

The Anything Art of Jimmie Lee Sudduth

By Carolyn W. Ezell

What would you do if you had a pile of sand, a chunk of clay, a piece of plywood, and a handful of leaves? Perhaps you would build a sand castle and decorate it with bits of the clay and leaves. Maybe you would use your imagination to create something else wonderful and unique.

Jimmie Lee Sudduth is an artist who uses his imagination to paint pictures with the many things he finds in nature.

Unlike most artists, Sudduth rarely uses canvases, paints, or brushes. His favorite painting surface is plywood. Instead of using paint, he uses clay, sand, soot, and such things as leaves, pine needles, and berries.

Sudduth has been painting since he was young. He is well known as a folk artist. Instead of going to art classes to learn their skills, most folk artists teach themselves their art forms and learn through years of experience.

When Jimmie was young, he would sometimes draw pictures in the dirt if he

could not find a board or a piece of cardboard to use. When he wanted to make a picture but didn't have any paints, he made his own from the colored materials he saw in his yard and around his hometown of Fayette, Alabama.

Many folk artists choose to show rural life through their art, but some also choose subjects from the city. Sudduth paints both kinds of scenes, and portraits, too. But he especially enjoys painting pictures of log cabins, flowers, and animals. "I can paint anything I can dream," he says. "Painting takes me anywhere my imagination goes."



In 1976 Sudduth's paintings took him to Washington, D.C., where he joined in a huge folk art festival during our nation's two-hundredth birthday celebration. While he was there, he was delighted to meet the President of the United States.

Sudduth has taught art classes to both grown-ups and children. Usually he begins with a piece of plywood, which he holds in his lap while he works. Sometimes he uses

other surfaces. In his studio you can find paintings on cardboard, old wooden shingles, and on pieces of floor tile. When he begins a picture, he surrounds himself with containers holding sands, soils, and clays. He likes to use white, gray, and brown sands as well as brown and black soils. He also uses white, gray, and red clays. He prepares these by adding sugar and a little water to the sand, and syrup to the dirt and clay to help them stick to the board.

Through the years Sudduth has collected many different colors of sand, dirt, and clay, most of them from the Alabama countryside. But people have also brought him unusual sands and soils from all over the United States. When he finishes a painting, he can point to the different colors in it, as though he were reading a map, explaining where he got each color.

Sudduth paints by dipping his fingers into the containers and then skillfully applying nature's "paints" to the board. He uses one finger to paint thin lines, and two or three fingers to paint wide lines and large areas.

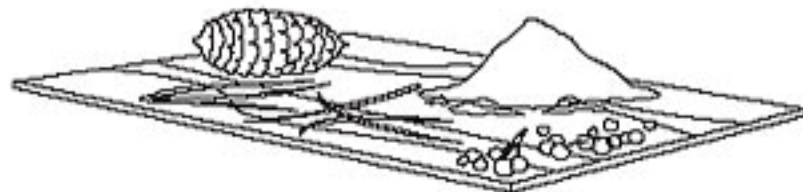
He makes the color green for trees, grass, and flower stems by crumpling leaves and rubbing them back and forth in designs across the plywood. In the winter, when it is

hard to find leaves, he uses fallen pine needles. To add purples, pinks, and blues to his work, he presses berries against the board. Soot from his fireplace is sometimes used when he needs black. Clouds are made by dabbing white sand or white clay into his skies. Some of the lines are drawn with colored rocks.

Sudduth paints every day. As Sudduth works, he experiments with materials he has not used before. But he warns against getting close to poison ivy, poison sumac, or poison oak when collecting materials.

Sudduth's bright and colorful paintings are shown in folk art galleries from Washington, D.C., to Berkeley, California. Each fall he takes part in an Alabama folk art festival called Kentuck. During this two-day festival, he shows hundreds of people how to paint using nature.

He says the most important parts of painting with nature are to explore the world with our imaginations and to have fun with creativity. His paintings make us aware of many things in nature that we often take for granted. "I taught myself to paint with mud," he says. "Dirt is free, and it never wears out." Neither, it seems, does Jimmie Lee Sudduth's imagination.



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1 Read this sentence from the article.

Many folk artists choose to show rural life through their art, but some also choose subjects from the city.

Which words have almost the same meaning as *rural life*?

- A. an artistic life
- B. a practical life
- C. life in the country
- D. life in a foreign land

1 The correct answer is C (life in the country).

Type of Passage: Informational Text

Benchmark: L.A.A.1.2.3 The student uses simple strategies to determine meaning and increase vocabulary for reading, including the use of prefixes, suffixes, root words, multiple meanings, antonyms, synonyms, and word relationships.

The correct answer is C. By providing “from the city” as a contrast, the sentences indicate that *rural life* has the same meaning as *life in the country*.