

# “Old World” Christmas: Swedish Dala Painting



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# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

As a group or one-on-one, discuss favorite Christmas traditions and foods. Paint images from commonly found Christmas traditions using acrylic paint on canvas board or by using paper with markers, crayons, or watercolors.

Many people celebrate Christmas each year with much joy and excitement. Wreaths of holly, Christmas trees, religious services, cookies, *lutefisk*, and Christmas carols are just a few of the traditions we continue to enjoy. The idea of a Scandinavian or German “Old World” Christmas is appealing to many people because of our heritage, but those traditions have become standard to many other cultures as well. This activity combines the images of Christmas with the storytelling aspect of Swedish *Dala* painting. One can relay his or her experiences commemorating the season through these paintings.

This plan is fun to do as a more involved activity using canvas panels with decoupage-style patterns and acrylics, but it also can be simplified using paper and watercolors or markers. Both the discussion questions and the review of family traditions are fun and engaging. The mere thought of such holiday traditions is known to generate warm personal feelings and to foster pleasant childhood memories. (The general outline of this activity plan can provide the structure for other holiday traditions, as well, regardless of one’s ethnic, cultural, or religious background.)

## TIME:

Two and a half to three hours over two sessions, with some prep time required before the second session. (Sessions 1 and 2 may be used together to combine a common theme, or individually as two separate activities.)

## MATERIALS:

- Acrylic paints
- Canvas board or panels
- Acrylic varnish in matte or satin
- Disposable plastic or paper plates to use as palettes
- Synthetic paintbrushes (medium and small)
- Water bowl
- Paper towels
- Cotton swabs (Q-tips)
- Isopropyl alcohol (for cleaning up small problem areas)
- 32# white paper
- #400-grit sandpaper or Scotch-Brite scruffy pads
- Scissors
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

Note: Suggestions for specific paints and brushes can be found at the end of Session 2. This activity is designed for acrylic paints and canvas panels, but the basic outline of the patterns may

be reproduced on heavyweight paper and colored with acrylic paint, watercolor, color crayons, or markers.

### **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

This activity is designed to increase the social interaction between participants through the sharing of stories from the past that foster a connection to a broader community. Making connections between participants helps to forge bonds important in addressing both loneliness and boredom. Those physically unable to paint may participate in the discussion, observe, or provide ideas for others. Do not exclude people who may not physically be able to do some things, for there is a place where they can be helpful if repeatedly encouraged. Oftentimes, elders may exclude themselves because they do not think they can do the activity. Thinking of creative ways or pairings that make use of the abilities of everyone is important when addressing the participants’ sense of helplessness. If it is difficult for someone to manipulate a paintbrush, think creatively about what other art-making tools could be used: cotton swabs, bingo daubers, small squirt bottles, eye droppers, sponges, tablespoons with cloth attached to the handle, and so on. The use of decoupage-style patterns and how they are made available for use do not require fine motor skills. Thus, a sense of helplessness is addressed.

### **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:**

Studies involving ego integrity versus despair for people over the developmental stage of 65 years of age show that sharing stories and reviewing one’s life decreases the fear of death, which in turn decreases pain and anxiety.

*--Erikson, E., M. Erickson, and H. Kivnick. Vital Involvement in Old Age. New York: Norton, 1986.*

*Erikson, E. Childhood and Society. New York: Norton, 1963.*

In this article, Dr. Routledge completely upends the commonly held view of the impact of “nostalgia,” often considered to be a sentimental, wistful longing for the past. From the time the feeling was first coined by a Swiss physician in the late 1600s until relatively recently, nostalgia was viewed as a medical disease, a mental illness that led to mental and physical health problems such as anxiety, insomnia, depression, and irregular heartbeat.

