

A New Hook for Go Fish

Palo Altans bait budding art lovers

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Four girls lounge on a couch and armchair, plotting their next move.

"OK, Ahna, do you have 'Trials of Moses'?" Erin Kravich asks.

"Oh gosh," Ahna O'Reilly answers, reluctantly handing over her cards.

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"Mari, do you have 'Madonna the Magnificat'?" Erin asks.

Mari O'Reilly does. She has "The Enunciation," too. Game over.

It's perhaps the most educational, artistic version of Go Fish around, and it's captivating kids throughout the United States and Europe.

The brainchild of the O'Reilly sisters, their mom, Wenda, and friend, Erin Kravich, all of Palo Alto, the Renaissance Art Game has hit the gift shops of the world's top museums: the Louvre, the Smithsonian, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, London's National Gallery, the Getty Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The game features 30 cards decorated with famous works by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli and Fra Angelico, along with an 80-page, colorful book divulging fun facts about the artists such as:

■ To paint human bodies just right, da Vinci would sneak into morgues late at night and examine corpses.

■ Michelangelo preferred sculpture to painting, which he once called "women's work."



Photos by JEFF CHIU / The Chronicle

Wenda O'Reilly watches Erin Kravich, 16 (left), and her daughters Mariele, 12, Ahna, 16 and Noelle, 14, play the Renaissance Art Game. The five of them created the game, which is similar to Go Fish. Left: Erin Kravich examines her hand.



The game sold 4,000 copies in its first two weeks, and the group is hard at work on a version about Impressionist art, which will be released this fall.

Ironically, it all started because the kids hated art.

For his work as publisher of the Travelers' Tales series, James O'Reilly, 47, frequently took Wenda, 52, and his daughters — Ahna, 16, Noelle, 14, and Mariele, 12 — globetrotting when the girls were younger. While in France for several months eight years ago, art lover Wenda, who has a doctorate in education from Stanford, roped the girls into visiting museums with her.

"They would spend about 20 minutes in the Louvre and say, 'Mommy! Is it time to go home? I'm really tired!'" Wenda recalled, laughing.

To help the girls appreciate what they were seeing, Wenda purchased a French game of Go Fish about Impressionist art.

"The kids played the game over and over and over again," Wenda said. "They didn't know anything about art, didn't read any books on it, but became well-acquainted with it."

She said with a chuckle that at first, they'd say, "Do you have the guy with the cut-off ear?" when asking for "Self-Portrait" by Vincent Van Gogh, or, "Do you have the donkey's butt?" when describing "Horses Before the Stands" by Edgar Degas.

But soon, they became veritable art experts and were excited when Wenda suggested creating their own version of the cards about art from the Renaissance period.

Wenda spent Saturdays scouring the Palo Alto Main Library for art books and writing drafts of information about the artists and their pieces. She taped them to the walls of the house, and the girls critiqued them, writing in kid lingo, "That's random" or

"This sentence is weird."

"They couldn't go to the bathroom without finding stuff to read," Wenda said.

At first, it started as a home project. But after years of work, Wenda decided to make their game available to the public and published it out of Birdcage Books, which she and James run out of their home.

"I didn't know if she was really serious about it, but the more years she worked on it, the more I realized she wanted to make a real game," said Ahna, a student, along with Noelle and Erin, at Menlo School. Mariele attends the International School of the Peninsula.

After all the years of work, seeing the game in its red-and-gold packaging was a shock.

"I had seen so many mock-ups and drafts on cardboard boxes that seeing an actual box that was going to be in actual stores was very bizarre," said Erin, 16.

Though the card game is designed primarily for kids, all ages can appreciate the reproduced works of art and the information booklet.

"I like to look at paintings as much as the next guy, which is to say not much, but this game has helped me appreciate paintings for the first time in my life," he said. "The artists were human and did goofy things."

Now, the girls talk at length about Renaissance art and artists. They agree that Botticelli is the best of the batch.

When asked whether their newfound appreciation for art will mean more enthusiasm when visiting museums, the girls groaned.

"It still takes a lot to get us to go to a museum," said Noelle. "We've kind of had our fill of museums for the next decade."

Where to Buy It

The Renaissance Art Game (\$25, Birdcage Books) can be found at major museum gift stores and bookstores, including Borders, Barnes & Noble, Brentano's and Waldenbooks. For more information, call Birdcage Books at (650) 424-1701.