

Finding Mona Lisa: the girls behind the art games

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Wenda O'Reilly recalls the moment her youngest daughter rebelled against high culture. They were living in France, and as they approached a stone building, 4-year-old Mary came to a halt and declared, "Stop! If this is a church, a museum, or a castle, I'm not going in."

Ms. O'Reilly tried a new tactic when she dared to take the family to the Louvre in Paris: They headed straight for the gift shop, where her three daughters chose a few postcards of artworks they could search for in the galleries. Having chosen the Mona Lisa, Mary disappeared into the crowd, "and then this loud voice said, 'I found it!,'" O'Reilly says.

For the past decade the girls have been sharing their discovery of how much fun art museums can be. Inspired by a French arts card game, they took their mother's suggestion to create a game of their own. They have since published three games and accompanying books, including the recently released "Van Gogh and Friends Art Game" (Birdcage Books).

Players match works with artists such as Gauguin, Cézanne, Seurat, Rousseau, and Toulouse-Lautrec.

The O'Reilly girls were 11, 9, and 7 when they returned to the United States and started doing research for the games. Along with neighborhood friend Erin Kravitz, also 11, they trekked to the library and chose their favorite artists and works, first from the Renaissance and later from the Impressionist and post-Impressionist periods. O'Reilly helped gather more information about the chosen pieces.

Often, one of the girls would have a strong opinion about a particular piece. Ahna, the eldest daughter, insisted on including Mary Cassatt's painting of a girl with a dog, entitled "Little Girl in a Blue Armchair."

"I did some research and found that it was a completely revolutionary picture," O'Reilly says, "because she was off center and there was this blank space in the middle, and she was in a bored, laid-back position, not sitting up like a proper little girl." It also highlights how Cassatt was influenced by both fellow Impressionist Degas and Japanese printmaking.

Once O'Reilly had written up snippets of information about the artists and their times and techniques, she posted them around the house for the girls to comment on.

"Often they would tell me, 'Really good, Mommy, but the ending is random,' or 'You're trying to say two things at once here,' or 'I trip over this big word, could you say it more simply,'" O'Reilly says.

They progressed sporadically, but eventually they reached the point where there was nothing left to do but publish. Four years after that first trip to the library, "The

Renaissance Art Game" was on the shelves of museum gift shops, including those in the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That one was followed a year later by "The Impressionist Art Game." Both have recently been awarded gold medals by the Parents' Choice Foundation. This year, the family published the Van Gogh Game (co-edited by Erin's sister, Katherine Kravitz).

Their latest project is an illustrated book on Greek myths, which Noelle, the middle daughter, is helping to write.

Although O'Reilly has a PhD in education from Stanford University, she says that when they started the game, she didn't know anything about art. "I loved it but it wasn't my field. It was good for the kids to see that you can tackle any subject, that you don't have to be an expert to start on a project."

She also credits the fact that the family didn't have television until recently. "For 10 years, we had free time," she says, a little wistfully, time not only to do puzzles, play board games, and watch old movies but "to haul the game off the shelf and work on it. I don't think it would have happened if we had had television."

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