



International House of Blues Foundation (IHOBf)

**IHOBF Blues SchoolHouse Extended Learning Activity:  
Sweet Mud Painting Workshop  
Resource Pak**

This workshop is related to the content of the IHOBf Blues SchoolHouse art tour and the Folk Art Section of the Blues SchoolHouse Classroom Guide with a focus on the paintings of Jimmy Lee Sudduth. Participating classrooms will complete pre-workshop activities and then take part in a workshop where they will create their own paintings on small cardboard panels.

Please note: This resource has been designed to support classrooms participating in IHOBf's Blues SchoolHouse Program but can be adapted for other circumstances.

I. Workshop Description:

- Pre-activities: Classroom Discussion and Student Assignment
- Sweet Mud Activity

II. Resources:

- Artist Profile (includes enlarged reproduced image of artist):  
Jimmy Lee Sudduth (Attachment I)
- Reproductions of Sudduth's sweet mud paintings (Attachment II-V)
- Key Vocabulary Sheet (Attachment VI)

III. Additional Resources:

- *Passionate Vision of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to Present*, Alice Rae Yelen, ed.
- *American Folk Art for Kids: With 21 Activities* by Richard Panchyk
- *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume I*, Paul Arnett and William Arnett, eds.
- Blues SchoolHouse Classroom Guide (available for download at the IHOBf website at <http://www.ihobf.org>)

*(Photos at top from left to right: Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Self-Portrait; Jimmy Lee Sudduth with artwork; Jimmy Lee Sudduth, New York at Night; Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Chicken)*

## IHOBF Sweet Mud Painting Workshop Description

The IHOBF Sweet Mud Painting Workshop is related to content in the IHOBF Blues SchoolHouse art tour and the Folk Art Section of the Blues SchoolHouse Classroom Guide with a focus on the sweet mud paintings of Jimmy Lee Sudduth. The project is comprised of two parts:

- *Pre-Activities:* Students will participate in a classroom discussion or presentation in which they will learn about and discuss folk art, non-traditional materials used in folk art and sweet mud paintings and reflect upon what they would use as subject matter in a sweet mud painting.
- *Sweet Mud Activity:* Arts activity of approximately 60 minutes in which students will create sweet mud paintings.

Please note: Workshop content aligns with state educational standards. IHOBF personnel and participating teachers work together to identify content standards for particular states and grade levels. As an example, following are California 5th grade content standards addressed by this workshop:

Creative Expression (5<sup>th</sup> Grade):

### Skills, Processes, Materials, and Tools

- 2.1 Use one-point perspective to create the illusion of space
- 2.2 Create gesture and contour observational drawings

### Communication and Expression through original works of art

- 2.4 Create an expressive abstract composition based on real objects
- 2.6 Use perspective in an original work of art to create a real or imaginary scene
- 2.7 Communicate values, opinions, or personal insights through an original work of art



## **Pre-Activities (Classroom Presentation/Discussion & Student Assignment):**

*Resources:*

- Artist profile and reproductions of Sudduth's sweet mud paintings (Attachments I-V)
- Blues SchoolHouse Classroom Guide (Folk Art Section)

### 1) General discussion about Folk Art and Sweet Mud Painting

Teachers lead classroom discussion with their students using the talking points listed below and drawing on the artist profiles and sweet mud painting of Jimmy Lee Sudduth. Following the discussion, teachers give students an assignment to prepare for creating their sweet mud paintings.

*What is folk art?*

- Folk art generally refers to the traditional artistic expressions of societies through visual arts, folklore, song, music and dance and other expressive forms that reflect the customs and beliefs at the heart of a culture.
- The term folk art describes art made by a people or "folk" and generally refers to artworks by individuals who have little or no training as professional artists. Some folk art is considered traditional, which means that it involves a skill that is informally learned and passed on from generation to generation. Other folk art is referred to as self-taught and may be influenced by traditional folk art but is not typically part of a folk art tradition.

Unlike artists who train in the “fine arts,” these artists do not attend art school or receive formal instruction. Folk artists sometimes begin creating art as part of their everyday routines and often do not intend to become well-known artists or even think of themselves as artists.

- Folk art has been around since the beginning of time and is found all over the world. Generally, folk art reflects customs or beliefs of a specific culture. It can include visual art, crafts, textiles, music, dance, storytelling, and other art forms.

*What is sweet mud?*

- Sweet mud is a painting media developed by artist Jimmy Lee Sudduth consisting of mud, molasses and pigment.