His studies indicate that nostalgic memories tend to focus on meaningful events in a person’s life and often involve loved ones in situations like family vacations, birthdays, weddings, and holiday gatherings. Additionally, he writes, “Social interactions (e.g., getting together with an old friend), sensory inputs (e.g., smells, music), and tangible objects (e.g., old photographs) commonly inspire nostalgic feelings.” Dr. Routledge’s studies indicate that “nostalgia, compared to the control conditions, does not increase negative emotions, but it does increase positive emotions. . . . [It] increases self-esteem

as well as perceptions of meaning in life . . . [and] perceptions of social connectedness.” Nostalgic memories are by and large very positive, even though they may include a tinge of sadness. Nostalgia, however, does not cause this sadness. Nostalgia is triggered by stressful situations and is evoked as an antidote to combat negative conditions, loneliness, and feelings of meaninglessness. Dr. Routledge concludes, “Nostalgia allows people to use experiences from the past to help cope with the challenges in the present.”

*--Routledge, Clay. "The Rehabilitation of an Old Emotion: A New Science of Nostalgia." MIND Guest (blog), Scientific American, July 10, 2013. <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/mind-guest-blog/the-rehabilitation-of-an-old-emotion-a-new-science-of-nostalgia/>*

*Cover photo: Swedish Dala painting by Pieper Bloomquist.*

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# Activity Plan

## SESSION I (1 HOUR):

I. This session will involve an introduction to the topic and discussion. Christmas traditions are connected to many different aspects of one's life, from the type of food eaten and decorating practices to activities like religious services, caroling, *juleboking*, and gift-giving.

The activity director should ask questions about favorite Christmas foods and who made them in an effort to initiate a dialogue between the participants. To spark interaction, read the folklore examples from pages 215-219 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, especially noting folklore items 41 and 43-46, which describe holiday food traditions.

- What foods did you have that were special this time of year? Was there a special serving dish, plate, or bowl that was used to present those items year after year? Were there specific tools that were used in preparation—rosette or *krumkakke* irons, *lefse* griddles, rolling pins, *sandbakkel* tins, a cookie or butter press, a simple coffee can? (If the activity director has access to such unique cooking utensils, bring them along. Pass the utensils around for the elders to touch and see. Leave them on the table for closer viewing.)
- Did you take over any cooking traditions from a parent or grandparent? If so, tell us about it. What was it? How did you learn it and did you teach anyone else?

- Was there a food that you did not like as a child but love to eat now as an adult? If so, what is it? How did you come to like it now?

2. Refer to the painting and traditions shown on pages 216-217 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Distribute enlarged photocopies of the paintings depicted on those two pages. Enlarge the images so they are more easily seen by people who may have difficulty seeing. The activity director should read aloud the introductory paragraph to explain, to everyone in attendance, the *Bonadsmålningar* tradition. Explain that the artist came from a family of blended traditions, adopting both Swedish traditions (represented by Santa Lucia, lingonberries and waffles, and spritz cookies) and German traditions (represented by St. Nicholas, “Tom & Jerry’s,” apple strudel). Read the text from pages 216-217 while pointing out each of the corresponding parts of the painting.

The activity director should then initiate an exchange, discussion, or sharing of the holiday traditions practiced by the participants. Ask such questions as:

- Did you participate in any activities similar to those shown on or discussed in the pages of this book? If so, tell us about them.
- Did you have a real or artificial tree? Did you cut your own

tree? Did you ever have an aluminum tree? Was the tree decorated on Christmas Eve or earlier? What did you use for ornamentation? Did you hang stockings for Christmas? How did you celebrate?

- The activity director should ask the participants to close their eyes and to imagine it's Christmas and that food is being cooked for the holiday. Then ask, "In your imagination, what foods do you smell? What foods do you remember being made especially for Christmas? Who made it? What was your favorite?"
- Did you place more importance on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day? How did religious services fit in to your traditions? Give such examples as Midnight Mass, nativity sets and their placement, Advent wreaths, Christmas Carols, and so on.

