



Led by Heather Mott, Raegan Porter and her classmates analyze “The Scream” by Edvard Munch. AMANDA THOMPSON

# EMPATHY FACTOR

Sealey fourth-graders learn to analyze art, emotion



Sealey art students are eager to share their interpretations of example artworks. AMANDA THOMPSON

**Amanda Karioth Thompson**  
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Reproductions of famous artworks line the perimeter of Heather Mott’s art room.

Examples from Romare Bearden, Mary Cassatt and N.C. Wyeth show a peaceful community, a woman holding a child, and a spirited wild horse. These artworks elicit strong emotional responses which have been studied and discussed by art historians and critics. In Mott’s class, they’re discussed by fourth-graders.

Projected onto the board are more examples of famous artworks and art students are prompted to describe the emotions they awaken. In response to Dorthea Lang’s “Migrant Mother,” one student shared, “it looks like she’s upset because she can’t pay her bills.” This type of close examination and inquiry relates to a new initiative at Sealey Elementary School.

Mott explained, “the Sanford Harmony program for social-emotional learning is research based and it helps the kids communicate better in their classrooms.” The goal is for students to gain skills to work through interpersonal difficulty, becoming their own mediators and problem solvers. By incorporating these strategies into her teaching, Mott sees additional benefits.

“It expands their vocabulary and helps kids become a bit more educated in art literacy.” When students are encouraged to analyze artworks critically, verbalize their aesthetic response and create their own expressive images, “they learn about their own and each other’s emotions. They become more empathetic to people’s feelings.”

Sealey fourth-graders investigated the displayed artwork reproductions and discussed their findings. After jotting down their emotional

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reactions on sticky notes, students adhered them to the artwork. They were asked to consider the way an image is rendered, with crisp lines or blurry brushstrokes, and how color might convey emotion. "Once they start seeing all of this, you can see the wheels turning," said Mott.

Responding to diverse examples allows students to thoughtfully design their own artworks.

Mott admits, "this is a challenging activity because a lot of kids just want to draw a heart and put love, love, love in the background. I talk to them about how it doesn't have to be so literal. I want them to struggle through it and it is a little bit of a struggle. I want them to come to some kind of agreement in their mind of how to convey how they feel, visually."

Amarion Thomas has some ideas. "I'm going to draw a basketball court with a goal and me making a basket. Basketball makes me strong." To communicate this feeling, he plans to use just three colors, a choice inspired by the restricted palette of "Hope" by Shepard Fairey, one of the example images shown to students.

Raegan Porter is going in the opposite direction. She plans to include a "rainbow of colors" in her artwork and she realizes that art can be a powerful communication method. "Sometimes drawing is easier than finding words," she said. "Also, artwork lasts longer than words will."

Creating artwork is a personal endeavor and an outward display of emotions can make some feel vulnerable. For students to share their feelings in such a visible way, they have to know they're supported. Mott is committed to making her art room a safe space where students respect and trust one another. "I encourage them to give positive feedback and listen to other people's ideas."

After 27 years of teaching, Mott is steadfast in her belief that art is essential to a complete education. "It is an outlet for them. They make so many decisions



**Heather Mott assists a student in brainstorming ways to visually depict his emotions.** AMANDA

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and solve so many problems in a 45-minute art class, more than people really know. It taps into their creativity but also their talent, memories and emotions."

"I hope that through their drawings, my students gain a better understanding of how they can put their feelings down on paper and feel empathy for somebody else so we're a little more compassionate to other people. I'm not looking for perfection, I'm looking for effort and understanding."

*Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*