Attitudes of Three Urban Appalachian Teenagers
Toward Selected Early Modern American Paintings

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Abstract

Three urban Appalachian teenagers were taken individually into an exhibit of early modern American art in the Cincinnati Art Museum. They were asked to choose one work that they wished to discuss. When the choice was made, they were asked to discuss the work, first freely and then directed by a set of questions. All three chose paintings in realistic styles that were of subjects familiar to them. Their discussions were limited by their level of training, but were otherwise perceptive and insightful. The act of choosing, the painting chosen, and the way it was discussed all seemed to both reveal and satisfy certain needs of each individual.

When an individual encounters a work of art, a number of complex and interesting things can happen. A painting, for instance, can be the stimulus for such a wide range of responses that it is conceivable that a whole book could be written about one single art lover's relationship with one single work. On a more practical scale, this paper is a consideration of the responses of three urban Appalachian youths to paintings hanging in the Cincinnati Art Museum. The purpose of this study was to determine the subjects' behavior, attitudes, and values concerning a kind of art, often referred to as high art, that is unfamiliar to them and is not highly valued in their subculture. As an art teacher teaching courses in drawing, painting and art appreciation, it became clear to me that if I had a better understanding of my students' responses to this body of art, I would be able to understand their work better, communicate better to them the values I saw in high art, and help them to develop their own appreciation of it.

Because what I was going to look at was fundamentally qualitative in nature, qualitative methods had to be found and modified for the task. Research in art education has historically made extensive use of methods
developed in the social sciences, such as case study methods and ethnographic field work. It was assumed in the design of this study that useful information could be obtained by: (1) observation of undirected and partly undirected behavior, (2) free conversation about the art work, and (3) formal interview techniques. To varying degrees, assumptions were verified in the study, and some interesting and potentially useful insights grew out of the analysis of the qualitative data collected, especially regarding how the subjects' responses were shaped by their individual needs (Beittel, 1973; Bogden and Taylor, 1975; Sevigny, 1978; Web et al, 1966).

Background

As director of a recreation center in the Lower Price Hill section of Cincinnati, Ohio, I had the opportunity to develop an art program for the "invisible minority" of urban Appalachians who lived there (Brown, 1968; Campbell, 1969; Caudill, 1963; Coles, 1971; Giffin, 1956; Howell, 1973; Maloney, 1976; Morris, 1976; Philiber, McCoy, & Dillingham, 1981; Photiadis, 1976; Weller, 1966). The neighborhood is typical of this population. It is run down, economically depressed, rather violent, and populated by proud, independent immigrants from the Southern Highlands (City of Cincinnati, 1976). Hard living is the norm. It is a daily struggle to have enough to eat and a roof over one's head, but there are enough people there with good enough jobs that a number of houses are well-maintained, and a few have been given a kind of expensive restoration that characterizes more affluent Cincinnati neighborhoods.

The Three Subjects

As I developed an art program for the center, I became close to three teenagers who were especially responsive. The three, Fergie, Spider, and T.J. were good friends. They had entered enthusiastically into several art projects at the center, showing a range of abilities from the talented to the very talented. As I grew to know them better, their individual personalities became far more vivid to me than any generalization about urban Appalachian youth. Fergie was lively, cheerful, and an engaging nonstop conversationalist. T. J. displayed a macho, unsmiling exterior that just barely concealed a sensitive and
skilled young artist. Spider, a young man of few words, seemed a bit stolid at times, but he had an easy charm that grew on people. Despite these positive qualities, they fit an unfortunate neighborhood norm: They were all having a great deal of difficulty with school, and all three ultimately dropped out of school (Wagner, 173). One of their few positive experiences in a school was that each of them spent a year in the art classes of a dedicated and ingenious artist-teacher, who has since left the area.

Cultural Preferences

Their alienation extends beyond school, too. The teenagers in Lower Price Hill do not connect in any significant way with traditional Appalachian arts and crafts. In an extended interview, all three subjects expressed a general lack of interest in Appalachian culture, and during a visit to Cincinnati's Appalachian Festival, they were openly bored with traditional crafts artifacts and expressed a dislike for mountain music and dancing.

