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A Two-Point Perspective on Art: Multicultural—Nonsexist Education

by Theresa E. McCormick

Opportunities abound for educators to promote intergroup understanding when two strong humanistic curricular areas are integrated—art and multicultural-nonsexist education. Both areas serve to humanize the teaching-learning process and to enhance the total school climate.

A multicultural-nonsexist approach to art teaching raises individual awareness and creates appreciation of one's own culture and that of other cultural groups. This approach to art teaching is a perfect vehicle to promote understanding of cultural commonalities and differences in a pluralistic society. Having such a diverse population in the United States requires educators to study the many and varied local cultures in all aspects of the curriculum, including art. As Taylor (1975) stated, "It is useless to keep pushing Columbus and the Pilgrims in an area (referring to Taos, New Mexico) that had been long and richly established millenniums before Columbus set foot in America" (p. 9).

Traditional art programs which have been chiefly concerned with the "old masters" in painting and drawing are no longer adequate for today's multicultural schools. The study of predominantly Western

European male artists, traditional curricula reinforces an ethnocentric view of society and an elitist notion of culture.

A white racist, male-dominated society promotes the belief that one race has innate superiority over other races. White racism resulted from the expansion of Europe and its technological superiority which permitted world dominance for years. The United States patterned itself in the early years of its development after Europe's example (Daniels and Kitano, 1970). Beliefs concerning our dominant culture negate most art by minorities and women and place emphasis on the "high culture" of Western European art. The "ideal" of beauty is a Western conception (e.g. Rembrandt, da Vinci) and the art principles of line, color, shape, picture plane are not taught with consideration of broad cultural influences.

Contributions by minorities and women artists have been left out of many art history and appreciation books and courses. The pointed question to ask is "Why is so little known about past women artists?" not "Why were there no famous women artists?" As Tufts (1974) explained,

... the answer seems to point to a collective and, rather recent, cultural neglect. The basic art survey books used today only rarely allude to the names of women artists, and even most histories dealing with specific periods of art do not seriously consider their work. And yet in the past women were appointed as court painters, were accepted as professionals, and were unstintingly appreciated by their contemporaries. . . . Since the Victorian age . . . a conspiracy of silence seems to have descended upon male chroniclers, and while the history of art was developing into a respected and crowded discipline, historians have conspicuously . . . overlooked or relegated to footnotes the accomplishments and even the existence of women artists (p. xv).

Multicultural-nonsexist art education requires the inclusion of the art of all groups (including women and necessitates accuracy in presentations, displays, and discussions. All aspects of the art experience should be permeated with the richness of diversity that exists in our population. Explore the community and share the discoveries about local artists with the students by taking them to exhibitions or perhaps by taking them to the artist's home or bring the practicing artist into the school. An inspiring example of a rich community resource is the sculpture in Austin, Texas, by Elizabeth Ney, now deceased. Beginning in her native Germany, she sculpted famous public figures and then emigrated to Texas. There, she continued to sculpt marble portraits of well-known people and initiated art studies at the University of Texas and in the public schools.

Students' appreciation of the multicultural nature of art can also be expanded by means of well-

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chosen, sensitive films. For example, the film, "The Spirit Catcher—The Art of Betye Saar," beautifully portrays the art and soul of Saar, an Afro-American, and shows some of the forces behind her work and life. The film examines the integration of her work with the past, present and future and is rich with imagery and symbolism. Watch the students' eyes widen and their interest mount as they sense the mystery in her art and see the connections with her African heritage. Approaches to art teaching, such as the ones just described, would encourage intergroup understanding, improve the quality of life for diverse ethnic people and women, and provide expanded expressive options for students.

Ethnic and cultural diversity has been the most enduring characteristic of United States society and is a prime basis for its unique place in today's world. This diversity should be viewed as a rich source for the teacher to draw upon to make the art curriculum relevant to the lives of the children. As Schuman (1981) stated,

If a child is unaware of the artistic aspects of his heritage, learning about them can be an important growing experience. If he is already aware of this heritage, he might find pleasure and self-respect in sharing this knowledge. Children, who are underprivileged in the sense that their community does not include minority groups, need to experience the richness of creative expression in cultures other than their own (pp. x-xi).

Art grows out of a people's culture and the two cannot legitimately be separated. The outward form of art is a manifestation of a people's experience and development. Art in pre-technological societies was not labeled or recognized as such, since it was an integral part of peoples' lives.

In our ethnocentrism, we often fail to understand the role and function of art in pre-technological societies and thus misrepresentative labels such as "exotic" and "savage" come easily in our teaching. Also, Western artists have been "inspired" by pre-technological art to the point of copying it and not giving due recognition to its origin. These are aspects of accuracy which the culturally sensitive art teacher would be aware of and incorporate into art appreciation lessons.