## 2) Introduction To Jimmy Lee Sudduth

(refer to Attachments I and II)

Jimmy Lee Sudduth was born in Alabama in 1910 and passed away in 2007 at the age of 97. He was raised by his mother and stepfather in a rural part of Alabama. His mother was a Native American medicine woman (for a younger group you may want to ask if anyone knows what that means). When he was a little boy, Jimmy would often follow her while she collected herbs, tree bark and other natural materials for use in her work. Sudduth remembers using mud to draw pictures on tree stumps while his mother was gathering her materials. He began using berries, flowers and other things – as natural dyes - to add color to his mud paintings. And when he was nine years old, he discovered that if he mixed molasses into the mud, the mixture would stick to the wood - which meant that the paintings would last longer and not be easily washed away by water.

For many years Sudduth used this mud and molasses mixture on plywood and other boards to create his art. He applied this mixture with his fingers and sometimes with a plastic fork. For some of his paintings, Sudduth continued to use natural dyes and pigments from flowers and berries to add color to the mud mixture. He became known as the “Alabama Mud Painter.”

Sudduth painted what he saw around him and things that were of interest to him. Many of his paintings are of people and he also painted self portraits.

Take a look at this sweet mud painting by Sudduth (Attachment II)

- *What is your first impression of Jimmy Lee Sudduth? (happy, warm person) Would you like to meet this person? Would he be friendly? Why or why not?*
- *What have you learned about this person from this painting? (He plays an instrument. He wears overalls and a hat)*

So, we’ve just seen how a portrait not only shows what a person looks like, but usually tells us something about the person as well.

## 3). Student Assignment to Prepare for Sweet Mud Project

Teachers inform students that they will have an opportunity to create a sweet mud painting and that they need to consider some things in preparing for the activity:

- The sweet mud paintings of Jimmy Lee Sudduth include a vast array of subjects, from portraits to landscapes, animals and city skylines. When you create your sweet mud painting, what subject matter might you choose? Why? *(allow several to share)*

Students will also be asked to consider the following information in thinking about their sweet mud paintings.

- Many of Jimmy Lee Sudduth's subjects were people, places and things that he saw every day.
- Who are the people that you see every day? What are the things that you see every day?
- Looking at the work of Jimmy Lee Sudduth, do you think that he sketched out his subjects and then painted them, or did he paint spontaneously without first sketching out his subject?
- Choose a subject from your everyday life as the inspiration for your painting



## Sweet Mud Activity (60 minutes)

### **Materials:**

- 8½ x 11" or smaller cardboard panels
- Newspaper (cover desks a/o floor)
- Disposable gloves (2 per participant)
- Plastic buckets of water with sponges
- Disposable cups (preferably small Dixie cups)
- Paper towels, paper plates, paper bowls
- Tool supplies: plastic forks, spoons, knives
- Beach or builders' sand (bags can be purchased at any home improvement store)
- Clear corn syrup
- Tempera paint in red, yellow, blue, black and white

**Note:** Because this workshop was developed in Atlantic City, an area directly adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean and its beaches, a variation has been made on the sweet mud recipe. Rather than using darker river mud, this workshop utilizes beach sand. In order to preserve the lighter color of the sand, molasses (a very dark syrup) has been replaced with clear corn syrup.

**Work Space:** A well ventilated room with worktables, chairs, and blackboard or demonstration board is needed for this activity. Each student or student group should have a setting that includes newspapers laid out to protect the table surface. If possible, it is suggested that the floor also be covered with either a drop cloth or newspaper. Avoid using carpeted rooms for this project.

**Presets on table:** Gloves, cardboard, plastic utensils, bowls of sand, extra bowls and paper plates can be preset in the center of each table.

Paints and syrup should be pre-poured in Dixie cups but should not be a part of the preset. Paint and syrup can be distributed while the facilitator is explaining the process.

Copies of the reproductions of Sudduth's sweet mud paintings should also be available for students to examine and reference, although a slide or PowerPoint projection of work examples is preferable.

**Special Note:** If only primary paint colors are being distributed, take a moment to discuss mixing secondary and tertiary paint colors.

**Sequence:** Facilitator should begin by having students look at the work by Jimmy Lee Sudduth, either through printed reproductions or slides/projections.

Write the following questions on the blackboard or, if using a slide/projection, include a slide with the following questions:

- What are the things that I see every day?
- Who are the people that I see every day?
- How would I represent or convey these things in a painting?

**Special Note:** Make sure that each participant has decided on the subject matter of his/her painting before the sweetmud mixing process begins.

While briefly reviewing Sudduth's biography and artwork, the facilitator can instruct participants to put on a pair of gloves, take a piece of cardboard, a bowl of sand and a spoon. Facilitator should also put on gloves to demonstrate the mixing process. Once students have collected their supplies from the center of the table, the facilitator can demonstrate the mixing process.

**Mixing the Sweet Mud:** Begin with approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a cup of sand in a disposable bowl. Dip a spoon into a cup of syrup, allowing the entire bowl of the spoon to submerge in the syrup. Do not spoon out the syrup. Once the bowl of the spoon is covered with syrup, hold the spoon above the bowl of sand and drizzle it across the surface. Once the syrup has been spread across the sand, begin mixing. Mixing can be done with utensils or fingers.

The sweet mud during the mixing process will have the consistency of slightly wet cookie dough. It will feel stiff while stirring. Add syrup or sand as necessary until the favored consistency is achieved.

ONCE THE MIXING PROCESS HAS BEEN DEMONSTRATED, SYRUP CAN BE DISTRIBUTED TO EACH TABLE.

Both syrup and paint will be communal, so each participant does not receive a separate cup of syrup. Depending on each table size, put out between one and three cups of syrup. This will also help to prevent overuse.

Once every table has all necessary supplies, participants should dip spoon into syrup and drizzle it over the bowl of sand and then begin the mixing process.

The texture of the sweet mud will vary from person to person. Some participants will prefer a thicker, clay-like substance, while others will prefer a thinner, paint or glaze texture. Either way, participants should avoid adding too much syrup, as the addition of paint will serve to further thin the sweet mud.

While participants are mixing the sweet mud, the facilitator can distribute paint to each table.

**Special Note:** While there is no correct way to mix the sweet mud, it should be noted that the denser the sweet mud and the more thickly it is applied, the longer it will take to dry. Similarly, extremely wet sweet mud will not hold a shape and will also take a great deal of time to dry.

**Adding Color:** Once participants have mixed the sweet mud mixture, they can begin to add color. Using a disposable plate as a palate, transfer a small amount of the sweet mud mixture (approximately one tablespoon) to a small area of the plate and add a small amount of paint to it. Mix until desired color is achieved. Repeat this process for each needed color, allowing each color to occupy its own section of the plate. It is suggested that each participant begin with two or three different colors.

Color should not be mixed into the original bowl of sweet mud.

**Special Note:** Encourage participants to use the entire surface of the cardboard to create their painting.

***Applying the Sweet Mud:*** After mixing two or three colors, the sweet mud paint can be applied to the cardboard panel. Participants can use forks, knives, spoons or fingers to apply the sweet mud mixture to the cardboard. This will not be as simple as it may seem, and may require adjustments to the original mixture to create the best adhesion. Encourage participants to experiment with different consistencies and textures. Each piece will be unique in terms of the media.

Once paintings are completed, they should be set on a table or rack to dry. Drying time on sweet mud paintings varies based on the consistency of the media. Most paintings will dry hard in 24 hours.

**Special Note:** Do not place paintings in direct sunlight or under heat lamps. Direct heat will cause the syrup to liquefy and will keep the painting from drying. Sweet mud paintings dry most quickly in a warm, dry environment away from direct sunlight.



## Jimmy Lee Sudduth

**Birthplace:** Born March 10, 1910, Cain Ridge, Fayette County, Alabama; died September 2, 2007.

**Background:** Jimmy Lee Sudduth was raised by his mother and stepfather in Cain Ridge, Alabama. Jimmy's mother was a Native American medicine woman. As a little boy, Sudduth accompanied her while she gathered herbs and natural materials. At the age of three, he recalled using mud to draw images on tree stumps while his mother worked. "I got to playing in that old mud hole and painted a picture on a tree. And I go back to that thing, half a mile, and I'd sit there and look at it. And it wash off. I was studying a way to make it stick. I couldn't sleep at night for studying that stuff."<sup>1</sup>

Eventually Jimmy discovered that the sticky (adhesive) quality of syrup was his answer. "I was up there with a man making syrup and he dropped the syrup in the mud. I picked it up and felt that mud and put it on the wall and it wouldn't come off. Sugar is what held it there. That's how I got started. I wanted to make things after that."<sup>2</sup> Sudduth began to use all types of natural dyes and pigments to make his art, including a variety of shades of Alabama mud found in the area around his home. He used other materials including flowers, berries, dirt, flour, grass, pine needles, coffee grounds and coal. Sudduth loved to make art, but it was not until later on in life that he was able to pursue his passion and make a name for himself as a southern folk artist.