(In order to stimulate as many of the senses as possible, place holiday ornaments or decorations around the room or table so they can be touched by everyone and seen. For the activity, maybe include snacks associated with the holiday—thereby stimulating both the sense of taste and smell.)

## SESSION 2 (1 HOUR TO 90 MINUTES):

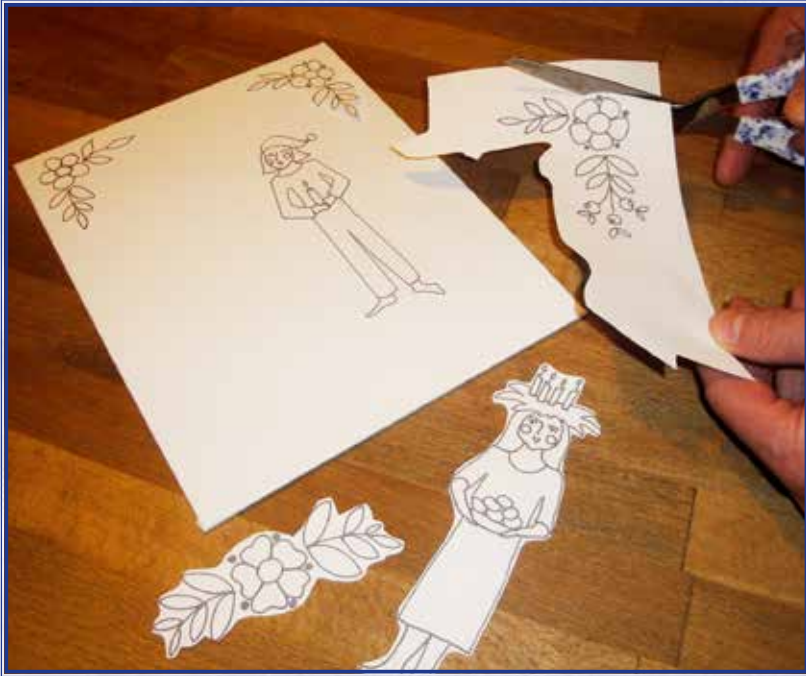
**1.** This session will involve preparation for and the creation of the participants' paintings. The activity director should again read pages 216-217 from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, which will help reacquaint the participants with the *Bonadsmålningar* tradition. Also show the images from those pages and explain that those in attendance will

create a painting in this style. (Limit the size of the group participating to no more than twelve people for this painting session.)

**2.** At the end of this activity plan are a series of black and white as well as color sketches or patterns that should be photocopied and distributed to the group. On 32# white paper, multiple copies should be made of each black and white pattern. This paper is easier to work with and will not rip or smear when it gets wet. The black and white patterns will be cut out and applied to a canvas. The color sketches will be used as a color guide for people unsure of what colors to paint on the black and white images once they are applied to the canvas. (Be sure to encourage the participants to choose which colors they would like to use. Tell them they should not be afraid of using other colors and to paint the images differently.)

