

Translations

THE NATIONAL ART EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

FALL 2008

Volume 17, No. 2

Dr. Mary Erickson
Editor

A Refereed Publication


 NAEA

Advancing Art Education
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Reston, VA 20191

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manuscripts for *Translations*
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Teaching about Native American Art: Issues for Art Educators

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“Do you live in a teepee?” “Do you ride a horse to school?”

Students have asked me these questions accompanied by looks of confusion, consternation, and disbelief, when I share with elementary art classes that I am of Native American descent. These honest questions put forth by children are sometimes echoed in various forms by preservice and inservice educators in situations of higher learning and professional development. The sincerity and the naïveté of these oft-repeated questions highlight two concomitant concerns in teaching about Native American arts and the many cultures that produce them. Students of all levels often display a sincere intent to learn; teachers display a sincere intent to teach respectfully about Native American arts and cultures. Both can be hampered by the stereotypes and misinformation embedded in mainstream culture. I have experienced situations in which both adult learners and public school students are disappointed to discover that what was learned from popular media sources as authentic Native American cultural practices were not actual experiences for contemporary Indian people.

Native American art is often part of art education curricula, and inservice art educators may have taught lessons about Native American art for years with the feeling that they have a level of expert knowledge in this area of our field. Because of this feeling of competence, adult learners may have reactions of shame, confusion, frustration, or anger when they discover that their desire to teach about Native American arts may be inhibited by inaccurate knowledge or unexamined views of Indians. I have found that these various reactions must be acknowledged and honored as valid before new learning can take place. Then these educators may reach a place of openness to new ideas. An important next step is to learn about the long history of teaching about Native peoples, which has sometimes been excellent and has at other times been what can most generously be called misinformed. This seems to help art educators understand that they are not alone in their quest for better teaching about Native American art.

Historical Trends in Teaching about Indians

In the 1800s and 1900s, many non-Natives saw both Indians and children as naïve, simple, and natural. Children were sometimes viewed as savages in need of civilizing, and Indians were often seen as children of the Great White Father (Deloria, 1998). National organizations such as the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, and the Campfire Girls were established at this time.

Ernest Thompson Seaton, one of the founders of the Boy Scouts, saw “playing Indians” as an antidote to mechanization as well as a patriotic role model for American youth (Deloria, 1998). Woodcraft activities, making Indian-like costumes, and performing Indian-like dances and songs were enacted in imitation of Indian cultures. These replicas of Indian cultures were taken out of the

contexts that Native peoples gave them and put to use in ways that were important to these organizations (Deloria, 1998; Jojola, 1998).

These activities, which were the mainstay of scouting, influenced what was taught in schools. Art educators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries could read books on how to make facsimiles of Indian artifacts, such as *Indian*

and *Camp Handicraft* (1938) by W. Ben Hunt, a Boy Scout handicraft instructor. Art educators also joined the rising number of tourists who traveled to the Southwest and saw demonstrations of Indian dances and purchased rugs, pottery, kachinas, jewelry, and paintings produced by Native American artists and artisans. Art educators reached for these sources for authentic information concerning Indian peoples and their arts, yet the scouting handbook authors and tour leaders were not, by and large, Indian themselves nor did they necessarily have insider knowledge about Native cultures.

How these sources came to be seen as experts is ironic. At the same time that non-Native people were encouraging "playing Indian" in the 19th century, Indian policy at the federal level in the United States was attempting to assimilate Indian peoples through a simulation of Whiteness. Native American students in boarding schools were forced to assume mainstream clothing and hairstyles and were forbidden to speak their own languages or to follow their own cultural and religious practices. They were primarily taught to be laborers and domestic servants and were often excluded from college preparatory coursework. Consequently, Indian people did not usually have power or resources to communicate their ideas in ways accepted as authoritative by the general culture.

These conditions led to an early trend of White people establishing themselves as authenticators of Indianness. Non-Indians, not Indian people, were seen as experts. Non-Indians wrote most books about Indian peoples and cultures and, as a result, Native American people lost their own voices in academia (Miheuah, 1996). Fabrications of Indianness overpowered Indian peoples' views, and Indian people often had to conform to White ideas of Indianness in order to gain a platform from which their ideas could be heard (Miheuah, 1996). Indian people themselves were not seen as the "Indian experts;" rather non-Native people who brokered their concepts of Indian culture were seen as authorities. Real Indians were kept distant, because their experiences

and knowledge could contradict what was taught by the "experts" (Griffiths, 1988). These "experts" influenced conceptions of Native people and what was accepted as knowledge about Indian cultures, which in turn influenced, and continues to influence, how art educators taught, and teach, about Indians today.

