STUDENT’S HEIRLOOMS IN THE CLASSROOM: A LOOK AT EVERYDAY ART FORMS

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of students’ heirlooms in the classroom, as a means to look at art forms found in everyday life. A contextual framework is given for a brief analysis of the heirloom in relation to the Appalachian region mountain culture. The heirloom is examined in this context through the use of a folkloric approach, applying formal elements of art, historic traditions, and change. The Appalachian heirloom can be used as a means to provide contextual stories, history, cultural ties reflecting the region, and rooted in a sense of place.

Introduction

One teaching approach, to awaken or strengthen an affinity towards art, is the use of students’ heirlooms in the classroom. In examining an Appalachian heirloom, the student can learn about the contextual framework, consisting of a Folkloric approach, formal elements of art, and traditions or derivatives. Family heirlooms used for this purpose are defined as art forms passed down through the family representing the regional Appalachian mountain culture. The heirloom considered may presently or previously been a functional tool for everyday use and regarded as aesthetic or pleasing.

Contextual Framework

Folkloric Approach

In looking at the heirloom, a student can question if the piece fits into a particular folk group within an Appalachian region. A description of a folk group is “any group of people who share informal communal contracts that become the basis for expressive, culture-based communication” (Congdon, 2000, p. 147; Toelken, 1979, p. 51). According to Congdon (1988), a folk group may include Avant-garde artists who formulate in various ways into folk groups. She continues, “Group members often share common jargon, values, aesthetics, and perhaps folk tales, as well as conceptualizations of themselves as a group” (Congdon, 1988, p. 154). The art forms may serve as a source of stories, which document life (Morris, 2000).

The stories may communicate aspects of media, culture, place, time, artists, and observation for the purpose of appreciation, understanding, and dialogue (Morris, 2000). Social historians believe that a work of art “carries ideas and that these ideas are shaped by specific historical, political, and social circumstances” (Barnet, 2005, p. 200). Barnet (2005) claims that “a work of art, like a religious, legal, or political system, is a creation deeply implicated in the values of the culture that produced and consumed it” (p. 201).

Connecting an art piece to a folk group within a region establishes a sense of place. Elements of art are tied to the mountain culture, instead of standing alone (Morris,
A sense of place is more than a visual image (Morris, 2000). It serves as a metaphor in regard to the Appalachian heritage through the art form. It also lends an understanding and renews the appreciation of mountain culture (Morris, 2001).

An example of art tied to a folk group and region is an engagement basket made in the Eastern Kentucky/Tennessee mountain region. In this region, a matrimonial value passed down through the generations, entails a man making a miniature melon basket to give as a gift during his proposal (Darvin Messer, personal communication, June 10, 2003). The giving and acceptance of this basket is understood and communicated communally within the folk group to be an informal proposed contract of marriage.

Basket makers often rely on folklore passed down from generations. This body of shared knowledge aids in the selection and preparation of materials (Blair, 1995). The Appalachian engagement basket is fashioned in a traditional way and made to last many years. It is crafted with split oak weavers which are split with the grain of the wood. Oak trees are indigenous to the Appalachian region and are usually found in higher elevations (Blair, 1995). The basket makers select the wood based upon the environment and conditions producing the best timber (Blair, 1995). The wooden weavers are tapered at the end as they meet the diamond shaped God’s eye design which is used to connect the handle.

Artwork can be a means of communication and a cultural artifact (Congdon, 1988; Chalmers, 1981). The engagement basket can be studied as a cultural artifact and communicates values, ways, aesthetics, traditions, craftsmanship, sense of place, history related to the culture. Stuhr (1991) found that traditional aesthetic art forms provide “visual, functional, and conceptual metaphors and symbols for the perceived philosophical and harmonious relationship between the artist and the environment” (p. 86). By looking at the basket as a cultural artifact within a folk group rather than within diverse ethnic groups, it fits well within multicultural education.

Morris (2000) claims that a colonialist perspective on teaching art forms emphasizes only the skill component. However, she suggests that the art form must not be separated from other art forms and from the place of origin. By separating the melon basket from the environment and placing it in a museum with a placard naming the artist, title and medium, the meaning is lost. The craftsmanship and skill is apparent, but its context is not.

Formal Elements of Art

We have chosen to use three general components of the discipline of art criticism in our critical analysis of the heirloom. These include description, interpretation and judgment. This process will involve asking questions about the heirloom. It is our intention to give a brief overview of the use of these components.

Description is the first method and includes the examination of the external information. According to Barnet (2005), a formal analysis consists mostly of description. This approach typically centers on the medium of the piece and the formal elements of art. The medium is a term that identifies specific materials used by the artist. It can also be used to designate a general grouping of art, such as painting, sculpture, textile, baskets, or pottery.
The description of the piece usually includes some or all of the formal elements of art. The elements include line, shape, space, pattern, texture, and color. Sculptural pieces are usually examined in the way they occupy space. They can also be described in terms of the use of an additive or subtractive process. The subject matter, scale, color, and arrangement of the piece also offers valuable insight into the analysis. Two dimensional pieces of art are examined for their use of shapes, lines, colors, subject matter, and composition. The description can also involve analyzing works of art based on techniques and craftsmanship.