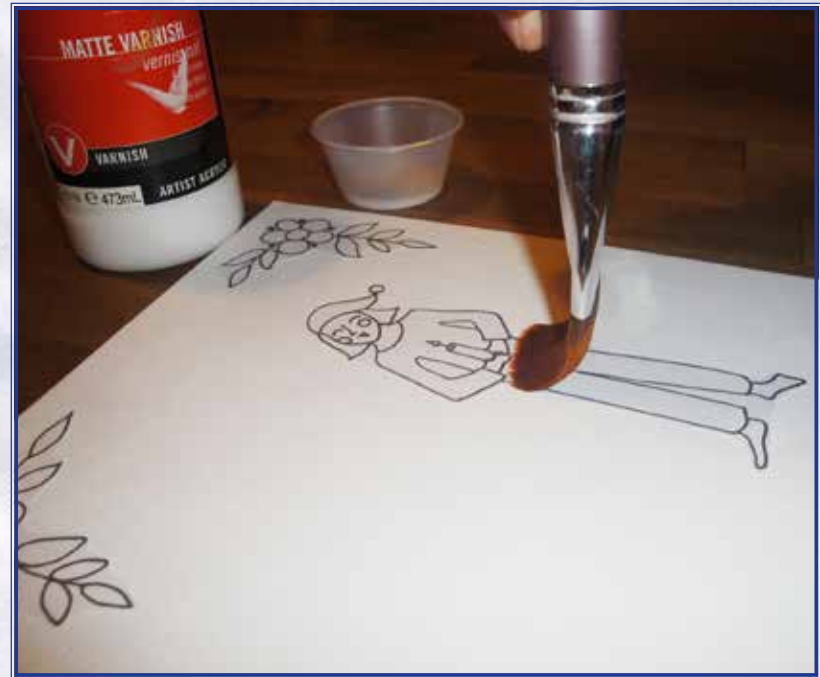
Distribute multiple photocopies of the black and white patterns to the elders, asking them to select the ones they like best. Tell the elders they can try to recreate a painting according to the color images provided as examples, or they can add, change, and combine various patterns based on their own personal tastes and creativity.

**3.** Ask each elder to cut out the black and white patterns they selected, making sure that the cuts are made leaving just a small amount of excess outside the lines of the sketch. (This allows the image to be seen and painted when applied to the canvas. Cutting outside the line also does not require the precise motor skills that some elders may no longer possess. Volunteers may still be needed to help some of the participants with the cutting.)



4. After each elder has cut out the images they wish to use, ask them to arrange the various parts according to how they want them to be placed on the canvas. Encourage them to move the different pieces around and play with the placement. Ask them if they want to include other images or more of the same designs or images. Once the elders are satisfied with their compositions, actively include the participants in preparing their own canvas panels.

5. Working quickly, paint a layer of varnish on the canvas panel in the area the participants wish to apply a cut-out image. Place the image on the board and paint a layer of varnish over it, smoothing thoroughly. It helps to smooth the image from the center to the edges, pushing out any bubbles that may occur. Explain this technique to the participants. (Write the participant's name on the back of the panel before starting to paint.)



6. When the compositions are dry, which takes about five minutes, sand them very lightly with #400-grit sandpaper or a Scotch-Brite scruffy pad. This will keep the paint from beading up onto the surface. Again, explain the purpose of this step to the participants. (For those people who need more assistance, consider preparing the cut patterns and canvas in advance of the session.)

7. Once the patterns have been applied to the canvas and the varnish has dried and been sanded, the painting can begin. Starting with one color at a time, place a large pea-sized drop of paint on the palette of each participant or have them do it themselves. Have the participant find that color on the color guide (the color pattern that was distributed earlier as a reference) and identify the area to be painted with that color on their canvas panel. (Again, this is for those people unsure of what colors to use. Encourage the participants to use whatever colors they wish to.)

Dip the paintbrush in water, dabbing the large drops onto a paper towel. Dip the end of the brush in paint and begin painting.

This is just like coloring, except with paint!

Note: Be sure to rinse the brush in water before moving on to another color.

8. When all the colors are painted, the project can be finished.

Explain to the participants that borders painted around the edges of a picture are very common in Swedish painting. The borders can be fun and do not always have to be the same on all four sides. If a participant wishes to add embellishments or borders freehand, he or she should be encouraged to do so. There is a color guide of free-hand borders on the following pages. Borders can be made using cotton swabs, stamps, sponges, fingertips, or larger brushes. Be creative!





**Note for Participants with Limited Motor Skills and Dexterity:** For people who have limited motor skills and dexterity, explain that flowers can be painted beautifully and stylistically without “staying within” or “filling in” the lines. Explain that some Swedish *Dala* painting includes examples of this technique, which produces wonderful results. Show the flower examples on the following pages

to the people in attendance. The person directing the activity plan may even want to distribute photocopies of the flower examples for people to see when they are doing their art. Participants with very limited capacity may have more positive results and feel better about their work by painting flowers in this style.



