

How To Teach the Folk Arts to Young People: The Need for Context

Note: This presentation was originally accompanied by slides. Numbers that indicate shift to a new image have been retained to give readers a sense of the pace of the presentation. Chalmers is the author of Celebrating Pluralism, a 1996 Getty Trust publication.

I'm delighted to be here. Over the last few months as I read and re-read the conference goals, looked at the program and all the other presenters' bios, my anticipation has grown. I love smaller focused conferences -- and there aren't too many that grab my interest as much as this one does. My congratulations to Maureen and to all those who have worked so hard to put "Folk Art and Folklife in Education" together.

To teach the folk arts without attention to context just doesn't make sense. I have always believed that we should contextualize all art. As I'll restate as a panel member this afternoon, what has been called "aesthetic scanning" and Feldman's four steps to art criticism just don't do the job. All art needs to be understood and made "in context." (1) **I have often argued that the study of art must be a social study. It seems to me that folk-art is among the most "social" forms of art.** But before I develop this, let me give you a little personal "context."

I was born in Aotearoa/New Zealand. (2) I'm an art school graduate. I was trained as a painter and I imbibed all the pretentious baggage, elitism and ethnocentrism that such training often involved. I went to the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts -- which the engineering students used to periodically re-label "The School of Fine Farts." They were right, there was lots of gas. We talked a lot about how we were going to be recognized as so-called "real" artists. I went to Teachers' College because it didn't seem that there was much else to do after art school. I survived (actually enjoyed) the art teacher education program. I began to teach. But for a young high school art teacher in the Antipodes, the so-called "Art World" still beckoned. When, in 1968, I left Aotearoa/New Zealand and came to North America, I wanted to come directly here, to New York -- instead, for reasons that originally had more to do with funding, I ended up among the cornfields of Indiana, studying not fine arts, but art education. Now, I don't regret for one minute what's happened since.

(3) My wife's a physician, and popular mythology tells us that in addition to being good golfers, doctors are supposed to be major patrons of real art. They certainly use enough of it in their publications! Medical spouses like me are supposed to be museum docents.

(4) But if you were to come to our home you wouldn't see very much "art" art on the walls, or on the mantel. (5) Instead you'd see lots of stuff, most of it quite inexpensive. (6) For a variety of reasons we both enjoy living with and need to live with this stuff. (7) I was going to say "simply" enjoy, but that's probably not accurate. (8) It's more complex than that. (9) Guests often try to guess what these are (10) -- and I'm sure many of them think that we're a lot kinkier than we are. (11)

(12) If you were to come for dinner, we might introduce you to the fascinating world and work of Millie's Great Grandpa Thorne, (13) an eccentric ex-Brit and Toronto character

who gave his great-grandchildren paintings of the Union Jack and who, in contrast to Canada's famous Group of Seven, (14) was labeled in a book by Millie's brother, as "The Group of One." (15, 16) As the evening progressed, and you got to know us a little more, you'd discover that: (17) mother, wife, quilter, physician, daughter, sister, aunt, father, husband, collectors, teachers, historian, male, female, and many others are overlapping and confused terms through which we find our identities. The "art" in our lives and in our home gives expression to these roles. The Maori of my homeland (Aotearoa/New Zealand) have a special word "turangawaiwai" which everyone seeks to find -- a sacred place called home. (18) This is a memory quilt that Millie made for our son. The art that we make, (19, 20) here is a quilt that we made together to celebrate each August at our cottage) and the art that we display (21) (for example mementos of trips taken, places visited, friends) roots, our experience. (22) If you came in December you'd see some of our biggest folk art collection: more than 30 Christmas crèches in various media from various parts of the world. (23) Although these might appear to speak to our liberal Christian values and up-bringing, they have become more problematic (especially for me) in a supposedly post-colonial society, and speak less to my present identity than they once did. We had to face this last December when our son's teacher, who knew about the collection, asked us to bring examples and talk about them with the class, in an arena of some cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity.

(24) Perhaps I was asked to speak to you this morning because of *Celebrating Pluralism*. This book is based upon the premise that all art matters. Grandpa Thorne's paintings, like Leonardo's matter. Art has some common functions. In *Celebrating Pluralism* and some of my other writing I define these as: perpetuating cultural values, questioning cultural values, and as contributing to the embellishing and "making special" of our lives and environments. (25) **Across cultures the arts may be used to express and reflect religious, political, economic, and other aspects of culture. At times artists, because of the impact of their work, have been identified as magicians, teachers, myth-makers, sociotherapists, interpreters, enhancers and decorators, ascribers of status, propagandists, and catalysts of social change.** The visual images, songs, stories, dances, etc., created by people that we call "artists" make it possible for us to learn about and understand cultures, and their histories and values. Sometimes artists ask us to question these values. Sometimes we are encouraged to imagine and dream. By "making things special" (a term stolen from Ellen Dissanayake), artists both delight our aesthetic senses and provide objects and experiences with many socio-cultural functions.

