Instructional Options for Aesthetics: Exploring the Possibilities

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Karen A. Hamblen and Camille Galanes

Dealing with aesthetics is a bit like facing the dilemma that Radar, a character of the television series *MASH*, faced. In one episode, Radar develops a crush on a nurse who is "cultured." Radar knows nothing about classical music, which she likes; he knows nothing about the books she reads, and so on. However, the MASH doctors, Hawkeye and B. J., tell Radar not to worry; they tell him that whenever he is asked about classical music or literature, he should merely raise his hand into the air, look off into the distance, and enigmatically say, "Ah-h-h, Bach." Radar gives this response on all occasions. Needless to say, conversations with the nurse are one-sided and confusing, and eventually Radar has to admit his lack of knowledge and understanding.

At this time in art education, it seems that often responses to questions on what aesthetics is about and how one goes about teaching it approach an "Ah--h-h, aesthetics," accompanied by the hope that the conversation goes no deeper into the matter. Confused, enigmatic statements on aesthetics seem to be derived from a lack of background and from educators referring to different instructional approaches for aesthetics. In this paper instructional approaches will be discussed that represent what art educators seem to be meaning when they say they are teaching aesthetics, as well as approaches that are not widely implemented or are still primarily theoretical in nature.

The purposes of this paper are to (1) discuss six instructional approaches to aesthetics, (2) discuss briefly instructional applications of these approaches, (3) assess their feasibility for classroom practice, and (4) place them in relationship to established educational rationales. If teachers are to make informed curriculum choices, they need to have access to information on the options that are available. Any one approach to the teaching of aesthetics may not be applicable for all populations or age groups or for a desired educational purpose and outcome. The six approaches to aesthetics will be placed in relationship to the following educational rationales: academic rationalism, cognitive processes, social adaptation, social reconstruction, and personal relevance (see Eisner, 1979). These rationales constitute a continuum extending from a reliance on external information and established knowledge to a reliance on personal directives and variable interpretations. These rationales also represent differing emphases on subject matter, social need, and student interest. (See Table 1.)

Briefly, *academic rationalism* involves the study of established information and exemplars. The "great books" and "great events" approach to curriculum content is an example of academic rationalism. An emphasis on *cognitive processes* assumes that the purpose of education is to develop thinking skills that will apply in a variety of contexts. Education for *social adaptation* emphasizes the learning of knowledge and development of skills that will support the status quo and will allow the student to fit into the value structure and occupational needs of society. Conversely, education for *social reconstruction* is critical of the status quo, supports the examination of cultural values and assumptions, and fosters social change. Education for *personal relevance* emphasizes the quality of experience in relationship to personal interest, understanding, and development.

Exploring the Possibilities

← subject – society – student →
← established knowledge and skills – variable knowledge and skills →
← external controls – internal directives →

ACADEMIC RATIONALISM	COGNITIVE PROCESS	SOCIAL ADAPTATION	SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION	PERSONAL RELEVANCE
historical-philosophical				
cultural literacy (body of knowledge)	cultural literacy (body of skills)	cultural literacy (body of knowledge & skills)	cultural literacy (value structures)	
	aesthetic inquiry (logic & semantics) (conflict & ambiguity)			
			social-critical consciousness	
cross-cultural & multicultural (humanist)	cross-cultural & multicultural (formal & technical)	cross-cultural & multicultural (populist)	cross-cultural & multicultural (populist)	cross-cultural & multicultural (populist)
	perception & experience (aesthetic scanning)			perception & experience (studio) (art & nature)

Table 1. Instructional Approaches to Aesthetics in Relationship to Educational Rationales

Aesthetics deals with questions such as "What is the nature of art?" "How is art defined?" and "Does a universal aesthetic exist?" The six approaches identified in this paper involve different educational journeys toward different answers to these questions and related issues.

HISTORICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS

Historical-philosophical aesthetics comprises the traditional collegiate approach to aesthetics. It involves the study of schools of philosophy, writings of specific aestheticians, and theories of art. These are usually put in some type of historical chronology or philosophical categorization. The historical-philosophical approach to aesthetics involves primarily reading about, writing about, and discussing existing aesthetic thought, such as fit within the Western "Big Four" theories of art: idealism, realism, expressionism, and instrumentalism (Hamblen, 1985). Oral traditions in aesthetics, the folk art

William Hogarth, *Scholars at a Lecture*, 1736. Etching and Engraving. Courtesy of Anglo-American Art Museum, Louisiana State University.

aesthetician, and the layperson as aesthetician do not readily come to mind for historical-philosophical aesthetics.

