



The Role of the Horse as Subject Matter in Adolescent Girls' Artwork

Alanna Stalker-Horner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/mzwp>



Part of the [Art Education Commons](#)

Copyright © 1986 Working Papers in Art Education.

Recommended Citation

Stalker-Horner, Alanna. "The Role of the Horse as Subject Matter in Adolescent Girls' Artwork." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 5 (1986): 9-15.

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

THE ROLE OF THE HORSE AS SUBJECT MATTER
IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS' ARTWORK

Alanna Stalker-Horner

"What is the significance of adolescent girls' frequent involvement with horses, and their choice of the horse as subject matter in their art?"

Psychologists, sociologists, art therapists and art educators all have noted the adolescent female's fascination for horses. The general consensus from these diverse disciplines has been that the girls' preoccupation is of a sexual nature and that they tend to lose their passionate interest in horses in direct proportion to their growing interest in boys (Braider, 1976); this is said to mark the end of the girls' phallic stage and their desire to have a penis. (Van Herik, 1982; Freud, 1923). This Freudian psychoanalytic theory of penis envy has gained wide acceptance and often is reflected in analyses of children's art in art therapy where the horse serves as a symbol of sexual power (Kramer, 1979; Leuner, 1983) and where a repetition of this theme over a period of time could become an "unhealthy preoccupation" (Kramer, 1979) especially if continued beyond the phallic stage.

For girls horses are more important than for boys. In general we find girls less inclined than boys to invest mechanical objects with sexual significance. Since their bodies provide no model of dramatic erection and detumescence, girls are not so readily fascinated by objects that can be made to start and stop at their owners will. Large animals that can be induced to lend their strength to the people astride their backs seem on the other hand to be particularly suited to express the little girls' fantasy of possessing a penis, or of gaining possession of a whole man's powers and so partaking of his masculinity. (p. 75)

Art therapy uses many psychological frames of reference as well as psycho-

analytic theory (Robbins and Sibley, 1976). Although psychoanalytic interpretation seems to be the dominant influence in the evaluation of the theme, other approaches point out that too often penis envy has become an over-used and simplistic explanation of a girl's development (Sugar, 1979).

Heidi's Horse by Sylvia Fein, a study coming from the discipline of art education, is a written and visual record, kept from the age of two to the age of seventeen, of a girl's drawings of horses. In contrast to Kramer's viewpoint, **Heidi's Horse** shows how one girl's love of horses and her persistence in drawing and painting horses almost exclusively, has been beneficial to her artistic development.

Her work has had a continuous harmonious disciplined evolution because she was able to develop and manifest whatever rich forms and artistic relationships she needed to communicate her curiosity, playfulness experience and enthusiasm. (1976, p. 157)

Close association with horses (horses size, shape, coloration, his gear and stall, his lineage, his strength, responses and his gaits) provided stimulating observations which could be selected and organized - her love for the horse sustained her deepening perception of his reality and helped her to develop him in her drawings, from a simple box-like structure to a complex svelte graceful creature. (1976, p. 157)

Over thirteen years the horse as subject matter leads her into various artistic explorations. Up to the age of five Heidi works towards drawing the horse according to her standards of how the horse should appear to her on the paper. By the age of five she is producing variations in the pose and stance of the horse (p. 58). Between the ages of six and seven she becomes involved with the character of the horse and wishes to create a more forceful personality for him (p. 61). She experiments with different ways of applying her drawing materials to get these effects. By the age of nine she becomes interested in the relationships of horses and discovers overlapping when she attempts to place a foal beside its mother

(p. 77). Moving towards adolescence, at age eleven her horses reflect mood changes (ie. gestural, wild, "ornery", horse-linear, quiet, delicate horse in peaceful landscape), (p. 130). Her work up to, and for most of, her teenage years continues to explore creatively both her reality and her fantasy of the horse. Her interest in the riders of horses presents her with problems of drawing the human figure (p. 86). She becomes involved in the history of the horse and produces the horse in his historical or mythological landscape (ie. circus horse, p. 118; knight and horse, p. 120; pegasus, p. 122). By age seventeen, before moving on to other subjects and interests to test her artistic skills, she is doing more detailed long-term drawings of the horse. Her work shows more involvement in rendering, draftsmanship and design.

The horse seen by Freud and Jung as representing powerful instinctive urges of a sexual and perhaps aggressive nature (Jung, 1927; Freud, 1927) has an even earlier history. In Greek mythology the horse stands for intense desires and instincts (Circlot, 1962). In medieval Europe the horse was considered to be a symbol of fertility. The hobby horse used as part of the spring festivals held to bless the planting of the crops ultimately was banned by the church as a pagan phallic symbol (Radford and Hole, 1961). It is also true however that the horse has been seen as dynamic, powerful and a means of locomotion - "it carries one away" (MacKenzie, 1965). The horse also has been known to symbolize clairaudience, endurance, force, freedom, intellect, strength, triumph, understanding, obstinacy and pride (Jobes, 1962). The romantic image of the Unicorn symbolizing purity, the Pegasus symbol of inspiration and the Centaur representing not only sensuality but also dignity and wisdom (Barber and Riches, 1971) must also be taken into account when we investigate the horse as archetype.

The concern of my thesis is to study the young girl's, primarily adolescent girl's, fascination for horses. I have chosen an ethnographic research approach to reexamine the question. An ethnographic approach allows the environment in which the research is to take place to be set up so as to allow the individuality of each child's personality to emerge, and, as a result, new ideas can be encouraged.

