



One Artist's Journey

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Following the Footsteps of Virgil James

As a boy, Virgil James lived with his mother and his grandfather, a Methodist minister, in the church parsonage. His grandfather would take him into the woods and study the Bible while Virgil played. When Virgil was five-years-old, a visitor in his home took the time to show him how to draw a semi-trailer truck. He was enthralled with his newly found talent. As a preschooler, his enthusiasm and delight could not be bound. He drew on everything -- even the church walls. When his mother made him stop, he would lie on the floor underneath the church pews and draw on the underside of the wooden seats.

Virgil James, a full-blood Choctaw, was born and raised in southeastern Oklahoma. He spent much of his time outdoors fishing and hunting, but two incidents made him rethink his desire and reasons for hunting. The first happened while hunting behind his house one day. His rifle didn't seem to be working correctly. Usually a good shot, he aimed, but wasn't able to hit anything. He kept shooting toward a squirrel and kept missing. He sat down to check his rifle and the sight. While sitting under the tree, he saw the squirrel that he had been trying to shoot go to its nest. He then saw that it was bringing food to a nest full of baby squirrels. To his amazement nothing was wrong with his gun.

The second incident happened after he had grown to be a man. Virgil had taught his son never to shoot at a nest. One day he ignored his own rule. He saw a bushy tail over the side of a nest and thought it was a squirrel. He shot at the tail and wounded the animal -- a raccoon. Unfortunately, he wounded, but didn't kill, the animal. He had to shoot the animal again to end its misery. Virgil continues to take his gun on hikes to explore the woods, but he doesn't kill anything. He just enjoys the pleasure of being outdoors.

As a teenager Virgil attended vocational school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. He considered himself to have a rebellious spirit because of the many times he would run away from school to return home, approximately 170 miles away. After hitchhiking all that way, his mother would send him back each time. She didn't punish him, but she would tell him the value of getting an education. After the second year of doing this, returning to school became embarrassing to him and he realized that he was responsible for his own actions. If he were going to get an education, he would have to do it himself.

His high temper and rebellious spirit lengthened his stay in school. It took him five years to graduate simply because he would not complete his school work. He eventually began to study and finish his assignments. He graduated near the top of his class. It was during this time that his interest in drawing was revived. While taking a painting course, he entered a painting in a contest and was awarded "honorable mention."

After graduation, Virgil attended Haskell Indian Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, for five months to learn the trade of printing. He still had a desire to attend art school but wasn't able to afford it. The GI Bill offered financial assistance to attend school for people who joined the military service. Virgil enlisted in the Navy for four years. During those four years he gained valuable experience drawing illustrations and printing. After the service, he worked as a printer and lithographer while attending more art classes. He also worked as an airbrush and product illustrator for an advertising agency. Virgil's strong desire to become a free lance artist and run his own business kept him returning to school to further his education.

from food containers to lettering on boxes. Virgil uses a variety of methods to draw, design or illustrate objects or lettering used in advertising. Virgil likes to work in most art mediums. He enjoys water color, charcoal, pencil, and painting.

Only a few years ago after an eye examination, Virgil discovered that he is partially color blind. His blindness is especially pronounced when he works with grays and graduated shadings of some colors. He doesn't feel color blindness is a handicap. He doesn't let it bother him in any way and continues to draw and paint based on his perspective of reality.

When working on a project, many times Virgil worked with clay, making a mockup of an object, or simply reducing or enlarging a design. Virgil kept a time sheet to record the time he spent on his work projects. He got so experienced he could look at a job and determine almost exactly how much time it would take and how much it would cost to make.

Once again, he returned to school for more training in the fine arts. He went to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. There he learned about painting, pottery making, and sculpting. In addition to art studio classes, he also took a variety of courses including history, English, and art appreciation.

While in Santa Fe attending the Art Institute, he was introduced to the art of traditional pottery making. Although he says that it's more painstaking and difficult, he respects the methods our ancestors used to make pottery and the beliefs and values of our oneness with nature. Pottery comes from the earth. It is made with clay, painted with minerals and plants, shaped with stones and gourds. As the Pueblo artists in Arizona and New Mexico take pieces of the land and make pottery, they feel this creates a bond. Traditional potters speak of including the whole universe—the earth, the sky, and human beings—into the design of the pottery. Pottery making is so ancient that archaeologists spend much time analyzing pottery fragments, or potsherds. The pottery remains offer a glimpse of the culture.

Virgil's voice is reverent when he speaks of pottery making. Clay is "picked" and is considered a gift from Mother Earth. Offerings of corn meal are given by some tribes, asking permission from Mother Earth to use her body for pottery to support themselves and their children. Much time is given to processing materials for potting. It may take twenty-four to thirty hours of work to mix one cubic foot of clay. Clay must be dried before it is soaked, sometimes ground and sieved clean. Water is changed several times to purify and dissolve stray minerals. Once saturated, the clay must be sieved to sift out the impurities of stones, branches, and roots.