The historical-philosophical approach is an academic rationalist approach to aesthetic understanding in that there is a historically and academically established body of knowledge that must be learned and understood. (See Table 1.) Efland (1979), for example, paralleled and cross-referenced aesthetic schools of thought to those established in psychology, sociology, and education. For college graduates and certified art teachers, historical-philosophical study is the most familiar approach to aesthetics, *if* (and that is a big *if*) courses on aesthetics have been included in their program of study (Murchison, 1989).

Applications

The lack of teacher preparation in historical-philosophical aesthetics is only the first objection to implementing this approach to aesthetics in K-12 classrooms. There are, of course, also doubts as to whether this approach is appropriate for young children. Crawford (1987) believes that aesthetic writings can be made applicable to advanced level students, and Lanier (1987) believes that such literature can be rewritten so that it is understandable to very young children. J. Sharer (1986) has identified curricula and sources in which philosophical issues are studied, suggesting that such issues could be expanded to aesthetics (Lipman, 1988; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscangan, 1980).

Broudy (1972) and Green (1986) take a slightly different approach to historical-philosophical aesthetics. It is believed that the reading and discussion of aesthetics should be undertaken to enhance students' responses to works of art. In other words, historical-philosophical aesthetics should be undertaken as a means to another end, i.e., a knowledgeable enjoyment of art.

AESTHETICS FOR CULTURAL LITERACY

Aesthetics for cultural literacy and the historical-philosophical approaches share the belief that there is an established, commonly recognized body of knowledge that exists separate from and prior to any given individual's experience. Hence, as it is usually interpreted, aesthetics for cultural literacy is also based on academic rationalism and on the acquisition of cultural knowledge for purposes of social adaptation. (See Table 1.) Aesthetics for cultural literacy, however, differs from the historical-philosophical approach in that its knowledge base consists of art objects per se rather than scholars' theories and statements *about* art.

Aesthetics for cultural literacy involves acquiring knowledge of artistic exemplars, which has essentially come to mean knowledge of Western, fine art. This is the art that is discussed in art history classes and that appears in major art texts. It is sometimes called the art and cultural assumptions of DEWMs (D-E-W-M) or dead European white males. It is art from the core, cash culture discussed by Bloom (1987) and Hirsch (1987) in their books on what citizens need to know to be culturally literate. Aesthetic cultural literacy is, in this sense, a form of perceptual literacy that involves recognizing designated major artists, styles, techniques, movements, and landmark art. It is also a verbal literacy entailing an ability to talk about art. To borrow from and paraphrase T. S. Eliot, aesthetics for cultural literacy implies that we should all be able to "come and go, talking about Michelangelo."

Body of Knowledge and Skills Applications

The major purpose of aesthetics for cultural literacy is to create knowledgeable appreciators of art. It involves recognizing "great art" and being conversant in discussing it. This type of aesthetic study involves a highly elaborated and complex *verbal* language and *visual* language of recognition, analysis, analogy, transposition. Aesthetics for cultural literacy is based on the assumption that there is a preferable body of artistic information and artistic images that form, or should form, a common culturally shared aesthetic. As such, aesthetics for cultural literacy encompasses a body of knowledge and cognitive processes that will allow for participation in, and the adaptation to, the cash culture of fine arts. (See Table1.)

Broudy (1982) conducted a study in which he examined the knowledge base of individuals and the extent to which they could recognize allusions to information within particular fields. For art, the example involved "Venus on the Half-Shell" wherein knowledge of Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" was essential to interpret the

John James Audubon, *Barred Owl*. Print. A. McIlhenny Natural History Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries, Louisiana State University.

written text. If that information or item of cultural literacy was not part of the individual's background, appropriate associations were not made, and the half-shell statement was ignored or misinterpreted.

