



Fibers in the Art Classroom

An Art Educator Highlight



Melanie Siegel
Artist in Residence
Grades 6-12
Toronto, Canada
<https://www.m-siegel.com/>



As a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design, with a focus on traditional tapestry weaving I was inspired to explore felt and the stitched textile as a medium to create art. For the past 15 yrs I have been attending conferences and workshops with the Handweaver's Guild of America, Surface Design Association, and the European Textile Network focusing on felting and stitch. The highlights of these workshops is meeting like minded individuals, learning new techniques, and viewing how others deal with the movement of the textiles. I was awarded teaching grants from the Ontario Arts Council to share my

knowledge of felting in both public and private schools. At one point I was teaching up to 750 students a school year, 5 day workshops, 90 students per day and then repeated for 5 days. It takes considerable planning for a school to hire an artist to work within their curriculum and pave a way for the students to learn a new technique. The teachers have also enjoyed the workshops, discovering a new technique that they would not normally introduce in their curriculum. The ages vary, I do have grade 1 group that I have taught year after year, but most of the time I am with grade 6 to grade 9 and at times grade 12. I share techniques in basic felt making and introduce stitchery and design. The feltmaking process is time based, the students must all work at the same pace, always watching the clock so we are all in sync. The layout is one session, the wet felting a second session, and re wetting

and rolling a third. Then we discuss embroidery, embellishment or whatever the school project dictates. In some schools, I have only a one day session, to complete the workshop two to three hours. It's very quick, and extremely challenging but with very basic felt making techniques always successful! One of my most popular projects is the study of the iconic Canadian Group of Seven. Students will have a school trip to the galleries to view the work in McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg Ontario, then will follow up with a workshop for several days, creating their own impression of the Canadian Landscape. One legacy project was to make a butterfly garden installation, another was to make a large foyer wall hanging in a Richmond Hill library. Another project was the creation of a wall installation of the red maple leaves for Canada Day, with a special needs class.

To be light hearted with the layout and abstracting of a design will be most successful and I encourage the students to take a spontaneous approach. It is generally the first time for many to work with such an unusual medium and it has a different sensibility than painting and drawing. We refer to the colour wheel, to understand colour blending if time permits. The teachers do grade the work, with the concept of how they students listened to instructions, their participation and completion. I often encourage parent volunteers in the classroom, specifically when we are wet felting the work, as it can become fun but chaotic! Safety procedures are most essential. I have written a document called "Recipe for a Successful Workshop" which clearly states what is expected from the school, e.g. a mop and pail, students must dress for mess, parent volunteers most welcome, my equipment (screens and rollers) should dry overnight and be stored for the duration of the workshop. All students' work must be labeled (as we often use the same colour palette, so there is no mistake who owns the work) Often the teachers give the students more time to complete after the workshop, as they are so enthusiastic.



I love sharing my knowledge with students, I enjoy seeing the reactions to this unusual medium. I think the success lies not only with the communication with the teachers, but the openness of the students. In some instances working with special needs, the verbalization is not necessary. They watch and most participate. My approach is simple and uncomplicated. I like to think I leave the

students with confidence. I have had students share with me that they don't like art, it's not their best subject, a list of ongoing negativity. I encourage them to leave all that at the door, and just have a moment to play. This becomes a stress release and to engage in the process, give best effort and enjoy the moment of creating. The students are amazed that when working with a dry fibre, their artwork transforms to a flat colourful textural surface. When we reveal the work, and begin to roll, they squeal with excitement and trepidation. We soap it up, we flip, we roll then it becomes magically connected as a new fibre. This past year was a turning point, I recovered from an illness and I decreased the hustle for teaching. I have my practice as an artist with exploratory work in textiles, entering competitions, and a position as co-chair and installation expert in a local heritage museum. An arts jury contract every year has been available. I have been an Artist in Residence at the main library in Richmond Hill and most recently with the Muskoka Chautauqua, a residency for a week in a resort in northern Ontario. What a delight! One school, where I return year after year, I get hugs in the hallway from former students. I have touched their lives.



Student response: What did you like the most about felting?

“What I liked the most was the process after you created your design. Although it was very messy and tiring, it was also fun at the same time.” Student, grade 9

How did the Felting artist assist you when you were working?

“Whenever I had a question/was unsure about anything, she was always there to help me through the steps when I needed. Once in a while, she would give me feedback on how I was doing and I think that helped me with the next steps in the creation of my piece.” Student Grade 8

“Ms Siegel is a very charismatic and creative artist. She taught my class some fundamental felt-making skills in a fun and engaging way. I will cherish the knowledge she gave me and my peers, and strongly hope to see her again.” - Elizabeth F.