



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

Virgil feels commercial art is involved in everything. People are needed to design everything 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.

4. What caused Virgil to remain in vocational school an extra year?
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?



Language Arts

How Can Clay Sing?

Objective:

Students will gain insight into the world of pottery long ago by reading Byrd Baylor's *When Clay Sings*.

Material:

- book: *When Clay Sings* by Byrd Baylor. New York: MacMillan, 1987. ISBN 0-689-71106-9.

Exploration:

Prior to reading the book aloud to students, discuss the title of the book.

Suggested Questions:

- What does the author mean?
- What do think the author is going to tell us about clay?
- Can clay really sing?

Seminar and Invention:

Discussion questions after reading the book:

1. Where does the story take place? What is the climate?
2. How long ago is the author talking about?
3. Did the things in the story really happen? How do you know?
4. Why did the parents tell their children to “treat the pottery piece with respect, because it is old?”
5. How can clay (or any object) be “a piece of one’s life?”
6. How do you think the colors were chosen by the illustrator for the book?
7. Why do you think the people who made the pottery left so much of it remaining for us to find? Do you think they thought about leaving the pottery for us or is it simply accidental that we have found the pottery?
8. What did people paint on their pottery? Have designs on pottery changed from that time?
9. What kind of bugs does the author say there were then?

11. What three words did the author use to describe the process of making pottery?
12. What can you tell from the book about the people who made pottery long ago? What was their world like?
13. How can you tell the children of that time were like the children of today?
14. What do you think the author means when she says “songs had to be powerful. . . ?” When/where do we have those type songs today?

Application Extensions:

1. Ask students if they have an item in their home (that belonged to another person) that their parents consider very precious? Discuss why it is considered valuable to the family? What meaning or significance does it have? Is the item valuable because of how much it cost or because it is important to one or more members of the family?
2. Tell students there are people who study other people through the things they used in the past. Discuss the term “anthropologist.” Why is this career important and what can we learn from the past?
3. Discuss family life and the things they do together that “holds life together” as mentioned near the end of the story.
4. Make water color paintings of the Southwest area.
5. Invite a potter to class for a demonstration.
6. Research clay designs and their meanings, past and present.