Art-based visual allusions and analogies can be found in modern media which require a *common* artistic understanding. Comics, political cartoons, illustrations, advertisements, magazine covers, and billboards make visual reference to works of art or portions of works of art to attract attention or as a means of evoking associations and meanings that go beyond what is literally depicted, Although the particular aesthetic taste culture of fine art or museum art has received prominence, it is possible for literacy to apply to other aesthetic taste cultures, i.e., that of folk art, the popular arts, the commercial arts, the hiddenstream art of the homeless, and domestic arts.

Value Structure Applications

Johnson (1988) suggested that cultural literacy should not be defined in terms of a body of knowledge. She proposed that cultural literacy should be considered as an ability to examine the assumptions and values that make up bodies of knowledge and modes of action in the arts.

AESTHETIC INQUIRY

Aesthetic inquiry involves an examination of what is *said about* art. It is not an examination *of* art objects, per se, but *about* meanings, values, descriptions, etc., given to art. According to Russell (1986), the study of aesthetics entails intellectual action (aesthetics as a verb) rather than the study of a completed body of knowledge (aesthetics as a noun). Aesthetic inquiry is an examination of various forms of talk about art; in this sense, it is possible to engage in aesthetic inquiry without ever dealing with specific art objects. Aesthetic inquiry is focused on the exercise of cognitive/conceptual processes; the emphasis is on examining written or verbal statements for their "sense making," logic, rationality, or persuasiveness. (See Table 1.)

Logic and Semantic Applications

At this time, aesthetic inquiry is probably the most examined and most clearly articulated instructional approach (Armstrong, 1990; Hagaman, 1990; Lankford, 1990; Russell, 1986, in press; Sharer, 1986; Stewart, n.d.). Russell (1991) has dealt with aesthetic inquiry in terms of logical statements about art. Among other exercises, he suggests using *the if-A-then-B* and *the A-without-B* procedures for concept comparisons. For example, given any two concepts A and B, if it is inconsistent to suppose A without B, then B is part of the meaning of A. In examining whether A is a sufficient condition for B, "If sculpture then art" as a conditional statement, then sculpture is a sufficient condition for art and only art has sculpture, but the converse or necessary condition of "if art then sculpture" does not hold true.

Stewart (n.d.) suggests the use of games and role modeling to explore aesthetic issues. For example, students are given such statements as "I believe art is anything I like" or "I believe art should take a long time to make" or "I believe that art should be made so that people will be better." Through role playing, students are to explain and debate these beliefs. Stewart has students distinguish between statements of fact, "This art work has many yellow lines in it," to statements of value, "The art work shows a good use of line." Stewart also has students examine quotations. Henry Moore said: "Art is not practical and not to be practical. Painting and sculpture are there to make life more interesting, more wonderful, than it would be without them." Students are to examine this quotation and identify those words that require clarification and those statements that need to be answered before there can be any agreement or disagreement with Moore's ideas. For example, "What do you mean by 'practical'?" requires discussion and clarification, whereas the question "Do you like to make sculpture?" does not.

Conflict and Ambiguity Applications

One approach to the identification of aesthetic questions or issues is through processes in which the ambiguous and controversial nature of aesthetics is utilized. Rather than trying to find clear definitions of art or trying to come to some consensus on how aesthetic study should proceed, it has been proposed that aes-

Frank Hayden, *Sixteen Men Make a Rod,* 1977. Mahogany. Collection of the Louisiana Arts and Science Center, Baton Rouge.

thetic issues can be discussed and actually *generated* through the principle of contested concepts (Hamblen, 1985,1988). To interject a problematic situation into the inquiry process, students can be asked to examine, for example, boundary-breaking art, questionable art, nonart, ugly art, art forgeries, etc. — anything that will skew normal expectations or defy a neat labeling of "this is art." In one such assignment, students were asked to defend their selections of nonart and of art objects. It was found that, when controversy and ambiguity were integral to the assignment, aesthetic issues were *naturally* generated by the situation.

AESTHETICS FOR SOCIAL-CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In aesthetics for social-critical consciousness, students examine the value systems underlying definitions of art, judgments of art, differentiations between fine art and not-so-fine art, and so on. Aesthetics for social-critical consciousness has students ask questions as to who defines art, who is excluded from the defining process, and how the defining process is socially maintained. For example, Berger (1977) examines art's social, class-based origins and how the usual ways of responding to art have obscured consciousness of social meaning and impact. According to Berger, the traditional reclining female nude that is found in Renaissance and post-Renaissance Western art is only superficially about any particular myth or about the artist's exploration of composition and painterly qualities. Rather, he suggests that most of these are about the display of women as passive objects that are to be visually observed and symbolically possessed by the *male* viewer. In other words, a form of class- and gender-based visual

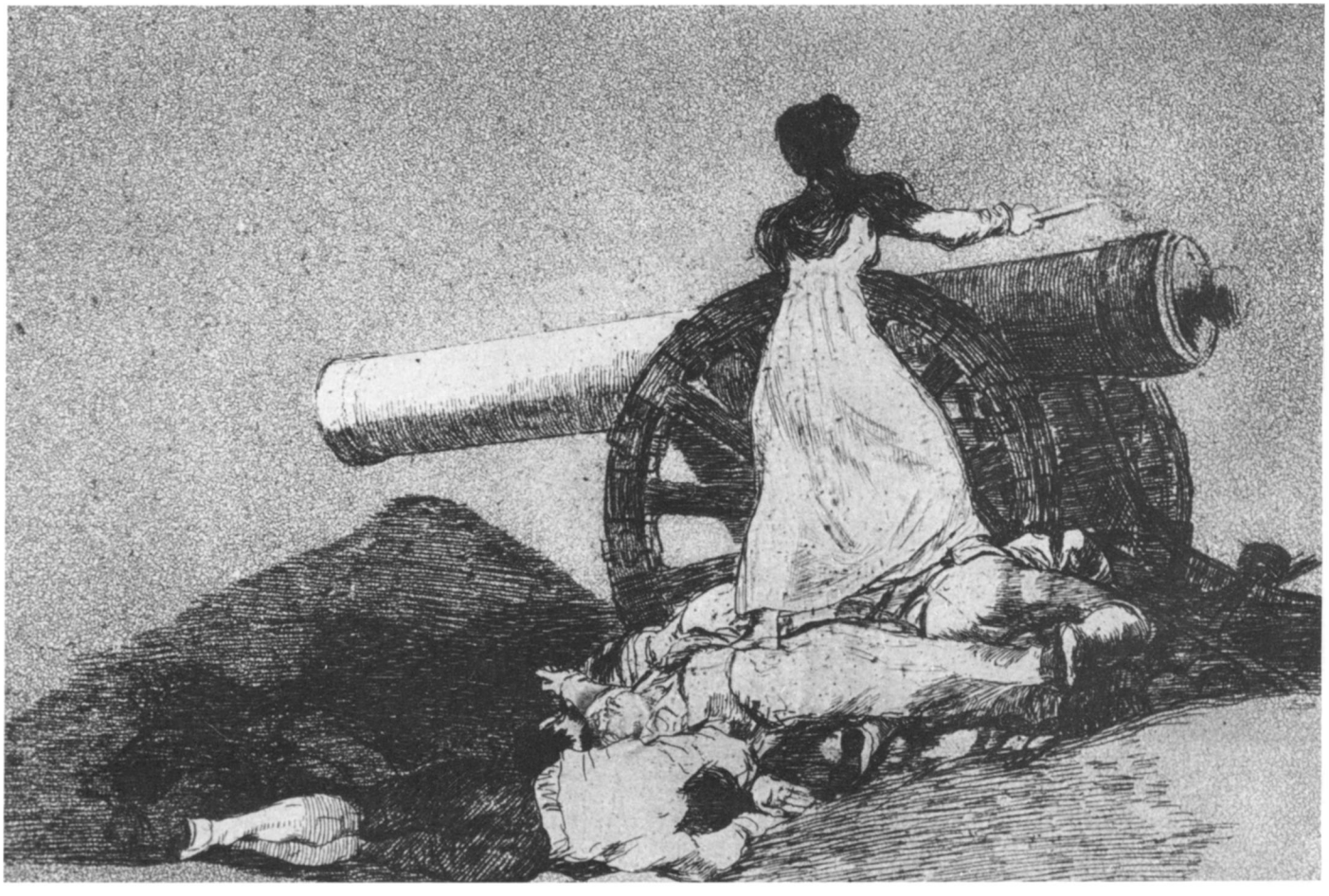
ownership is involved.