It is comparatively recently that the contextual ways in which art is studied by anthropologists and sociologists have been embraced by some aestheticians, art historians, and critics. This "has resulted in a considerable advance in our understanding of the 'peopled' arrangements that help to define the matrix of art production and consumption" (Blau, 1988. p.269). We, in arts education, need to make use of context because we cannot really understand the arts without including such perspectives or lenses from the great variety of individuals and groups across cultures who make art, preserve it, sell it, collect it, steal it, study it, use it, and enjoy it. We have to help students see that art encodes values and ideologies. How folk art (or any other type of art) is discussed and interpreted "is never innocent of the political and ideological processes in which the discourse has been constituted." (Wolff, 1981, p.143). Even what can seem like

direct and simple aesthetic enjoyment is socially grounded and dependent upon the contexts in which it is experienced. But this doesn't mean that arts education can't still focus on the "look" and the "sound" of things, **"What is this work about?" and "Why does it look the way it does?" as it becomes more like social studies education and seeks to have students, understand art anthropologically in a diverse and pluralistic world.** If, as the Royal College of Art's Bruce Archer (1978) said, art making and performing are media for "the doing, the making, and the living of a culture," (p.12) (26) it is reasonable to assume that cultural understanding could be one of the most important reasons for learning about the arts.

That artists produce their works within a matrix of shared understandings and understood purposes now has considerable support. In the case of the folk arts we need to help students realize those understandings and purposes. Art involves all those people and organizations whose activity is necessary to produce the kinds of events and objects that a particular group loosely defines as "art." This includes people who might conceive the idea of the work (patrons and special interest groups as well as artists), people who execute it (either individuals or groups), people who provide necessary equipment and materials (donors, manufacturers, technical experts, community representatives), and people who make up the audience for the work (other "folk" as well as (eventually) professional critics, aestheticians, and later historians).

In *Celebrating Pluralism I* explored and used the work of 3 people who are among those who provide an important pedagogical foundation for teaching and learning about all types of art. Each has implications for ways in which the arts can be taught as both a social and aesthetic study. Each presents a view of art as a powerful pervasive force helping to shape our attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors.

(27) Ellen Dissanayake (1984) identified eight general and cross-cultural functions that art is said to serve or manifest. She claimed that art reflects or echoes, in some way, the natural world of which it is a part. Art is therapeutic, she wrote, because "it integrates . . . powerful contradictory and disturbing feelings, . . . allows for escape from tedium or permits temporary participation in a more desirable alternative world, . . . [art] provides consoling illusions; promotes catharsis of disturbing emotions" (p.37). Art can allow direct unselfconscious experience. Dissanayake writes that it "can temporarily restore the significance, value and integrity of sensuality and the emotional power of things, in contrast to the usual indifference of our habitual and obstructed routine of practical living" (p.37). **Art has been called "essential" because it exercises and trains our perception of reality.** Art, in many cultures, may have "the unique faculty of preparing us for the onslaughts of life" (Jenkins, 1958, p.295) by turning our attention to things that should concern us, as members of that culture, by recommending particular subject matter to our attention. Art assists in giving order to the world. Although it contributes to order, Dissanayake also called attention to the "dishabituation" function of art, i.e., the fact that we may respond to art in unusual non-habitual ways. **Art provides a sense of meaning or significance or intensity to human life that cannot be gained in any other way.** Dissanayake also sees art as a means of reaching out to others for mutuality, a means of communion as well as communication. As I look again at Dissanayake's functions, and think about the folk arts, I find myself thinking again about the ways in

which folk artists reflect or echo aspects of the small worlds to which they belong. As I think about my home, my turangawaiwai, folk art can certainly "allow for escape from tedium [and] permit temporary participation in a more desirable alternative world." Folk art is often praised for its depiction of direct unselfconscious experience. We see various perceptions of reality. Order is given to the world; sometimes a strange order that can be dishabituating. Folk art can certainly provide meaning or significance or intensity to human life that cannot be gained in any other way. (28) If you're familiar with *Celebrating Pluralism*, you'll know that several of the illustrations come from the Girard Foundation Collection in the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. (29, 30, 31, 32) The two days that I spent in that museum were intense encounters with meaning and significance. Folk art seems especially for communion as well as communication.

