

Studio Saturdays: Animal Characters

The Catastrophe by Mary Russell Smith



Mary Russell Smith

The Catastrophe

1864

Oil on Canvas

Gift in Honor of Gatsby Philip Narayan Mukherjee

Mary Russell Smith was born in Philadelphia almost 180 years ago and was most famous for her oil paintings of animals, especially chickens. After painting, Smith's favorite hobby as a young girl was to raise chickens. She got so good at painting them that her family encouraged her to become a professional artist when she was only 14. Both of her parents were also artists and supportive of her work, so much so that her mother trained Smith herself.

Smith's paintings were popular for two main reasons: her attention to detail and her ability to create a narrative, or story, between her subjects. To help her viewers relate to her subjects, Smith used anthropomorphism, or the practice of giving human qualities to non-human things. For examples of anthropomorphism, think about the animated movies you have seen that have animals as the main characters. Have you noticed how different they look from animals in real life? Like Mary Russell Smith, animators realized that it was easier for people to connect to their characters if they looked and acted like humans.

Because Smith's realistic style limited how much humanity she could give her subjects, she relied on animals' symbolic meanings to tell her stories. In *The Catastrophe*, Smith's choice to include a weasel, which represents death and untrustworthiness, sets up the viewer to see the weasel as the likely cause of the two chicks' deaths because of what weasels symbolize. The barnyard becomes the background for her story and helps us explore the personalities of the animals within their own environment.

Using Smith's work as a jumping-off-point, we'll be creating our own animal-characters and stories. Because there are three popsicles in your kit, I'll be making a story with three characters. My characters will be a cat, a dog, and a mouse, and my story will be about them becoming unlikely friends. You're welcome to create a story with more than three if you'd like by snapping your popsicle sticks in half or using other similar materials like pencils or sticks. When we are done drawing them, we will take our characters outside and use the popsicle sticks as stands in the ground to create an outdoor story scene. These characters can be any animals you want, and the story can be about whatever you would like! Think about what these animals mean to you and how you want to bring them to life using your imagination, your experiences, or your favorite memories.

THINK LIKE AN ARTIST

- 1) Why did you choose your animals?
- 2) Consider your background. What story are you telling?

LIST OF MATERIALS

- 2 or 4 Sheets of White Paper
 - *You may need more or less depending on how many characters you are making.
- 3 or 4 Popsicle Sticks
 - *The total number will be determined by our number of characters.
- Glue Stick
- Sharpie
- Scissors

INSTRUCTIONS

Start by thinking about the story you want to tell and what animals will serve as your characters. My story will be about the friendship between a cat, a dog, and a mouse!

Once you have chosen your characters, consider some different ideas for scenes you can create to illustrate your story. For example, the friendship between my characters might be shown through them holding hands, singing a song together, or going to the beach, since these are all things I enjoy doing with my friends in real life!

Take a new sheet of white paper and draw your first animal character. Even though we will be using a sharpie or standard marker to draw a figurine with bold lines, we will start with a pencil to sketch. That way, you can make changes along the way. This is called an **underdrawing**.

Once your underdrawing is done, take a sharpie or marker and trace your animal sketch. If you want to change the position of something or leave out any of the sketch lines you drew before, do so carefully, because now that you are using a marker, the drawing becomes permanent.

After you finish tracing, erase your underdrawing. I will be leaving my characters in black and white, but you can add colors after you are done erasing to brighten up your characters.

I want my characters to be **proportional**, meaning the size of one is determined by the size of the other, so I will draw guides to make sure my cat is bigger than my mouse. But you can make your animals any size you like.

When you have made all your characters, take some popsicle sticks or other rod-like objects and glue them to the back of your characters. These will serve as stands so you can set them in the ground outside and bring your scene to life!