Their chosen culture is much closer to the heavy metal variant of the youth-rock culture. Their tastes in poster art and music both reflect the energy and aggressiveness of this style. The posters in their rooms feature heavily muscled men fighting dangerous mythical beasts, often with a nubile woman on the scene. Also favored are portraits of actual predators, such as snakes and tigers.

They, and in fact all their friends, have an active dislike for punk and new wave styles. Fergie told an amusing, if a bit frightening, tale of a gathering of teens in a park where one was playing new wave on his large portable radio. One of the others told him to turn it off, he refused, and the first drew a pistol and shot the radio, effectively ending the concert. The first thing this incident brings to mind is Elvis Presley, who is a cult hero to these young people and who had a habit of shooting television sets that were broadcasting adverse reviews of his concerts. The incident also points up a connection between the neighborhood style and the youths' artistic tastes. Aggressiveness in males is a highly prized trait in Lower Price Hill. All three subjects reported that the main pastime of the older men, those in their twenties
and thirties, was to get drunk and get into fights, which are occasionally fatal. There does seem to be a potential relationship between the aggressive male-dominated worlds of urban Appalachia and heavy metal rock. In this context, the subjects' very different responses to the paintings of the project are a bit surprising.

Desires for a Better Life

The subjects all exemplified the positive side of the Appalachian character too, in their self-reliance and independence, balanced by cohesiveness and mutual support. In Lower Price Hill, one public manifestation of these qualities has been a series of neighborhood restoration and beautification projects. Fergie, Spider, and T. J. share with the rest of the neighborhood a drive to establish a better life, both collectively on the streets of Lower Price Hill, and individually. This need in the three youths was often expressed by a desire to own expensive items such as high-powered cars and high-powered stereo systems -- but it also had an essentially aesthetic component. Fergie, especially, participated in the aesthetic side. During the study he was employed as a carpenter restoring one of the houses in the area, and when asked what kind of art should be installed in public places, he made the creative suggestion that sculptures "that the kids could climb on" should be placed on street corners.

This emphasis on the aesthetic was no doubt affected by the context of this study and by my identity with them as an art teacher. T. J., though, showed no inclination to tell me what I wanted to hear. He was, instead, blunt to the point of rudeness in the expression of his preferences and in stating the limitations he unilaterally placed on his phase of the study. However, his responses to the aesthetic objects that were presented him were no different from those of the two more cooperative subjects, and he was, in some ways, more sensitive to mood and feeling.

The Field Work Phase

The field work for the study was conducted in the Cincinnati Art Museum. The three subjects were conducted separately to Room 80 of the museum, which houses a collection of American paintings, sculptures, and
furniture from about the first four decades of the 20th century. Many of the paintings in this room are realistic, but there is a primitive, a cubist, an abstracted landscape, and a piece that would have been called pop in a later generation. The furniture is early modern, and the sculptures, which are quite small, are all decidedly romantic. The procedure of the study was to turn the subject loose in the room and observe his reactions and his overt responses to the art he saw. He was then instructed to choose one item to discuss with me. He was first given the opportunity to comment freely without direction and then to answer a series of questions about the piece.

For this study, I took ethnographic field techniques as a point of departure and modified them for the purpose. Instead of observing and interviewing the subjects in their natural habitat, I intentionally placed them in an unfamiliar environment to study their responses to art. As it turned out, however, one subject, Fergie, was quite conversant with the museum because of the frequent visits he made while he was a student in a summer art program at the Cincinnati Art Academy which is housed adjacent to the museum. This collection was new to him, though, and his previous experience did not seem to affect his reactions to the point that they were markedly different from those of the other two subjects, who had not experienced this museum in any significant way. (Spider had been there once on a school field trip several years ago, and T. J. had never been there.)

Styles of Orientation and Encounter

As one immediate outcome of this relatively nondirective approach, a clear difference in the style of orientation or encounter was observable in the three subjects. T. J. systematically went around the wall, thus missing the sculptures which were placed nearer the center of the room. He looked at each painting in turn, giving some of them close attention and others the merest glance. With a stopwatch, one could have produced a rough quantitative index of his interest in each painting, so consistent and systematic was his behavior. He volunteered the comment on one painting, Maxfield Parrish's Portrait of a Tree, that "It don't look like a painting." He made this remark more than once in praising the
photographic realism of a number of paintings, including a large Sargent portrait of a young woman in the adjacent room. Spider, by contrast, was overselective. He went directly to one corner of the room and looked at no more than 6 paintings of the 20 or so in the room. Fergie, the lively one, engaged in a random walk moving diagonally across the room several times and into the next room where the contemporary abstract, optical, and pop collection is housed. It is difficult to say how many of the paintings in room 80 he actually saw, because of his radically nonlinear approach.

