

# Race and Culture in Art and Design Education

*Art and design education in England is probably the most ethnocentric of subject areas, being almost exclusively based on a European Post Renaissance conception of art. Pupils need to have a 'concept of culture' if they are to be aware that their own activities are, to a large extent, predetermined by the Anglo-centric culture in which they live.*

*Alternative approaches to studying the art and design of cultures other than one's own are considered and a framework is developed for teaching a concept of culture. An international perspective, rather than a national pluralist perspective, is proposed as the basis for the selection of cultures. A practical example is described from a secondary school pottery lesson in England where a clay pot from Papua New Guinea is used as a teaching aid. It is demonstrated that the outcomes of a lesson of this type have much in common with the desired outcomes of anti-racist education. Although the rationale is generalizable for all schools there are special implications, in terms of teaching procedures and possible outcomes for schools which are multiracial and multicultural.*

The continuing debate about multicultural education highlights the nature of education as a value laden process. Underlying the debate are two main issues. Firstly that the individual pupil's chances of success during and after formal education are limited by his or her race membership and secondly that an ethnocentric curriculum is detrimental to harmonious intergroup relations. (See for instance DES (1977), Bolton, E. (1979), DES (1981)).

The concern about underachievement has resulted in the debate about education in a multicultural society becoming suffused with broader changes in the school system to provide for equality of opportunity. In the wake of egalitarian policies, such as the introduction of comprehensive education, the 16+ examination and destreaming, new areas of study such as development education, peace studies, world studies, antiracist education and multicultural education have emerged each having in common the objective of fostering the dispositions, understandings and skill needed for harmonious intergroup relations. The polemic associated with the ideal of egalitarianism and the issues of race and underachievement has led to a confusing variety of terminology and failed to generate a comprehensive or agreed theory for the education of all children in a multicultural society.

This paper argues that there are inherent weaknesses in a curriculum which is culture bound. The implications of this for art and design education are examined and a practical example from an art and design lesson is described to illustrate how cross-cultural reference can facilitate and enrich learning in that subject, whatever the particular cultural base of the pupil. It is proposed that the outcomes of a curriculum which is not culture bound, in terms of pupils' interest in, attitudes towards and competency with other cultures, correspond closely with the desired outcomes of antiracist education. The term 'multicultural education' is used to refer to education in a society where there are perceived differences in culture arising from racial group, ethnic group or social class membership.

## **The academically sound non-ethnocentric curriculum**

The philosophical and practical implications of making cross-cultural reference in teaching have been the topic of ongoing dialogue, (Zec 1980, Walking 1980, Phillips-Bell 1981, Marshal et al 1981, Brent 1982). From this dialogue it is evident that there is, inherent in the theory of knowledge, a *prima facie* case for education which is not culture bound. This general educational principle is of special relevance to art and design education because of the particular tautological relationship between the subject and the culture within which it is taught. In every society attitudes to the arts and assumptions about participation in the arts define the concept of art and have influenced the way it has been taught. Conversely, the predominant culturally defined concept of art in British society produces attitudes towards and assumptions about art in other societies, and about the art of minority cultures in this society.

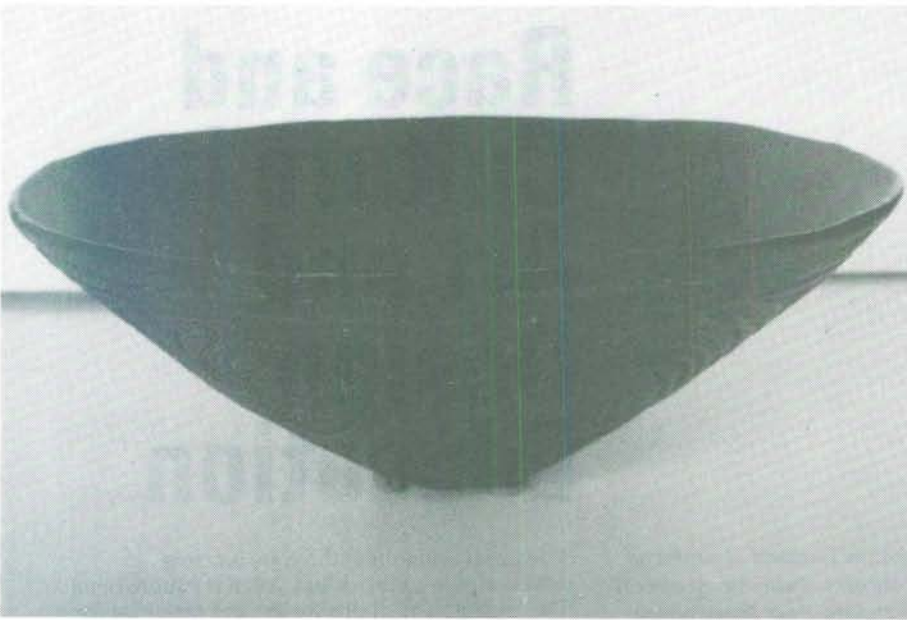
## **An Internationalist framework for teaching Art and Design in a Multicultural Society**

