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Teaching Children the Value of Pre-Web Pages

By KAREN JONES

SQUEEZING paint from a tube is too tame for the sixth graders in Ida Owens’s art class. They prefer making their own with malachite (a green mineral), spinach and cochineal — or dried insects. “They love cochineal,” said Ms. Owens. “To them it’s working with bugs.”

Her class at the Gordon Parks School for Inquisitive Minds (P.S./I.S. 270) in Queens is part of the [Morgan Book Project](#), which aims to instill in children of the digital age an appreciation for books by providing authentic materials to write, illustrate and construct their own medieval and Renaissance-inspired illuminated manuscripts. The free program was developed by the Morgan Library and Museum with the New York City Department of Education for public school grades 3 through 7.

Ms. Owens said she thought her students acquired a greater affinity for physical books after designing and building one. “They see the process involved and can look at books as an art form,” she said. “When I suggest that they are doing something that keeps this art form alive, it makes them feel important.”

Institutions like the Morgan, with collections drawn from the printed word, are balancing the digital and physical worlds with their offerings and finding ways to embrace both. Marie H. Trope-Podell, book project creator and manager of gallery programs at the Morgan, said that although the book project was a way to instill the importance of physical books in the next generation of readers, “it is not a rebellion or reaction against the digital book — quite the opposite.”

She said children were always surprised when she made design comparisons between medieval illuminated manuscripts and Web pages. “The mixture of text and images all over the Internet is very visual, and medieval manuscripts are very visual,” she said. “These manuscripts are not paginated and the Internet is not. You can scroll and scroll and need visual aids to figure out where you are.”

Teachers participating in the project receive training at the Morgan on book-creation techniques. Students, most of them from low-income communities, visit the museum to view ancient illuminated manuscripts before creating their own interpretations.

The project's hands-on approach also helps demystify museum collections for children, said Ms. Trope-Podell. In addition to cochineal, traditionally used to make red dye, the project's 16th-century-style toolbox includes fish glue, gum arabic, saffron threads and 22-karat gold.

"We try to create a bridge to those very precious things by giving children the opportunity to do something as close as possible to what they see in museums," she said. "They had no idea they could make paint with a bug or use fish oil as glue." She adds that providing the highest-quality materials like 22-karat gold is key. "I want to boost their ego to give them a sense of being trusted," she said. "I don't think we trust kids enough with precious things."

Participating schools send a selection of finished books to the Morgan for review by an awards committee. Winners are then honored at a ceremony for students, teachers and beaming family members.

Ms. Trope-Podell recalled one poignant moment: "We had one winner whose father was there. They were homeless and living in a shelter. He was so proud of his daughter and said he didn't even know she could draw or paint, but he was going to make sure he bought her some art supplies. We were all almost crying."

One of the strengths of the Morgan project lies in its authenticity, said Rosemary Agolia, curator of education at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass., which also emphasizes the importance of the physical book for children. She adds the project's hands-on approach to problem solving is a plus for young learners. "Kids know busy work and it rarely engages them," she said. "At any age we are actively building knowledge and thinking about what we are doing, experimenting and exploring. Giving that learner permission to be a problem solver is key, and it is happening less and less."

The Eric Carle Museum is dedicated to preserving illustrated children's books and inspiring a love of art and reading in children. The bridge between visual and verbal literacy is crucial to its mission, said Ms. Agolia. Museum programs feature interactive story times. "It is amazing to watch kids talk about what they see in a book," she said.

Ms Agolia said that because children today spent so much time with digital devices, they viewed "screen time" and "book time" as different. "In book time they hold it in their hands, feel the pages and feel the heft of it," she said. "Flipping back and forth in a book is much different experience than on a Kindle." She clarified this as an observation, not a judgment: "You do not want to feel like a Luddite or trying to stop the flow of technology."

She said she believed that digital and physical content delivery formats would co-exist in the next generation of readers but that books did hold a place that digital data could not fill, at least for now. "As human beings we surround ourselves with things that help define who we are and books are one of those things — not just the narrative or story that is easily reproduced on the Kindle," she said. "It is those dog-eared pages, coffee-stained covers or where you signed your name in the front when you were 4 years old. That memory is attributed to a physical object. Books are really part of what makes us human."

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/arts/artsspecial/for-children-lessons-in-medieval-manuscript-illumination.html?_r=1&ref=artsspecial

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