

Appreciating the Visual Beauty of Canning: Watercolor Jars



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

This plan involves individual drawing and watercolor projects, as well as group discussions between participants, staff, and family members about pickling, canning, and preserves. Pickles and jams will be made available as snacks to encourage discussion and to foster a feeling of community. These foods, through their taste and smell, are also to be used to trigger food memories and/or imaginings. In the end, the participants will leave the final session with a piece of art or a folded greeting card they can send or give away as a gift.

TIME:

Two or more hours over two sessions (add an extra forty-five minutes to one hour if an optional pre-session artist demonstration is included).

MATERIALS:

- Watercolor paper (9" x 12", two or more sheets per student)
- Scratch paper to test colors
- Paper towels
- Paintbrushes
- Small cups for water
- Watercolor sets (or tubes of watercolor and plastic palettes)
- Pencils, crayons, and permanent markers
- Stiff Mason-jar templates (optional) in the shapes of different jars, such as wide-mouth or jelly jars, ranging in size from 7" to 9" tall (an artist or someone else should make these from heavy stock paper or cardboard in advance of the activity)
- Examples of artwork for inspiration (as indicated herein or general watercolor images found online)
- Jars of pickles and jams (for visual inspiration, as well as to smell and taste to trigger memory, imagination, and physiologic responses. Homemade is best!)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

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

Many people have positive memories surrounding the preservation of food. If they have not personally canned and pickled food, they likely have a relative who preserved summer’s bounty for their family to later enjoy. This activity is designed to encourage conversations around those shared common memories, culminating in a final collaborative project. This sense of community will address the issues of both loneliness and boredom. Even if certain participants do not want to create their own pieces of art, they will be encouraged to eat some pickles and share their own stories. The loose painting technique encourages even hesitant participants to pick up a paintbrush, as the emphasis is on personal expression, not realism. Watercolor does not have to be precise, or “within the lines,” to be beautiful. Thus, people with dexterity issues can be reassured that they can create beautiful artwork—even with shaky hands. This addresses a sense of helplessness. In the end, participants will leave the final session with a piece of art or a folded greeting card they can send or give away as a gift. This artistic, communicative exchange can be used to combat loneliness. The open and encouraging atmosphere, as well as the emphasis on personal choice, will help to address a feeling of hopelessness.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

K.H. Pitkälä et al. states, “Loneliness is a distressing feeling of a lack of satisfying human relationships. It is associated with poor quality of life, impaired health, and increased mortality among older individuals. The study aim was to determine the effects of new

psychosocial group rehabilitation on the subjective health, use and costs of health services, and mortality of lonely older individuals. This randomized, controlled trial was performed in seven day care centers. A total of 235 older people (>74 years) suffering from loneliness participated. Intervention was implemented in 15 groups (each with 7-8 participants and 2 professional group leaders) meeting for 3 months altogether 12 times. Group intervention aimed to empower elderly people, and to promote their peer support and social integration. . . . The groups had the following activities according to the participants’ interests: (a) therapeutic writing and group psychotherapy, (b) group exercise and discussions, and (c) art activities. Group leaders received thorough training and tutoring. Subjective health, use and costs of health services, and mortality were measured. At 2 years, survival was 97% in the intervention group . . . and 90% in the control group. . . . The intervention group showed a significant improvement in subjective health, thus resulting in significantly lower health care costs during the follow-up. . . . Psychosocial group rehabilitation was associated with lower mortality and less use of health services.” [Abstract]

*—Pitkälä, K.H., P. Routasalo, H. Kautiainen, and R.S. Tilvis.
“Effects of Psychosocial Group Rehabilitation on Health, Use
of Health Care Services, and Mortality of Older Persons
Suffering from Loneliness: A Randomized, Controlled Trial.”
Journals of Gerontology, Series A: Biological Sciences and
Medical Sciences 64, no. 7 (July 2009): 792-800.*

Activity Plan

OPTIONAL PRE-SESSION (45 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

I. An optional way to start the artist residency would be to have the artist set up an easel and paint a demonstration in one of the public gathering areas. This would not necessarily have to be a formal affair. There could be coffee and snacks served, and residents and family members would be encouraged to visit and ask the artist questions while he or she creates a demonstration painting from start to finish. This could serve as a “meet and greet,” introducing the artist to the residents of the care facility to ease the way for the activity to formally begin.

SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

I. Arrange participants in small groups around work tables; perhaps five participants per table. Have at least one volunteer, care facility activity coordinator, or artist at each table, if possible, to help direct activities with the participants. Groupings of participants should be arranged in a way to encourage discussion and sharing. There should be a variety of canned or jarred foods to look at for visual inspiration, as well as some on plates for snacking and to trigger food memories or imaginings. Many studies indicate the potent role smell plays in triggering physiologic responses and the recall of memories. Thus, having jars of pickles, jellies, and jams on the table should be used in an effort to trigger more active responses in the discussion to follow. Encourage participants to taste the samples and compare them to the preserved food from their own memories or personal tastes. **(It is**

important, however, to talk first with the care facility medical staff to be aware of any allergies on the part of the participants.)

Be sure to have fun with this part of the activity. Hide the jars from sight, at first, and ask individual participants to close their eyes. Hold a jar of canned food, whether it is of pickled cucumbers, beets, or watermelon rinds, under their noses and ask them to smell it. Keeping their eyes closed, ask the participants to describe what they smell. What might some of the ingredients be? Ask them to explain what is going through their mind at that moment—any images, memories, or if they experience any sensations like salivation. Ask them to guess what it is they are smelling, without opening their eyes.

Then, to further break the ice and begin the conversation, read the folklore beliefs about plants and planting on pages 153 and 156 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Ask the participants if they or someone they know or knew ever grew a garden. Ask them what they grew, when they planted, and if there was anything special they did to make sure their garden produced a bountiful harvest. The person directing this plan should share what he or she knows, so that it becomes a conversation.

Expand the conversation by reading “Saskatoon Berries” from page 277 and “A Little Here and a Little There” (also show the pictures) from page 285 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Have

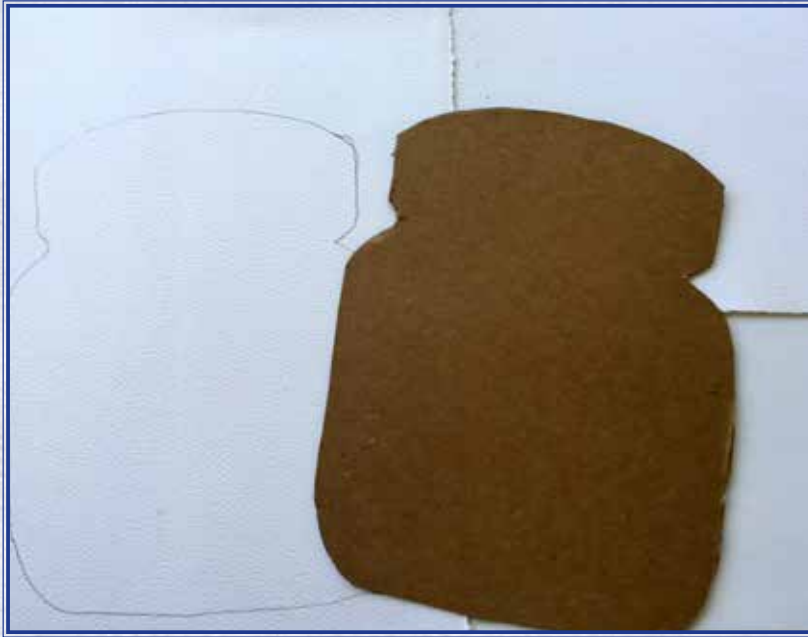
a discussion about gathering berries and other wild foods from nature. What did people gather and pick—asparagus, mushrooms, chokecherries, wild plums? Where were they found? When is the best time to gather them? How were they prepared to eat?

Finally, begin with a discussion about food preservation, asking if anyone cans or has ever canned food. Does anyone have a friend or family member who cans or has canned food? When and what do they can? What kinds of vegetables, berries, and meats are canned? What kinds of jams and jellies were made? Who taught them these food preservation methods? Did they write their recipes down or did they make them from memory? Are there any tips or tricks?

2. Pass out one piece of watercolor paper per student, as well as brushes and palettes with small dots of color or ones that are prefilled. Explain that more water will create a lighter effect, and that small, soft strokes can help them to avoid rips or holes in the paper.

3. Look at examples of watercolor artwork. Point out that the drawing does not need to be precise and the colors do not need to stay within the lines to be beautiful. Each artist will have his or her own unique style, which will only make the finished product that much more special.