In what way should the pupil's context of participation be changed in order to take into account cultural diversity in British Society? Jeffcoate (1979) distinguishes two possible models for practice, the 'transmissionist' and the 'transformationist' model. The first model involves drawing on content from the cultural stock of minority ethnic groups and through this, confirming the pupil in that way of life. The second model requires that the school aspires to the status of social critic and cultural synthesiser by giving the pupil the necessary skills and understanding to move competently across cultures.

The transformationist model corresponds most closely with an epistemological argument for learning about other cultures and is the position adopted in this paper. Within this model one of the responsibilities of the art and design teacher is to help the pupil develop a concept of culture; that is a consciousness of his own culture and of other cultures and how they are projected.



*Bowl; Boiken area,  
East Sepik Province  
Papua New Guinea.*



Whether or not a cultural synthesis is in fact an inevitable outcome is uncertain. However, it is to be hoped that the individual pupil will be in a position to decide for himself his group affiliation or cultural 'base' and at the same time be socially competent in other cultures. These twin goals have relevance for the self concept, mobility and equal life chances of all children in a multicultural society.

What are the ways in which art and design education can help the pupil develop a concept of culture? Firstly, this means examining and responding to art objects other than those produced in the classroom. Secondly, in order to illuminate a particular culturally defined concept of art, (which for the great majority of British school pupils has its origins in the European Post Renaissance), it is necessary to study examples from alternative artistic traditions. Thirdly, proceeding from the theoretical basis in epistemology and the transformationist model, and for reasons explained in detail later in the paper, an internationalist perspective underlies the selection of examples for study, rather than a purely local perspective based on domestic cultures in Britain.

What is being proposed is a study of art forms and the place of art in societies across the world. This represents a fundamental shift from the more conventional studies which trace a unilinear, chronological progression and which frequently, in art history lessons, focus on culturally exclusive and hence esoteric objects with little attention given to the context of production and social function of the object.

Feldman put forward an anthropological type of art curriculum which has this synchronistic characteristic. The anthropological approach, he proposed has the advantage of allowing pupils to examine in 'simple' societies

the connections between the creation of art and institutional factors such as hunting, food production, war, magic, human fertility, health, worship and so on.

(1980, p.7)

He continued, pointing out that

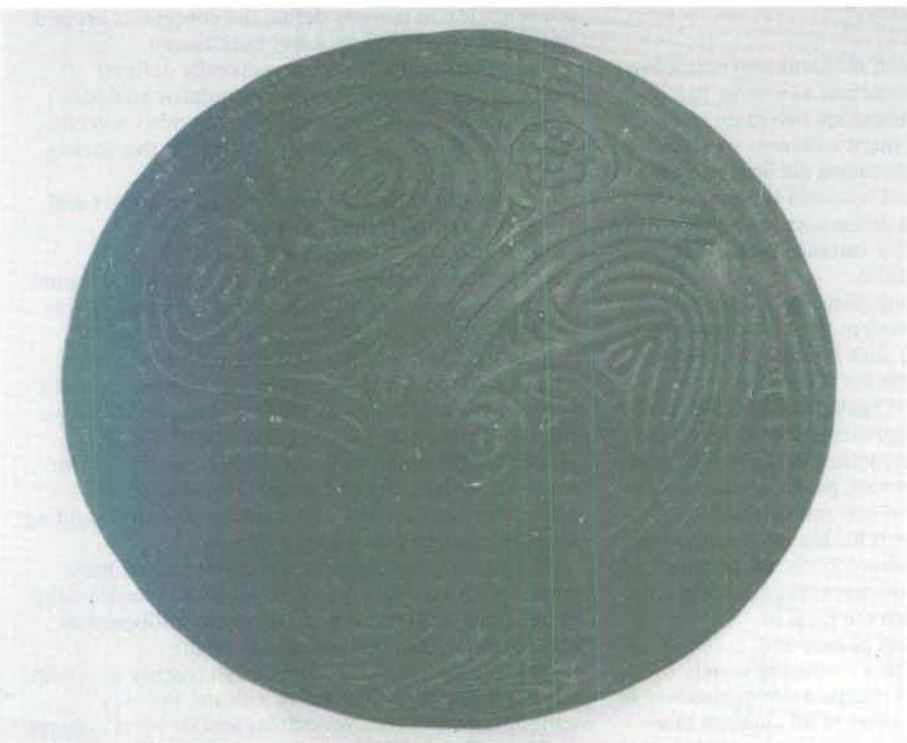
the evidence consists of real artifacts made by real people in real, not experimental situations.

