Issues Posed by the Study of Folk Art in Art Education

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Abstract

The study of folk art processes and products reveals several issues concerning the study of art and our educational methodologies. This paper will address the following issues and how they relate to the field of art education: (a) the learning process which takes place in folk art settings and the notion of the folk artist as educator; (b) aesthetics, art criticism, and art history from the folk artist's perspective; (c) the many functions of art and the value of one function over another in our society; and (d) the existence of elitism in folk art categorization by academics.

In 1975, I taught art in the Women's Section of the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, County Jail. Most of my students, younger adults who lacked formal education, were members of minority groups. Nearly every inmate had lived a life of poverty. Although I had previously taught in schools with large Black populations, this experience made me keenly aware of the differences between my aesthetic preferences and those of my students. The nature of the setting dictated that I find ways to respect their aesthetic choices and allow them to define, redefine, and expand those choices. When I left Wisconsin to work on my doctorate, I did so with the intention of finding ways to help art educators become more sensitive to the aesthetic preferences of groups from different cultural backgrounds and to incorporate those aesthetics into the classroom with dignity. I found that the best route for accomplishing these goals was to study the art of folk groups (usually ethnic, occupational, regional, and/or religious).

Since that time, I have studied folk art intensely. Understanding folk art processes raises certain issues about how we define and approach art and art education. Although I discuss four areas of concern in this paper, these categories are not separate and distinct entities. They each interact in the way in which they reveal concerns for our field and
suggest its fluid boundaries. Art education cannot be separated from the concerns and processes of daily life any more than can art. The areas of concern in relation to folk art as it affects our understanding of art education are as follow: (a) the learning process; (b) aesthetics, art criticism, and art history; (c) functions of art; and (d) elitism and folk art categories.

Learning Process

Folk art is alive and well; it is being created in every state in our nation. It is dynamic, with some forms changing more than others. Although some forms of folk art may have died out, like all other types of art, many folk art forms have been replenished by new techniques, tools, and subject matter. Loggers are beginning to explore the process of carving with chain saws in place of pocket knives and rug hooking might now be done on canvas rather than on a burlap sack (field notes, Maryan Morin-Jones, Oregon Arts Commission, 1980). Federal and state laws have drastically affected many folk group practices, yet they have not stopped folk artists from continuing to develop new ways of doing things or from patiently waiting and remembering. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in the interest of assimilation, attempted to discourage all manifestations of Indian culture. Although Native American art at that time diminished greatly, it is now experiencing a significant revival (Rubinstein, 1982). However, some materials, such as bird feathers and seal and caribou hides that are used to make Eskimo dolls are still subject to government restrictions (Fair, 1982). Grasses used to make traditional baskets in Oregon and California have been destroyed in order to suppress fires (Toelken, 1983). These few examples show how folk arts as traditionally practiced have been discouraged in the United States. Today, with limited funding and support from the fine art world and academically trained art educators, folk art preservation groups are increasing and state arts councils and historical societies are attempting to recognize, encourage, and preserve the folk arts.

Folk art continues to be taught, practiced, and appreciated in communities throughout the country despite laws, prejudices, and minimal
bureaucratic support. Generally, folk artists do not write formal curricula, attend educational conventions, compare and contrast art criticism methodologies, or worry about losing their jobs as educators. In conjunction with their roles as mothers, fathers, grandparents, farmers, lawyers, dentists, and loggers, however, they do make art and engage in teaching activities encompassing aesthetics, art criticism, and art history, as well as formal studio production. My exploration into the folk art process, from books and articles, films, videos, and oral histories, has presented me with the art work of hundreds of folk artists who informally pass on knowledge about their art to groups of willing students. Without an active national organization, massive funding, large educational institutions, or years of art education training from academic establishments, they are doing what we academically trained, somewhat organized, and more heavily funded art educators are also attempting to do.

The question arises as to whether art educators should perhaps be asking folk artists for help. At the very least, should not we recognize in our settings what they, the quilters, chain carvers, lacemakers, traditional boat builders, and coverlet weavers, are doing? Is it wise for the academically trained educator to be oblivious to these natural processes of artistic creativity which are so firmly entrenched and intensely appreciated, and which convey a sense of family and community history and cultural values? Many seem to look only to the major museums and galleries for art and to university art educators for methodology, neglecting the wealth of expertise and aesthetic communication which already exists in our backyards and in small communities across the nation and the world. Has there not been too much faith placed in the "ivory towers" and "gallery walls"?