Interpretive strategies ask the viewer to present their own understanding of the heirloom. Barnet (2005) defines interpretation as a “setting forth of the meaning of a work of art” (p. 23). Interpretations ask what is the intention or function of the piece of art. Does the piece conjure up memories of places, events, or individuals for the viewer? Each individual’s response to an art form is unique and is based on his or her own experiences. “A work of art may stimulate a variety of interpretations from different viewers because we each bring our own attitudes and knowledge” (Katz, Lankford & Plan, 1995, p. 50). Interpretations allow the viewer (can be someone outside the culture) to provide their own explanation of the piece.

In considering the formal elements of art, associations tied to them vary. European-based Western art has been part of the dominant art culture, however not all cultures provide the same meanings and associations. Hurwitz and Day (2007) support the use of various approaches found in world cultures specifically in handling space in a work of art. For example a Japanese work of art may use space with floating images and overlapping techniques, while not including a horizon line.

After considering these issues involving describing and interpreting the piece, the viewer can then form their own judgment. This can be based on the degree of skill that went into creating the piece or be subjective in terms of personal aesthetics. Barrett (1996) found that in order for a judgment to have validity it should be based and supported by evidence present in the actual piece of art.

Value and Appreciation of Heirloom

The analysis of the heirloom should also consider the meaning of the art form through aesthetics. Basket making allows artists to express beauty in utilitarian objects and continue a tradition. A well-crafted melon basket is aesthetic and pleasing within the folk group.

A basket and other heirlooms often reflect meaning apparent only to members of the culture in which they are created. Blair (1995) found that, “most Appalachian basket makers were taught to make baskets by a parent, relative, or community member, and they began to make baskets at a very young age” (p. 65). The significance of the art form is often lost to individuals outside its ethnic culture. Examining traditional art from a specific culture can present opportunity to reconstruct some of the missing information. The construction and material used in an Appalachian basket offers insight and links to specific cultural traditions (Blair, 1995).

To better understand the meaning of the piece, look for the signs and symbols incorporated into the art forms. “Social historians assume that every art form, if carefully scrutinized, tells a story of the culture” (Barnet, 2005, p. 199). They assume that the work
of art “carries ideas and that these ideas are shaped by specific historical, political, and social circumstances” (Barnet, 2005, p. 200).

The symbols can represent ideas, which can communicate to others, a state of mind and meaning in the art (Day & Hurwitz, 2007; Dissanayake, 1988). The metaphors may be a tool to teach those within the culture. Social, spiritual, and moral issues as well as a shared situation may be gleaned from the symbols (Morris, 2000).

**Tradition**

Traditional art forms offer the best insight into the cultural heritage of the heirloom because they closely match the processes and techniques used by the artists of that specific culture. According to Stuhr (1991) traditional art forms are generally utilitarian and that the “relationship between traditional art forms and the environment is historic, absolute, and strong” (p. 85). It is the link that helps the viewer to appreciate the value of their heirloom. Stuhr (1991) claims that the traditional art forms are “generally utilitarian, sometimes possessing great spiritual powers, and often fashioned in the “old way” (p. 83).

When traditional art forms are not available Stuhr (1991) recommends using derivative examples because they “still generally embody the values of the traditional ethnic communities” (p. 86). Derivative artists produce pieces of art based on the original design and similar in style to the traditional artist (Stuhr, 1991). Many basket makers continue to create traditional baskets but add their own personal touches. Stuhr defines derivative art forms as those that are modified either partially or totally from the traditional materials or processes. This may come in the form of an Appalachian basket that utilizes commercial reeds but still adheres to the traditional weaving techniques. According to Stuhr (1991) these art forms offer some connections to the narratives and to the environment in which they are created.

Baskets that fall under the modern category can vary widely, but according to Stuhr (1991) these art forms “emphasize the aesthetic rather than the utilitarian purpose” (p. 97). These art forms may look authentic but usually do not follow the proper procedures in accordance with the traditional techniques or embody the traditional narratives. Most of the modern artists Stuhr (1991) interviewed revealed that the visual connections between their artwork and their culture were secondary to their own personal agenda. They contribute these references to the common use of “recycled images” or “natural materials” (Stuhr, 1991). Recycled images are cultural symbols and metaphors that are taken out of context and do not reflect the traditions. The use, of these images in a work of art, is only to enhance the artist’s own individual style.

**Recommendations**

When incorporating heirlooms into the classroom, we recommend that teachers always try to use traditional or derivative pieces to aid their students in not only developing an appreciation of the tools, materials, and processes that were used to create the pieces, but also to value the rich cultural history the art forms have to offer. Using modern art forms in the classroom may offer recycled images that do not reflect the traditional values of the culture.

We recommend that teachers include multiple perspectives when conducting
critical analysis of the Appalachian heirlooms. We feel that using heirlooms can start a dialogue which provides cultural ties reflecting the region and rooted to a sense of place. We selected a basket because it is an art form created by almost every culture and provides valuable information about the artist and their values and cultural heritage.

References: