

Teaching Multicultural Art in the age of Cultural Appropriation

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Anthropological Approaches to Art Education (AAArt Ed)
C. Epp

It is 2019, and...

We live in an age where cultural appropriation is a big deal. From the use of blackface by celebrities and politicians to hipsters wearing Native American headdresses at music festivals.



Yet, we want to be able to share the art of other cultures with our students!

So the question is, how do you present the work of other cultures, and have students authentically learn from it, without being disrespectful to the culture?

Don't worry, there is a simple way to do this!!!

Background

If you don't know much about cultural appropriation, I highly recommend this wonderful site by Amy Bultena that explains the hows and whys of the issue.

<https://artfulartsyamy.wordpress.com/2019/01/30/eradicating-cultural-appropriation-in-art-education/>

She also gives some good suggestions on how to do multicultural projects with students, but I am going to present another way of approaching it.



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Eradicating Cultural Appropriation in Art Education



In contemporary society, cultural appropriation is a hot topic. We most commonly hear about cultural appropriation when news sources and/or social media cover a celebrity accused of appropriating culture. But, how often do we/you discuss cultural appropriation outside of celebrity news? Do we even have a firm grasp of the definition of cultural appropriation? And, as educators, should we include how to avoid cultural appropriation in our professional studies, and by proxy, our classrooms?

Humans have been adopting the practices and cultures of other humans since the beginning of time; take the Roman and Greek empires for instance



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Think of it this way...

Let's say an elementary school art teacher told the kids that they were going to learn about Jesus Christ and then create a crucified Jesus on the cross using pom poms and pipe cleaners for the body and cardboard tampon tubes for the cross.

PRETTY OFFENSIVE!!!!



In fact, you might be so upset that you want to stop looking at this presentation, but don't! I have a point and I am about to make it.

That would be offensive, but then why is this so common?

For decades, art teachers have been teaching students about Hopi Kachina dolls and then having them make this sacred object out of TOILET PAPER ROLLS!

So to compare with the tampon applicator Jesus:

Religious figures - CHECK

Deeply important to a culture - CHECK

Mimicked using bathroom products - CHECK



So then how do we approach multicultural projects?

You use ANTHROPOLOGICAL concepts!

You look at the WHO, WHAT, WHY, and HOW of a tradition and then, with your students, figure out what they do in their culture that is similar!

Because as Frank Ape says:



We celebrate the differences, but we connect other cultures' ideas, beliefs, and motivations to our own lives.

First, we employ ideas about **Cultural Relativism**. “Cultural relativism is the idea that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another.”

We take the **EMIC perspective**. We try to understand why people make certain art objects. We look at their reasons for their point of view...from the inside (emic).

What is the purpose of an object? What importance does it have in that culture?

And THEN...

With our students we discuss what we do in our culture that is similar...

Depending on the age group, it could be as simple as looking at Greek Vases that celebrate athletes of the day...and maybe connecting the celebration of athletes in our own culture.



So what does this look like in class?

1) **Introduce** the work in class. Which culture or individual made it, when they made it, how they made it, etc. Can even talk about the visual and material aspects of how it is made.

2) Talk about the **meaning** of the work. WHY was it made. What is its purpose? How does it fit into the lives of the people in that culture?

3) **Connect** the purpose to your class and their lives.

4) Have students **create** objects that reflect that similar meaning in their own lives.

**OK, what does this
REALLY look like in a classroom?**

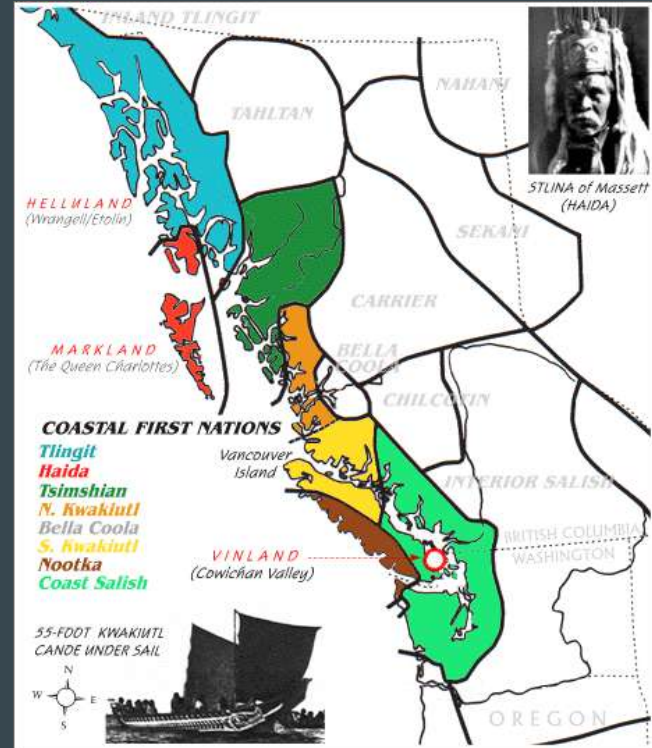
INTRODUCE

- 1) Introduce Haida / Kwakiutl Totem poles (Gyáa'aang in the Haida Language)) in class. The Who, What, Where, How, etc. Talk about techniques and materials. Maybe form and repetition, etc. And also the combination of symbols.



Kwakiutl Totem Poles, British Columbia, Canada

Photo: Eric J. Cochrane



MEANING

2) Talk about the various reasons that the Kwakiutl made totem poles. “Totem poles are monuments created by First Nations of the Pacific Northwest to represent and commemorate ancestry, histories, people, or events.*” Perhaps decide to focus on one aspect, such as ancestry.

https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem_poles/

(and of course go in more depth)



CONNECT

3) Have the class brainstorm the different ways that their own lives and culture/s. commemorate ancestry. Maybe they talk about attending Highland games, or Irish step dancing, making Ukrainian easter eggs, or eating certain foods at holidays. Or festivals they go to at church. Or jumping the broom at a wedding ceremony. Maybe it is more personal and they talk about the tattoo their mom got to honor her grandmother that passed away.



CREATE

4) Then the project can be any media you want...you could stick with sculptural form if you like.

Just make sure the students are commemorating their ancestry and combining symbols to do it. This could be anything from a suite of logos to a ceramic place setting,

Anything where they are engaging in the same purpose of the original art without copying it or mimicking it in any way

CHOOSE ONE OR MORE:

FORM – sculpture or use of limited color palette

MULTIPLES – have several parts work in unity together

THEME – ancestry, or honoring the dead

MEDIA – anything you want

JUST DON'T – have them make totem poles unless they are Northwest Coast First Nations themselves

Finally, think about how you present non-western art in the first place

Instead of starting with the CULTURE, try starting with the THEME!

So if the theme was ANCESTRY/HONORING THE DEAD, then show work across different cultures and times:

- Totem poles of the Northwest Coast First Nations
- Memorial graffiti murals
- Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial
- Day of the Dead celebrations
- Egúngún masquerades, which are celebrations of the ancestors among Yorùbá peoples of West Africa



BECAUSE THE POINT IS THAT OUR STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE OF HUMANITY

We all fall in love, we all get our hearts broken, we all work to feed our families, we all learn from others, we all prepare food, we all celebrate the good things in life and and we all grieve the sad.

People do these things in different ways, but we all do the same kinds of things overall.

This is the most important lesson in teaching multicultural art.



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