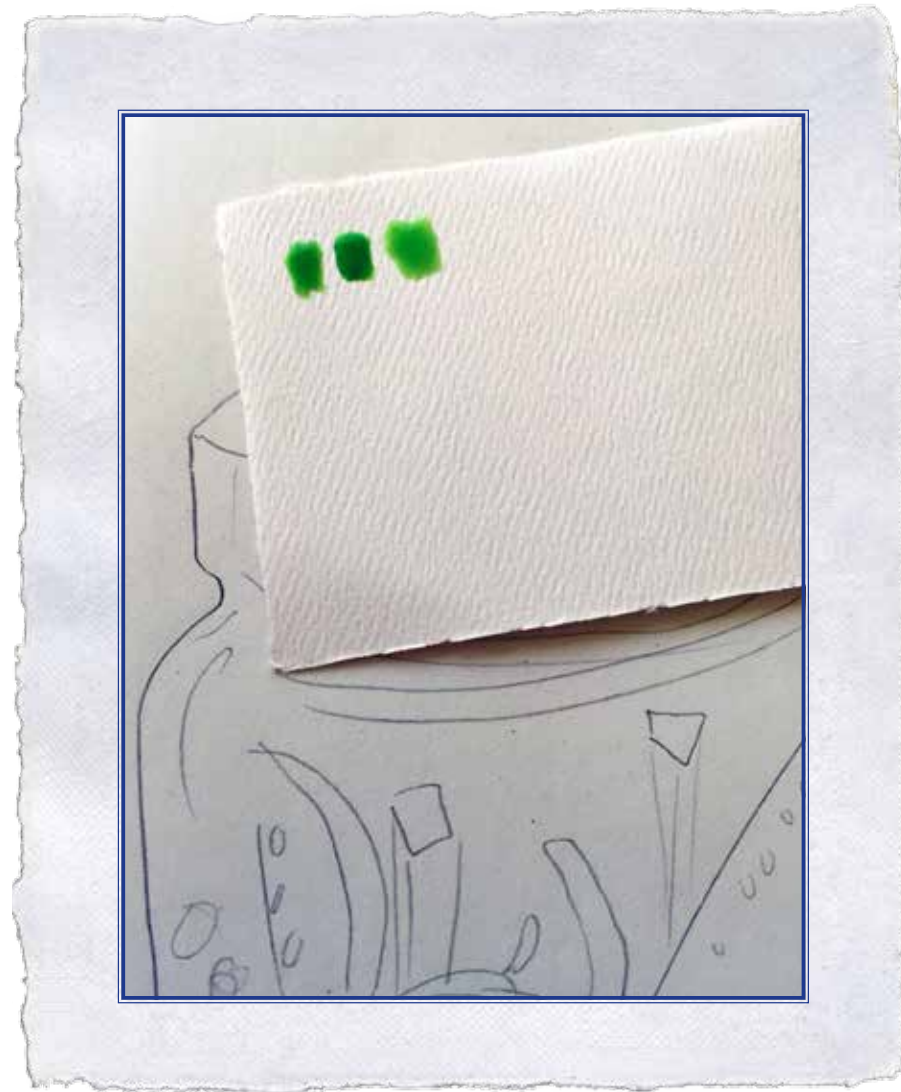
4. Begin by sketching the shapes of the Mason-jar lids, pointing out that you may or may not see the top of the lid depending on where you are sitting. Discuss different jar shapes, patterns, and labels. Continue sketching, filling the jars with spear and triangle shapes that represent the cucumbers, garlic, and peppercorns that we might see in actual pickling jars. If a participant is hesitant to start because the big white page is intimidating, let him or her begin by tracing a premade Mason-jar template. After that, adding a few lines to create a carrot spear or a few circles to be dill and pepper does not seem as scary! Depending on the style of their drawings, the participants may wish to create a bold outline effect with permanent marker, or a wax-resist effect with a light crayon, which will leave behind a white mark on the paper even after the paint has been applied to it. Point out these effects on the chosen watercolor examples to encourage the participants to explore different ways of creating marks.



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5. Begin to add color to the drawing, reminding the participants that a brighter color will be achieved by using less water. If a puddle of water begins to form, they can easily dab it with a paper towel.

6. Pin up the finished pieces with magnets, if available, or have the participants hold up their finished pieces to discuss what each one reminds them of, what they learned, what they are proud of, and so on. Make sure each artist signs his or her own work!

