

# EXPLORING ART TODDLER STYLE



by **Melissa Scholes Young**

**M**ommy, look! It feels like the ocean!" My three-year-old daughter, Isabelle, squealed across the art studio as she rubbed globs of electric blue finger-paint together on her palms. She smeared. She poked. She used her index finger as a modified paintbrush and created zigzags and waves of blue across the glass.

I gazed over her shoulder and catalogued the ways my daughter has exhibited her genius since birth. Isabelle promptly leaned over and licked the ocean in her hand. A frown appeared on her face: "Mommy, it didn't taste like ocean. Sweet. No salt?" I wondered if finger-paints have any significant nutritional value.

Isabelle and I have been exploring art in its numerous forms since her first love affair with a kid's Van Gogh book of colors

when she was one and a half. That book, with its tattered edges and gnawed corners, simplified the complex world of art into common shapes and primary colors. In typical toddler fashion, we read it repeatedly until I could recite every page in my sleep. The book had been a gift from an eclectic hippy friend who presented my husband and me with Isabelle's extended astrology chart for her birth. She declared my daughter an artist. And she is.

We first began taking summer art classes together at the Brush and Palette Studio on Timberlane Road two years ago, starting with a class in "exploratory art" designed specifically for toddlers. Each week the instructor set up four different projects for us to progress through. We worked at a toddler's pace, which meant either that our short attention span caused us to complete all four

projects in under twelve minutes, or that we would spend sixty full minutes tearing colored tissue paper into tiny bits. I found myself "exploring" too, and felt guilty when I realized I was nudging my daughter towards the simple green shaving cream foam so I could concentrate on a more complex mosaic with seashells.

"Remember, it's the process not the product," reminds Pam Talley, the owner and instructor. The overzealous parents collectively sighed and stepped back from our coaching to let our budding artists investigate. This was particularly frustrating during what I call Isabelle's "Mud Period" – the time when she discovered over and over that adding brown or black to any color miraculously turns the whole thing brown or black. I kept pushing the yellows and reds, while Pam gently guided me back to a safe viewing distance. I have a plethora of framed portraits featuring a single black paint stroke to prove my restraint.

Isabelle and I have learned to mold clay into snakes and melt crayons into a blur of waxy hues. We've rubbed pencils onto paper and watched as the outlines of keys and pennies and veined leaves emerged. We've dripped neon paints into a salad spinner and spun a rainbow of paper plate masterpieces. And we've stomped aluminum foil into sculptures of swans and kitties. Each class was thoughtful and adventuresome, and Pam gently explained the art concepts as we explored in sync.

To encourage a finer appreciation for art, I've also organized outings to each new exhibit at the Mary Brogan Museum and the LeMoyné Art Foundation. Isabelle asks wonderfully profound questions like, "Look at the old mummy! Can I climb it?" and "Why is the picture upside down?" One day, as we cocked our heads sideways to appreciate the abstract brush strokes of a very modern artist, she broke the silence of the gallery by exclaiming, "It's very messy, mommy." I personally thought it resembled one of Isabelle's mud period masterpieces, but for the sake of teaching gallery etiquette, I shushed her and strolled on.

Of course, hands-on art is Isabelle's favorite method of discovery. When we happened upon "Complex" by Alex White in *The Art and Ecology Triennial* installation at the Brogan, Isabelle spent an hour happily rearranging the collection of spray-painted egg cartons on the floor. I hovered

like a helicopter, waving my arms to intercept the impending destruction, but the wonderful people at the museum assured me that my toddler was doing exactly what the artist intended.

Isabelle also likes to simply sit amongst the art and absorb. The Helen Lind Sculpture Garden at LeMoyné is one of our favorite places to soak up culture. I pack snacks and art books for us to share. We stroll the brick paths and rest on the stone benches as we discuss each sculpture. This is where Isabelle's imagination really comes alive; she pretends each piece of art can speak only to her. "Listen, mommy, to the art....," she exclaims. The sculptures whisper their secrets as we pass, and she nods at them in encouragement.

I don't know if Isabelle will be the next Jackson Pollock or Vermeer – though she has recently demonstrated a proclivity for watercolors – but I know that I won't have these precious days with her again. So for now, I am content to "ooh" and "aah" over each new toddler creation. As I rinse out her paintbrushes and replenish her palettes, I realize Pam was right: it is the process and not the product that really matters. **CC**



Images: Opposite page - Melissa Scholes Young and her daughter Isabelle enjoy an afternoon of finger painting.