(33) E. Louis Lankford (1992) posited that art is valued for a number of different reasons that include the pleasurable experience it provides, its economic worth, its emotional impact and the aspect of social criticism and political clout. It is valued for its sometimes sentimental associations, its abilities to beautify, surprise, inspire, stimulate the imagination, inform, tell stories and record history, the insight it provides into the human condition, its technical accomplishments, its characterization of a particular cultural spirit, and for the status it might afford its owner. In advocating the study of art as a social study I don't want to deny the pleasurable experience and emotional impact that folk-art can provide for maker and viewer. It is also important to realize that socio-cultural learning about the arts neither denies nor diminishes the notion of art for aesthetic enjoyment. It is my fervent hope that in addition to both the understanding of, and meaningful participation in, the arts, teachers and students will enjoy folk culture and be far less culture-bound in their appreciation of art. (The title of my book is, after all *Celebrating Pluralism*). The economic worth of folk art is a well-documented fact. Social criticism and political clout aspects must not be denied. Folk art is valued for its sometimes sentimental associations with an alternative world. Most of all perhaps, folk artists are often storytellers and recorders of history. We admire work for its technical accomplishment and its particular cultural spirit.

(34) Art educator June King McFee (1986) [who was both Kristin's and my mentor] proposed six functions of art. She suggested that art objectifies in that it is used to make subjective values, emotions, ideas, beliefs and superstitions more sensuously tangible, so that they can be seen and felt. Art enhances and is used to enrich celebration and ritual in human events. Art differentiates and organizes. It confirms ranks and roles. It tells people who others are. As communication art is used to record, transmit, and generate meanings, qualities, and ideas. Art has a role in cultural continuity and change. It is used to stabilize cultures by perpetuating the convictions of reality and the identity and accomplishments of individuals and groups. By identifying problems, satirizing, or portraying alternative views, art can also destabilize cultures. McFee stated that these functions operate in varying degrees, both individually and in combination, subjectively and objectively, affecting the experience of people in all cultures. Like the other authors, McFee is writing about all art, but her functions seem to apply particularly to folk art.

(35) From the above summaries we can develop possible themes for folk art education curricula. For example, students can study art that objectifies and perpetuates cultural values and functions for continuity and stability in such aspects as religion or politics.

Or, after studying art that urges change and improvement and encourages social reconstruction, students might initiate their own related studio projects. If any of you were at this year's National Art Education Conference in New Orleans you might have been introduced to YA/YA (Young Aspirations/Young Artists) a private non-profit arts and social service organization with strong folk art connections. But it is not the only project and the folk arts offer many opportunities for more socially and politically charged arts education.

Images might be collected of folk art forms used to enhance and enrich different environments.

The study of different holidays and festivals is a curriculum organizer that goes right back to the time when "industrial drawing" became "art and craft" in U.S. public schools nearly 100 years ago -- but whose potential has not always been fully realized. Within folk art / folk life contexts we may be able to really develop our legacy of a curriculum structured around seasonal projects. We need to show students that, across cultures, many types of art are used to celebrate and enrich major cultural events.

Art used to record and to tell stories can be studied, and it can be made. Studio projects can encourage students to tell their own important stories. (Sometimes it can seem that studio projects lack context. Perhaps it is easier to think about art as a social study when it is being considered historically, or written about). (36) While this student's painted bus shelter in a Vancouver suburb may appear to be just another kitschy over-use of folksy cows, it is not. (37) It marks the site of Vancouver's most important 19th-century dairy farm. (38) This shelter tells of the cultural diversity of its immediate neighborhood. (39)

(40 Blank slide) Technical skills and accomplishments can be admired and appreciated in objects from a variety of cultures.

As I've said in Celebrating Pluralism (but with different examples) students could be asked to find similarities and compare and contrast examples of folk art where the makers have become:

- ascribers of meaning (e.g., decorators of Ukrainian Easter eggs, makers of traditional patchwork quilts); (I'm a visual arts educator, so I've chosen visual examples. If you're a dancer, a musician, a theater educator I challenge you to find some examples in your own areas).
- ascribers of status (e.g., tattoo artists);
- catalysts of social change (e.g., graffiti artists, Chilean arpilleristas);
- enhancers and decorators (e.g., makers of printed and woven textiles and ceramic tiles);
- interpreters (e.g., most folk artists are probably interpreters of one sort or another);
- magicians (e.g., sand painters, mask makers);
- myth makers (e.g., some commemorative artists and storytellers);

- propagandists (e.g., political poster artists, environmental sculptors and sign makers);
- recorders of history (e.g., public sculptors);
- sociotherapists (e.g., makers of images in a variety of media that allow us to dream and escape);
- storytellers (e.g., quilt makers, illustrators, muralists); and teachers.