Aesthetics for critical-social consciousness may be theoretically focused or it may be focused toward concrete social change and reconstruction. (See Table 1.) Aesthetics for social-critical consciousness is still highly speculative and prescriptive, but it does exist as a discernable curriculum component. Researchers such as Bersson (1987), Blandy and Congdon (1987), and Sandell (in press) have discussed art instruction with a blend of feminist and social theory that translates into aesthetics for heightened social-critical consciousness and action.

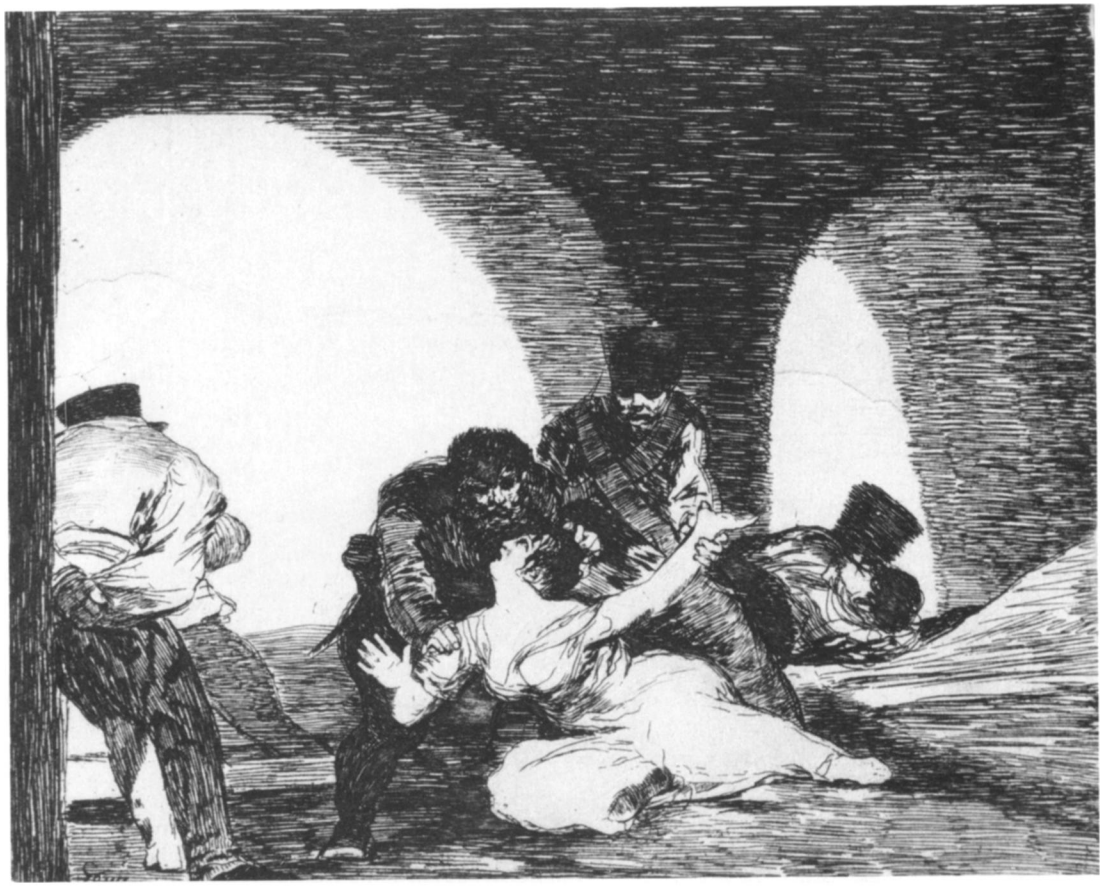
Applications

The assumptions, the deep structure, and the generative metaphors of art and, by extension, of their creators and their cultures are examined in this approach. Definitions of art and what is given social value are seen as being humanly authored and, therefore, amenable to examination and possible change. For example, world views can be compared, contrasted, and evaluated as to what they mean for one's individual experience and for their social impact. Architectural structures, such as twentieth-century skyscrapers, can be seen as being imposed upon the earth. Conversely, in the modernist's exaltation of individualism, architectural forms can be seen as expressions of human will and accomplishment that rise above the exigencies of the physical world.