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*(Flower photos courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*

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### **Tips:**

- If a participant is *really* unhappy with a mistake, edges can be cleaned up or light-colored paint can be partially removed if quickly wiped with a little isopropyl alcohol on a cotton swab. However, this technique should not be encouraged in order to create a perfect picture, and participants should be reassured that it is no longer required to stay within the lines!
- Cotton swabs can be used instead of a paintbrush to make bigger polka dots. Just dip the end in paint and press down vertically to make a perfect dot. (This technique was used on the female gnome's blouse and on the heart and flowers design provided at the end of this plan.)
- Dipping the handle end of a paintbrush or a pencil tip into a small pile of paint and then dotting it on the painting surface can create tiny dots.

### **Specific information regarding supplies:**

- Canvas panels: Any quality will work fine for this project and can be purchased from art or craft suppliers in bulk or classroom-size quantities at a fairly low cost. 5" x 7" and 8" x 10" are good sizes for this activity, although 11" x 14" can be used for those who prefer a larger and more involved project.
- Brushes: #5 or #6 round brushes are great. The Loew-Cornell Comfort Grip 3000 Series brushes are ergonomically designed to relieve stress on hands. A good high-quality brush will last longer and create a cleaner brush stroke, making the

painters more satisfied with their work.

- For the varnishing, any semi-stiff 1" brush works well.
- Paint: Any brand acrylic craft paint will work for this project. The paints used for the designs shown in this activity plan are Americana, Apple Barrel, or Folkart.

Listed below are the colors used:

- Dark green—use Christmas Green, Pine Green, or Hauser Dark Green
- Light green—use Lime Green or Leaf Green
- Red—use Santa Red, Christmas Red, Lipstick Red, or Tomato Red
- Blue—use Americana True Blue or Prussian Blue
- Yellow—use Yellow Ochre or Straw
- Turquoise—use Americana Laguana Blue or Tahiti Blue
- Grey (Santa Lucia gown)—use any light grey or mix a tiny drop of light blue with white