The Influence of Media

In addition to the problem of a preponderance of sources that were authored by non-Indians, art educators of earlier eras also were inundated with American popular entertainments that catered to the public's desire for culturally exotic images of Indians. In late 19th and 20th century American popular culture, Native Americans were portrayed as either noble or bloodthirsty savages in a variety of media, including fictional narratives, dime store novels, pageants, film, Wild West shows, and advertising (Griffiths, 1988; Kilpatrick, 1999). Indians were also portrayed as doomed savages, either nobly accepting Manifest Destiny or ruthlessly fighting against it (Bird, 1998). These manufactured images of Indians included the protective male lover and the beautiful Indian princess. Usually portrayed as an anachronism from the pre-reservation era, these constructed Indians were also typically presented as having a unique spiritual relationship with nature (Bird, 1998).

An examination of current media will reveal that these stereotypes are still being produced and consumed in the US. With the development of new technologies, such images are now available globally. Unfortunately, the power of film and marketing can make these manufactured and constructed ideas about Native Americans seem like truth.

Stereotypes of Native Americans Impede Teaching and Learning

Stereotypes held by students and teachers are a real impediment to learning and teaching about Native American people, art forms, cultures, and history (Cornelius, 1999). Art teachers must make instructional decisions every day. These decisions often

rest on personal experiences. Frequently art teachers' experiences with unfamiliar cultures and ethnic groups are too limited to provide unbiased instruction (Pepper, 1997). If art educators' personal experiences with Native American cultures are only through mass media, then this is the kind of experience they will share with students. A vicious cycle can be established in which what is taught in art education classrooms effects public perceptions of Native Americans, and public images of Native Americans effect art education. Children's conceptions of Native Americans often develop out of media portrayals and classroom role-playing (Reese, 1996). Unless taught differently, children will keep these conceptions of Native peoples into adulthood when, as citizens, they may have opportunities to influence policies for Native peoples.

Stereotypes are Harmful to Native Americans

Constructed images of Indianness can be detrimental to Native American peoples' images of themselves and have been found to effect Native American persons' mental health (O'Neil, 1996). False imagery of Indian people and cultures can cause Native American people to experience emotional distress, anger, frustration, insecurity, and feelings of helplessness (Miheuah, 1996). Native American students therefore need art educators who can help them identify with their home cultures. These home cultures can provide the social supports necessary for students' physical and emotional survival and positive self-images, which are important factors in educational success (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983).

How to Teach about Native American Cultures and Artforms

Some art educators will, out of ignorance, not ill will, present the image of the "essential, historical Indian." These kinds of oversimplified and distorted accounts of Native Americans in art classrooms can reinforce the "buckskin and feather" and "igloos and Eskimo" stereotypes (Pepper, 1997). Art educators need to assist

students in unlearning stereotypes and replace them with reality-based images and understandings.

Many students will arrive at school with the idea that "real Indians" hunt buffalo, live in teepees, and wear leather and feathers. The reality is that many Native American people live in houses and apartments, have jobs, eat at restaurants, and wear regular clothing. They may practice their traditions or they may not. They may live on reservations or they may not. They may be visually identifiable as "Indian" or they may not. Teachers need to aid students in realizing the complexities of contemporary Native American life, which often consists of a blurring between Native and non-Native worlds (Hosmer, 1997). Additionally, students may not be aware that traditionally not all Native nations lived in tipis or that traditional life styles and traditional beliefs can be very different from one tribe to another. Art educators need to be specific about artifacts and traditional cultural practices (Reese, 1996) because this can help students understand the reality of Native American existence. Tribal museums can be excellent sources of accurate information about specific tribes.

In social studies classes, history is often presented by learning about Indians first and then, after statehood is taught, Indians are not mentioned again. Using this timeline approach implies that Native Americans are dead or gone and that Native Americans belong only in the past, not in the present or future (Griffiths, 1988). When art educators provide instruction only about historical artifacts and people, students can receive an impression that Indians have disappeared (Pepper, 1997). An alternative is to teach about contemporary Native American people, art forms, and cultures first, and then teach earlier times. Teaching "backwards" on a historical timeline can emphasize that Native American people are alive, their cultures are alive, and they continue to thrive in contemporary American society despite centuries of colonization.

Art educators may not recognize the role art pedagogy can play in colonization.

Traditional topics in a modernist art education framework, such as formalist aesthetics and color theory, are not easily joined with topics addressed in a multicultural art education framework, such as power, authority, and cultural repression (Chalmers, 1996; Holloman, 1996; Hausman, 1999; La Pierre, Stokrocki, & Zimmerman, 2000; Stokrocki, 1992; Kind, Irwin, Grauer, & De Cossin, 2005; Young, 2007). The result of the grafting of these two pedagogical frameworks can be that non-canonical artworks are either dismissed or cursorily glossed over in a kind of "cultural tourism" that enables students to recognize various non-Western styles of work including Native American arts, but only gives students vague ideas about how "other" people live.