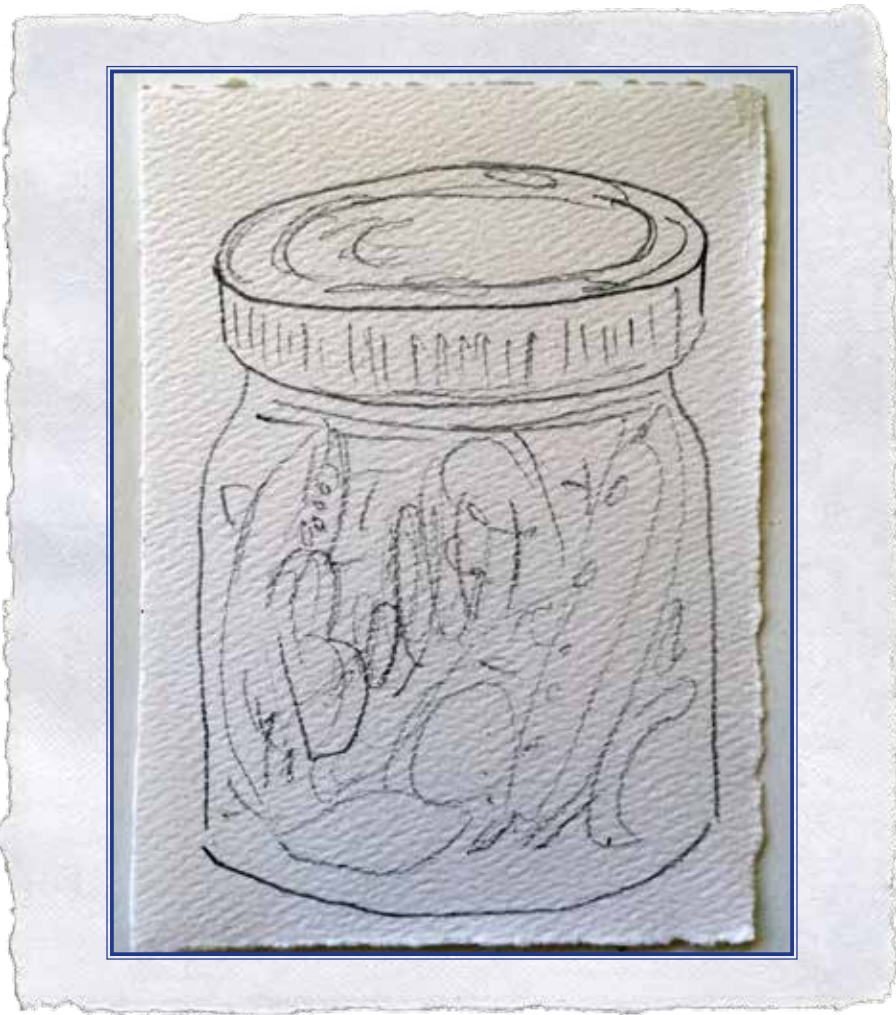




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SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

1. The second session should begin by recapping the first session. Discuss the watercolor paintings that were made, as well as the stories remembered or imagined and shared. Explain that the participants will paint another jar, like they did previously, but this time on a piece of watercolor paper folded in half.



2. Encourage participants to build on what was learned and the skills acquired in the first session. Inform them that they will create a greeting card to send to a loved one. If they paint a jar of pickled beets or cucumbers or some other canned food based on a family recipe, they could even write the recipe inside of the card to pass on a family tradition.

3. The participants could also paint a few jars lined up on the shelf. Then end with another group discussion.



AUTHOR • NICOLE GAGNER:

Nicole is an artist who lives and works in Bismarck, North Dakota. Nicole's career in art instruction began immediately after college with VSAND, an organization that brings art classes to groups of individuals of all ages with physical and intellectual disabilities. She then moved to California and began working with Options Family of Services, where she continued to work in group homes and day programs for the intellectually disabled and traumatic brain injury community. Her work teaching art to students with a range of physical and cognitive disabilities solidified her idea that any person of any age can be an artist, if given the appropriate tools, opportunity, and encouragement. That concept always has been at the center of Nicole's personal artistic mission. Nicole brought chunky, adaptive tools, such as large-handled paintbrushes or a mahl stick to steady a shaky hand, into her classroom. The use of forgiving mediums, like pastels, acrylics, or water-mixable oils, are another one of the many ways that Nicole has helped her students unleash their inner artist, regardless of their ability levels. Engagement in the arts provides lifelong enrichment and can begin at any time.

(Artwork and images provided by Nicole Gagner.)

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