Aesthetics, Art Criticism and Art History

In June, 1984, I was introduced to a young Black furniture refinisher, John Mason, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I had heard about him from a friend, and I wanted to write about the sense of community identity his work gave him, the memories he had of his father, who was his teacher, and the aesthetics involved in his creative
processes. John's high school education cannot be given much credit for his aesthetic preferences, his deep understanding of wood, or the thinking processes of the craftsperson. His father, a basketmaker, shoemaker, and woodworker, who worked at home because of a polio disability, was the teacher who most invoked John's great sense of purpose and aesthetic understanding. I soon realized that I could not write about John and do him justice. He did not need an academically trained art educator to help him speak about his work or to understand its function in his community. I returned to his shop and community during the summer of 1985 with a video crew, a loosely written script, and a humbled sense of myself as a knowledgeable art educator.

It was not John Mason's furniture which first caught my eye. I still cannot readily tell one wood from the next. But he taught me about old craftspeople, the smell of wood, the feel of working on it, the texture of a smoothly finished piece, and how to attend to the color of natural wood. I began to look at wood and refinishing furniture differently. Initially, I thought making new furniture was more creative, somehow more artistic than refinishing old pieces. Now I realize that, for John, it is getting into the mind of the old craftsperson that is exhilarating.

Something similar occurred when I began to study the buckaroo (cowboy) art of eastern Oregon. Previously, saddles, bridles, and large silver belt buckles had elicited little more from me than indifference. But as I became more familiar with the area, buckaroo folklore, and the uses of such art (status, identity, pride, functionalism), I saw it in an entirely different light.

None of these revelations about aesthetic response should be surprising. Many writers have discussed how aesthetics are a part of formally and informally learned, cultural, and social processes (Chalmers, 1981; Hamblen, 1984). When art can be understood in its social and cultural context, one can more fully appreciate its formal elements, its function, and its meaning. In writing about the Eskimos of the Bering Straits during the 1880s, Edward W. Nelson (Olmart, 1982) relates a tale about an elderly storyteller who listened to some organ music for the first time. The old man said he did not understand what the noise said
and that the sounds were confusing to his ears. He preferred to listen to the drum singing in the kashim because he understood it.

Many art educators are changing the ways students are introduced to art on museum walls, acknowledging the fact that, for many, these forms will appear strange until historical information, critical dialogue, and aesthetic literacy provide perspectives. Many believe that these awarenesses will lead to a broadened range of aesthetic responses. If art educators take the time to teach about museum art and to listen to the criticism of academically trained critics, why not also attend to the contextual dimensions and criticism of the saddlemaker, the furniture refinisher, the lacemaker, and others in the community who use and appreciate their own art forms? Can we be certain that the educational background of one critic is better than another? Will the words of the academically trained critic speak more clearly or with more meaning to a group of students than the folk art critic? If our students can extend themselves to enjoy the academic approaches to aesthetics, criticism, and art historical processes, then too, cannot "professional" art educators who have university training in similar language systems and research methodologies extend their choices and preferences by listening to the words and world views of the traditional basketmaker from rural Mississippi, or the Navajo weaver? Do we limit ourselves by conversing with only one group of people? There is nothing inherently wrong with promoting the culture of academics. But many of our students have been brought up in, and will return to, a world removed from the fine arts museum and gallery art scene and from the current values and practices of academia. They deserve choices for aesthetic appreciation that relate to a wide variety of meaningful environments. Providing these choices can only enhance their aesthetic development as well as the development of the academic world.

Functions of Art

Academically trained art educators tend to look at art works deemed worthy of our attention by the art establishment that consists primarily of museum administrators, wealthy patrons, established art critics, and university scholars. Most contemporary art seems to be based on two main
ideas: the "I-did-it-first" syndrome, which Lucy Lippard (1984) calls blatantly classist; and the "art for art's sake" category, which Radar and Jessup (1976) say isolates art from everyday life and represents aesthetic preferences of an increasingly smaller audience. There is nothing wrong with having art function for a select group of people in this manner, and if it is the innovative that evokes an aesthetic response, then the major contemporary art museums are the places to go.

