

School Arts

Inspiring Creativity in Teaching
February 2001 \$4.00



DAVIS

At Home and Abroad

Betsy Ross Revisited

William Grabowski

One of the most positive outcomes of mandated federal and state standards has been our student's increased awareness of expanding career opportunities in art. The wider the variety of options we can present, the more fully equipped a child will be when contemplating a career in the arts. This process need not wait until high school to begin.

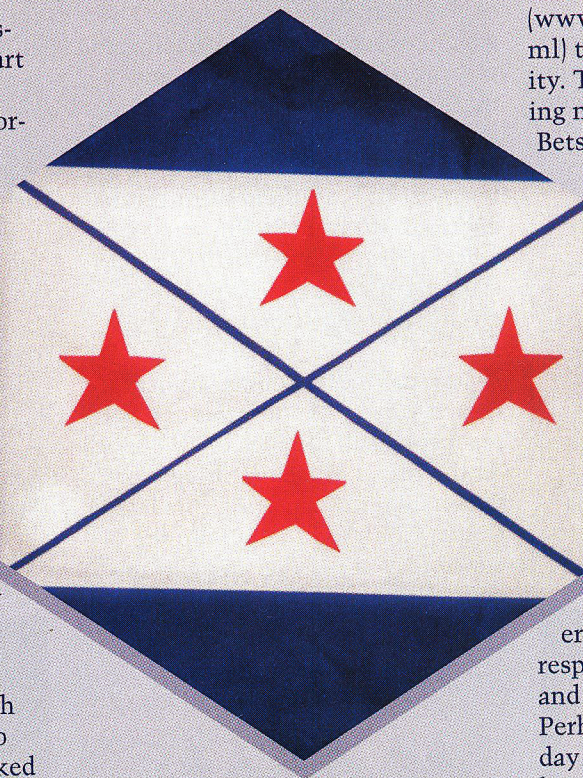
In fifth grade we began a discussion about the two directions an art career might take—fine art and commercial art. We decided the former focuses on personal expression, art from the “inside-out,” while the latter chooses direction from “external” sources as a starting point.

We discussed who the first commercial artist in this country might have been, and what the subject of the first commission might have been. I gave them a hint when I told them my choice for the first commercial artist was a woman. This provoked a discussion which led, with some gentle steering, to Betsy Ross. She was, after all, asked to creatively fill a commission using strong graphic design, given specific guidelines as to color, and specifically asked to interpret a theme (patriotism). My liberal interpretation of American History notwithstanding, we began the following project.

“It is the year 2076, our Tri-Centennial, and you are the most well-respected commercial artist in the country. President Michael Jordan, Jr. has asked you to re-design the American Flag to help us focus our

celebration. However, he has asked that the following criteria be met:

1. The flag must be red, white and blue.
2. Stars and stripes may be used, but are not mandatory.
3. Symbols of our country (eagle, Statue of Liberty, etc.) may be used as elements.
4. The format need not be rectangular.”



Using these guidelines, we decided a collage would be an appropriate choice of media. I provided 12 x 18" (30 x 46 cm) construction paper in three colors. Time has taught me to facilitate in certain areas. I suggested tracing a ruler's width several times to produce similar stripes. Another idea offered was to draw a shape or motif on folded paper before cutting, thus creating many exact copies (stars, etc.) I also used this project as an opportunity to define and explore the concept of

stylizing an element, (i.e. greatly simplifying an object while retaining its integrity), or, in another way providing the least information that a viewer might need to understand it. This concept enabled the students to better concentrate on strong, simple design—as flags are simple, bold graphic statements. “Less is more” became a goal.

We used the Internet to research, and explored the Betsy Ross homepage (www.ushistory.org/betsy/index.html) to help us sort myth from reality. There was a flag gallery exhibiting many versions, a virtual tour of Betsy's home, and rules on correct flag etiquette. There were also FAQs, timelines, and opinions offered as to who the real designer was.

The experience tied in nicely with classroom curriculum as well as Women's History Month. Results were often quite powerful and striking. Most students responded very well to the concept and challenge of commercial art. Perhaps a re-designed flag might one day find a place in an art major's college portfolio. ▲

William Grabowski is an art specialist at Center Street Elementary School in Williston Park, New York.

NATIONAL STANDARD

Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks.