

The Visual Arts & Ethnic Transmission

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Recommended Citation

Renken, Arlene. "The Visual Arts & Ethnic Transmission." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 2 (1983): 103-104.

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THE VISUAL ARTS & ETHNIC TRANSMISSION

Arlene Renken

Introduction

The content of this paper addresses one facet of multi-culturalism, that of ethnic identity, which is only one form of identity that people experience. More specifically, this paper derives from a study of how the arts of an ethnic group symbolize the core values of the group and thus become instrumental in transmission and continuity of ethnic identity from one generation to the next. The investigation proceeds from field studies methods, with ethnographic interview being the primary field work approach.

The ethnic group selected for the study are descendents of Finnish immigrants who arrived in this country at the turn of the century and settled primarily in the northern tier of states from east to west coast. American Finns have thus experienced three or four generations of assimilation into mainstream culture.

My long-standing interest in Finnish-American ethnicity stems from a Finnish parentage and an upbringing rooted in a Finnish heritage. My study, then, is an outgrowth of a close association and familiarity with the Finnish-American culture.

The emigrant movement took place at a time when a strong craft orientation existed in Finland, particularly in rural areas from which the primary exodus occurred. Of the imported crafts, rug weaving and log construction have survived and are still practiced by descendents of Finnish immigrants; together they provide the central element on which the study is based.

Art and Ethnicity

The art that is associated with an ethnic group is not usually learned in school; it is transmitted informally within the social group through kinship and other transmittal patterns. The cultural knowledge that is inherent in art and conveyed through art in the transmission process can be explicit in terms of skills, procedures, processes, information or images. Art is also a means of passing on implicit or tacit cultural knowledge. The latter relates to more subtle understandings such as the acquisition of values and attitudes, and the meanings attached to art objects by members of a social group.

Art objects then have characteristics that are visible or explicit and qualities that are hidden or implicit. An art object is, to quote Redfield (1959), "a body in which two souls dwell."

In cultures where a strong imagery pattern exists, symbolic meanings

in works of art and their significance in preserving value systems over time may be more easily discerned. But in cultures that lack a strong visual imagery tradition, the symbolic significance of art objects may be rooted in social patterns that are external to, but connected with, the art objects, as in the case of Finnish-American handicraft traditions.

Two questions provide the framework for analysis of collected data in this study: How do art traditions reflect core values of a social group and thus help to sustain ethnic identity? and What alternative forms of education contribute to survival and transmission of ethnic traditions over time?

Implications for Art Education

Today's schools are functioning on a philosophical orientation based on cultural pluralism. Studies of ethnicity in relationship to art point out a need for examining instructional practices that relate to ethnic content of art. Too often such practices are directed to superficial, external qualities of the art of different cultures without consideration of the social context in which the art was created. At the elementary level especially, students sometimes acquire wrong impressions about cultures from superficial attempts at replicating art objects of different cultural groups.

An investigation of alternative forms of art education provides a broader base from which to evaluate formal art teaching methods. It points out that different ways of learning and teaching have occurred through history to successfully transmit art knowledge. If cultural values are at the root of ethnic art survivals, art instruction in a formal school setting is also based on a value system. For effective teaching and learning, the value structure underlying contemporary formal art teaching practice needs to be uncovered and its viability in a multicultural society examined.

Studies of acculturation in art education are rare. Investigations such as this promote an awareness of the effects of acculturation on the art development of children who enter the mainstream culture of our schools from other societies, and a greater sensitivity to differing cultural values.

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