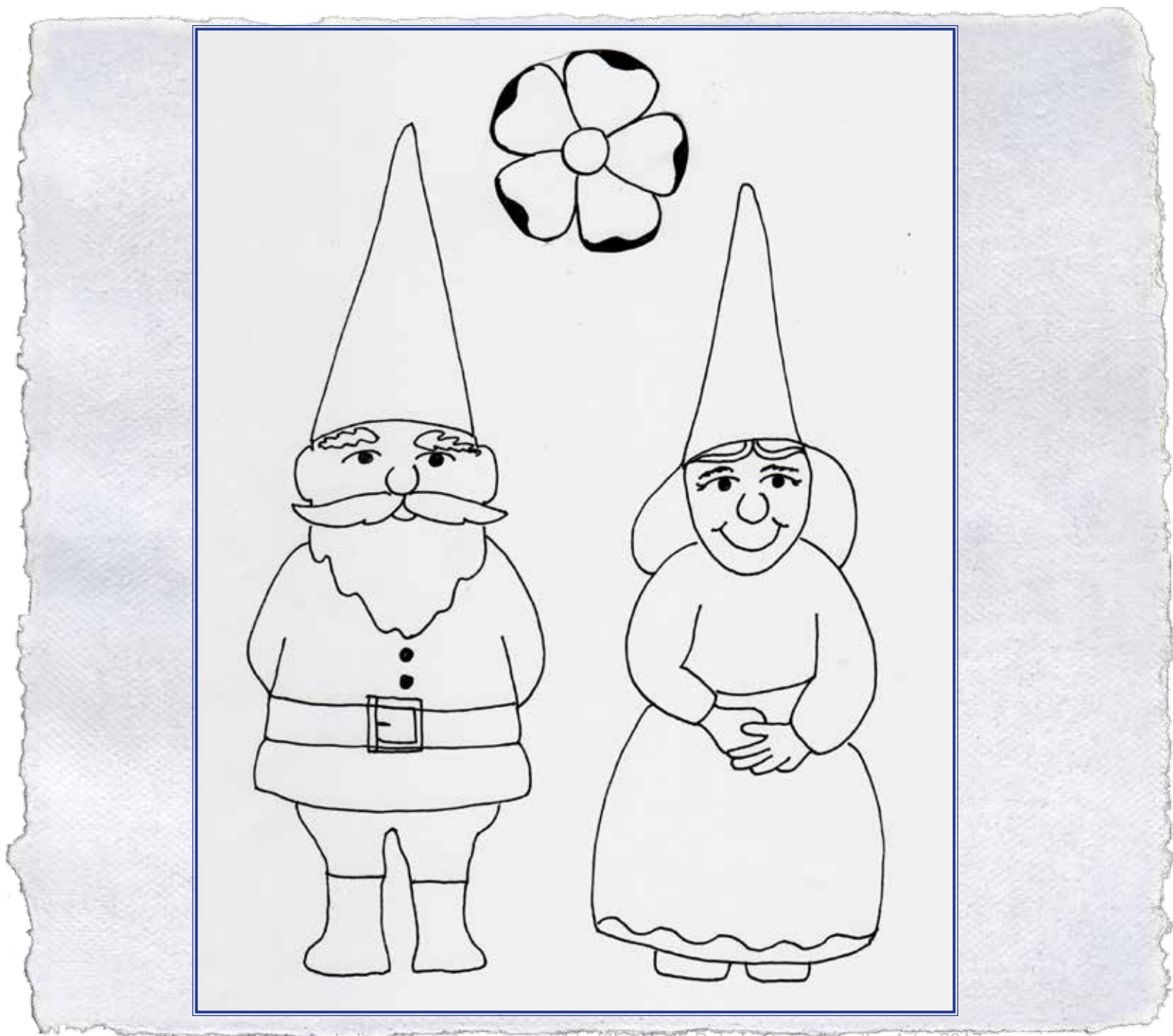
**AUTHOR • PIEPER BLOOMQUIST, BSN,  
REGISTERED NURSE:**

Pieper received her Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. With over twenty years of experience caring for oncology patients, she currently works at Altru Hospital in Grand Forks, North Dakota, on the Oncology Inpatient Hospital Unit, as well as the Altru Cancer Center, Radiation Oncology. Pieper is also a Swedish-American *Dala* painter who has received many awards, including first place at the national Swedish painting exhibit in Scandia, Minnesota, for her eighteen-foot-long mural painted in the Southern Swedish style. Pieper was featured in the 2003 Prairie Public Television documentary *Scandinavian Traditions*. As a folk artist and registered nurse who works in a hospital setting, she was included in the North Dakota Council on the Arts' first *Art for Life* pilot project. Since then, Pieper has conducted therapeutic arts programs for elder residents in numerous care facilities as part of the *Art for Life Program*. She is known for interacting with and incorporating ideas from elders in the creation of large wall murals in the Swedish *Dala* painting style.

**IMAGES AND CUT-OUT DESIGNS**

Photocopies of the black and white images on the following pages should be distributed and cut out by the people attending the session or with the help of staff or volunteers. The cutting should not be exactly on the lines, but generally outside the lines. These cut-outs will be the components for the decoupage. The corresponding color images can be photocopied, distributed, and used as inspiration by the participants in the decoupage-like painting process. Do, however, encourage the participants to choose their own colors and to be creative in the arrangement and combination of the cut-out designs they select.

