



Everything Jersey

St. Benedict's students showcase knowledge of American Romanticism at Newark Museum

By Rohan Mascarenhas/The Star-Ledger

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NEWARK -- Marion Wilson doesn't look at art the way most people do.

Faced with a gorgeous depiction of a sunset from an American Romantic painter, the Newark high school student had one major criticism.



Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger

St. Benedict's Preparatory School student Richard Vincent, of Hillside, in Newark Museum's Picturing America Galleries.

"The yellow in the sunset should be higher than it is because of its position in the light spectrum," Wilson, 17, said. "Red should be there."

Wilson was one of nearly 200 students from the St. Benedict's Preparatory School at the Newark Museum today, showcasing a semester's worth of a unique interdisciplinary curriculum that blends art, music, drama and literature.

It's an approach in diminishing supply in both private and public schools in the state as standardized tests have gradually taken hold and dictated lesson plans, said Alan Sadovnik, a Rutgers University sociology professor.

"It's very hard to do interdisciplinary because the tests mandated by No Child Left Behind Act and other laws are often skill-based and discipline-bound," he said.

For the past six years, the school has chosen a theme or person -- the Harlem Renaissance, or Billie Holiday --

to examine a subject from different angles.

This year, the students focused on American Romanticism, a movement that blossomed in the 19th century and defined writers from Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The period saw thinkers praise imagination, emotion and the pursuit of knowledge, and it seemed an obvious choice as a theme for an interdisciplinary project.

Pamela Wye-Hunsinger, the chair of the fine arts department at St. Benedict's, praised the curriculum for drawing lines between spheres of knowledge.

"The kids are seeing that learning isn't just compartmentalized," Wye-Hunsinger said. "A culture is alive with people of many different ideas."

As part of the project, the Newark Museum invited students to look at its collection of Romantic paintings, which the art students used as inspiration for six illustrated children's books.

Ishmael Solomon, 16, used a knight depicted in a Romantic painting from 1850 as the main character in his 11-page book.

"It took a lot of brainstorming and creativity ... to try and convey the artists' emotions in a story," said Solomon, 16.

The school also brought in musicians from the American Symphony Orchestra, who trained students to play Romantic music pieces from Brahms and Tchaikovsky and performed with them today.

The orchestra's role has attracted national attention, winning a \$40,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for the orchestra's role in the project.

While the students rehearsed at the museum for today's performance, Anthony Nunez, 16, stood in outside of the auditorium, in front of his group's science display, which featured different cloud formations made of cotton.

"I know now that clouds are more than things in the sky," he said. "They can have depth. They can be beautiful."

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