In the Spotlight

Art Study Impacts Students

By Tim Hargis
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(KENTWOOD, MI) It is 8:40 on a Friday morning, and while the day is just getting started for many, Crestwood Middle School students in Kathy Klug’s eighth grade art class are hard at work, zeroed in on their projects, absorbed in their creations and their learning.

The students are in the midst of two projects. The first is a study and creation of African tribal masks. Students have spent several days molding and shaping their creations out of clay and are now waiting for their masks to be ready to paint. It is obvious the students have put plenty of time, research, and thought into this project just by looking at the intricate and unique designs of each mask.

Eighth grade student Jayvion Burnette says he did research online and looked at a variety of African tribal masks to get ideas for his design. Not only is he proud of his creation, he understands the importance of the learning that is taking place in his classroom. “I feel like people should learn about this,” Jayvion says, “because it’s a really inspirational thing, learning about people’s history and where they come from.”
The second project students in Klug's class are working on is a study of contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley. Wiley is a 45-year-old painter based in Brooklyn, New York, known for his large scale portraits of African Americans posed like classical European paintings. His subjects, while taking on historical poses, are oftentimes dressed in modern day clothing, and are painted with a backdrop of intricate floral patterns. His most well-known work is a portrait of President Barack Obama, completed in 2018, and now displayed in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.

The students’ attention to detail is impressive during this early morning class at Crestwood. They each have a photo cutout of a subject for their portraits, posed in the classic European style, based on some works by Wiley. They are working on designing the sophisticated, detailed backgrounds that define Wiley’s portraits. Klug’s students’ designs are vibrant and colorful.

Simply put, their work is stunning.

“I think they really identify with the subject matter, and I think they really buy into the assignment,” says art teacher Klug. “They get really excited about completing the project because they respect the work.”

While the work of these projects is taking place during Black History Month, this is not simply a project for this month alone. In fact, finished pieces from the Kehinde Wiley assignment done by a different group of students earlier in the year are prominently displayed on a bulletin board in the hallway outside of Klug's room.

For Klug, learning about different cultures, celebrating them and celebrating diversity, is a year-round endeavor.
“I definitely try to have a cultural project every year,” says Klug. “Last year we did Japanese tea cups. We learned a little bit about Japanese culture and the significance of the tea ceremony.”

Klug is especially excited about this year’s classroom project that centers on the work of Kehinde Wiley. “What’s so cool is that he accomplished his goal,” Klug says of Wiley. “He wanted more diversity in portraits, and look at what we are studying. We’re studying African American portraits.”

Klug’s students understand the importance of the learning taking place in their classroom. Eighth grade student Tahji Corrothers comments on how realistic and creative Wiley’s work is. Her classmate, 

“They get really excited about completing the project because they respect the work.”

Kathy Klug
Crestwood Middle Art Teacher
Chariah Whitfield, points out the importance of Wiley’s work because it shows diversity.

Klug understands the importance of the learning that goes along with this project, as well. “I think it’s important for my students to see role models that look like them,” she explains. “Having Kehinde Wiley be a role model, a contemporary artist that’s working today, not just someone who was around 100 years ago, and to have it be someone who looks like them, well, I think that is impactful.”

Eighth grade student Abubakar Abubakar agrees. “Kehinde Wiley, he has diversity in his portraits,” says Abubakar. “And I think it influences the world.”