The King and the Three Great Painters

a folk tale from China

The King of Kadu wanted the best piece of art he could get. He decided to send for the greatest painters in his kingdom. They would paint for him, and then he and his court would pick the best piece.

The first painter to appear was a short bald man. He brought a large piece of canvas, 50 brushes, and 50 paint pots. A servant mixed his colors. The painter bowed low to the king and began to paint as fast as a rushing river. In one hour, he had painted a picture of the king's palace. "Look at that," said the court. "You can see every stone of the castle!"

Next was a tall old woman. She brought a large piece of canvas, 100 brushes, and 100 paint pots. A servant mixed her colors. The painter bowed low to the king and began to paint as fast as a flying falcon. In half an hour, she had painted a portrait of the king in his crown. "Look at that," said the court. "You can see every wrinkle—and the twinkle in our king's eye!"
As they argued about which painting was better, a little girl entered the room. She had nothing but a sheet of paper, a brush, and an ink pot. She bowed low to the king and began to paint. She painted seven black lines on the paper. The simple lines made a tree branch with leaves and flowers and even a bug on a leaf. The court began to laugh.

Just then a tiny gold bird flew in the window. It flew to the painted branch and pecked at the painted bug. "Look," cried the court. "The bird thinks the bug is real!"

The bird lifted its head and began to sing. The song was so lovely that everyone smiled, including the king. "You have taught us all a lesson," he said.

The bird went on singing.

—Alice Chase
Check Your Understanding

Write the letter of the best answer for each question.

1. Why did the people of the court think the first two paintings were so good?
   A. because they showed so many colors
   B. because they showed so many details
   C. because the artists were grownups
   D. because the king made the paintings

2. Which conclusion can you draw about painters who have servants to mix their colors?
   A. The painters are successful.
   B. The painters know how to mix colors.
   C. The painters use large canvases.
   D. The painters work quickly.

3. Why did the people of the court laugh at the little girl's painting?
   A. because she was too little to be a painter
   B. because the bird in it was singing
   C. because it was a simple painting
   D. because she put a bug on the branch

4. What lesson did the king learn from the bird's action?
   A. that a simple painting can be the most lifelike and beautiful
   B. that birds are easily fooled
   C. that painted bugs taste as good as real bugs
   D. that birds can fly through the window

5. At the end of the story, the king felt —
   A. angry at the little girl
   B. frightened by the bird
   C. embarrassed for the other painters
   D. glad to have learned something

Vocabulary

Find each vocabulary word in the selection. The words and sentences around it will help you figure out its meaning.

Write the letter of the best definition of the underlined word.

1. The first two painters brought canvas.
   A. extra paper
   B. cloth to paint on
   C. gifts for the king
   D. clothing worn by painters

2. Look at the picture of the king's palace. You can see every stone of the castle!
   A. home of a ruler
   B. movie theater
   C. platform
   D. small wooden house

3. The king was surrounded by his court.
   A. area where sports are played
   B. people who serve the king or queen
   C. family pets
   D. favorite objects

4. They argued about which painting was better.
   A. cried
   B. laughed
   C. sighed
   D. fought

5. Everyone smiled, including the king.
   A. for the sake of
   B. right at
   C. except for
   D. as well as