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FOLK ART
AND OUTSIDER ART:

Acknowledging Social Justice Issues in Art Education

BY SIMONE ALTER MURI

The study of “folk art” and “outsider art” is often neglected in the classroom, although these types of art are highly visible in museums, galleries and bought by collectors. The inclusion of “folk art” and “outsider art” in the art curriculum can serve as a tool for social awareness. Presenting these forms of art to children can help to build a sense of connection with the community and enhance acceptance of diversity, which in turn can increase an understanding of multicultural issues, as they are expressed in art education.

FOLK ART

A conclusive definition of folk art cannot be found in a glossary of art. Folk artists usually are described as individuals who are self-taught, are not overly interested in the technical aspects of artmaking, or are those who do not reflect a great deal on the psychological aspects of their art. Most folk artists are everyday people, often from lower working class and socio-economic backgrounds. Their art many times depicts suburban, rural, small-town life. Folk art is frequently considered to be a catchall term that includes the art of stylistically naive, primitive, and “Sunday” painters. The “eccentric” individual, the hobby artist, senior citizen, and prisoners (Parsons, 1986) are grouped together under the label of “folk artists” by the mainstream art world. Lippard (1990) prefers the term “vernacular artist” to folk artist, since most folk artists create their work at home.

OUTSIDER ART

Outsider art evolved from the term *L'art brut* which was created by artist Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s, literally translated as “raw art.” Interest in outsider art grew from the publication of the book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* published in 1923 by Printzhorn, an art historian and a psychiatrist. Printzhorn (1923/1995) chose to name the art made by the patients that he collected *bildneri*, a German term for “image making.” The first exhibit of the art of individuals with mental illness was held in Paris in 1905 (MacGregor, 1989). In 1936, at the International Surrealist Exhibition, the surrealist artist Andre Breton exhibited an assemblage box made by a client with schizophrenia. DuBuffet wanted to liberate the art from the stigma of psychiatric labels such as “art of the insane,” therefore he created a non-psychiatric term to describe it. DuBuffet believed that the psychopathology of the artist was only one way to purify the artist’s freshness of vision. Outsider art could also include the art of social outsiders, spiritualists, and eccentrics. DuBuffet sought out people who created such art and arranged to have their work exhibited (Parsons, 1986). Roger Cardinal, a British humanities professor, coined the term “outsider art” (Cardinal, 1972). DuBuffet was inspired by the “raw art” that he viewed and collected, created by individuals in mental hospitals in Switzerland.

Many psychiatrists, artists, art historians and art critics have further refined the definition of outsider art. Ideally, outsider art is art created without the influences of artistic culture. The ideology promoted by DuBuffet assumes a romantic notion of



Figure 1. Memories Box by “Grandma Carlberg.”

the freedom and special power of the outsider artist. However, art that is inspired and executed from the depths of the artist’s unconscious may be very painful, repetitive and include images that depict unusual preoccupations. Cardinal (1972) described outsider art as art created by people who have no relationship to pre-existing models of art. Currently, the argument exists about whether or not, in today’s society, anyone can be truly self-taught and escape social or cultural influences (Ames, 1994). Bourbonnais, a colleague of DuBuffet who founded a museum for folk and outsider art in Dicy, France, believed that this art was the only “real” art. Bourbonnais held the view that outsider and folk art is art

not compromised by a style of art, school of thought, or a marketing trend in the art world (Ragon, 1993).

“Outsider artists” are usually self-taught and have an inner need or compulsion to create art. Thevoz, (1976) believed that the one quality that distinguishes outsider art is that it flows directly from the artist onto the art material with little censorship. Outsider artists do not want to translate their inner worlds to the viewer; they are interested in creating what flows from within. Cardinal (1972) believed that outsider art could enable the viewer to experience instinctual feelings.

MacGregor (1989) described the characteristics of outsider art as markedly obsessional work that reveals unique creativity and intensity. This art is raw and powered by internal forces that have little or nothing to do with the conventional motives underlying the so-called “traditional reasons” for creating art. Other attributes of outsider art sometimes include a continuum from rigid geometric forms to elaborate details and obsessive stereotypes.