The setting for my research was a riding camp in the country. I set up an art room in the barn – the centre of activity. The riding camp was attended, for the most part, by girls between the ages of nine and fifteen. The camp is open not only to girls, but girls represented 80% of the student population. The main concern of the riding camp is to teach the campers care of horses and basic equestrian skills. The students, coming from a variety of backgrounds, urban, rural, middle and working class, are drawn together at this particular location by their love of horses.

In the first few days of the camp I set up the art room in the midst of the activity of the camp, participated in activities, got to know the students and learned the daily routine. From those first moments of camp life I began to collect cultural data. The "culture" was adolescent girls and their interaction with horses in their day-to-day activities at camp. I attempted to describe the culture "on its own terms" (Spradley, 1972). The main activities of the camp centered around the care of the horses – mucking out the stalls, feeding, grooming, lessons in equitation, and basic dressage and jumping, all in preparation for the horse show at the end of camp. The artroom, once it was set up, became the place for students to come once a day for an hour to paint and draw – to express their views visually about themselves. A variety of materials were on hand for them to do so. Within this environment the researcher began by asking descriptive questions, making observations and taking field notes.

The questions revolved around what the life of girls seriously committed to horses is like, and why they are so committed. The art experience, as a new addition to camp life, was intended to help in legitimizing the students' interest. The live discussion and interviews, as well as the art work they made, allowed the children **themselves** to explain why they like horses and what their involvement means to them.

I believe this study may have important implications for art education. Many art educators have registered the belief that the child's cultural and social background plays an important role in how the child approaches, and participates in, the making of art. (McFee, 1970; Feldman, 1970; Barkan,

1955), and that their artistic expression is directly related to the child's ethical development, his or her emerging values based on culture, class, sex, neighborhood and friendships (Feldman, 1970). Influenced by the concerns of the women's movement some art educators have concentrated on questioning traditional values as they specifically relate to the female child and how she is viewed (Collins and Sandell, 1984; Loeb, 1979) or how socialization influences the female child to pursue one type of art topic while the male child pursues another, (Feinburg, 1979; Kavolis, 1968). An understanding of this most recent research will be an important factor in this study on girls and horses for this new information has emerged since the writings of both Kramer and Fein on the topic. June King McFee stated that the increased consciousness of minority groups is challenging old stereotypes and that art educators must recognize these changes (p. 74). She also believes that we as art educators must find new criteria for evaluation of the visual arts if we are to become involved in the problems of society and social change (1978, p. 89). Manuel Barkan stated his belief that the values of art education are a result of our knowledge about the growth and development of children and the cultural and social influences on that development. He asked how the child's experience through the arts best serves the purpose and needs of the child (1955, p. 73).

Children draw the things that are most important to them, the things that actively stimulate them at the time they are drawing - stimulation is the most influential factor in arousing a child's interest. It is the environment that provides stimulation and the child's environment provides natural (nature) and cultural (including social stimulation.) (Lansing, 1976, p. 262)

REFERENCES

- Barber, Richard and Riches, Anne. **A Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts.** London: Macmillan, 1971.
- Barkin, Manuel. **A Foundation for Art Education.** New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955.

- Braider, Donald. **The Life History and Magic of the Horse.** New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1976.
- Chapman, Laura. **Approaches to Art in Education.** New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Cirlot, J. E. **A Dictionary of Symbols.** London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.
- Collins, Georgia and Sandell, Renee. **Women, Art, and Education.** NAEA Press, 1984.
- Feldman, Edmund Burke. **Becoming Human Through Art.** Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1970.
- Fein, Sylvia. **Heidi's Horse.** Pleasant Hill, California: Exelrod Press, 1976.
- Feinburg, Sylvia Gruber. "The Significance of What Boys and Girls Choose to Draw - Explorations of Fighting and Helping" in **Feminist Collage - Educating Women in the Visual Arts.** Judy Loeb (Ed.) New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1979.
- Freud, Sigmund. **The Ego and the Id.** London Press, 1927.
- Jobes, Gertrude. **A Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols.** New York: Scarecrow Press, 1962.
- Jung, Carl G. **Man and His Symbols.** New York: Dell Publishing, 1964.
- Jung, Carl G. **Psychology of the Unconscious.** New York, 1927.
- Kavolis, Vytantas. **Artistic Expression - A Sociological Analysis.** Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968.
- Kramer, Edith. **Art as Therapy With Children.** New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
- Kramer, Edith. **Art Therapy in a Childrens Community.** New York: Schocken Books, 1977.
- Kramer, Edith. **Childhood and Art Therapy.** New York: Schocken Books, 1979.
- Lansing, Kenneth M. **Art, Artists and Art Education.** Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1976.
- Leuner, Hanscarl, Horn, Gunther and Klessmann, Edda. **Guided Affective Imagery with Children and Adolescents.** New York: Plenum Press, 1983.
- MacKenzie, Norman. **Dreams and Dreaming.** New York: The Vanguard

- Press Inc., 1965.
- McFee, June King. "Society Art and Education" in **Concepts in Art Education**. George Pappas (Ed.) London: MacMillan Company, 1970. pp. 71-89.
- McFee, June King. **Preparation for Art**. Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., San Francisco, 1961.
- Pariser, David A. Linear Lessons in a Centrifugal Environment - An Ethnographic Sketch of Art Teaching Experiment. **Research in Visual Arts**, 1981 no. 13.
- Radford, E. **Encyclopedia of Superstitions**. Christina Hole (Ed.) London: Hutchison, 1961.
- Spradley, James P., and McCurdy, David W. **The Cultural Experience - Ethnography in Complex Society**. Chicago: Science Research Associates Inc., 1972.
- Sugar, Max. **Female Adolescent Development**. New York: Bruner Mazel, 1979.
- Van Herik, Judith. **Freud on Femininity and Faith**. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982.