Various ways to examine the world views and assumptions represented in phenomena such as art have been suggested. One procedure is to examine phenomena in relationship to their opposites; the converse of what is expected or what is traditional can provide insights into that tradition. Bowers (1984) also suggests a three-step procedure to promote a state of heightened consciousness. The first step involves an examination of one's immediate, personal, and social experience of a particular topic. For example, one might examine how native populations are represented in art, such as depictions of Native American Indians by Frazer (Capps, 1976). Historically, the Native American Indian has often been romanti-



Francisco Goya, *What Courage*, 1747-1828. Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, Virginia.



Francisco Goya, *Bitter Presence*, 1747-1828. Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, Virginia.

cized in art — such as in the theme of defeated warrior — or presented as brutal savage. The second step is to study the historical origins of such depictions and the attitudes and values they convey — in this case, a romanticized view of warriors who in defeat are stoic and uncomplaining. The third step involves a cross-cultural comparison to how other societies have dealt with and depicted minority populations, e.g., how Australian aborigines have been depicted by the white population, how the Japanese depicted early Western traders.

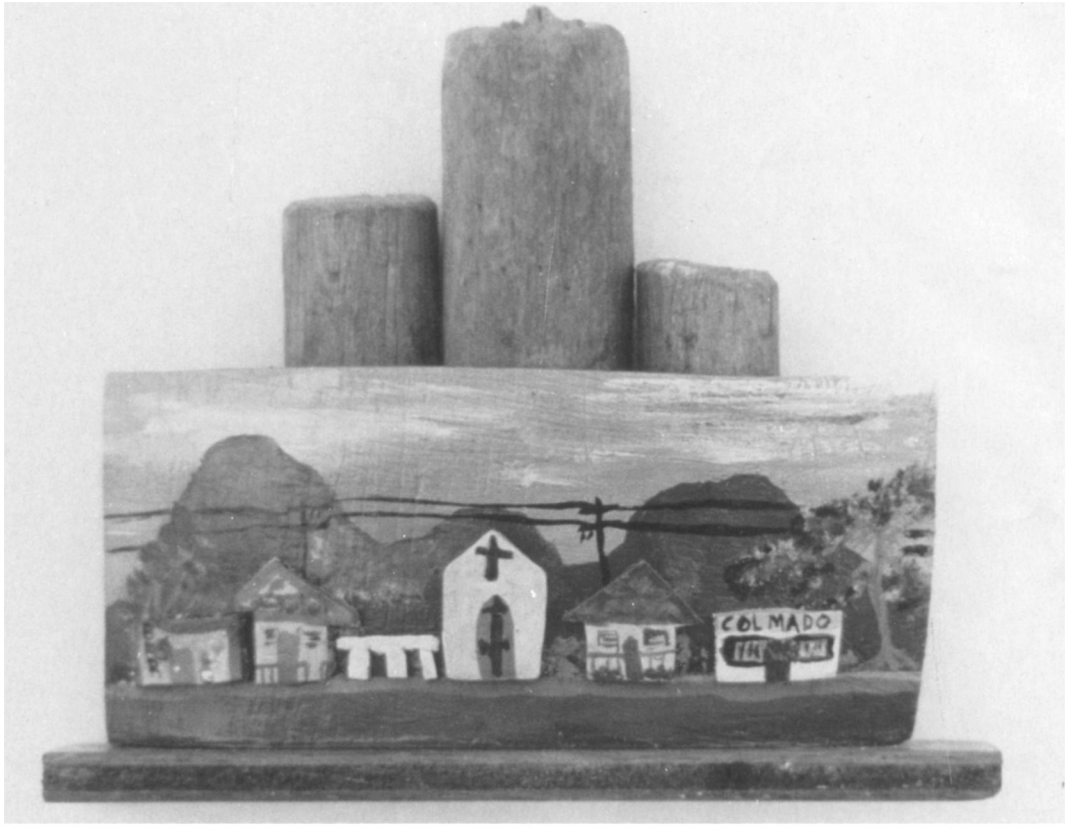
The purpose of aesthetics for social, critical consciousness is not to foster art appreciation, but to examine *forms of appreciation* for the purposes of heightened consciousness and social/aesthetic reconstruction. For this approach to aesthetics, there is the belief that a value system (and, perhaps, a social class hierarchy) underlies aesthetic choices, definitions, likes, and dislikes.

