

little or no value as collectibles in today's market. For collectors of toys, condition and rarity is everything. The excitement of folk art for both scholars and collectors is the endemic uniqueness of the art form. For various paintings and sculptures, it is the collective wisdom and consensus of curators, appraisers, scholars, and dealers that determine which periods in an individual artist's development is most important and ultimately most valuable in the market. Punctuated by acknowledged and valued qualities, there are nevertheless arbitrary biases in all categories of collected objects accentuating the spirit of individualism.

The market and the classroom often corroborate democratic orientations. Public opinion and public taste form a shifting matrix of consensus. Object learning advances the national art education standards with its emphases on critique, cultural history, aesthetics as well as technique and design. As states throughout the country are issuing and revising arts standards, the reappearing concern for creating community connections is supported by the heightened examination of the artifacts of our personal and collective histories.

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# Miss, Miss, Look at What My Mother Sent Me from Jail

## Future Akins

When I tell people that I teach in a public school, especially when I go on to say that I teach at the Junior High level, there is almost always snickering sounds and rolling eyes followed by horror stories from the



past. They relate memories of crowded, noisy hallways filled with bullies; classrooms that felt like jail, teachers that were bored and lots of hormone driven mis-adventures. I just smile because I know it is all too true. I do not attempt to explain why, as an artist, I choose to return to the classroom after so many years or how I am inspired everyday by the energy and truth of the students I encounter. I have come to learn that this immediate reaction by

others is only a small part of the whole experience.

Junior High, for all its craziness and rambunctiousness is also a place of incredibly direct honesty. I do not know if this honesty is a remnant of innocence from elementary school or if it is the beginning bravado of young adulthood. It is probably a mixture of both. I only

know that if I get out of the way, if I pay attention, and if I allow for the unexpected, I will experience glimpses of unbelievable insight. It is these moments that guide me as a teacher, and as an artist.

Through my personal teaching experiences, I have observed young men and women who transcend the conditions of their daily lives to communicate through art the raw truth of who they are. When I teach, I do so from the experience and perspective of an artist. I try to bring the world of art into each life by first helping each student realize art is everywhere, that you do not have to be privileged or wealthy to see art or to study art; you simply have to look around you. With this in mind I periodically ask a simple question "who has seen some art lately?" After we all survive the giggles from the various versions of questions about cartoons (yes, they are art), video games (who do you think drew the characters?), wrestling (look at the wonderful colors and use of design in the costumes), graffiti (how many symbols do you see everyday?) and slightly racy scenes from movies (yes, when you go to college you will be able to draw and paint nudes), there are some shy responses about a painting or a drawing in someone's house. I always ask them to describe the piece in words that paint a picture...size (height by width by depth), media (drawing, painting, sculpture), and subject and then to tell us why they liked it or disliked it. In the case of small pieces or reproductions, I encourage them to bring them in or to take a photograph of the art so our class as a whole can experience the visual image first hand. We have good reports and not-so-good reports, but we are talking about art and it is this dialog that I believe is the foundation of an awareness of art that can last a lifetime.

One day the importance of this casual conversational atmosphere became clear when a very excited young woman quickly raised her hand and shouted out "Miss, Miss, look at what my Mother sent me from jail!" She held up an envelope covered with drawings. I knew I

had no time to hesitate in my acknowledgement and encouragement of this form of art. So, as she opened the letter and brought out the enclosed handkerchief, I asked the class to gather around. Instantly, we were surrounded by "oohs" and "ahhs." Suddenly, students that had been silent throughout all our art talks started to tell of art they had received from relatives in jail. They compared images, color of ink, styles of lettering and the pro and cons of using tears. We were all looking, really looking at, the quality of the lines; the subject matter and the emotional message each image carried. It was a great art moment.

Art can bring people together who never might have met. In one class, one very shy young man (Ben) who was new to the United States (English was his second language), living with his elderly grandfather, ended up sitting next to another young man (Jared) who was a bright, gifted and talented student from a well-to-do home. I am not sure how they ended up next to each other (I allow my students to sit where they please), but I do know that they were the two smallest guys in a class of very large and very life-experienced students. We were about halfway through the semester when we developed a project on maps. I casually mentioned that they could work in groups. I explained how collaborations in art happen more often than most people think. I showed a number of slides of examples of collaborative work, discussing how the work was divided fairly. Class continued as usual for a number of days and then about a week later, Ben came up to me and carefully asked if I had meant it when I said they could work together. I assured him I did and then asked him why he wanted to know. He reluctantly turned over a drawing of the cartoon character "Snoopy", explaining that he and Jared both loved Snoopy. He hesitated, but slowly went on to explain that it was really important that it was "OK" to work together because "I don't always draw so good, but Jared can draw what I think." I wanted to cry or hug them

both. Somehow, a simple cartoon had helped two young men transcend cultural, financial and social barriers that most of us take a lifetime to even recognize.