This differentiation in response styles among the three individuals having very similar backgrounds adds further support to the cautions that may be found throughout education literature about the stereotyping of minorities. Fergie, T. J., and Spider, do, in fact, share many traits associated with urban Appalachians, but their differences are vivid and at least as important as their similarities. One can even come to enjoy T. J.'s gruff honesty.

The Subjects' Choices

The choices made by the subjects, within the limits of that one gallery, shed a good deal of light on their ways of responding to paintings. What they picked out for discussion were realistic paintings of very familiar subjects. Fergie chose Edward Hopper's Street Scene, a quiet residential cityscape bathed in light, but with no visible human activity. Spider chose the photographic Portrait of a Tree that T. J. had commented on, and T. J. chose a portrait of a pensive, or perhaps sad, little girl, Patience Serious by Robert Henri. All three paintings are similar in subject and method to contemporary popular art, though obviously of much higher quality. The most painterly of the three, the Henri, was, interestingly enough, chosen by T. J., apparently for its emotional content as much as for its subject or technique. He did express, in his way, admiration for the brushwork, which is a bit reminiscent of Franz Hals. "It looks impossible," was his evaluation. He used exactly that phrase again in another phase of the study when confronted with the exquisitely detailed brushwork of a Van Dyck portrait.
All three subjects volunteered remarks that pointed to familiar subject matter as a criterion for their choice. Fergie said that Hopper's New England street looked like Lower Price Hill "in the old days," before the neighborhood had begun to decay. He clearly enjoyed the nice old neighborhood quality depicted in the painting, a quality that is being restored in a number of sections in Cincinnati, including Price Hill. Spider's choice of a tree turning red in the autumn sun reminded him of Pine Knot, Kentucky, one of his favorite down-home haunts. T. J. said that the little girl in the Henri reminded him of his younger sister.

Need Fulfillment

These expressions of familiarity connected also with various personal needs that could be inferred either from direct statements of the subjects or from their particular situation. Fergie's interest in urban restoration was clear, given his employment with a contractor doing restoration work in Lower Price Hill. And, interestingly enough, he made several positive references to the peaceful quality of the street in the painting, indicating desires that go beyond his heavy metal tastes for excruciatingly high levels of sensory input. In the interview, he mentioned two fashionable gaslight areas of Cincinnati--Hyde Park and Clifton--as places where he would like to live. Neither of the other two subjects expressed such desires. Spider merely wanted to move farther west to a better, but by no means fashionable, part of town, and T. J. expressed satisfaction with where he was. T. J. lives in comfortable circumstances in one of the rehabilitated apartment buildings and has sufficient spending money. During the interview, he was wearing designer jeans and an Izod Lacoste shirt.

In his interview, and in his discussion of Parish's tree, Spider made repeated references to the country and his enjoyment of its peace and quiet. He also spoke once of the tree as being "full of life," meaning wildlife. This was more an insightful guess than a perception, since there is no animal life of any kind depicted in the painting. There are, though, deep shadows in and under the tree that could easily suggest refuge for numerous birds and small animals, especially to an animal
lover such as Spider. One of his stated ambitions is to become involved with some program that would lead him into animal work.

The most complex need-satisfaction was expressed by T. J. It is surprising that he chose the emotion-laden portrait of a little girl from the collection, given his rather harsh, macho veneer, but his reaction was, "I took it right away." Along with his admiration for the technique, he expressed considerable emotional response. "Sad," "pitiful," "like she just got whupped, or something," were his terms. This emotional responsiveness could be connected with his life at the time of the study. He was in trouble with the law, having been convicted of stealing audio equipment from cars, and he had recently broken up with a girl friend. It is my guess that he may have been projecting into the painting some sadness that his rather conventionalized masculinity would not allow him to express openly. Certainly, the notion of purging emotion through art is not a new one, at least to those familiar with Aristotle's Poetics, but to see it suggested so directly in T. J.'s responses raises the interesting question of how common such a phenomenon might be, even among relatively unsophisticated people.