Sudduth had little formal education and began working at an early age. For many years he made a living by working on local farms and grinding cornmeal. In 1950, he and his wife moved to the town of Fayette where he worked as a gardener and part-time handyman around town. He became a local favorite and developed somewhat of a reputation in the community for playing his harmonica and making paintings in his spare time. In the 60s, Sudduth began painting full-time. He entered his mud paintings in county fairs where he also played his harmonica, gaining further notoriety for his talents. Over the years, Sudduth became well known for his art. His work has been exhibited at the Smithsonian and in museums and galleries around the country. Sudduth passed away at the age of 97 in September of 2007.

**Subject Matter:** Sudduth did not paint from memory, but preferred to paint what he saw around him that was of personal interest. His paintings include lively representations of farm animals like *Rooster* and native Mississippi wildlife such as *Gator*. Another common subject in Sudduth's work is his dog, Toto. Sudduth typically illustrated Toto simply using a single, white **form** painted on a solid **background** with a few basic **shapes** representing the eyes, nose and mouth. In spite of the simplicity, the dog appears playful and happy in some paintings and sinister in others.

Sudduth used the same basic approach when painting **self-portraits** and portraits of people in his community. Figures are illustrated using simple shapes and are usually standing face-forward. In his

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<sup>1</sup> William Arnett. "Cutting to the Slice." *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Vol. I.* Eds. Paul Arnett and William Arnett (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000) 270.

<sup>2</sup> Arnett, 270.

self-portraits, Sudduth typically depicted himself as a farmer dressed in overalls and a cap, in a bold stance with his **body language** indicating a strong and proud man.

Sudduth was interested in architecture and painted local buildings and monuments. He completed numerous paintings of local structures, such as the town lumber company, Caines Ridge Church and covered bridges in the Fayette area. After he became well known as an artist, he was invited to New York and Washington D.C. to see exhibits of his art. Sudduth recorded memorable images from these visits, such as *New York at Night*.

**Process:** Sudduth typically began by “priming” a plywood board for use as a painting surface. To prime the board, he applied a protective coat of paint. Once the primer coat dried, he propped the board up at an angle and created an outline of his subject by dipping his fingers into a mud and sugar mixture (“sweet mud”) and finger-painting the outline of his subject. He filled in the outline with a combination of sweet mud and paint and used the tip of a fork or sharp object to create the details of the painting. He often finished a painting by making a border or frame around the edge of the picture.

Sudduth could identify up to thirty-six shades of mud that he used in his paintings over the years. Throughout his career, he also used **binders** other than syrup in his work. Examples include refined sugar, honey and even Diet Pepsi (anything with a sugar base). The natural **hues** and **pigments** he used came from his surrounding environment. Typical materials included pine needles, berries, four o’clock leaves, flower petals, grass and soot. Later in his career Sudduth began using house paints and **acrylics** instead of natural materials. With increasing age, Sudduth found it more difficult to gather materials from nature. Also, he learned that collectors preferred the lasting quality of store-bought materials to natural materials (colors from natural materials tend to fade over time). Also, in his later years Sudduth created many of his works using paintbrushes instead of painting with his fingertips due to the toxicity of the paints.

**Your Response:** Each of us has a unique and personal response to art. Our responses can be similar to those of others, but they can also be very different. Read the following questions and then take a few minutes to really look at the images before responding. If this is a group discussion, be prepared to hear responses that may be surprising and quite different from your own.



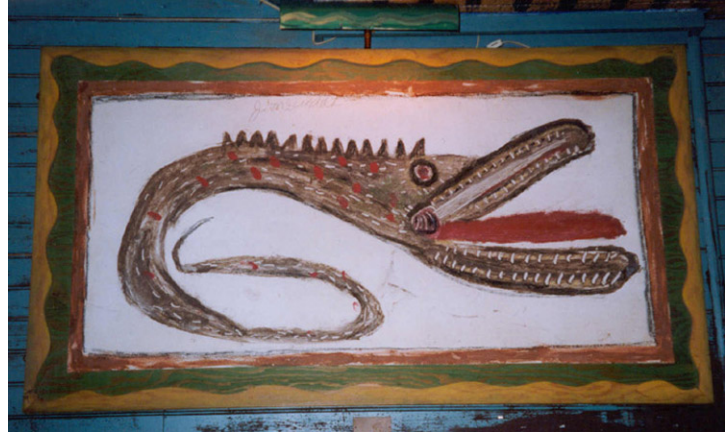
*Self-Portrait*

Look at the painting *Self-Portrait* by Jimmy Lee Sudduth. A self-portrait is a very unique form of self-expression. It is a portrait an artist creates using his/herself as the subject. Self-portraits may be an accurate representation or take on a more expressive form, sometimes using exaggerated colors or distorted shapes to convey a specific mood or message.

- What colors and shapes do you see?
- Where do you think the figure in the painting lives? What might be his trade or profession?
- What does he tell us with his body language?
- Think about making a self-portrait of your own and describe what you would include.



*Chicken*



*Gator*

Jimmy Lee Sudduth captured images of rural Mississippi life in the paintings titled *Chicken* and *Gator*. In addition, Sudduth typically used materials from his surroundings to create his artwork.

- Why do you think that Sudduth chose to represent things from his immediate environment?
- How might the subject matter be different if Sudduth had lived in a city?
- How might the materials that an artist would use in the city vary from those found in rural areas?
- What are subjects in your environment that interest you? Are there any materials in your surroundings that you could use to depict these subjects in a piece of art?

Sudduth made paintings inspired by his love of architecture. County courthouses, libraries, apartment buildings and log cabins can all be found in his work. In *New York at Night*, Sudduth chose a series of high-rise buildings as his subject.

- What colors did the artist use? Are they bright or muted?
- Describe where you find the use of patterns or repetition.
- Can you imagine what features about the building inspired Jimmy Lee Sudduth to make this painting?



*New York at Night*



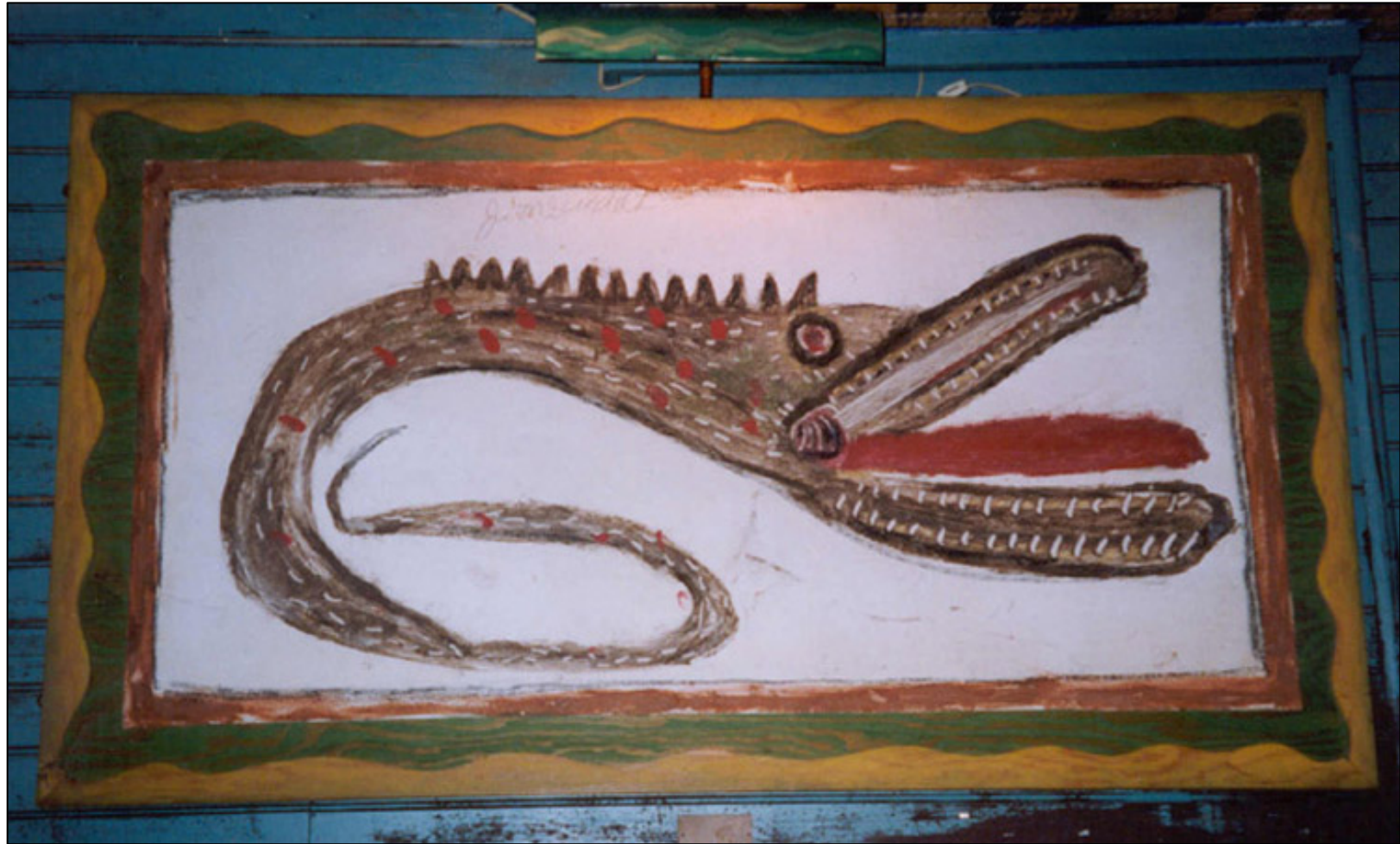
**Jimmy Lee Sudduth**



***Self-Portrait with Mandolin* by Jimmy Lee Sudduth**



***Self-Portrait* by Jimmy Lee Sudduth**



**Gator by Jimmy Lee Sudduth**



***New York at Night* by Jimmy Lee Sudduth**

## IHOBF Sweet Mud Painting Workshop Resource Pak: Key Vocabulary Sheet

**abstraction** - A work of art that emphasizes design and investigation of forms. The subject matter may be recognizable or may be non-representational and completely transformed into shape, color and/or line.

**acrylic paint** - A synthetic (manmade) paint with a water base that dries quickly and is easy to work with. Acrylics may be thinned with water or used straight out of the tube.

**background** - The part of a picture of a scene that appears to be farthest away from the viewer.

**binder** - The ingredient that enables paint to bind to the painting surface. Latex is a common binder in house paint.

**body language** - Gestures, facial expressions and bodily movements that serve as nonverbal communication.

**color** - The hue, value or intensity of a pigment. Examples include bright, bold, dull, muted (pigment - substance used as coloring; hue - the shade or tint of a color; value - the lightness or darkness of a color).

**composition** - The arrangement of elements of art in a work of art.

**expression** - To picture, represent or symbolize a mood or feeling in art, music or dance/movement.

**figurative** - Relating to the representation of form or figure by drawing, carving, etc.

**form** - An enclosed area that has or suggests volume; three-dimensional. Example: cube, cylinder.

**hue** - The name of any color found in its pure state in the color spectrum or rainbow. It may also refer to an aspect of a color. For example, "the lake water had a greenish hue."

**improvise** - To invent, compose, or perform spontaneously, or with little or no preparation.

**line** - A continuous mark with length and direction. A line can be the outline of a shape, or it can create patterns and movement. Examples: straight, diagonal, curved, zigzagged, etc.

**medium** - The material or technique used in making art. Example: sawdust and glue, house paint on wood, sandstone.

**mid-ground** or **middle ground** - The area within a composition that lies between the foreground and background.

**mixed media** - The plural of medium; an artwork that includes the use of two or more media. Example: using pastel, ink and colored pencil.

**mood** - Expressing certain qualities of the mind. Examples: somber, happy.

**motif** - A recurrent theme or a repeated element of design in an artwork.

**opaque** - A material or substance that does not reflect light and cannot be seen through. The opposite of transparent.

**pigment** - The fine, colored powder that produces the color of any medium. For example, mixing a blue powdered pigment with water, oil or other fluids will produce a blue paint or dye.

**portrait** - A work of art that represents a person or a group of people. Portraits usually show what a person looks like as well as reveal something about the subject's personality.

**pose:** position in which the body is held in place without moving.

Frontal: with face straight forward

Profile: turn to the side so that only half of the face shows

Three-quarter: halfway between frontal and profile, so that face and shoulders are seen at an angle.

**self-exploration:** the effort to discover your own character, personality, moods, motivations, goals, likes and dislikes.

**self-portrait** - A portrait that an artist creates by using himself or herself as the subject, usually executed from a reflection in a mirror.

**shape** - An area enclosed by an outline or contrasting color that is two-dimensional. Shapes can be geometric (triangular, square, etc.) or organic (free form, with curving and irregular outlines).

**symbol** - A form, image, sign or subject that stands for or represents a meaning or suggests something else. Examples: the peace sign, business logos, cultural and religious images.

**texture** - The feel of the surface of a work and/or the illusion of this touch. Examples: rough, smooth, bumpy.