However, the study of folk art evokes an awareness that art has different functions for various individuals in order to be appreciated. People have varying aesthetic needs and often attend to different aspects in art objects; thus, aesthetic responses vary. The recognition and support for the different functions of art are ways of supporting cultural pluralism in our society. To choose one or two functions of art as more worthwhile is to belittle the aesthetic choices, world views, and values of many minority group members, women, and others in our society. Some examples from folk art documentation will clarify this point by stressing functions of art other than innovation or the art for art's sake idea.

Elijah Pierce, a Black relief sculptor born in Mississippi, who lived in Columbus, Ohio, said "My carvings look nice... but if they don't have a story behind them, what's the use of them? Every piece of work I carve is a message, a sermon" (Livingston & Beardsley, 1982, p. 120). For Pierce, his art communicates a message and gives his viewers direction.

Carpenter (1971) writes about how, for the Eskimos, the process of creating art was more expressive of their world view than the finished object. The act was a way of reaffirming life's values. "It is a ritual of discovery by which patterns of nature and of human nature are revealed by man" (p. 163). When the artist reveals form in a universe that is formless, he or she has brought beauty into consciousness (Carpenter, 1961). Although all art expresses the world view of the artist, for Eskimos the process of reaffirming their perception of the universe was central to the function of making art. The spiritual and physical necessity of securing food, shelter, and clothing was given form in the creation of their art.

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For one midwest chain carver who had experienced job dissatisfaction, carving a chain from one piece of wood gave him the psychological prestige he needed (Bronner, 1985). This same carver also said that carving was therapeutic for him when his wife died and he was faced with loneliness. Another carver said that making chains released his mind from his problems. Many artists, especially women, talk about the pleasure they gain from creating art that is personal, not made for large audiences, which speaks quietly to them, their families, or close friends (Lippard, 1976).

The functions of telling a story, relating a message, expressing a world view, giving purpose to an individual, or creating a therapeutic environment can apply to artists who strive for innovation and follow the art-for-art's-sake ideology. But these functions have not been viewed as worthwhile or relevant by the establishment art world. When I talk to a folk artist or a folk art appreciator and see the emotion brought about by a traditional quilt pattern, a piece of bobbin lace, or a chain carving, or when I listen to a Hungarian speak about the role embroidery plays in her life, I cannot say that his or her priorities or judgments are invalid, misplaced, or inconsequential. Just as I would hope that someday these people might also experience Motherwell, O'Keefe, and Mondrian, and come to appreciate the aesthetic experience which may come from the art-for-art's-sake approach, I would also hope that regular patrons of the Museum of Modern Art might take the time to understand the aesthetic process of Elijah Pierce, Willie Seaweed, and Clementine Hunter, and the way their art functions in their respective communities.

Do academically trained art educators put too much, almost exclusive, faith in the idea of creativity as innovation (Congdon, 1984)? The function of art as something removed from society and day-to-day living may have its place in some groups, and does deserve recognition, analysis, and study, but should it be the only approach we take to art's function in society? If we study contemporary art only as innovation and put it above the day-to-day processes of human interactions and needs, do we not set up one person's assessment of the worth of an art object over another's? Who can say whether innovation in art (which may extend one's way of looking at and understanding the world) is more important than an
art work which gives one a sense of identity (a family quilt), tells a story (a carved walking cane), or holds a cowboy on his horse (an intricately carved saddle). Should one group of critics or art institutions attempt to set functional priorities in the visual arts for an entire population?

**Elitism and folk Art Categorization**

Since the so-called "discovery" of American folk art at the beginning of this century, defining the category of folk art has created difficulties among various university and public groups. Some scholars say it is innovative; others maintain it is traditional. Some say folk artists are isolated loners; others are convinced they are members of folk groups and their art is representative of the group's world views and values. Some collectors propose that folk art can be easily appreciated apart from its context; others cringe at this suggestion. Many believe that folk art is dead or dying; others insist it is flourishing. Some claim that folk artists are rural, isolated, uneducated people; their counterparts conclude that all people belong to folk groups and that folk artists can come from any economic or educational background.