RELATIONSHIP OF FOLK ART AND OUTSIDER ART

A fine line distinguishes folk art from outsider art. According to Borum (1993/1994), the difference between these two styles of art reveals more about the individuals critiquing the art, than it does the artwork and artists that they are intended to identify. Lippard (1990) and Parsons (1986) define folk art as art that reflects the culture. Folk art is often recognized as simple art that appeals to viewers because of its directness or honesty. Outsider art is art created from personal viewpoints, reflecting a somewhat inner or psychological perspective. Often, all nonacademic artists are lumped together under the label of folk artists. Similar to outsider artists, folk artists are considered to be “outside” the modern “rat race” lifestyles, therefore art products are valued as artificial links to an idealized past (Lippard, 1990).

Folk art is important to society because it portrays social and historical aspects of areas or times that are changed or lost. Folk artists are often barometers of the popular culture. In most cases, folk artists engage in

depicting socially familiar ideas and themes in their art.

INCLUSION OF FOLK ART AND OUTSIDER ART IN THE CURRICULUM

Including folk art and outsider art in the curriculum is an excellent teaching tool for multicultural pedagogy. Multicultural or “cross-cultural” art, according to Lippard (1990), is an integral component of postmodern art. Efland, Freedman, and Stuhr (1996) believe that the postmodern view of culture is rooted in the present. Postmodernism in art represents the art of less empowered groups including women, minorities, the elderly and individuals with disabilities. In postmodernist art, the distinctions between fine art, folk art, and popular art are dissolved. Postmodern art emphasizes the study of contemporary artists. Many states mandate the inclusion of multicultural art and artists as part of the art education curriculum. Multiculturalism is a postmodernist concern in art because content is not taught that will enable individuals to acquire knowledge of art for art’s sake, but instead, instruction takes place in an attempt to change social relationships (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996).

The importance of including folk art and outsider art in the curriculum espouses post modernist pedagogy, since both art forms are created by individuals outside the mainstream culture who are often minorities. This challenges the hierarchy of art in the art world. Social reconstructionism is another aspect of postmodern pedagogy; it is described as a process of addressing, through the curriculum, the inclusion of teachers, students, staff and community to practice action for the benefit of disenfranchised groups

(Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). The integration of folk art and outsider art in the classroom can benefit minority groups by empowering students to understand the distinctions that marginalize less dominant groups and the hierarchy that exists in the art world. Folk artists live and work in many communities. However, galleries do not often represent them or have exhibitions of their art. The entire



school community can accept and acknowledge outsider and folk artists by inviting these artists from the community to talk with students and/or have their art exhibited at the school. Discovering folk and outsider artists in the neighborhood and displaying their art or inviting them to present and discuss their process of

creating art to the class can instill a sense of pride in the community. Elders might feel honored to tell stories about paintings and art objects that describe the community when they were children. Postmodern art includes art from social interactions and the elements in society that sponsor these interactions (MacGregor, 1989).

Art educators can gain access to folk and outsider artists in the community

Carlberg, 90 years old, who has been painting her memories of landscapes. She was invited to exhibit her art and discuss her creative process with elementary school children who attend the same school that she, her daughters, and grandchildren attended, and which now her great grandchildren attend. Irene enjoyed her trip to the school and the recognition that she received

teacher to have her students create art for residents of a local elder care facility.

Field trips can be arranged to visit locations that are depicted in a work of art. Elders in the community can be interviewed about the changes that have occurred in a particular geographic area, as well as the era in which the work was created. The



The **integration** of folk art and outsider art in the classroom can **benefit** minority groups by **empowering students** to understand the **distinctions** that **marginalize** less dominant **groups** and the **hierarchy** that exists in the **art world**.

Figure 2. Nighttime Thoughts.

by contacting parent-teacher organizations and placing notices in the school newsletter regarding their interest in meeting elders and other individuals in the community who create art. Flyers can also be distributed to local religious groups, churches, and social service agencies. Figure 1 shows the art of Irene

encouraged her to continue to produce art. Students in the school were inspired by “Grandma” Carlberg’s presentation, and in response they created art about their memories of the town. This exhibit also inspired a

inclusion of folk art in the art curriculum can help students to explore design elements, and reinforce their appreciation for the art of early America. Quilts, collages, hex sign paintings, portrait painting, stenciling, and murals are all part of folk and outsider art traditions.