CROSS-CULTURAL AND MULTI-CULTURAL AESTHETICS

Cross-cultural and multicultural aesthetics is discussed in this paper as a separate approach inasmuch as it is distinguished by *what,* i.e., artistic diversity, is studied. The ways in which cross-cultural and multicultural artistic diversity can be dealt with apply to a variety of educational rationales. (See Table 1.)

Humanist Applications

Cross-cultural and multicultural aesthetics can consist of studying different art forms for purposes of comparing and contrasting human activities and values. One might study how age and aging is depicted in different cultures or in different time periods (Kauppenin, 1990). Past depictions of women compared to current feminist art show strong contrasts as to women's roles and the nature of "women's work." Examining how families are depicted, ways the spiritual world is portrayed, and how cultures use humor in art to explore meanings are just a few of the many instances in which cross-cultural and multicultural aesthetics can be instructionally implemented. This is a humanities approach to aesthetics wherein art is seen as expressive of deeply structured and vitally experienced human needs and activities.



Anonymous. Scene of Puerto Rican village. Higuera and acrylic, 3" x 4". From the collection of Camille Galanes.

Formal and Technical Applications

Cross-cultural and multicultural aesthetics can be presented in an ostensibly asocial manner consisting primarily of comparing the formal and technical qualities of art. For example, portraits from various times and places can be studied in terms of poses, lighting, and surface qualities; traditional African sculpture has been discussed as to how its formal qualities are similar to modern Western abstract art; the geometric qualities of women's patchwork quilts have been paralleled to the abstractions of Russian Constructivism. In this sense, cross-cultural or multicultural aesthetics is a matter of studying expressive, technical, and formalistic comparisons and developing appropriate perceptual discriminations and verbal skills of analysis.

Populist Applications

A third type of cross-cultural and multicultural aesthetics is not a conceptual approach per se but is characterized by an inclusive attitude toward the types of art that are to be studied — fine, popular, folk, etc. It is believed that in dealing with all types of art one accesses different aesthetic and social value systems, and, by implication, an appreciation and tolerance for individual and social differences can result. This is a populist stance toward aesthetics (Blandy & Congdon, 1987).

AESTHETIC PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE

The enjoyment of art has been a major rationale for the study of art, and this rationale has been related to aesthetics. This approach involves aesthetic study for perceptual sensitivity and heightened experiences of art. It involves a sensory, contextual, direct experience of art wherein the end goal is enlightened, knowledgeable, peak aesthetic experiences (Broudy, 1972). In order to have such experiences, it is believed that aesthetic study should involve developing skills that will enhance one's ability to respond to that which is integral and essential to the art form, i.e., the formal qualities of art and the principles of design which can be directly and sensuously experienced. Aesthetics studied as perception and experience primarily falls into the educational rationale of personal relevance with some implications for the development of cognitive processes. (See Table 1.)

Hamblen. *Tree on Green Hills.* Photograph.

Studio Instruction Applications

Traditional studio-based activities are the mostly commonly cited way of developing aesthetic sensitivity and of preparing for heightened aesthetic responses. Abilities to discriminate and categorize visual qualities and to see underlying structures and organizing principles are indicated as essential to aesthetic perception and aesthetic study (Broudy, 1972; *Visual and Performing Arts Framework,* 1982). It is believed that aesthetic sensitivity is a by-product or natural outcome of making art and of exploring art's physical properties.

Art and Nature Applications

A second way in which it is believed that the art classroom is involved in perceptual and experiential aesthetic study is through similarities between art and nature, e.g., through ways in which art can replicate or reveal the underlying structure of nature. In the tradition of Dewey (1934), aesthetic experiences can be had through both art and nature and both result in experiencing life (in general) in an aesthetic manner. In a survey of curriculum content for elementary art education, Spearman (1990) found that

Photograph by Gabriela Segarra, 1990, Taxco, Mexico.