In their own art making students can embrace some of the above roles. In contrast to some topics commonly used in education, these theme organizers are far from trite. They encourage us to see the common functions of all art. They focus on art, and they all require us to embrace all the art disciplines (art production, aesthetics, art criticism and art history). Folk art is often local, and this is important. "Why do people make and/or use art?" can certainly be explored around the world. But such questions also demand local answers. How are the visual arts used in some local places of worship? Are there women, or men, in a local quilting guild who are willing to show their work and talk about why they quilt? How do students themselves use clothing or jewelry, or decorate their lockers or bedrooms, to make statements about themselves and the cultural groups to which they belong? What sorts of art and craft are taught in local community centers, or, in the case of something like graffiti, "on the street?" Why? How do different sectors of the community react, e.g., to graffiti? There are so many possibilities for seeing art's commonalities.

If the focus is on the why of folk art, on context, arts teachers in pluralistic societies need not worry that they do not know enough about folk art in a plethora of cultures. Rather than view teachers as transmitters of huge bodies of knowledge we should see them as leaders and facilitators who are able to focus on the process and assist students in their investigation and understanding of commonalities in the functions and roles of art. A teacher is a leader who initiates action, maintains the teaching-learning process by setting individual and group guidelines, and who evaluates students' experiences and products. When the focus is on the why of art and when teaching is viewed as facilitating and learning is active, the above themes offer much scope for learning about and making art. Such a perspective requires a questioning, problem solving, and inquiry-based approach to instruction.

(41) Let me give you a specific example of the importance of context. In 1993 in the United Kingdom the Crafts Council commissioned an Education Handbook to be used in conjunction with a touring exhibit: Contemporary American Quilts. This teaching resource was organized around a list of 22 questions devised to hi-light visual, technical, historical, sociological and cross-cultural issues. Among the contextual questions were:

- (42) What is traditional about (a) quilts and (b) quilt making?
- What reasons can you suggest for making quilts?
- Was the practice of quilt making in a pre-industrial society one of pleasure, need or status?
- (43) Why is the quilt an important symbol of American culture?
- What social role has quilt making had in the past? Does it have a social role today?

- Is quilt making a feminine craft?
- (44) What relationships exist between quilts and fashion?
- In what ways does the wealth of information about quilt making (books, exhibitions, workshops) enable and/or inhibit contemporary practice?
- What kinds of personal, political, and cultural messages can be expressed through quilts today?
- When does a particular motif or type of fabric become a symbol?
- Which 'virtues' do you associate with the processes of re-cycling and re-use?
- (45) Compare three quilts: a contemporary piece made by an artist craftsperson, a quilt . . . purchased very cheaply in a charity shop, and an antique one passed down through the generations of a family. How do your attitudes differ to the quality and content of each one? What criteria have you applied?
- (46) If the contemporary quilt is no longer being used as a bedcover and has no utilitarian function, should we be calling it a quilt at all?
- (47) What determines where and how a quilt should be exhibited and displayed?

Imagine studying quilts without asking these questions. Imagine trying to answer one of the questions that I did not cite: "How do you assess the quality of a quilt?" without having some answers to these other questions.

(48) I believe that the focus needs to be on context: Why do we make art? How do we use art? and, What is art for? With some knowledge of the functions and roles of art across cultures and a willingness to learn about art with students, teaching the why of art is not as daunting as it may first appear. If art is understood in these ways, in terms of its functions, in terms of what it's for, in terms of why it's made and displayed, we have a solid and rich foundation upon which to build meaningful curriculum. Art needs to be, and to be seen as, a potent aspect of all cultural life. I believe that authentic folk art is especially potent. People are increasingly leading complex multicultural lives. We so desperately need visions, goals, ideals, and aspirations to replace the shallow materialism which can so easily suffocate persons' spiritual lives. Art can be especially affirming. This is perhaps the timeless purpose of all art: Western art, Eastern art, African art, African-American art, First Nations art, women's art, folk art, children's art, gay or lesbian art, the art of galleries and museums, rural craft, and the public art of the streets: to enhance our sense of being, not only here and now, but also in a continuum of time and traditions. When effectively taught, the arts can endow our sense of being with sometimes nearly inexplicable meaning.