Adding a temper of sand, finely ground rock, or potsherds helps the clay to dry more slowly and more evenly. There is an art to deciding the proportion of temper and clay. Next is shaping and scraping the clay to rough out the form of the object. There are many methods and techniques to pottery making. But potters, including Virgil, believe the forms and designs are a part of you. Your story or feelings or how you view your world will be evident in your pottery.

Virgil enjoys life and feels everyone should enjoy whatever they do, that one shouldn't hold back emotions, talents or feelings but be aware of one's self and one's feelings. He feels one should always be honest with one's self and others. He also believes in respecting others with the same respect he would like. He believes his feelings, emotions and attitudes cannot be hidden from painting or molding clay. As far as his work is concerned, he doesn't settle for less than his best.

Discussion Questions:

1. What kind of person do you think Virgil James is? Justify your comments based on the profile information.
2. How can you tell Virgil enjoyed drawing as a young child?

5. Virgil's mother did not punish him when he ran away from school, she just talked to him and sent him back. What were other ways she could have handled this? Name at least two, and tell what you think the outcome would have been regarding Virgil's life and attitude.
6. Why did Virgil finally decide to stay in school and work hard?
7. What was Virgil's reason to enlist in the military service?

Career Inventory:

Virgil had to make many decisions about his career. How would you respond to these questions?

1. Do I want an indoor or outdoor job?
2. Do I want to work with people or by myself?
3. Am I willing to go to school after graduating from high school?
4. Do I want a job that is year-round or seasonal?
5. What hours of the day would I prefer to work?
6. Where do I want to live? in the city or country? near my present home or somewhere else?
7. Am I willing to travel with my job?
8. How high do I want to advance? is advancement possible in my job?
9. What type of salary will I need to fulfill my lifestyle?
10. Could the job I choose be eliminated in the near future because of advancements in technology?
11. What type of equipment or tools will I be using?
12. What type of clothing will be required?
13. Will health insurance be provided? a retirement plan?



Science

Clay Treasure Hunt

Preparing for a Clay Dig Field Trip -- Part I

Objectives:

Students will recognize the two types of clay found in nature.

Students will describe possible sources for clay deposits.

Students will learn considerations given in planning a trip/expedition/field trip.

Materials:

- coffee cans
- plastic bags
- hammer
- screen (one foot by one foot square)
- spade or small shovel
- container of water
- backpack

Exploration and Seminar:

Students should discuss and determine as a group what materials they might need in order to dig clay. What items might they need for themselves as well as materials to retrieve the clay? How would they determine where to look for clay? What people or other items could serve as resources in getting needed information?

Invention:

The class should determine that supplies needed for each group should include empty cans (coffee cans will do), hammer, spade, plastic bags, container of water (carry in milk jugs), screen (one foot square), and a backpack.

Review with the class information about layers of the Earth, emphasizing the location of clay areas. Earth movement or shifting will also affect the location of clay. Discuss the two types of clay: residual-primary and sedimentary. Discuss the types of clay and how their names denote their location. Possible sources for clay deposits might include river beds, road cuts, and mountain sides. Possible resource people might include an art teacher, science teacher, potter, or parent of students. Geological maps of your area could also be obtained from the city or county offices. Students may then select a clay site and organize their field trip. Transportation, parental permission and school policies should be considered.

Application:

Many clay explorations have taken place since the beginning of time. Did those early explorers have

The Clay Dig -- Part II

Objective:

The students will locate clay in a natural setting and complete a site report.

Materials:

- coffee cans
- plastic bags
- hammer
- screen (one foot by one foot square)
- spade or small shovel
- container of water
- backpack

Exploration:

Each group will be asked to record the steps in preparing clay. The teacher will demonstrate the steps and then each group will be asked to locate three different clay sites. They will test the clay at each site and set it out to dry. They are to choose the clay that feels the most plastic and take three different samples back to school for further study. Remind students to label each sample by site.

Teacher Demonstration of Clay Dig:

1. Shovel a small amount of clay on to a screen.
2. Screen the clay into a coffee can.
3. Add enough water to the clay for a dough consistency.
4. Make a small pot from the mixed clay and set out to dry.
5. Observe the drying pot for cracking and plasticity.

Seminar:

Suggested Questions:

What clay dig steps did you record after locating a clay source?

What did you list as steps in preparing your clay?

Did you make any observations that had not been mentioned in the demonstration or in the experiment?

Where did you find the best sources for clay in nature?

What were the physical characteristics of each of your samples?

What can you say about the absorbancy, plasticity, and cracking of your clay samples?

Which of their samples was better for pottery making and why?

Invention:

Teams should record these minimum steps for their clay preparation:

1. Locate clay source.
2. Allow clay to dry; then shovel onto a screen.
3. Screen clay into empty coffee can or plastic bag.
4. Mix substance with water to dough consistency.
5. Make a small pot and put in sun to dry and observe for cracking and plasticity.

In recording their information about their samples the following information may be noted:

- Location
- Preparation
- Physical characteristics
- Absorbency
- Plasticity
- Cracking

Students may also note if their findings or hypotheses about locating possible clay sources were accurate.

Application:

Based on your knowledge of the qualities of clay found in different sites, predict other sites of potential digs. Test your predictions.

