



The children of Grandma Moses

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At Hastings-on-Hudson Public Library on a hot, humid day, art teacher Jacqueline Ritch asks young workshop participants how they think Grandma Moses got her name.

"Was she the grandmother of Moses?" one student pipes up.

It is, of course, an incorrect response, but one that nonetheless suggests the kind of imagination that has fired artists for centuries.

The 13 first- and second-graders in the Grandma Moses workshop know all about artistic imagination. Soon they're busy creating landscapes after the legendary folk artist, who launched her 30-year painting career when she was 70 years old.

It's part of the Westchester Library System's 2009 Summer Reading Program, which invites young people to be creative and express themselves with books, workshops and events on the arts.

The summer program covers libraries in 16 states.

"But everyone does a variation on the theme," says Judith Rovenger, director of youth services at Westchester Library System in Tarrytown, which coordinates the program for 38 member libraries. "Part of it has to do with the particular personalities and passions of the libraries and their communities as well as the teachers involved."

In Hastings, which is also commemorating the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's exploration of the region, Ritch and fellow teacher Helen Calamari have been conducting workshops on [Hudson River](#) School painters Thomas Cole and Jasper F. Cropsey, who lived down the street.

Next up are programs covering the lives and works of one-time New Rochelle resident Norman Rockwell and Nyack native Edward Hopper.

Calamari and Ritch use dolls, books and music to tell the youngest participants about the artists' lives and works. Then the students create colored drawings in the spirit, if not the exact style, of the artists.

In homage to Grandma Moses - whose homey paintings captured her nostalgia for the farm she grew up on in upstate New York during the post-Civil War era - Calamari asks the first- and second-graders to draw on their own memories. In a matter of minutes, without the slightest pause for deliberation or self-consciousness, the students are able to create elaborate landscapes.

Even more impressive is the power of their drawings to evoke experiences and emotions. One student artist, Joaquim O'Malley, tells Calamari that in his drawing he tried to show how cold it was the day he visited the Statue of Liberty.

"It was very cold," he says more than once. And you get the sense that for the moment, he is back there despite the hot summer day - one with Grandma Moses, sledding on the snows of childhood memories.

Not everyone is taken with the notion that Grandma Moses started a second life as a painter at age 70.

"Weird," says Emily Penner.

But hopeful, no?

"Still weird," Emily insists.

Her mother, Diane, and Kristen Aronoff - whose daughter Eve is in the workshop with Emily - are more heartened by Grandma Moses' narrative.

"It's nice for (the children) to hear stories like that," Aronoff says.

Rovenger says she hopes the use of hands-on play in the summer reading program will lead to a lifelong love of reading and the arts.

"There's a hunger to understand and express yourself," she says. "The more you participate in the arts, the more you're educated to appreciate them."

The Summer Reading Program at libraries in Rockland has a schedule of creative events, too, including "Bringing Books to Life with Fantastic Theatrics." Registration is required. For more information, go to rocklandlibraries.org.

For more on the Westchester Library System's 2009 Summer Reading Program, go to www.westchesterlibraries.org.

There are separate reading lists for [picture](#) books, elementary readers, tweens and teens. The teen site includes a daily news quiz to stay on top of current events.

A companion "Read Your Art Out @ Your Library" publication prepared by The Journal News and LoHud.com is available at library branches or online at: lohud.com/legacy/nie/ReadYourArtOut.pdf