Most teachers link art with the environment while studying the beauty of trees and the significance of saving them. One class studied the beauty of nature by observing crystallization. Teachers discussed art principles, color, and textures. One teacher mentioned the importance of creating a rich sensory environment for students, consisting of sights, sounds, smells, and colors. (pp. 59-60)

In one group of elementary classroom teachers, 67% of the teachers dealt with aesthetics in this manner. (Also see Chapman & Newton, 1990).

Aesthetic Scanning Applications

A third way in which the study of aesthetics has been related to perception and experience is through a procedure called *aesthetic scanning* (Broudy, 1972). In contrast to developing aesthetic sensitivity through direct experiences in making art or observations of nature, aesthetic scanning is a verbal, analytical activity whereby the student develops skills to perceive and discuss visual qualities and relationships that, it is believed, are at the core of the aesthetic experience, (See Table 1.) In aesthetic scanning activities, the object's sensory, formal, expressive, and technical qualities are discussed. Sharer (1986) argues that aesthetic scanning actually belongs within the area of art criticism in that it involves judgments about specific art objects whereas aesthetic inquiry deals with the larger issues of what art is and how art is defined.

SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT

The six instructional options to aesthetics discussed in this paper allow teachers to select approaches that are compatible with their teaching styles, teacher preparation backgrounds, beliefs on the purposes of art instruction, and abilities of their students. The following presents some further considerations for curriculum selection.

The *historical-philosophical approach* most closely resembles traditional academic subjects in structure and pedagogy. The abstract and often difficult nature of much aesthetic literature raises doubts as to whether this approach is appropriate for young or even not-so-young children without a great deal of adjustments of materials and ideas. Information from philosophical aesthetics seems to be primarily used at this time to underpin knowledge that will lead to a wider appreciation of art and heightened aesthetic responses.

Aesthetics for cultural literacy is primarily knowledge and skill based, with the critical distinction on types of art that conform to a preselected cultural literacy. Cultural literacy is a popular rallying point in education at this time, and a Western, fine art interpretation of literacy is compatible with mainstream education and established textbooks and curricula in other subject areas.

Aesthetic inquiry is an approach that is language-based, nonstudio, and has affinities to creative writing, language arts, and instruction in higher order thinking. This allows aesthetic inquiry to enter the pre-existing, receptive pedagogic environment of general education. At this time, aesthetic inquiry is the most specific and well-defined of the approaches identified in this paper.

Aesthetics for social-critical consciousness is based on the rationale that a critical, assumption-examining stance should infuse all art study. However, most information in schools is presented in a taken-for-granted, apolitical manner; the authorship of ideas is obscured, conflict is minimized, and historical-cultural value systems are often ignored (Bowers, 1984). Aesthetics, however, does seem to be an area of study particularly well-disposed to making problematic critical areas of social and artistic thought and behavior. Perhaps an indication that this is how we *should* be dealing with aesthetics is that it is the approach least compatible with teacher-proof materials, standardized testing, accountability check-lists, and preselected outcomes.

The *cross-cultural and multicultural approach* entails, most basically, the study of diverse art forms. In light of the multicultural nature of our society, this approach could easily be incorporated with study for aesthetic experience, aesthetic inquiry, and so on. Such overlaps among these six approaches should be expected and capitalized upon in our quest for understanding what aesthetic study might encompass.

Aesthetics for perception and experience focuses on appreciation and aesthetic responses. This is how aesthetics is most commonly discussed in the literature, with a variety of studio-based means towards those ends. Since it is assumed that studio production will develop skills for aesthetic response, this approach is also highly compatible with traditional practices in art education. For this approach, essentially nothing needs to be done differently, i.e., the aesthetic component is included by doing what one would do anyway in a studio-based art classroom. Broudy's aesthetic scanning presents a specific skill-developing activity that is nonstudio and represents a conscious focus toward enhancing aesthetic experiences.

Conclusion

Aesthetics is an area of study that offers a wealth of possibilities; rather than being overwhelmed by diverse approaches or trying to search for an ideal approach, we (collectively) now need to elaborate upon theoretical rationales and conduct research studies that give us information on when certain approaches are appropriate and how students of various ages can be expected to deal with different approaches. The ambiguity that surrounds the teaching of aesthetics at this time should not be considered an indication of confusion but, rather, a situation offering possibilities that evokes an "Ah-ha, aesthetics!"

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Approaches to Aesthetics in Art Education: A Critical Theory Perspective
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