

# Teaching Art Via Culture: Fictive Travel as a Learning Tool

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## Teaching Art Via Culture: Fictive Travel as a Learning Tool

Erin Tapley

Traveling, for an artist, is a portal to appreciation and insight which should refresh and bespeak a relevance to the viewer no matter his/her culture. We can use the traveling analogy in a like-sense in art education, because it works on a similar plane as the art processes of discovery, interpretation and incorporation of ideas and material reality.

If students see themselves less as passive observers or imitators of art lessons and more the investigators of the great world-wide traditions of art; they may be called to understand the wide definitions and permutations of art, which truly exist in the world. They may choose to apply these to their future. As students see and try different ways of making and evaluating art, they are introduced to the range of art's meanings throughout the world.

My teaching "art as itinerary" (Smith 1990:79) is by no means an innovation in art education nor in the history of art production. Since every art form and culture has always borrowed ideas from others, it is reasonable that "travel" becomes the inevitable and primary means of idea sharing. Nonetheless, my impetus to conduct art teaching as the opportunity to share in some of the "discovering" delights of culture, comes from my own travel, and especially a recent trek through Botswana, Africa, where I witnessed art and cultural education both in and out of the public school classroom.

### Traveling to Botswana to Look at Art and Art Education as formed by Travel Itself

In Botswana, I saw individual craftspersons model traditional ways of learning art trans-generationally while using the environment's natural materials such as ostrich eggs for their work. I witnessed self-help workshop members working as a community to make large quantities of more commercial artworks such as textiles which are of primary interest to tourists. I also saw and spoke to many of Botswana's fine artists, who incorporated many Western art mediums and knowledge gained from international travel in their work. But, the most inspiring aspect I gleaned from this range of art production, was seeing its reflection in the classroom, where federally sponsored curricular efforts seek to teach art and culture simultaneously.

Recent efforts to expand art education in Botswana in order to promote nationalism among Botswana's many ethnic groups intrigued me and seemed reminiscent of key crusades in the United States to infuse multiculturalism across the curriculum. Specifically, in Botswana, The National Museum and Art Gallery serves a unique purpose in extracting the variety of artforms to be taught and models the "learning" of these as a kind of authoritarian duty. Botswana's National Museum and Art Gallery operates a mobile museum called *Pitse Ne Yaga* (The Zebra Mobile) which travels to villages and documents both traditional visual

and performing arts. Such findings are published in a monthly magazine called **The Zebra's Voice** and in addition, the museum sponsors many teacher workshops, so that teachers may learn both indigenous and international art forms which they then teach in their classrooms. Botswana's current curriculum guide published by the Ministry of Education also offers teachers valuable resources and ideas for finding and then promoting knowledge about commercial art, fine art and craft production. All of these efforts represent exemplary and concerted effort by a third world nation to teach "culture" alongside art in service to the building of a national identity based on the pluralistic nature of people and art.

For me, the most interesting angle of this teaching is the position that cultural *education* be integrated into an arts curriculum instead of vice versa and that such lessons are not static but participatory and investigative like travel itself. They may incorporate other fine arts such as theater, dance, music and literature to show correspondences between these and visual art production. As Botswana has modeled; teaching which brings students to another area of the country or world to uncover new meanings and methods in art, underscores the role of diversifying one's classroom and teaching multiculturalism as "appreciation for otherness".

### **Applying Differences**

When I returned from Botswana, I decided to apply such a strategy while teaching culturally-based art, when I was a visiting artist for public schools in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Through this practical experience of presenting certain culture's artforms to K-12 classes, I gained a better understanding of the implications of teaching culture and art, in an American school setting.

### **Description of Teaching**

In the span of five months, I decided to work with participating teachers and visit classrooms to teach a traditional art from Botswana or Japan. In essence, I would (figuratively) travel with students to these places and turn over to them the role of "visiting artist", so that they could create art works which would somehow reflect aspects of the society and lifestyles of certain artists within these societies. For this purpose, I derived various experiential activities and art projects using as many authentic methods, materials and meanings as I could.

#### **1. Teaching Textile Manufacture via Botswana**

In teaching the textile art of Botswana, to a group of second grade students, I decided to convey to them one of the most frequent showplaces for African textile production, by creating as "prop" an African marketplace, which is indeed a source for raw material for textile design and also a retail spot for completed material. Students then would come and trade their finished works for money (tokens) at our "marketplace" and then purchase materials for their next project.

Prior to this activity however, the students and I first looked at slides and artifacts of Botswana and discussed some common motifs evidenced on the printed textiles I presented. We determined that many designs represented proverbs and the use of African animals to sometimes represent these characteristics. I then asked students to choose a human feeling and make a very simple symbol of it, which they could then carve into a potato for stamping.

