I Don't Teach Art—I Teach Culture

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A recent NAEA Advisory (Spring 1999) declares that "The artroom offers the perfect opportunity for students to make connections between their own culture and personal experiences through the study of multicultural artists." This arrogant claim is typical of many found in the pages of art education journals, newsletters, books and heard in meeting places coast-to-coast. Hyperbole (cf. *perfect*) is needed to establish the significance of the utterance. And the use, unexplained or defined, of the key concept (cf. *culture*) is voiced as a form of holy truth acknowledged by all: Of course, we all know what *culture* is and we all have one. And then, to demonstrate a form of linguistic creativity, there is reference to artists who must have at least dual citizenship or maybe more to qualify as *multicultural*.

But is the concept of *culture* understood sufficiently for us to deal with it honestly in the artroom? I have collected a handful of divergent uses of that word from a range of recent writings to point out the obvious confusion, what I sense is the purposeful obfuscation that surrounds the concept.

1) [The Columbus Dispatch. June 20, 1999] "Customs prove that chimps have culture" (p. 6B). It seems that some researchers believe that the variety of behaviors the chimps engage in constitute a culture. What sorts of behavior? Grooming, hunting habits, use of plants for food and medicine, courtship, etc. Chimps from different geographical areas, however, do such things differently.

2) [The Columbus Dispatch. June 13, 1999] "Rock art is a clue to ancients" (p. 5G). Referring to petroglyphs in our Southwest (more than prehistoric graffiti) which tell us about the culture of the times. Without any written or oral records, we are free to speculate about the meanings, i.e., the social significance of the pictures of animals and abstract human figures.

3) [The Archaeological Conservancy. Letter to author, July 22, 1999] Referring to "endangered archaeological sites" the objective of the organization is made clear: "to ensure the preservation of our country's cultural heritage."

4) [Imprimis. June, 1999] Richard Lowry raises the issue of America's "culture wars" (p. 1). He is concerned by those who want to "remold American society . . . in keeping with an extreme feminist and multicultural world view" (p. 1). This is a battle of values over the shape of our wider culture.

5) [Freedom Writer. May/June, 1999] "Religious Right failing: Leaders say that the culture war is lost" (p. 1). Again the battle over values, in this case the mission to inject conservative Christianity into American culture.

6) [Art Education. July, 1999] "Folk Art as Communal Culture and Art Proper" (by Elizabeth Manley Dulacruz) informs us of the complexity of the concept because "folk artists cross racial, gender, religious, ethnic, political, and class boundaries" (p. 35), to say nothing of the influences of the artworld proper on their products.

7) [Cornell University Arts and Sciences Newsletter. Spring, 1999] Benedict Anderson explains how for political and then academic motives, a new culture was invented: Southeast Asia. Ignoring historical and "extraordinary religious heterogeneity of the region" an "imagined reality" was created (p. 1).

8) [The New Yorker. June 7, 1999] Mimi Schwartz details the changes in a major newspaper, The Miami Herald, including the appointment of a new editor, "a blue-eyed product of Caribbean genes and a privileged Northeastern upbringing, a high culture vulture just as comfortable slinging slang in English as in Spanish" (p. 42).

9) [Bookbird. Fall, 1998] The editorial reflects on the problems facing the jury deciding on the winners of the major international children's literature awards. One of the issues was recognizing "an artist or writer who presents his/her national culture or one who transcends cultural and linguistic borders by representing the human experience," such matters as "legends, mythology, history, and details of daily life compared with the universal experience of love, family relationships, fear, and the pain of growing up" (p. 2).

Even these isolated current examples should be enough to raise serious questions about the ongoing clamor for *multicultural* art studies. *Culture* is an omnibus term that apparently includes objects, archaeological sites, behaviors, and values. It somehow, in some ambiguous ways, relates to other umbrella terms like nation, people, civilization, region, and encompasses such social institutions as religion, politics, and economics. Which of these should art teachers deal with? How many artists does it take to represent or to present a *culture*? To what extent must we investigate the context of an artist's life, i.e., the complex social environment in which the artifacts are made? What values and behaviors do we select and which do we ignore or hide? Is it simply a matter of "transforming an area of your classroom into a specific country" by "displaying photographs of artifacts and/or real artifacts [are there no real qualitative differences between these two sorts of things?] along with written information" and playing "authentic" music? [NAEA Advisory, Spring 1999]

Further confusion is exemplified in the choice of stuff to study. In the main we have photographs of items from museum collections. These objects derive from a narrow stratum of a society, the upper crust of rulers and rich folks. The cry to *save our cultural heritage* refers in the main to the crown jewels, the rich merchant's paintings, the high priest's golden necklace. These after all are the artworld's treasures and are what's available. What sense of *cultural authenticity* is obtained from even a profound investigation of so limited a group of artifacts?