Handmade craft and art items are a common bond among people of all races and nationalities. Our art legacy helps us trace our roots and provides for communication between generations. Yet, in our highly technological and compartmentalized society, many people are losing the ability and surety to create art and craft objects with their own hands. In fact, some people believe that art as fine art in the late 1900s may be dying out and that the only genuine art of our age may be the folk art of untrained, ordinary people (Taylor, 1975).

Recently the writer saw the exhibit, "Black Folk

Art in America 1930-1980," at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Each of the 300 or more works represents a celebration of life. These works by southern black artists show humor, parody and irony in a tremendous array of materials (mostly salvage), shapes, colors, textures and forms. A companion exhibit, "African Insights: Sources for Afro-American Art and Culture," of over 70 objects from the Field Museum's major African collection provides a means to understand the influence of African culture as it moved through the slave trade into the Americas.

In the "Black Folk Art" exhibit were several wall pieces from the collection of the Kansas Grassroots Art Association (located in Lawrence). While grassroots art is not technically rooted in cultural tradition as folk art is, it clearly springs from the imagination of free-spirited ordinary folks, untrained in art, who use whatever materials are at hand to create environments, towers, statues, paintings and carvings.

Exhibits, such as the ones just described, and museums are a fertile resource for the art teacher and for his/her students. Cross-cultural comparisons can be made between Western art and that of the pre-technological, grass-roots or folk art on display.

Another resource for the teacher are cultural carriers in the community. Cultural carriers are people who remember and/or continue to practice the unique ways of a culture. When the doors of a school are swung open to welcome the grandparents and others who still make art and craft objects by hand, the art program becomes vital, reality-based, and powerfully motivating to the students.

Focusing on the culturally acquired learning patterns and using them as the principle source of instruction are the strength, of a multicultural-nonsexist art program. La Belle (1976) reinforced this idea:

The teacher must systematically investigate the cultural background of his/her students in order to comprehend the impact such a background has on the way in which the child perceives the world and is accustomed to learning and being taught. On the basis of such investigations the school and the teacher can promote continuity for the child (p. 78).

Children from culturally different (different from the mainstream white middle-class child) backgrounds are torn between the influences of the home and the school and often suffer socially, emotionally, and academically. Their self-concepts are weakened by the divergent messages they receive for proper behavior and how to succeed in life. Thus, one of the major values of a multicultural-nonsexist approach to teaching art is the enhancement of the child's self-concept. By minimizing conflicts between the messages given to the child from the home and the school, the teacher is facilitating the child's good feelings about him/herself and the home and thus in-

creasing the likelihood of the child's academic success.

The strong negative impact of growing up in a racist society on the self-concepts of black children is clearly documented in the film, "Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed," narrated by Bill Cosby. The film shows art of black children who leave off arms and legs and do not color themselves dark in their self-portraits. On the other hand, the art of children who are confident of their self-worth and the value of their heritage is full, complete, and uninhibited. Lansing (n.d.) stated, "The cultural environment . . . helps to determine the nature of child art because it possesses the power to shape the personality or the emotional condition by influencing habit, attitude, values . . ." (p. 245).

Assuming that art teachers internalize the preceding information, they will shift the focus of their teaching from art for art's sake or the production of objects to a process orientation which integrates cultural considerations. For too long art education has been concerned with an Anglicized notion of "making" art instead of the process and meaning of art in the lives of children. Taylor (1975) reported on the experience of a teacher at an Indian school in Arizona: ". . . if the school reflects the values of the culture from which the children spring . . . the self concept of children who have been told by another culture and believe 'Nobody wants me, I am nothing' can change" (p. 9).

One means of bolstering minority students' self-esteem is to tap into the oral traditions of their heritage. In our increasingly visual, technological society, oral traditions are being lost. The author of **Bless Me Ultima**, Rodolfo Anaya, stressed the importance of the rich oral tradition of the Spanish American. He encouraged "a balance between seeing, telling, and listening . . . a cultural language-experience approach to teaching. He urged art educators to use oral tradition for art making . . . to find the legends and magic of oral

traditions and let the child conceptualize and visualize the images" (Taylor, p. 9).

In summary, a multicultural-nonsexist approach to art education helps teachers bridge the gaps between the home and the school and those persisting between the democratic ideal of equal educational opportunity for all students and actual school practice. Most importantly, a multicultural-nonsexist art education helps students from all heritages reach self-realization in a rapidly changing, pluralistic society.

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