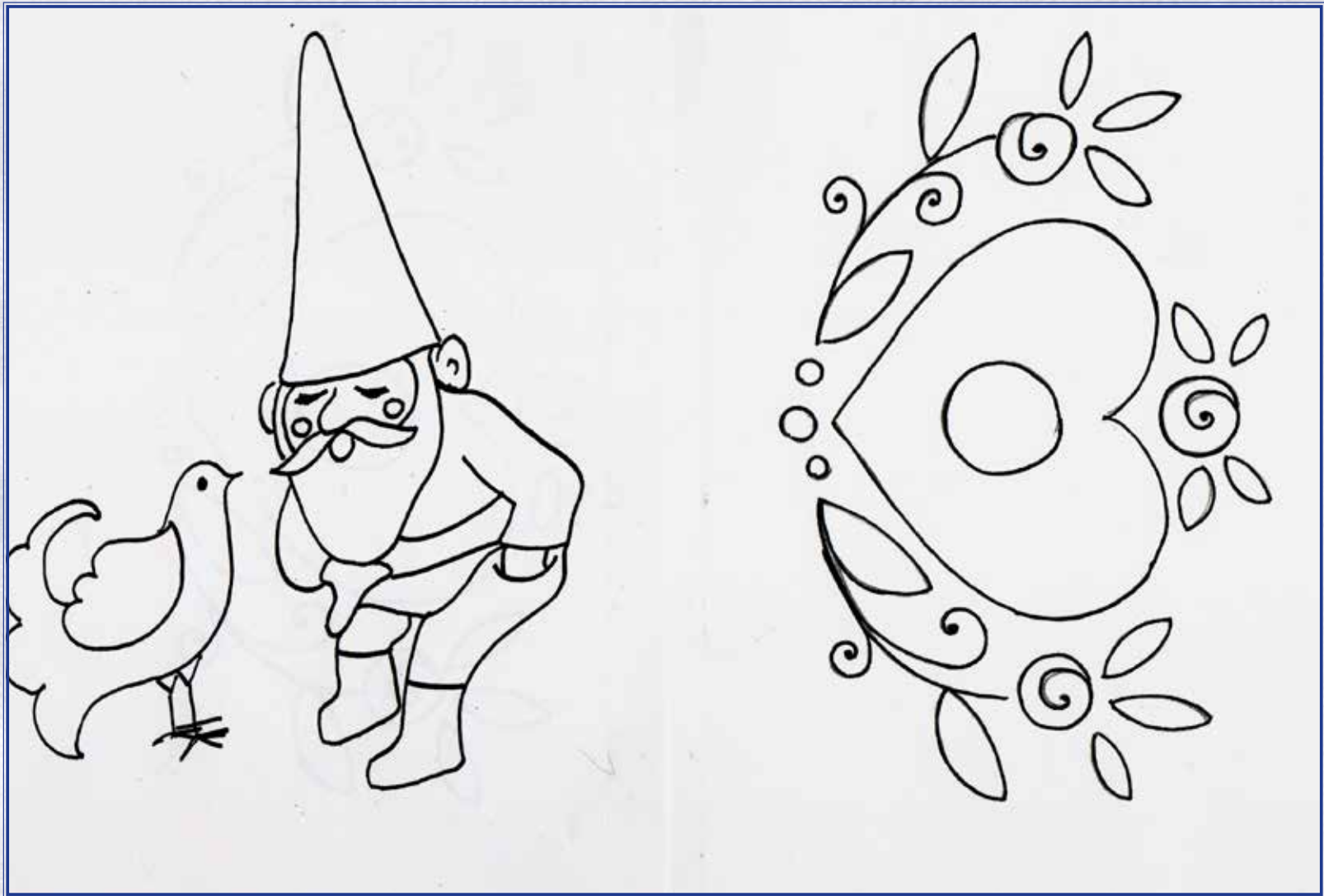
*(All images, artwork, and cut-out designs provided courtesy of Pieper Bloomquist. Flower images associated with notes for people with limited motor skills and dexterity provided by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*