Presented with that type of evidence the pupil can see the connection between the sources of artistic activity, the form of the art object and its role in society. Having gained this insight the pupils will be able to apply it in investigating art in their own society and in reflecting on their own practical art work.

Amongst the limitations (acknowledged by Feldman) of the anthropological curriculum is that it

does not aim directly at the mastery of their (the people being studied) skills and techniques. Neither does it set a premium on self-expression or the creation of artistic products. (Ibid, p.7)

A further limitation arises because Feldman does not apply the anthropological approach to





contemporary societies — whether 'simple' pre-industrial or complex industrial. There is the possibility that pupils may become inculcated with a distorted view of other people and their art fossilized in obsolete ways of life. Also, and more central to art and design education, a different set of art related questions can be clarified by applying an anthropological approach to contemporary industrialised nations. For instance, the interplay between art traditions, political and economic theory and artistic innovation. Modern China provides an example of this with the recent encouragement of traditional arts and crafts.

Finally there is the danger that the anthropological approach reduces the art object to artefact; a tool for understanding other ways of life. Jantjes, an exiled black South African artist working in Britain, wrote

Our cultural body was painstakingly dissected by Colonial archaeologists, ethnographers and anthropologists who studied each segment separately from the other. From then on African art was generally put into categories that were out of context. The new home for much of our art became the cold cases and vaults of so-called primitive art museums in Europe. Our art became artefact. (1983, p.16)

There is, in fact, a dearth of information of the type which enables an appraisal of how such art expressed the creative heart of pre-colonial societies. Where this information is available from primary sources it becomes possible through critical appraisal of the art object to gain access to the aesthetic concepts and standards of 'primitive' people. This can be a highly formative learning experience.

Whatever the source and complexity of the art object selected for study, changes in the dimensions of the context of participation need to correspond with the personal and artistic development of the pupil. (For examples of this see Allison 1972). Everyday objects, such as cups or shoes, can be examined for cultural messages, such as the relationship between form and function, between material and form, between material and beliefs and values. McFee and Degge (1977) set out a sequential programme which is suitable for adapting to the particular interests and concerns of individual pupils. The programme commences with the examination of simple utilitarian objects common to different societies and leads onto more complex art forms and phenomena from different countries.

The selection of everyday utilitarian objects has two fold benefits. Firstly, it demonstrates, in a simple way, the principles underlying the relationship between a culture and its products. Secondly, it extends the pupil's context of participation by placing on a single continuum of aesthetic forms both the range of manmade objects which make up the physical environment and the set of objects which bear the signature and personality stamp of the artist and which are displayed for contemplation.

The internationalist perspective, as incorporated in the programme set out by McFee and Degge, can be

further developed to complement the unilinear study of art and design. By presenting world art history as a web of separate art traditions it can be seen that, as concepts, processes and art forms become more refined and sophisticated, traditions peak and become either increasingly specialised or dialectic. A world view taken either currently or at an earlier point in space and time helps to illuminate the key characteristics of distinct artistic traditions and the results of cross-fertilization of ideas between traditions.

The preceding description of methods for teaching about the relationship between art and design and culture has been subject intrinsic. That is, it has been confined to the possibility of improving the curriculum and thereby helping the pupil in relating to and engaging in art making activities. The case has been made that, whatever the curriculum model and patterns of teaching, it is necessary to provide the pupil with the dispositions and rules to disengage himself and adopt an objectivist stance in reflecting upon what he is making or responding to as art and design.

