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# CASE STUDY: AESTHETIC ATTITUDES AND VALUES OF SELECTED URBAN APPALACHIAN YOUTHS

*Bonnie Southwind*

The worst case of staring at a blank piece of paper must be a graduate student looking for a topic for her doctoral dissertation. In a way, I was lucky. Some time ago I had the opportunity to become the art director for a recreation center that serves an area of Cincinnati which has an urban Appalachian population. I had always been interested in the rural Appalachian culture, and I had opportunities to observe this culture while living in the South. However, this position gave me the opportunity to work with urban Appalachian individuals, individuals I soon found to be uniquely different from their rural counterparts. This opportunity presented a real challenge in that it forced me to re-evaluate the more traditional attitudes and values that I held about these individuals.

I also was interested in teacher-student rapport. From my earliest experiences with art classes, first as student and then as a teacher, it was obvious to me that not much teaching is going to take place unless there is a good rapport between student and teacher. This feeling was reinforced strongly by an exploration of linguistics I undertook at any early stage in my research. The questions and methods of linguistics served to focus strongly on issues similar to the ones I had felt. Linguistics asks, "What is this person's language like?" not "How should this person be talking?" It takes the attitude that the person being studied is the one who knows about her language and that the job of the linguist is to understand and describe as accurately as possible what the language is like.

It became clear to me, reinforced by this philosophy, that rapport could best be established by coming to understand the validity of my students' positions, whatever they may be. I had a head start on this understanding from my previous knowledge of the Appalachian craft tradition and from the respect for Appalachian people I had developed through my close contact with them.

I obtained additional support for this approach from two sources: Herbert J. Gans' Popular Culture and Jerry Morris's dissertation. From Gans I clarified the notion of a "taste public", a concept that was useful in the design of my study. That was valuable in itself, but far more valuable was Gans' emphasis, first, upon need fulfillment as a way of understanding the aesthetic preferences and behaviors of these publics and, second, upon an acceptance of any taste preferences as valid for those who hold them. Morris's work gave particular insight into what those needs might be in the case of urban Appalachians. An Appalachian himself, Morris emphasized that the rural Appalachian has almost no experience with art but lives by a "life-aesthetic" that gives a flavor of art to everyday experience.

The topic and design for my dissertation, therefore, came directly out of my work as an art teacher and my conviction that I could do that job adequately only after having established a strong rapport with my students. It became clear that I would be able to bring them to an understanding and appreciation of traditional art only if I started with them where they were. The fundamental questions of my thesis, then, became: "Where are the aesthetic values of these urban Appalachian youth?" and "Where do these attitudes and values come from?" On examination, these turned out to be questions that called for qualitative, rather than quantitative methods. Studies designed to produce statistical results can predict how a person might respond, just as an examination of their cultural history can, but the kind of information that art teachers need is about the particular living person they are dealing with. Thus, a large part of the energy I devoted to this thesis was spent in developing the design and methodology of the study. Professor Wygant led me to a number of aesthetic theories that elaborated Gans' acceptant approach to individual aesthetic experience, as well as to some very relevant articles on qualitative methods of research in art education.

These led directly to a consideration of "ethnographic" methods employed in anthropology and sociology. In these methods, I spent a substantial amount of time with my subjects, trying to see their world as they see it, and reporting my findings in an almost literary prose. Robert Coles' classic studies of Southerners is a model of this kind of enterprize. Ethnographic methods, modified to fit the requirements of a thesis in art education, proved to be especially appropriate. By the time I started the actual field work of this study, I had interacted on a daily basis with the population I was studying for some five years. This interaction, further, was not so much as an art teacher, since the art program at my center was informal and purely voluntary, but more as an interested friend and confidant.

From this population, I chose three young men in their late teens with whom I had developed a close rapport at the center. I had, as a part of my program, provided a number of experiences with art for these subjects, and they seemed to perceive the actual field work of my study as merely a different kind of experience. A central part of my research was a visit to the Cincinnati Art Museum. My subjects seemed to react to this experience as a pleasurable outing, one which they expressed a desire to repeat.

In addition to the museum visit, I included a viewing of an episode of "The Dukes of Hazzard" as an example of popular art, and, for the Appalachian tradition, a visit to Cincinnati's annual Appalachian Festival.

One particularly interesting thing that came out of these different experiences was that their responses to the paintings in the art museum were very positive, in general more positive than to the "Dukes", which they seem to have outgrown, and to the traditional Appalachian craft tradition, which interested them a great deal less than the youth cul-

ture they shared with people their age from all backgrounds. Two things in particular emerged from the museum visit: first, they responded to the excellent technical execution of the paintings with something approaching awe. "That seems impossible", was the comment of one of them as he examined the detail of a Van Dyck portrait. And second, given a choice of early Modern American paintings, they all chose paintings that spoke very clearly of their own experiences. One chose a Hopper street scene because it looked like his neighborhood in better days. One chose a landscape by none other than Maxfield Parrish because it reminded him of Pine Knot, Kentucky, his favorite vacation haunt. And the third chose a portrait of a pensive little girl by Robert Henri, apparently for more complex reasons relating to personal sadness of his own, which he did not seem willing to express directly.

Their responses to the paintings of their own choice were rich enough to suggest that students in art appreciation courses might make faster headway if allowed a freer rein in choice of works to discuss. It was especially pleasant to listen to the subjects describing their responses, prompted by my questions. It is well known that one way to develop good rapport is by listening to the other person.

After collecting all this data, my final task is to draw from it the answers to the basic questions of my study:

1. What are the aesthetic and art-related attitudes, perceptions, and values of these three young men?
2. What is there in their cultural, social, and physical environment that has influenced these factors (attitudes, perceptions, and values)?
3. What needs are being satisfied by the aesthetic experiences they seek in their culture?
4. How do their "life-aesthetic" and their connection with popular and Appalachian traditions affect their responses?

So far, it's clear that the best way to proceed is to begin with what is already known. This applies equally to the task of helping students enrich their responses to art and to the task of settling on a topic for your dissertation.


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