



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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ART IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

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No one has ever defined art in a way that has achieved universal acceptance, yet usually we operate as if this were not so.

Is hairdressing art? Is pottery art? Was Christo's wrapping up of Little Bay art? Is architecture art? Is John Cage art? Is photography art? Is Andy Warhol's "Flesh" art? Both "yes" and "no" have been answered to these questions.

This is more than a problem in aesthetics: it is very much a problem in education, and Aboriginal education in particular.

Judging by what we find in art galleries, concert halls and bookshops, it seems that art is - at least - something people make or do. But the things people make or do can be either reproductions or close imitations of things other people have made or done (or - if the actual article is not reproduced or imitated - the principle or pattern is); or they can be completely original, underivative things or activities, created, invented and initiated by an individual human. And herein lies the distinction between what (I believe) is usually called craft and what is usually called fine art (or just art).

The craftsman is one who takes as a model an article (say a tea-pot), of which the form is already established, and reproduces it to the best of his ability (craftsmanship). The same applies if the model is a picture or a sculpture. The fine artist has no model to start from. He has only the ideas in his head and the impact his environment has on him. What he makes may or may not be utilitarian, but it is a statement of *his* ideas, ideals and opinions. Only the potter who made the first ever tea-pot was an artist. The rest are craftsmen. Even the material used is not definitive in itself: a Namatjira who happens to use the materials of art (paper, colour and brushes) to reproduce the kind of pictures someone else taught him to make (Battarbee) - and, more especially, a Namatjira imitator - is more properly termed a craftsman than an artist. Conversely, a Milton Moon who happens to use the materials of the potter to make original, individual pots, different (largely) from each other and from anyone else's pots, is more properly termed an artist than a craftsman. Of course - and to complicate matters - there is (or

ought to be) craft in art. A Michelangelo has to learn the craft of stone-carving, but he uses his craftsmanship as a means of expressing his ideas and intentions as an artist, whether he makes a "Moses" or a spittoon.

Bearing this distinction between art and craft in mind, I am forced to state that, having visited most western and northern South Australian Aboriginal schools periodically over the past several years, I have seen very little *art* in them. I have seen hundreds of pictures painted by Aboriginal children, but most of them are reproductions (at least in principle) of other pictures - landscapes with purple hills and ghost gums by children at Yalata who have never seen the ghost gum country; endlessly reproduced "tear-drop" or "pretty flower" pictures from Ernabella - thus, I would call them works of *craft*, not art. How true this is of other schools in other places in Australia who have Aboriginal students I do not know, but I understand that most teachers of Aboriginal children maintain that art is a most important ingredient in any educational program for Aboriginals. I wonder whether they mean art or craft,

But this is more than an exercise in semantics. Recent moves in South Australia to provide an appropriate curriculum for secondary-aged Aboriginal children have brought the problem into focus. The existing South Australian Secondary School Certificate Art and Art-Craft Syllabus (which was designed for white South Australian children) states the following aims:

1. Through guided self-expression in many art and craft media to aid individual maturation and emotional adjustment.
2. To promote the development of perception and awareness of art, life and nature.
3. To promote the development of an evaluative attitude to art, life and nature.
4. To teach knowledge of art and craft procedures and to promote the development of skills, while encouraging creative and individual thought and expression.
5. To inculcate knowledge of, and respect for, our cultural heritage and those of other nations and eras, and to encourage verbal expression in this area.
6. To discover and promote the development of specific talents.

The emphasis in these aims on encouraging free expression and individuality is due to our belief that (white) children need such experiences in school to counteract the harm done to their developing personalities by the repression of natural childish impulses which occurs in western child-rearing. Tribal Aboriginal children are indulged outrageously (by western standards) from birth. They are not raised in the "don't touch - don't scribble on the wall - don't play with your genitals or faeces" climate that white children grow up in. Do they need to be stimulated to express themselves in a socially-acceptable western convention, such as art?

Also, it is fairly well established that Aborigines have exceptional manual dexterity and visual acuity. Hence, they appear to be "good at art" (*sic*) - at painting realistic pictures, that is. But the traditions of their culture dispose them to "learn how" to do things, and to repeat and imitate what they have been taught. Their traditions also dispose them against thinking and acting as individuals. Both these characteristics are as inimical to 20th-century western artistic expression (but not to craft expression) as they are integral to Aboriginal culture. Is it not, then, the most complete and insidious assault western education can make on Aboriginal culture to encourage children in schools to be creative, divergent and individualistic; to express opinions of their own; to create forms they have generated themselves and not been taught by others?

To return to the other stated aims for Art in white secondary schools: what need do tribal Aboriginal children have of teaching by white adults which attempts to develop their "perception and awareness of art, life and nature" or their "evaluative attitude" to these, and what need have they of our (western) cultural heritage and to be able to verbalise about this?

So why teach art to Aboriginal children at all? There are two usual answers to this question:

1. Children of Yalata say they enjoy painting pictures because they might one day be able to sell them, so they reproduce the kinds of pictures they know sell in the tourist shop. They practise this endlessly, just as they practise the debased decoration of boomerangs with incised emus and kangaroos. By some odd process of cultural incest the white touring public has come to recognise as truly Aboriginal something quite un-Aboriginal - and the craftsmen pass on this "tradition" to their apprentices. So these Aborigines want saleable crafts - not art.

2. Some educators, it appears, would leave it at this. Others, however, claim that one aim Aboriginal schools should have is to enable Aboriginal children to join and survive in white western society should they choose to. The encouragement of individual, creative self-expression in the arts is seen as a good method of teaching Aboriginals something about how westerners think. These teachers teach art.

However, there is a third possible answer and it combines aspects of each of the former. Given that - whatever the children's motivation, whatever their teachers' methodology - Aboriginal children willingly engage in art and/or craft activities, these activities provide an ideal medium for the teaching of western concepts and skills which the children may later find useful in their contacts with the white world - concepts such as measurement, time and money, and skills such as verbal and written English and some elementary western science and technology.

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