#### **Examples of outcomes common to art and design education and anti-racist education**

The following practical example illustrates ways in which these subject intrinsic learning procedures and dispositions relate to the development of cultural understandings as well as contribute to humanistic and anti-racist concerns. The example is taken from a series of pottery lessons given to a group of twelve to thirteen year olds in a Norfolk High School in which emphasis was given to the study of a terracotta pot from Boiken village in the East Sepik province of Papua New Guinea. The objective was to teach the coil construction technique and the method for carving designs into the surface of clay ware. The pupils were shown where Boiken is on the opposite side of the globe to Europe. The environment in Papua New Guinea was described to them by the teacher as ranging from palm fringed beaches to dense rain forests on the coastal plains to high mountain moorland. They were told that the people are equally varied in appearance — tall and almost black on the coast, short, stocky and pale brown in the mountains.

The pot was displayed and various features about it, its making and use, were described. It is conical with a printed base suitable for embedding in wood ash or sand. The charred grey surface colouration comes from the wood ash. Although it had not been thrown on a wheel it is perfectly circular and symmetrical. The walls are about 5mm even thickness and, on the outside, have highly stylized designs. These designs are organized so that the shapes carved out relate to the remaining proud shapes to form an interlocking design.

Following this introduction the initial impression reported as having been formed by the pupils towards both the pot and the people producing it was one of strangeness and remoteness to the pupils' life experience. Further contextual information was supplied to help make sense of the meaning of the



unfamiliar imagery. It was explained that the design motifs on this pot are based on the village ancestors. The people believe that the spirits of ancestors live on, so making stylized images of ancestors' faces provides a link between the people and their ancestors and, it is thought, pleases the ancestors' spirits when they revisit the village. Cooking pots which are in everyday use are usually decorated with living creatures such as birds so it is likely that this pot was kept for special occasions such as wedding ceremonies. The people prefer clay pots because they are better than metal ones for some purposes, such as, for instance simmering and storing certain foods in.

It is important that whatever evidence is shown is fully and accurately explained. For example if a photograph of the village is used it needs to be explained that the people do not need to wear shoes because there is nothing left lying around that could be injurious or unpleasant to step on. The split bamboo house construction material enables ventilation, the thick palm frond roofing material keeps the air inside cool and so on. There is usually a sound pragmatic explanation for whatever can be found in such communities and children will readily grasp this.

As a picture was formed of a distinctive way of life the pupils noted links with their own experiences, for example; the handmade pottery in their homes, the occasions when they had cooked and lived outdoors and the images which reminded them of relatives who had died. Once these links were established there was a noticeable transformation in the general attitude towards the pot, its producer and his way of life. This could best be summarized as a transition from feelings of puzzlement and amusement to a feeling of interest, characterized by the awareness of an intelligible alternative culture.

The final stage in the series of lessons described above, was, after technical instruction and practice, to ask the pupils to build a replica of the pot. When they compared the results, in, for example, the symmetry and evenness of the pots and in the effectiveness of the negative and positive shapes in the surface design, they became fully aware of the advanced skills and sensitivity of the original craftsman.

The principles and practices underlying this example can be employed in examining art objects of different complexity for instance contemporary Zimbabwean Shona stone sculpture or Malaysian batik work, or the art of minority cultures in Britain. The cultural examples selected should be chosen for the educational and rational reasons that they are the most suitable exemplars for the course of study.

Through a cross-cultural study such as the example outlined above the pupil learns that people in other societies have different beliefs and values and different ways of acting and thinking. In short, that there are different cultures; this is a difficult notion for a young child to grasp. At the same time and despite the differences it becomes evident that individual members of the society are clever and sophisticated. The significance of this point is not lost on politicians working in multiracial areas. For example, at the

opening of an exhibition of Commonwealth children's textile work at Leicester Polytechnic the chairperson of the county education committee stressed that

Because some of the exhibits here are so beautiful they demonstrate to our children the enormous talent that children in other parts of the world have.

The study of art and design in other cultures illustrates that the cultures possess the skills and sensitivity to embody in material form a message which carries its meaning across cultures. An image of the people is being projected for instance through the clay pot and what is being responded to and evaluated primarily is the visual evidence of artistic processes displayed in the pot. While contextual information, such as the preference for clay pots and the belief in ancestor spirits, is provided to help in understanding the form it is not necessary to evaluate the information in order to evaluate the form.

