




Commentary: When Art Speaks: One Student's Inquiry Process

Alexandra Hillcoat

ABSTRACT

In this interview, Alex Hillcoat, a cycle three elementary school student, shares her experience in developing a special project related to the life of artist Marie Laurencin. Her project included several creative art forms: poetry, painting, writing, crossword puzzle making and even developing a museum floor plan with the works of the artist. Alex reflects on how perseverance in her research served her well and how these skills will be useful for her in the future. Finally, she has practical advice for students engaging in similar projects as well as for their teachers.

I want to speak to you today about a project you did at school in cycle three elementary this year. First of all, can you tell us how the project was introduced to you by your teacher?

ur teacher—we had just finished the last theme and she always introduces our topics by opening up a PowerPoint project that she made and starting off with a question. She started off with the question, “Art speaks. What does it say?” and then there’s this whole thing of answering the question and then she told us about the art project. For the past years we’ve been watching the grade sixers do the project and always at the end the rest of the school would go and watch them. So it’s really exciting to be the ones in grade six now. Our teacher gave us a paper that said, “Choose the artist you want to research.” We went to choose.

Can you outline what you were expected to do in this project?

What we were expected to do is to take a three-sided Bristol board and choose three of the options she gave us to explain the life of our artist. So we had to find 20 facts to start us off and that would be used to make the three items, the three options we each chose, along with a poem. We had to explain the artist's life using just those materials.

How did you decide to do your research on Marie Laurencin?

Marie Laurencin was on one of the lists she gave us and there was two girls—and I wanted to do a girl, just didn't want to do a boy—and I also wanted to do one that no one had ever done before. So, one of them, Marie Cossette, plenty of people had done her before but with Marie Laurencin I realized I hadn't seen anyone that had done research and I looked up her life and she had an interesting life so I chose her.

How did you go about doing your research?

I typed in her name and I chose anything that looked interesting. I read the little like—in Google there's the title of what the website's called and then there's a description of what's in the website. So I'd look at that, find it interesting and I'd click on the link. At school our computer teacher found this tool on Google where you typed in something that you wanted to find and it would give you what to type in to find exactly what you wanted. So I did that and slowly picked up little pieces.

What are some of the products that you produced?

So one thing I did is a crossword and I found a crossword-making website. It took me a few tries because a lot of them wouldn't let me print the actual crossword part. The questions were about her life so someone who had been listening to me when I had done my presentation, they would have been able to answer the crossword. And then I made a poem. It's based on the five senses. Basically I chose a painting and it's what I think would be in the painting if you were to actually step in it and what it would feel like. I also made a painting that I think she could have made because she painted scenery, she painted a whole lot of things. One of the things I

found when I was looking at paintings by her is that there were a lot of women with dogs. So I painted—I tried to at least—to paint a picture of a woman with a dog and then I had to write what I would call this painting and why I tried to paint it.

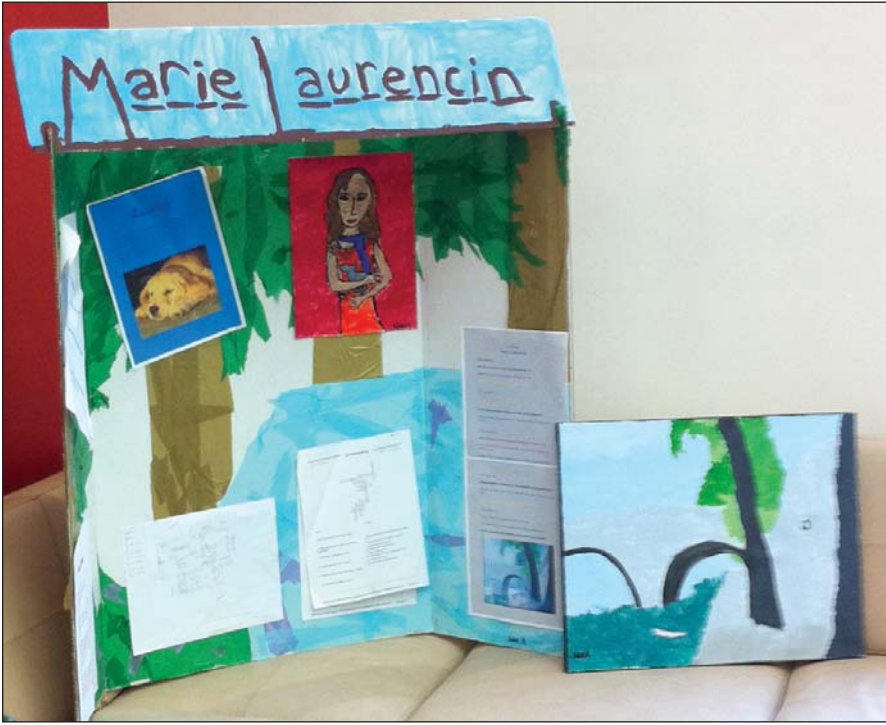


Fig. 1: Highlights from the Marie Laurencin research project

What are the main things that you learned about Marie Laurencin as a result of your inquiry?

First of all I never learned about the Impressionists before, the Impressionist painters. I didn't know anything had happened like that in the world. I learned that she, at first, was going to be just like everyone else, painting mythology and everything, but she was inspired by the other Impressionists, so she started to paint, to become an Impressionist artist even though she knew the consequences.

What did you learn about doing research?

I learned that you have to keep trying to find things even though it seems impossible. I searched so many websites and got only teeny bits of information about her. I found that when there was supposed to be a whole biography of her that it was a paragraph that didn't explain half of her life. It was hard but I went through, like, a million websites and finally collected the things I needed.

One of the things you did in your project was a floor plan of a museum. Can you talk about this?

Alright, so the floor plan. I didn't know what floor plan meant. I had to look it up on the Internet and try to figure out for myself what it was. So I found pictures of it on the Internet. There's another boy in the class who did it. He just did a room separated into teeny bits—there wasn't even any doors. I wanted to make it a bit different so I made different shapes with rooms. I put very detailed things on it. I put the paintings I liked most that she did in the rooms categorized by scenery, or dancers and with the one I did "le pont" in the middle in the scenery one. And I tried to be creative as I could. I put benches, garbage cans, a ticket booth, an information booth, the museum place for a tour, where the tour would start. And then I had to explain in each room why I put everything there, why I wanted to place that there.

What would you say to other students who are working on projects?

First of all don't try to do it all at once. It may seem like you're getting it over with but it's actually much longer because you start not wanting to do it anymore. So if you do it in small bits then you get it done faster even though it seems [it would take longer to do].

What would you say to teachers who want to assign projects?

Don't give them a due date that's so close that they have to do it in one night or whatever, because it's not always such a good project and it's kind of stressful if you have to do it in one night.

Last of all, what have you learned from this inquiry that will help you in the future?

Just keep trying. I'm going to have to research things in the future, that's for sure. I'll have to do many things like this in the future and if I have to get more than 20 facts it's going to take even longer than the hours I spent trying to get information for this. Basically just to keep trying and not just say it's not out there, I can't find it.



Alexandra Hillcoat is a grade six student in Montreal. She has two sisters, a dog and a cat. She spends her time hanging out with her friends, snowboarding in the winter, camping, hiking and longboarding in the summer and loves to read and write. She is currently working on a fantasy adventure novel.