Categorization can become problematic. In the travels of William Least Heat Moon (1982), he became aware of the relativity of what constitutes West in our country:

> I crossed into Texas. I've heard Americans debate where the West begins: Texans say the Brazas River; in St. Louis it's the Mississippi, and they built a very expensive "Gateway Arch" to prove it; Philadelphians say the Alleghenies, in Brooklyn it's the Hudson; and on Beacon Hill the backside of the Common. But of course, the true West begins with the western state line of Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. . . . I'm an authority because my family lives two hundred feet from where this line passes through Kansas City. (p. 135)

Indeed, categorization of the West, or of folk art, depends on one's experiences and on certain available information as well as to which aspects of a definition one attends. Limiting ourselves to one definition of where the West begins or what constitutes folk art would be most helpful in communicating with others, but surely the experiences and the
processes of coming to a definition are more useful in understanding human behavior and therefore more intriguing than the final proclamation. Grappling with these processes constitutes the real learning experience and poses more important questions. We are asking, for example, not what is folk art, but what it is we value in the art object, in the art process, or in the artist that makes one art experience different from another.

Wide discrepancies in the definition of what is folk art have made it difficult for folk art enthusiasts to use each other's research, participate cooperatively in conventions, and utilize funding in the name of the art which is called folk. Fortunately, art educators need not be too concerned with having a single definition of folk art in order to study it; many of us believe that any art which evokes aesthetic response is worthy of attention. What we can gain from the active dialogue on definitions is an analysis of the way in which folk art has been studied, appreciated, and critiqued. We can then apply those processes which are useful to all art forms (Congdon, 1983).

The tendency is to categorize the art of ethnic group members, rural, economically poor, and nonacademically trained artists as folk art (even while disclaiming the criteria for categorization) and the work of those who studied in art schools as fine art. The unfortunate unspoken policy in the art world is that fine art is better than folk art. Because of this strong tendency, academically trained art educators seldom look at folk art objects as worthy of study in and of themselves (Schellin, 1973).

Many folk artists have created art works which explore the visual ideas that have made some fine artists famous. In 1942, Sidney Janis, a folk art collector, wrote about the folk artist:

Knowing nothing of Cubism, he may paint a picture in which a circulating viewpoint is used, or one that is counterpoised like a cubist painting. Knowing nothing of Surrealism, he may create enigmatic surface textures, use literary ideas and fantasies that are closely akin to Surrealism. Knowing nothing of Freud, he may undesignedly employ symbols similar to those Dali uses with specific intent. (p. 10)
Janis's definition of folk art is that which is made by the nonacademically trained artist. His correlation between the two art categories gives us much to think about in terms of the values employed in art judgments that set one art work above another and how classism and the political art world connections might influence us.

If, as many already do, we learn to value perspectives toward art which are often studied in conjunction with that which has been called folk art, such as tradition, community and individual identity, sense of place, communication with the values and symbolic system of a small or different groups of people, the effect may be far reaching. First, our goals of cultural pluralism may be enhanced by accepting, appreciating, and understanding diverse groups of people. Second, we may be encouraged to value folk art (often the art form which speaks most readily to many of our students). And third, the influence of the classist, elitist system which now exists may be minimized. Goals for the democratization of arts should not be limited to bringing the fine arts to the ghettos and rural areas of our country; it should equally involve recognizing, valuing, and sharing quality art from suburban kitchen countertops, urban street corners, and dormitory rooms.

In our country, there is little doubt that art history and aesthetic choices are controlled by a select group of people from similar educational and cultural backgrounds. Art education, however, should speak to every child and adult from every conceivable background. In order to do justice to our students, we must respect the art forms which communicate to them from their own cultural context, and they must be given more information with which they can make informed, intelligent choices in the future.

Conclusion

In summary, my studies in folk art have shown that if we are committed to cultural pluralism in art education, we must do more than just include the ethnic arts in our curricula. We must, as Nadaner (1984) points out, recognize many more world views than those represented by only one or two groups of people. We should become aware of the many forms in which art education takes place, so that we can preserve and
expand pluralistic cultural values. We need to broaden the choices available for aesthetic responses, art criticism, and art history. We must allow for and respect the many functions which art has in our society. We need to begin questioning how categorization of art forms occurs. The kinds of prejudices and discriminatory values inherent in creating boundaries between art categories needs to be examined, as well as which kinds of evaluatory guidelines might be useful in analyzing all art forms.

Like many art educators, I make suggestions which move the boundaries of the field of art education outward at a time when many others are calling for more definition and unification. Art education is not just a school activity, nor are aesthetic responses to art relegated only to museum experiences. To see it as such shuts out large segments of our population. Art education must deal with social concerns in its content (Beyer, 1984) and with cultural pluralism in its methodology (Chalmers, 1984).
References


Schellin, P. (1973). Is it Wilshire Boulevard which is ugly or is it we? *Art Education, 26*(9), 6-9.