



Margot Mack is making a collage today.

The longtime WSMS teacher and WSMS-TEP art instructor made a New Year's resolution to create one new collage every day in 2012, and so far she has kept her promise. (Coincidentally, WSMS teacher Cristina Moreno is doing the same thing, just with photos.) No two of Margot's collages are alike; all of them are beautiful. Not only is the project enjoyable, it serves as a daily reminder to her of the importance of keeping art in one's life as an adult.

COLLAGES BY MARGOT MACK AND PHOTOS BY CRISTINA MORENO ON DISPLAY IN THE TEACHERS ROOM AT WEST SIDE MONTESSORI SCHOOL



HAVE PAINTS WILL TRAVEL

MARGOT MACK'S ROAMING ART CLASS



Margot brings the same joy and creativity to her “roaming” art program at WSMS. Now in its second year, the program was conceived by Head of School Mimi Basso as a way to build on the school’s already robust art curriculum. Margot visits each classroom twice a month for one hour, and spends that time helping students develop basic and advanced skills (holding a brush, mixing paints, working with clay) as well as their grasp of artistic concepts and vocabulary. Much has been written about the positive impact of art education on early childhood development; what is more immediately apparent at WSMS is how much the children enjoy Margot’s visits.

Over the past two years Margot has brought in a variety of art materials for her students. Finger paints offer a richly tactile way for children to explore pigment. Watercolor paints require more control and an internalization of the sequence of steps required to realize one’s vision. Tempera paints present an interesting challenge: unlike watercolors, they obscure what’s painted underneath. Margot has found clay to be a particularly magical medium in which to work: she has her students take off their shoes and socks and discover the properties of clay with their toes and the soles of their feet.

In keeping with Montessori practice, Margot offers presentations of how to use these media before she invites the children to begin. She hastens to clarify, however, that the program is not about teaching

students how to do something versus how not to do it. Rather, she helps her students discover the properties of various media, and she models techniques that the kids can use to achieve the effects they are envisioning in their mind’s eye. Much of her discussion with them focuses on cause and effect.

“Students start to see that they’re working differently from one another, but what’s great is that there’s an adult there who helps to shape that, so that when someone mixes all the colors together and everything turns brown I can say, ‘That’s so interesting. How did that happen?’” Margot explains. “When the kids see my reaction, they learn that that’s an okay thing. I never say, ‘Oh! You forgot to wash your brush!’ but I might say, ‘I notice your water is still clear. Have you tried washing your brush yet?’”

To encourage her students’ spirit of exploration, Margot makes sure to engage multiple senses when presenting the materials. She uses clear, colorless containers for the paint water so that the children can observe what happens when they swirl a paint-covered brush in it, or when they dip in another color afterwards. She runs a paint brush over the backs of the children’s hands before they begin painting so they get a sense of the brush’s texture, how it will move across the paper. She invites students to squish finger paint between their fingers, or to try using it with their knuckles, or even their elbows.

Although Margot has spent most of her life making art, in the classroom she lets the children take the lead: “It’s not about thinking of ideas for the kids to do; it’s about getting them to work in the medium and get comfortable so they can express their own thoughts and feelings with those materials you’ve provided for them. The motivation comes from the children, not from the adults.”

The Montessori approach applies to all learning disciplines at WSMS, and Margot’s art program is no exception. Before any actual drawing is done, for example, she leads a discussion about line and accompanies the students on a “hunt” for different types of lines in the classroom and in nature. Before any attempt to draw a flower, Margot has the children take apart real flowers and examine all their different parts. Prior to painting, she gives each child his/her own individual set-up: a cup of water, a fresh palette. Once a child receives a set-up, it belongs to that child for the remainder of the period. Margot allows each child to work for as long as he/she wishes within the allotted hour.

The end of the hour always comes too soon for both teacher and students, and Margot often ends up staying a couple of minutes longer before having to gallop straight to her next class. Many of the rewards of the work are clearly instantaneous, but when asked about the bigger picture—the role that art plays in a child’s development—she replies without hesitation.

“Art is one of the most amazing gifts that you can give to children,” Margot declares. “It’s innate in all of us. They’re doing it naturally, with us or without us. There are so many things that can be expressed just in the process of doing it. The way children interact with it, it can be a release of emotions; it can be an expression of



THERE ARE A LOT OF CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ART AND CHILDREN’S DEVELOPING LANGUAGE. ART IS ONE OF THE BEST STORYTELLING MEDIUMS OUT THERE: MAKING SOMETHING AND THEN TELLING THE STORY OF THE PROCESS OF WHAT YOU MADE.

what they’re feeling; it can relax them. There are a lot of correlations between art and children’s developing language. Art is one of the best storytelling mediums out there: making something and then telling the story of the process of what you made.”

Although WSMS has long been praised for its commitment to art education, Margot regards this new program as an important step forward and is honored to be entrusted with its administration. She explains, “What’s wonderful about WSMS is that we’re constantly reviewing our practices with children: How can we better support children’s development in this area? How can we better support teachers’ development in supporting children in this area? This program has been a real growing experience for us as a school, and most definitely for me as an individual.”

She has an ever-growing string of beautiful collages to prove it.





When asked what parents can do to support their children’s artistic efforts at home, Margot offers the following advice:

- Have plenty of materials readily available. You needn’t provide anything fancy. Bring recycled paper home from work, or buy a huge ream of newsprint paper.
- Let your child start over. Sometimes children need to crumple up what they’re working on and start again. By having materials abundantly available, you and your child will be less inclined to regard them as a precious, limited resource (“You’re using too much, you’re wasting it!”)—a perspective that often hampers a child’s creativity.
- Enjoy art with your child. It’s important for children to see that art is something enjoyable to adults and children alike. Sit alongside your child and make an art project of your own, or take him/her to an art museum.
- Be keen observers of our environment, and of nature. So much of art is inspired by nature, and so many art materials are derived from nature. Anytime you are out and about with your child, take the time to notice together the sights, sounds, and smells around you.