We were then ready to begin stamping and I demonstrated some basic procedures for stamping and making designs on cloth, and we discussed the functions of textiles in Africa and how the marketplace is one place where cloth makers can sell their work and/or buy new fabric to make more work. I asked the students to consider how they could make their designs very different and appealing to people who might buy their cloth and think of purchasing it to make into clothing.

So, our "stage" was set and the students were completely absorbed in the lively and production-based atmosphere of the room and upon completely stamping their cloths, they would come to the marketplace and justify to me their requested price as per the "worth" of their work. In the spirit of the communal ways art is actually made in Africa, we played African music at the marketplace, which sounded out onomatopoeic flourishes and encouraged students to exclaim parts to their classmates who shared their tables.

In the formation of sharing tables, students began to react as I had hoped, and they got ideas to combine resources for a larger selection of paint and cloth, which they had to buy and replenish after selling their work at the marketplace. Their ideas were also effected by their neighbors and strategies developed based on their selling successes. New ideas for stamping techniques or new designs emerged and were imitated by other students, and then these would fade out, when they were replaced by other ideas. Students seemed to have no trouble absorbing the commercial aspects of the activity and the of the art production were momentous.

Nonetheless, at the end of the project I did want students to refocus on the overall aesthetic nature of textile stamping so we held a mini-critique in which they temporarily adjoined cloth pieces into a quilt-like form. As each student lay down a piece, the others critiqued the work by looking at how the placement of the piece fit with pieces surrounding it. This helped students perceive and articulate some aesthetic aspects of their works and they occasionally shared how they achieved certain special effects.

But the commercial frenzy of the class lived on in their memories, and even right after the critique when several students were asked to donate one of their cloths to be made into a class quilt, and they responded that they wanted to take the n home - - since they made them with their own money! An activity such as this in the art classroom, called attention to the pace, qualities and purpose of producing art work for hypothetical commercial purposes. As a "special" event the construction and working nature of a "marketplace" taught students to perceive and make art in a new way.

## 2. Suibokuga via Zen Traditions in Japan for Tenth Grade Students

Another cultural phenomena which exemplifies a different ideal in art, may be that of Japanese sumi painting which is philosophically charged in Zen traditions from Japan's sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Briefly, although brush painting had long been practiced in and imitated from China, Zen monasteries in Japan, translated the artform into the spirituality of its process and brush painting and calligraphy were practiced to enhance a meditative and refined life.

Therefore, linked to Zen proclivities for serenity and concentration on nature to individually achieve inner peace, the unique ideals of Japanese brush painting effect subtle and often humble looks. Many contemporary Japanese Sumi teachers, also extract guidelines from Zen principles and teachings of celebrated Japanese *Sumi e* Painters throughout history. Many of these ideals have in turn been extracted and adapted from those listed within the famous book of painting instruction, **The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting**, written in the fourteenth century by Chieh Tsu Chuan. The aesthetic ideals articulated in this text, advocate a meditative "way" toward truth and art. The book's copious lists of suggestions also contain very poetically contrived instruction which uphold the acceptance of visual paradoxes toward such realization. At the heart of a more perfect spiritual state for many major Eastern religions, is a harmonious balance of polar forces.

Although I never dreamed I would attempt to convey to high school students such esoteric thought, I attempted to in one upper level high school class. Here, students and I first discussed some readings on Japanese aesthetics and philosophy and I described philosophical and historical attributes of sumi painting, as they had evolved and been taught in Japan. We discussed Japan's geography and historical connections with China, from which ink painting was imported. I showed and told the students about **The Mustard Seed Garden Manual** as my sumi teacher in Japan had once done for me. I noted that while tenets of sumi painting tradition were philosophically-aligned, they could also be considered formulaic and learned through imitation of a master. This process enabled the preservation of the art form throughout time.

I then posed "call and response" drawing tasks for the students, in order to illustrate these points. Students drew in response to a given command and afterwards I would read the representative **Mustard Seed** maxim.

As one example of these maxims, I wrote one such drawing instruction:

*"Render a sketch of a stormy summer sky with your eyes closed and then for contrast render a sketch of a snowstorm with your eyes opened. Finally, render a waterfall in five seconds or less."*

Most students produced very stylized snowflakes when asked to render a snow storm looking at the page, but for the blind drawing of the stormy summer sky, students were much bolder and more individually expressive in their marks. With closed eyes and increased concentration on recollecting the vision and

perhaps movement of celestial phenomena, most of their pencils moved in a free conductor-like motion in the allotted spaces on the paper. Then I copied these phrases onto the board:

"all rocks must have faces,  
but too much eccentricity hides the essence of things-  
the source of all waterfalls must be known." (Chief Tzu Lien 1969 ).