When I teach, I try to show how art has many inspirations and takes many different forms. Just as art is all around us, it is also within each of us. As we are all different, so is art. The idea that there is only one "good" art is ridiculous.

Last year my school decided we should have multicultural classes once a week for our magnet students. (These are students who are bused-in from other parts of town based on their outstanding scores in science, math or the performing arts). Although this extra assignment was given to the foreign language department, I volunteered to help because it seemed like a good idea. I quickly surmised that what had been decided was a "country a week" theme as I was asked what country I wanted to talk about *next* week. I politely declined, mumbling some excuse and walked out the door. While leaving the room I literally ran into one of the Spanish teachers who was also escaping the situation. After just a few minutes reaffirming each other's disbelief in what was happening we said "lets do it right". It did not take long to find left over students (non- magnet students who just happened to be in a language class with mostly magnet students), to locate an available classroom, or to get a general okay from the administration (to do the class our way) with the warning to keep it on task.

We had no real idea what needed to be covered, so we did what good teachers do everywhere— we asked the students what they thought about the subject. What we learned is that the students were not sure what multi-cultural was or why it was important to them. So, we decided to begin by inviting people to come and try to help us answer the question. We asked two friends to the class: Rebecca Riley, an artist from Houston and Dr. Robert Owen, a Fullbright scholar who worked in Paraguay. Both were wonderfully open with the students as they talked about their work in South America. Ms.Riley had lived and studied in Brazil while a young woman. She spoke of her love for that region and how that special time/place had changed her art forever. Dr.Owen talked of his work in Biology. He told of how he had traveled throughout the world, emphasizing the importance of speaking two languages. He talked about science and made references to how like art, it was a universal language. The students thought it was "neat" and loved that both guests spoke beautiful Spanish. They found it interesting to hear the strange variations on the language.

But, something was still missing. Everything seemed beyond the student's reach. They were not artists—even though I keep assuring them we could do art—nor were they scientists with big college degrees. What could they do? What could any Mexican-American do that mattered? Why did they have to learn about other cultures, anyway?

In an attempt to help them find answers we reviewed a video on the life and the work of Caesar Chavez. At one place in the movie Chavez is called a "hero". Someone asked out loud "what is a hero?" The Spanish teacher stopped the video. We looked at each other and knew this was the opportunity we had been waiting for. We embraced the question and re-asked it to the entire class. What happened next was phenomenal.

The class quickly came to the agreement that a hero was someone who would put his/her life on the line for you or sacrifice his/her life for yours. We began to name heroes that we knew from history. Martin

Luther King, Mother Theresa, Caesar Chavez, and Gandhi were all mentioned. We next asked about heroes they might know in their own lives, families or neighborhoods. It took a few minutes but names and stories began to come forth. At the same time, one student reminded me that they had been promised a chance to do art, so we diverted the conversation for a few moments to decide what kind of art everyone wanted to do. As suggestions were given and discussed, the class (with some gentle guidance) divided into groups based on students' general ideas about what makes a hero, as well as students' interests in a certain type of art.

Two young women wanted to do something about Mother Theresa because they had heard about her in church.

After a brief inquiry both admitted they liked things that were sewn and embroidered, even though they confessed they knew nothing about handwork. Shyly they agreed to try. They also agreed to ask relatives to share sewing abilities.

Another group of students wanted to do something about the school's new mascot. After 50 years as the Redskins, the school had rightly changed its name to the Knights. There had been much discussion both in and out of school concerning this decision. Many students were third generation attendees and brought the resentment they heard at home to school. We had talked for over a year trying to help the students understand how much courage it took to change a name that was offensive, to a name that stood for a higher goal. It took a while, but finally, most students accepted the new name. This particular group wanted to honor that decision. They believed that mosaic tile; with its broken pieces of many colors, would be a great way to portray the diversity of the school.

The largest group of students was committed to local heroes and wanted to do photography. One young man had recently been given a used 35-mm camera, which he was willing to share and the Spanish Club had a camera we could check out; so we were set. Next, I asked

the students to take time to make up a list of heroes to be photographed. When I returned and asked them about their list, I was overwhelmed with the results. Some names were predictable but for unpredictable reasons, others were touchingly personal and unique. At the top of the list were weathermen, because "they tell us when the bad weather is coming that will hurt us." Living in West Texas tornadoes and violent hail storms are a reality. Many of these students came from families that had survived the deadly tornadoes of the early 1970's and had been raised with the stories of devastation.