Responses to Craft and Form

Besides these responses, the subjects all seemed to have a particular interest in the technical craft of the paintings. From the context of the study as a whole, it is apparent that this comes from two distinct sources. First, there is a traditional respect for craft in Appalachia, which the subjects shared, despite their dislike of the rather stereotyped uses to which it is often put. At the Appalachian Festival, all the subjects responded to technical mastery of the media being used, provided the technique was accompanied with imagination. They all expressed high respect, which I shared, for the memorial display of works by the late Chester Cornett, a well-known local furniture-maker. In a mainstream gallery, his work would have been characterized as fantasy furniture. It featured four-legged rockers, heroically proportioned chairs and cradles, and such, but it also displayed a fine command of the traditional techniques of the Southern Highlands: pegged joints, hand-carved ornaments, and fine, symmetrical caning. Fergie, especially,
expressed a respect for the integrity of Cornett's craft, contemptuously dismissing a cradle held together with ordinary stove bolts: "This doesn't belong here." By contrast, he enthusiastically admired the hand-carved pegs holding a large chair together: "He was trying to achieve something with that."

To this background has been added an appreciation of technical command stemming from their own struggles with painting in their art classes. In the museum, they all gave due attention to brushwork, not only in the paintings chosen for the study but in others that caught their attention as well. I have already commented on their admiration of the photographic realism of several of the painters in Room 80.

On the other hand, their ability to perceive, or at least comment on, less technical aspects was severely limited. Questions posed on formal qualities did not elicit very sophisticated answers. When asked about such things as shape, line, design, or perspective, they answered with noncommittal evaluations: "It's good," "It's okay," "I like it."

This outcome is neither surprising nor particularly distressing. It would appear that their struggles in their own art classes with simply getting the paint to go on the surface with the intended effect were sufficient problems for them at this stage of their development. Their design sense is almost completely at the intuitive level, and they remain naive when asked to verbalize about it. It is worth noting that many experienced professional painters are often unwilling, and sometimes even unable, to discuss such matters. The subjects' monosyllabic responses should not be taken as symptomatic of lack of interest or poor training in art, but rather as an indication of a particular stage of their development. In fact, all three youths enjoyed the museum experience, and all three spontaneously expressed a desire to return to the museum.

Some Implications

While I was analyzing the subjects' responses to the paintings, it occurred to me that, except of a few naive remarks such as "It don't look like a painting," almost everything they said could as easily have been said by a much more experienced individual. Each focused on his chosen painting's distinctive quality: the glowing light and planes of color of
the Hopper, the photographic realism of the Parrish, and the emotional evocativeness of the Henri. Because of their levels of development, they had less to say than an artist or connoisseur would about form and design, but what they did have to say about technique and feeling was accurate and perceptive. Similarly, their range of stylistic tolerance was narrower than a more experienced person's might be, although certainly many art sophisticates display a ready willingness to denigrate any painting that does not fall within the currently fashionable style. They did not respond to the primitive, the abstract, or cubist styles nor to the romantic sculptures. I found myself disagreeing with most of their negative valuations of the paintings in the collection, but not with their remarks about the paintings they chose to discuss. It would appear that their lack of enthusiasm for many of the paintings came simply from the fact that they had not experienced these styles sufficiently. They chose basically realistic works that are closer to the popular art they are familiar with and that connect, through literal and emotional content, with their interests and needs. Within the limits of their stage of development, they responded in ways that are not noticeably different from those of one experienced in art.

One of the most important theoretical bases for this study was Herbert Gans' conceptualization of public tastes, their interactions and their implications for art education. (Gans, 1974). Of particular interest is Gans' statement:

American society should pursue policies that would maximize educational and other opportunities for all so as to permit everyone to choose from higher taste cultures. (p. 128)

The operative word, in the context of this study is "choose." I am convinced that the permission to choose, even from a very narrow range, a painting to discuss had a positive effect on the subjects' willingness to participate fully and on the validity of their verbal responses. In the design of an art appreciation program, it would appear that the tactic of giving a range of choices, rather than always choosing for students, could lead to both a greater motivation and a greater sense of mastery from encountering works about which students could find something valid to say.
References


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