Art teaching practices based only on mastery of technique and formalist aesthetics do not provide students with the skills necessary to work through difficult issues that can surround non-Western approaches to art. Art educators can teach critical thinking skills by asking students to examine previously unexamined assumptions as well as dominant cultural conventions by approaching them from the view of historically ignored or silenced Native American artists.

Conclusion

Art educators can play an important role in improving the ways that Native American people are perceived in mainstream American culture by teaching about Native American arts in the context of the contemporary lives of the artists who create them. This can be a challenging goal, because students and their teachers can have absorbed stereotypical ideas of Native American people from mass media. Resources that assist educators in learning about these contexts are improving in their quality and quantity thanks to art educator researchers such as Christie Ballengee-Morris, Jim Bequette, Mary Erickson, Sharon Greenleaf LaPierre, Mary Stokrocki, and Bernard Young, to mention only a few (Stuhr, 1991, 1995; Jim & Stokrocki, 1999; Ballengee-Morris & La Pierre, 2002; Erickson & Young, 2002; Bequette, 2005). However, more needs to be researched and written to support art

educators in K-12 classrooms who aspire to teach respectfully and accurately about Native American arts and the people who create them.

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Impediments to respectful teaching about Native American arts and cultures:

- Stereotypes held by students and teachers are a real impediment to teaching and learning about Native American people, art forms, cultures, and history.
- Sometimes art teachers and their students have little experience with Native American individuals and their cultures and instead have gained their knowledge of Indian people from popular media.
- Historically, Indian people themselves were not seen as the “Indian experts;” rather non-Native people who brokered their concepts of Indian culture were seen as authorities.
- Resources available for art educators may lack in-depth information and Native American viewpoints or may fail to place artifacts in cultural contexts.

What art educators do to improve teaching about Native American cultures and their Artforms:

- Assist students in unlearning stereotypes and recognize any feelings of anger, loss, shame or confusion as part of this process.
- Teach about contemporary Native American people, artforms, and cultures first, then teach earlier times.
- Emphasize that Native American art is part of a complex culture comprised of multifaceted and varied individuals.
- When having students create art projects based on Native American arts, avoid costuming, such as creating paper bag vests decorated with Indian designs. This can perpetuate the idea of “playing Indians.”
- Feathers are highly religious artifacts for some tribal members. Creating headbands with dyed turkey feathers or paper feathers can be seen by some Indian people as highly disrespectful.
- Whenever possible, seek out resources that are produced by Indian peoples themselves. Links to North American Tribal Museums: <http://www.tribalmuseums.org>

Resources for art educators that include lesson plans:

Clover, F. & Jim, A. *Navajo pottery: Beautiful objects: DINE' BIS: HOZHO DOK'LIS*. Retrieved June 3, 2008, from Arizona State University Herberger College of the Arts Artsworks
Website: <http://artswork.asu.edu/arts/students/navajo/index.htm>

Erickson, M. & Young, B. (Eds.). (2002). *Multicultural artworlds: Enduring, evolving, and overlapping traditions*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Smithsonian Institution (2004). Native American dolls. *Smithsonian in your Classroom, Fall* (2004). Retrieved June 4, 2008, from National Museum of the American Indian, Education Department
Website: http://www.nmai.si.edu/education/files/SiYC_Dolls.pdf

Giersbach, C., Gorelick, J., and Termin, S. (1997). *To Honor and Comfort: An Educational Curriculum*. Retrieved June 4, 2008, from National Museum of the American Indian, Education Department
Web site: <http://www.nmai.si.edu/education/files/Quilts.pdf>

Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art. (2002). *Mihtohseenionki (The People's Place): Teacher Resource Guide*. Retrieved June 4, 2008, from the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Education Department Website: http://www.eiteljorg.org/ejm_Education/JustForTeachers/details.asp?id=116 Archuleta, M., Meyers, M., Nahmias, S., Woodsum, J. and Yorba, J. (1994).

Native American Fine Arts Resource Guide. Phoenix, AZ: The Heard Museum, developed with the support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

The Native American Fine Arts Resource Guide focuses on painting and sculpture produced by Native Americans in the continental United States since 1900 and is appropriate for all levels. The accompanying slides are free. Requests for the free guide must be made on school letterhead and sent to: Ann Marshall, The Heard Museum, 2301 North Central Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85004-1323.