

Introduction: New Vistas in Art, Culture, and Ethnicity

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Last semester at Arizona State University in the School of Art, I offered a course in multicultural issues in art. It is important to note that the state of Arizona is under national scrutiny because of the negative publicity it has received in the past few years on the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday and other concerns about racial and cultural issues. I am not going to claim that Arizona does not have a lion's share of problems in this area; what I will claim is that most of my students are middle class, white, receptive, and sensitive to ethnic studies. It is typical that I only have a few students of color each semester. During the semester I introduced several new vistas to my students. One new vista which is historic and known to many people is the Harlem Renaissance. Only one young Hispanic student in the class had ever heard of the Harlem Renaissance. Nineteen-nineteen to 1929 was the period of which Langston Hughes wrote "Harlem was in vogue." Black painters and sculptors joined poets, novelists, dramatists, and musicians in an artistic outpouring that established Harlem as the international capital of black culture. These Arizona students became very familiar with the works of Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Palmer Hayden, Romare Bearden, James Van Der Zee, Meta Warrick Fuller, and others. The students repeatedly asked: "Why have survey courses of American art history omitted these artists?" The answer to that question is complex and would take up too much space to answer here, but I realized as I taught the course that most of the materials were new for all the students in the class. The new vistas introduced became classroom activities that involved cognitive acts of acquisition and organization of knowledge that our present generation of students must be introduced to. I am certain many of these students in later years will discover, rediscover, and reanalyze this information as they enter the workforce and assume positions of responsibility.

This special issue of *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* features "Ethnicity and the Arts" and presents several new perspectives and prospectives about various

forms of art, culture, and ethnicity. It is especially exciting for me to edit and put together a journal of work in the arts with an emphasis on ethnicity because there are so few avenues to publish, communicate, and retrieve literature in art, culture, and ethnicity. It is becoming increasingly obvious that we are living in a multicultural nation with people of different ethnic backgrounds, religions, arts, socioeconomic levels, and native languages. If universities, museums, and other institutions that claim to foster cultural and artistic heritage are to survive in the near future, they must make drastic changes in their operational procedures. Multiculturalism is becoming the catch-phrase of the 1990s, and the new vistas that are being presented must be carefully attended to. According to Robin Cembalest, an associate editor of *Artnews*:

Demographics have certainly provided museums with some sobering news. In Los Angeles, which is touted as the most multicultural city in the country—and the model for what most other cities will soon be like—last year the population was 38 percent white, about 36 percent Latino, 15 percent African American, and 12 percent Asian. Yet a recent study by the city's chamber of commerce showed that 93 percent of visitors to local museums are Anglo.

It should become even more clear for institutions that the demographic changes have meant that there are more voices and, politically, they must listen to those voices. Currently, neither museums nor the current literature adequately represents the country's cultural diversity. If these institutions don't change and become current, they will become irrelevant. On a national level African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians constitute about a third of the US population, and their numbers are increasing faster than those of the white majority. By the year 2000, demographers expect minorities to constitute the "new majority" of young people in this country. Many traditionally trained researchers, artists, and creative people in higher education have failed to acknowledge the interrelationships and effects of ethnicity, culture, art, and socioeconomic status while conducting research, creating art, or producing new vistas. This situation usually contributes to a stereotypic and problematic literature, void of many realities, leaving minority scholars in a reactive mode that takes away from a more proactive and productive mode of research.

Writers like Cedric Dover in *American Negro Art* (1960), Alain Locke in *Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936), and *The Negro in Art* (1940), and numerous articles on African and African American art did discuss ideas on African American aesthetics, but there is a serious lack of consistency among writers who write about the aesthetics and arts of people of color. The history of art in Mexico is well documented, but the current available information on Mexican American artists is not very well documented. Mexican art has flourished for twenty centuries according to some scholars. The creative arts have long been an important part of Mexican life, and Mexico has given the world many important architects, artists, composers, and writers. Although many culturally different

artists are making contributions, new vistas in art and discussions of cultural diversity in contemporary issues are difficult to locate.

Cedric Dover wrote *American Negro Art* (1960) and Samella Lewis wrote *Art: African American* (1990), but there has not been an abundance of literature written about African Americans and their past. Certainly some progress has been made, but there is still a need for much more research and analysis. Like African, Native, Asian, Chicano Americans, and other culturally distinct groups, neither our scientists nor our artists have been given very much representation in the histories of the United States. As Lewis reminds us in her text, only a very few minority writers, visual artists, and musicians have been included in the textbooks or are on library shelves.

An excellent example of what we need more of was demonstrated in the recent exhibition catalogue and scholarship of the Henry Ossawa Tanner exhibition that started at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The exhibition will travel for approximately one year. The catalogue is textbook size in depth and material. Tanner (1859-1937) emerged as one of the best known and most highly esteemed artists of his time in both the United States and France. The fact that he was an African American and he is only now receiving some of the much deserved respect he should have had years ago supports my position that the support is not abundant. Another text that should not be ignored is *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America* (1987) with essays by David C. Driskell, Mary Schmidt Campbell, and others. The work of Antonio Rodriguez, and his text on *A History of Mexican Mural Painting*, is important, but newer materials that represent current conditions and new art have to be institutionally supported if we are to have a continued growth and have new vistas in art, culture, and ethnicity.

This issue of *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* is a brief beginning to open new vistas into the multi-cultural and multi-dimensional world of artistic expression. Angela M.S. Nelson in her article, "The Persistence of Ethnicity in African American Popular Music: A Theology of Rap Music," looks at a specific form of music, and Margaret M. Dunn and Ann Morris's "Narrative Quilts and Quilted Narratives: The Art of Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker" look at painted picture squares of traditional quilting and "visual metaphors" between the relationships in literature and traditional arts. John Labadie's "An Art-Historical Paradigm for Investigating Native American Pictographs of the Lower Pecos Region, Texas," Consuelo Lopez Springfield's "Edna Manley's *The Diaries*: Cultural Politics and the Discourse of Self," and Jacinto Quirarte's "Sources of Chicano Arts: Our Lady of Guadalupe" introduce an international focus to ethnicity and art, presenting interdisciplinary approaches to art history. All of these writers understand the need to break traditional barriers of how art has been studied and appreciated in American classrooms, and all provide readers with new ways to view the art world.