properties of art.

Show the class the image of *Becoming as a Little Child* and discuss with the class what is the main emphasis or intent of this painting (i.e. Is the artist trying to make things look real? Is the artist trying to convey emotions or feelings within the artwork?) In the discussion, you will want to include the idea that houses, people, etc. don't have to be realistically portrayed in art. One of the most destructive ideas, to art, is that things must look a specific way, be a certain color, or be portrayed in a way that tries to represent accurately the physical aspects of objects or people. Point out that no artwork is ever more than a visual image. No matter how realistically portrayed, the work is a response, an artist's interpretation of nature. Art is intended to convey ideas or feelings is often referred to as expressive art. If you have other examples of work that clearly portray feelings or ideas using references to real life, as Harding's work does, include those examples.

Then assign the students to decide on one item or person who has meaning for them. If the students are old enough to write, have them make a list of words or phrases that describe the object or person and the feelings they have for it or the person. Then they should make a simple sketch, focusing on the ideas they've written about their subject rather than on the looks. Each decision the students make should refer back to their list. For example, their concern should not be "What color is my dog?" but rather "What color will convey to viewers how I feel about my dog?" Make your approach fit the age of your students, but be sure to remind them often to think about what feelings and ideas their artistic choices will have on the viewers.

3. Language Arts

Objective: The students will demonstrate an understanding of descriptive language by writing word poems.

This activity can be done in conjunction with art activity 2. If you chose to do this activity only, use as much of the preparatory discussion in art activity 2 as needed to introduce the writing activity. Or, use some of the following material in the art activity and intertwine the activities as seems good.

Read the students a physical description such as the description of a particular dog breed from an encyclopedia. Then read them a description of a dog or other animal from a book or short story. Discuss the reasons for the differences in the descriptions. Then relate the discussion to artworks.

If the class has done the art activity, they can use their word lists or can make new ones. Have them write descriptions of a chosen object or person, focusing on creating word pictures for the readers. If the students seem to be struggling to find descriptive words, you may need to help them by asking them to list words by categories like colors, sounds, emotions, sensations, time, places, etc. If your students are old enough, include some more abstract concepts like speed, confusion, illness or peace. Have the students share their word poems with the class. If you have done both the art and language activity, create a display with the word poems and artworks.

4. Social Studies

Objective: The students will demonstrate their understanding of important contributions to society by completing one of the following activities.

Choose one of the activities outlined below to emphasize contributions from society .

1. Time Line or Illustrated Map--discuss the kinds of contributions people and groups have made to our society. Lead in to the period or area the class will next study, or is studying, in Social Studies. Make research assignments that cover the most important people of the time or area, and when research is complete, have each student or group make a section of a time line or illustrated map that shows what the assigned person or groups' contribution to society is. Arrange the time line or map in a prominent place in the classroom where it can serve as reference material during coming lessons.

2. Play or Dramatic Scene--Another application is for the students to do research to learn about one or several important contributions and have the students either write a short play or several individual scenes about people or groups who were important to the time or area being studied. Let the students bring props and simple costumes and preform the play or scenes for other classes. Or, have all the classes of the same grade divide up subjects and research and write plays they can perform for parents as well as the rest of the school.

3. Open Activity--Give students the chance to choose various contributions made by society from a prepared list or to research and then choose some individual or group who is important to the time or area being studied. After brief research about the chosen subject, each student will decide on an appropriate way to present his or her subject to the class. Allow as much latitude as possible, but make sure each student gains your approval for his or her project. Students may choose to make a painting, create or learn a piece of music or dance, recite poetry or drama, write an essay or report, teach the class a skill, build a model, give a report, present a slide show, bake or cook food, or anything that will help the class understand and remember the person or group and the contribution made.

Give the students time to make the agreed-upon presentations to the class. Part of your agreement with the students will probably have to be a reasonable time limit per presentation so the activity works with your class' schedule.