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Explore a Unit: Public Art (Grade 1)

June 20, 2019



The world-famous Picasso statue. Wall murals in the Pilsen neighborhood. The Fountain of the Great Lakes. First-graders at GEMS World Academy Chicago explored these and other examples of public art in Chicago and considered how such works affect, and are affected by, the community.



After exploring those questions, the students created their own public art. They recorded themselves reciting original poems, then they made the recordings available via publicly posted QR codes.

Grade 1 teachers at GEMS said that the Public Art unit tends to be an engaging one for students.

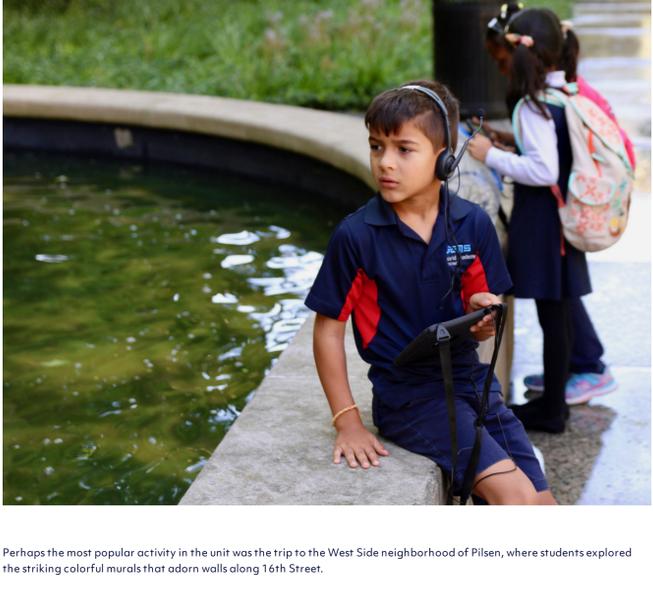
"There is a lot of excitement around this unit because the students are literally seeing the world through a new lens," teacher Kirsten Richards said. "They begin to think about art in a different way than they had before, how it connects people to each other and to the communities they live in."

Because Chicago offers a stunning array of public art to explore, the city essentially became the students' classroom during the unit. They visited the famous Picasso statue in Daley Plaza, asking questions about form, perspective and function.

One student, in a reflection about the visit, noticed that different students recognized different things in the statue.

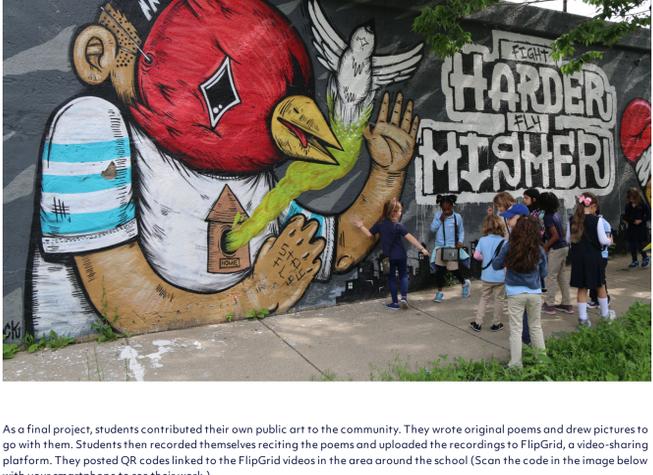
"Some people thought it looks like a detective from one perspective. From the other perspective, some people thought it looks like a horse, or someone wearing a horse mask on a hang glider," the student noted.

Students also explored two works included in the city's Talking Statues program, which allows visitors to hear the works "talk" about their history. Using iPads and Wi-Fi hotspots, students listened to the Fountain of the Great Lakes statue and the famous lions that stand in front of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Perhaps the most popular activity in the unit was the trip to the West Side neighborhood of Pilsen, where students explored the striking colorful murals that adorn walls along 16th Street.

"Our inquiry into public art is powerful because it helps students and teachers alike think deeply about the statues, murals, and musicians we walk by every day, but perhaps pay little mind," grade 1 teacher Joel Blecha said.



As a final project, students contributed their own public art to the community. They wrote original poems and drew pictures to go with them. Students then recorded themselves reciting the poems and uploaded the recordings to FlipGrid, a video-sharing platform. They posted QR codes linked to the FlipGrid videos in the area around the school (Scan the code in the image below with your smartphone to see their work.)

Students reflected that the unit changed their views of art and artists.

"I learned that public art can be graffiti, and I'd never even heard of graffiti before this unit started!" one student said.

The Public Art unit is part of the International Baccalaureate curriculum framework in place at GEMS Chicago. Congrats to the first-graders and their teachers for their innovative work!

See more images and a short video from the unit below.



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