APPLICATIONS TO ART HISTORY

Folk art and outsider art can be integrated into discipline-based art education, teaching art history, artmaking, aesthetics and art criticism. For example, a discussion of outsider art could include the study of art history through presenting slides of work by Picasso, Klee, and other artists in Europe who were interested in the art of native people. Teachers could also display the art of Rousseau (a French postman) and the art of well-known “outsider” artists. When introducing the genre of folk art to students the art teacher could discuss the history of exhibiting folk art at museums. For instance, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Newark Museum during the 1930s had major exhibitions of folk art including the work of “Grandma” Moses (Brown, Hunter, Jacobus, Rosenblum, & Sokol, 1979).

A studio folk art experience that is popular with the children I teach, is to draw or paint on a small, gesso-covered box. Students can draw or paint landscapes of their neighborhood, town or city on the box and add collage materials to create an “assemblage.”

According to London (1994), art education must be relevant to the community and relate to the students’ environment. This can foster a sense of connectedness between the school and the community, helping to build cohesive environment for living. Through projects like these, children can start to appreciate the qualities of the community that might be overlooked on a day-to-day basis (London, 1994).

Folk art and outsider art can be **integrated** into the art curriculum as a way for **students** to discuss the **social** and **political ramifications** of **art making** and the art “world.” Children can begin to grasp the **concept** that art of the **privileged classes** and art of the “**folk**” are separated by vast differences of **access** to travel, education, training, and power.

Teachers could lead discussions on aesthetics in relationship to folk art. Articles about aesthetics, criticism and outsider art appeared in this country as early as the 1940s. The noted art critic, Janis (1942), exhibited and wrote about art created by self-taught artists. Students can begin to understand the ramifications of art criticism by applying critical theories to folk and outsider art.

Art created by “outsiders” may resemble some of the art made during the Expressionist period. However, outsider art is created in a different manner and with variant different goals from those of the Expressionists. Contrary to outsider art, the art produced in most art classes has a goal

of creating visual order from chaos. In outsider art, the emphasis is often placed on the process rather than on the product. It is unusual for outsider artists to conceive of themselves as artists, or of their creations as art, until an authority informs them that they are creating art. Traditionally, the outsider has been described as producing art in response to strong internal impulses, often spontaneous and unprogrammed.

Mr. O. created art from his internal imagery. During times of inspiration, he could make several pieces of art at one time. Some of his images depicted frightening faces that many students

found intriguing. This association with the artwork by the students enabled many of them to create their own expressions without fear of being a "failed realist" (See Figure 2).

Discussions of outsider and folk art raise issues of gender, class, ethnic equity and the relationship of the art world and high culture. Such conversations point to differences in the ability many groups and individuals have to receive education, training, and meaningful cultural experiences. Folk art and outsider art can be integrated into the art curriculum as a way for students to discuss the social and political ramifications of art making and the art "world." Children can begin to grasp the concept that art of the privileged classes and art of the "folk" are separated by vast differences of access to travel, education, training, and power. Interest in this new "ism" alerts art educators to question society's insatiable appetite for novel items (Ames, 1994). Studying outsider art can promote higher-level questioning by students regarding the values and limitations of placing labels on people, artifacts, and cultures. Art can make visible the aspects of society that are hidden by the barriers of classism and sexism.

Like folk art, outsider art is balanced on the edge of the elite world and the world of the unconventional. Outsider art and folk art have become marketing terms classified as such by the mainstream art world. Currently, outsider art is in high demand, and galleries are paying large amounts of money to display this work. Art schools in urban areas have taken pride in discovering new marketable outsider artists, and folk art has become a viable means to remind the public that the act of creating art can help to heal and serve a purpose other than decoration. For

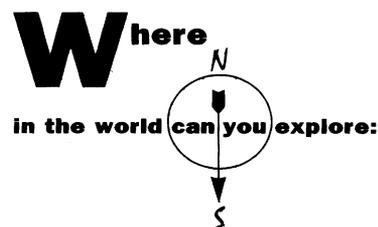
example, in the Fabulorsiereie museum in Dicy, France there is an exhibit of the art of Simone Galimard, an elderly woman who was denied the use of dolls and toys as a child. Late in life when she retired, Simone Galimard collected toys and dolls from flea markets, and created assemblages and environments full of broken dolls and toys in order to understand and perhaps to help her heal from the memories of her strict upbringing (Bourbonnais, 1993). This is only one of the many examples of the creative force that people can tap into when they are not under pressure to create a realistic masterpiece. Introducing folk art and outsider art in the classroom reminds students that art can be created in a spontaneous way and be accepted and acknowledged as meaningful for themselves and for others.

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