Next on the list were firemen because "they saved my little cousin and my aunt." One young man had just written "my dog" on his list. When I asked him why, he told the most beautiful story of how when he was little he had fallen into a play pool and the dog had pulled him out. His dog was his best friend. All students agreed the dog was a hero. Others on the list included our principal because he kept the school safe, the head cleaning lady because she kept the building clean and even cleaned up the restrooms when someone got sick. There was a surprise addition of one of our young performing students who had only recently "come out" as a gay. When I asked why this choice, (I was fearful of some cruel backlash) they were all silent. Then one student just said he thought the male student "had guts and he could really sing great."

Finally on the list were Lowriders (highly modified cars with extensive individualized detail on the exterior and interior). I said, "Ok, I know you all love the cars but are cars heroes?" They laughed and said, "No, Miss, but the men who work on them are." I again asked why and they simply said, "Because they keep us off the streets and out of trouble."

As conversation continued a few decided to leave the photography group to concentrate on Lowriders. We learned that *Lowrider Magazine* was beginning a series of articles on the history of these unique cars. Since most of these young men were in a reading

class, we instantly knew we had a way to help them with their reading. The Spanish teacher offered to oversee this part of the project. Each student agreed to read the article each month, in class, together, and out loud, while working on drawings and models of the cars the rest of the time. As the year progressed the students told of how proud they were to be carrying on a tradition, how much fun it was to learn why these cars were so much a part of their Hispanic heritage.



It was a great year. We went to a dehydration plant to learn first hand what a very small group of people do to feed the world. While there, we were amazed to hear the director of the plant tell the story of the first shipment overseas going to Mother Theresa. The girls working on the embroidery banner were thrilled. We toured the civil engineering department at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, to learn how tornadoes are formed and to hear stories about the work of the storm chasers. We had the Fire department come with their engine and all their equipment to talk with the students about what it was like to be a firefighter.

We ended the year with an exhibition of their finished art works at the Museum, Texas Tech University. One of my favorite pieces was a painting by a young African American student that came into class near the end of the school year. When we explained the theme of heroes, he smiled and said his grandmother (who had just died which was why he was suddenly at our school) was his hero. He missed her. He asked if he could do a painting about her. I thought it was a good idea. When I next checked on him, he was doing a plant. When I asked what happened to the idea of using your grandmother, he said, "this is my grandmother." Now I have been doing art as long as I can remember, but this was a jump in thought even for me. So I asked him to explain. What he said was "My granny loved plants and she named all her plants. This one is Arron, he was her favorite." I understood.



I have learned that art can help bridge historical and contemporary cultures through the study of famous artists. One such artist is Diego Rivera. I show slides of his work. We view a video on his life. We discuss the difference between murals or graffiti. And, we examine how art can make a statement. Usually I give each student a three-foot by three-foot square of canvas and tell him or her to design an image that will say something personal. Then, I allowed the students to team up in

order to combine resources and skills. The topics can be about anything as long as it is honest and the students have proven to me they have thought about it and planned out what they want to do. There are lots of dragons and dogs, cars and pop stars.. We use acrylic paint and try not to be too messy. The work is fun.

Each year one canvas piece stands out for its honesty and its power. During my first year, one of my most relulant students came up after a couple of days and asked if it was okay if a group got together to do something really big. When I asked how big, he said, "You know, kind of like a wall big." I took the bait and asked why that big. He smiled and said slyly that he and a few others had "previous experience with that size." I laughed and agreed. He then asked if they could use spray paint. Once again, I asked why. This time he simply said he could do a better job with spray paint. I told him I would have to check with the principal, knowing I was on that thin line between we-love-to-see-art-work-in-the-halls and you-are-encouraging-illegal-activity. Finally the principal agreed after I assured him I would account for every spray can— everyday. The next thing I knew Elias had convinced the entire Hispanic male population of two classes to join canvases with his. He then organized and oversaw the creation of a magnificent banner approximately forty-eight feet long celebrating the Mexican and American history. Influenced by the illustrations from popular magazines and tattoos, the banner proclaims the power of unity through freedom and justice. It was grand.

I have always held that art is a universal language. That it speaks when words fail. That it has the power to unite. This has never been more true than during my second year when two young women, one from Moscow, USSR the other from the Philippines worked together to create a visual statement on their canvas about the abuse and misuse of power they experienced everyday in school. Their work was direct and bitter. It told of a principal who yelled more than he spoke, of

being shoved into lockers, of students sleeping in classes, of teachers who had given up long ago, and of being herded along as if they were cattle while being fed food unfit for cattle. As with the other stories their story was personal, insightful, and honest.

**Not everyday is filled with moments like the ones I have described. But, when I am able to experience one of these rare moments I am reminded of my own time in public school and how art became my place of safety. The place I first learned to trust the truth within. I only hope that I am somehow able to create the same safe place.**