I then asked students to look at their three sketches again and decide which one was the most idiosyncratic, original, harmonious and then undefined. Unanimously, students all chose the snowflake drawing in which most of them had used asterixes or downward-pointing dot patterns to denote precipitation. We applied the book's phrase "all rocks must have faces" phrase to illuminate idiosyncratic tendencies in drawing which often counteract originality .

I then asked students to looking at their (blind) summer sky drawings, and evaluate their individual sense of character or "faces on rocks". Most students responded that with eyes closed they gained a necessary sense of concentration in order to create harmonious and original lines. Finally, in the last "waterfall" drawing, students understood the need to control speed in sumi painting, since lack of time the had to do this sketch, did not allow them to denote "the waterfall's source" and hence define its as a waterfall. The class and I then continued to repeat these exercises and discussion for eight more phrases. Students seemed to connect with the activities as a chance to understand the philosophical bases of the artform even before we learned its more prescribed techniques. Students noted in their evaluations that because of the introductory activity they could make sense of the many paradoxes of Sumi painting such as the need to simultaneously embrace restraint and release.

### 3. The Empty Canvas Syndrome and Eidetic Thought

In painting with a cognizance of Zen philosophy, students learned to approach each mark they made on the page as valuable and symbolic of a larger whole, which at best could encourage meditative moments of a viewer. However, vestiges of another "meditative" process in artmaking from the San people in Botswana illustrates more religious bases for artmaking and also serves as alternative example for approaching the initial step of making art work: what to depict. Procedurally, for many artists, the most daunting moments of art making are the first ones in which the empty canvas or painting must be marred.

But for the indigenous San people of Botswana, cave drawing was approached as a magical event, and the "painter" did not realize his ideas but rather looked to the natural formations of the cave for such information. Specifically, San rock paintings are most attributed to the still existent Bushman or San societies, who maintain trance-inducing ceremonies, in which designated shaman/artist enters a trance and then draws or announces his perceptions as divinely inspired advice for his people.

Although these practices and productions may seem more linked to culture than aesthetics, the approach perhaps offers contemporary art students an option for "beginning a drawing". Eidetic processes also involve an initial dialectic between the artist and the art material which is different from the artist merely reacting solely to his/her previous marks. Applied to reductive sculpting as well, eidetic thinking is most efficient, since stones are selected for the image they naturally embody and the artist is only responsible for honing these.

As part of a presentation on sculptural carving, I designed the following activity to help my students understand an eidetic nature of working. I taped to the wall very large pieces of brown butcher paper and wrinkled these with soiled hands so that they would be neither smooth nor blank. I then chose several students to slowly begin drawing "what they saw" in permanent magic marker, while the other students watched them. I allowed the "drawers" to continue for several minutes, and then we hung new paper until everyone had a chance to draw.

Throughout this activity members of the non-drawing audience maintained an interested silence, but would occasionally whisper to one another what they thought the drawer would do next or what he/she neglected to see. The task of the drawer was fascinating because it could be both shared and individualistic, predicted and yet also capable of surprise. Students also commented that the fun, experimental nature of the assignment diluted the pressure of drawing in front of their peers.

Finally, the nature of this activity was attributed to San ritual painting on rocks and students learned about the relationship of art to religion or metaphysical beliefs. They also noted how truly natural art materials such as stone for carvings have more limits but at the same time more possibilities because these limits could direct the artists intentions.

## **Conclusions**

When culture and art are combined toward the greater range and creativity of art instruction, there is a wealth of possibilities for designing lessons which impart both technical and ideational understandings of art. The concept of culture, the purposes of a featured art form, the role of the artist in certain societies, the nature of an art form's materials, innovative possibilities for the artform, and culturally-based critiquing formats are among many categories on which a multiculturally-driven art lesson may focus. In all cases, a student is asked to "learn" differently and their curiosity to know other cultures is peaked by the experiences.

In her book, **Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Art Education and Social Change**, Maxine Greene discusses the importance of this our mental transformation into the worlds of others for the sake of not only learning but of understanding. She says, "we are called upon to use our imagination to enter into a different world to discover how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose worlds it is" (1994:45).

Admittedly, there are extra efforts required of teachers in executing such lessons which seek to shift "worlds" even albeit figuratively. However, there is potential for larger communities to become involved in "research toward a better understanding" of other cultures and this involvement furthers the classroom rewards of "fictive travel" in order to know, experience and learn the art of another culture.

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