Before we get swept away by yet another faddish educational tidal wave, one that has more to do with politics and personal power grabbing than sound education, we might want to consider the attributes of the artmaking process. Who makes art and why? What skills are demanded by such making? What is our role in helping our student develop those skills? Art educators like Renee Sandell and Peg Speirs [Feminist concerns and gender issues in art education. Translations: from theory to practice. Spring 1999] avert that we "need to see ourselves as a major catalyst for ongoing feminist social change in society that begins in our art class-

rooms." I'm not sure what sorts of skills social change agents might need to help fight the culture wars between masculine and feminine values, but I doubt that they resemble the elements and principles of design. Nor do I sense the urge to enhance drawing skills in those concerned with extolling the virtues of non-western arts and artists and their *cultures*. Many of us in the post World War II years have taken the easy route and followed *traditional* art values. i.e., have used European derived artifacts as our exemplars. We were lazy and short-sighted, but we were following the lead of the artworld proper. Today, not just because we owe it to recently arrived children nor existing excluded ones, but because we can be more effective art teachers for all students by including all possible examples of artistic activity, we could make efforts to bring objects from all times and all places to our students' attention. But if we insist on loading these artifacts with all sorts of social baggage we will be increasing the probability of adding not to diversity but to divisiveness, creating stereotypes that can be used as weapons. By all means celebrate human diversity of dress, architecture, food, etc., but let's keep our focus on the art. Knowledge of sculpture from ancient Greece to contemporary Uganda opens students' minds to the assorted possibilities in creating three dimensional form. Must we also attempt to deal with Greek politics and their wars with Persia or with the colonial struggles in central Africa? When we talk of *cultural content* what de we refer to, and how do we justify our ability to deal with it within the realities of school schedules?

As far as resources are concerned. I can be tolerant of a wide range of reproduced images, photographs of all sizes and color variations, although they present the merest hints of three dimensional qualities. But among my favorite artifacts are picturebooks because they are what they are, original conceptions rather than some surrogate set of visuals. And we are fortunate to have large numbers of them telling stories of historical, mythical, and present-day life in almost any piece of the world we can identify. They lift a small corner of the cloth which hides their total sensibilities, their *culture*, if you will, and allow us a tiny glimpse rather than a significant view. By means of each artist's interpretation we are offered a chance to approach life lived differently. In some cases the illustrations are couched in historical styles of the region, but in most there is a sense of a more universal design. After all, for many of the peoples represented, a book is a totally foreign concept. So the task is one of *translating* the local imagery, perhaps in a way like the translation of words, to allow us aliens to understand a bit of the complexity of some other's lives.

Chief Lelooska in Spirit of the Cedar People (1998) chooses to exploit the characteristic encapsulated shapes of his Kwakiutl ancestors almost undiluted for his illustrations. He includes a CD wherein he chants and drums and retells the legends to help us better understand the oral nature of the storytelling. Baba Wague Diakite, on the other hand, who is also a storyteller in the tradition of his Mali forebears. uses a batiklike decorative ceramic tile set of paintings in his own style to assist the reader in getting with the mischievous emotions of *The Hatseller and the Monkeys* (1999). Somewhere in between, Paul Morin tells an Aboriginal Australian story of *Animal Dreaming* (1998) in which he emulates their rock and bark paintings staying very close to some originals but isolating their presentation showing only details from the indigenous sites. And Peter Sis in his *Tibet Through the Red*

Box (1998) digests the mandela form of picturemaking and uses it in a personal way to elegantly visualize the story of his father's years in that exotic place. None of these purport to be *authentic*. But surely, each in its own way helps the reader come to grips with different modes of picturemaking, of telling stories through images which have roots in people's hearts and minds all the world over.

By experiencing several picturebooks from a region we come to see that they, like us, are not monolithic in their visual interpretations, that the nature of artistic license in today's world is universal. The picturebook puts the art work into a specific context, i.e., it tells a story about particular events with particular characters. It adds another kind of teaching tool to the photographs and texts which we all have used to inform our students.

I can well remember the 1950's when many of my fellow teachers took up the banner of creativity and proclaimed it, rather than art, to be what they taught. Have we so drained the pool of artistic insights that we must look to other fields like psychology or sociology for our content? Do our art teacher preparation programs reflect such a shift and now include courses that legitimize us to teach *culture*? Well oiled terms like *culturally relevant* are nice but obviously meaningless because they fail to recognize the multiplicity of values and beliefs we deal with daily. What such language points to is fresh dogmas and proscriptions. There's a massive amount of study in art, i.e., things *made special* (to give credit to E. Dissanayake). The *How* they are made and the *Why* of such artifacts are questions enough to keep all of us busy teaching art.

Children's Books

Diakité, B. W. (1999). *The hatseller and the monkeys: A west African folktale*. New York: Scholastic Press.

Morin, P. (1998). *Animal dreaming: An aboriginal dreamtime story*. San Diego: Silver Whistle/Harcourt Brace.

Sis, P. (1998). *Tibet: Through the red box*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.