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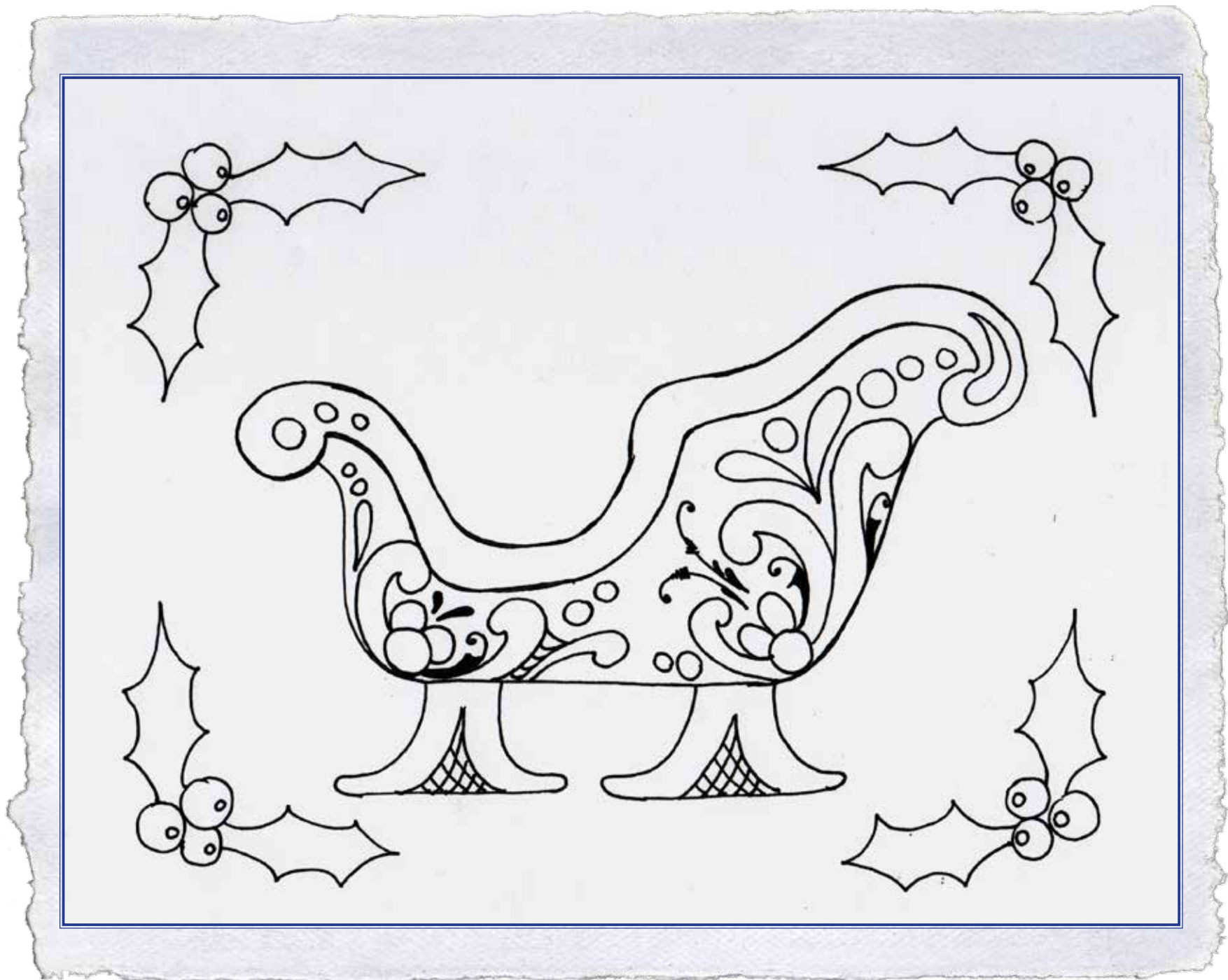
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# Borders