In conducting studies of this type the teacher adopts the role of neutral chairman, assisting with the understanding and appreciation of the art object. The information about other cultures has a supportive role and the cultural image presented is therefore presented in a non-didactic manner. The pupil's judgement of the culture arises reflectively and privately without the intervention of the group feeling which motivates stereotyping and xenophobia.

The art and design based learning process outlined has parallels with direct methods for teaching about race-relations but avoids some of the pitfalls of direct methods. The particular benefits of the art and design based process can be summarized as follows.

First, the process of critically appraising art involves the temporary suspension of judgement, subject to the analysis and interpretation of the evidence. The practice of this ability, which requires resisting initial impressions and preconceived notions, can have a transfer effect on the pupil's competency in encountering unfamiliar life styles and people.

Second, art is the medium which least distorts the original message. The feelings, beliefs and values of a culture are embodied in the visual form it produces; this is the incontrovertible evidence of alternative ways of life. The critical appraisal of this perceptual evidence provides direct access to understanding an alternative way of life.

Other modes of minority group expression requiring an intellectual response are more susceptible to misinterpretation and devaluation. Carby (1979) discusses the impediments to the critical analysis of the literary expression of minority groups, either in dialect, or in the language of the dominant group. She proposes that

We need to create a framework for trying to analyse to what extent, when repressed languages are heard, they are distorted or reshaped by dominant modes in an active social relationship of struggle. (Ibid, p.24)

In the visual arts there is less possibility of the message becoming distorted or reshaped. For example,



in the study of the clay pot described above the technical standard and the design skills and sensitivity can be *seen* even if the symbolism and pictorial language is unfamiliar.

Third, it is recognized that facts and information alone about a culture do not necessarily alter attitudes towards the culture (see for instance Schools Council 1981). A transformation in human relations results from a combination of cognitive and affective learning. The experimental base of understanding and responding to art and design combines the cognitive and affective aspects. At the same time, the art and design object can serve as a vehicle for understanding culture both impartially and non-contentiously. A parallel process, which employs open discussion in the classroom and uses pupils as a resource, can become awkward to handle (see for example the race relations teaching strategies trialled by the Humanities Curriculum Project. (Verma, 1980)).

Finally, there is support in learning theory for the effectiveness of using remote examples. Koestler employs interesting symbolism to describe the mental processes involved in learning from what is initially curious or exotic.

thus the impact of a sudden, bisociative surprise which makes reasoning perform a somersault will have a twofold effect: part of the tension will become detached from it and exploded while the remaining part will slowly ebb away. The symbols on the triptych are meant to refer to these two models of discharge of tension: the explosion of the aggressive — defensive and the gradual catharsis, or 'earthing' of the participatory emotions (figure 1). (Koestler, 1966, p.88)

The 'eureka' feeling or sudden insight accompanying this linking of remote associations can reinforce the learning event and, it is proposed, motivates the pupil's interest in learning about and encountering other cultures.

#### The application of an internationalist perspective in a multicultural school

The procedures and outcomes of a non-ethnocentric art and design curriculum are relevant to the education of all children in a multicultural society. A further set of potential outcomes can be enumerated for multicultural schools. (See for instance Fine (1973), Khan (1976 and 1978), Grayburn (1979) and Taber (1981)). Also, there is a steadily expanding range of courses and resources for teaching art and design in a multicultural school. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review these initiatives but information on initiatives, both in schools in this country and overseas has been collected by the Leicester Polytechnic 'Art and Design in a Multicultural Society' (AIMS) Project. Details of these materials are available from the author.

A general guideline to emerge from initiatives in multicultural schools is that the opportunity needs to be left open for pupils to resolve their self-awareness and feelings of group affiliation and to project this resolution in visual imagery.

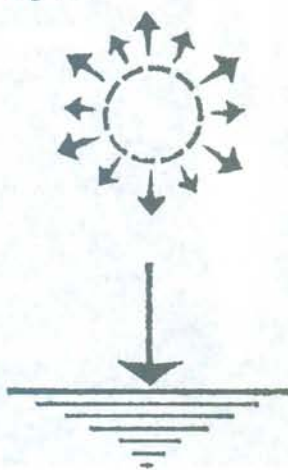
Whether it is an all white school or a multicultural, multiracial school where an internationalist framework is implemented the prospects in terms of art and design learning and innovation are open ended. The exploration of these prospects requires an attitude of open mindedness, for examining art in different societies, combined with an awareness of the potential contribution of cross-cultural reference to human and artistic development.

This characteristic of positive open mindedness is sustained by an internationalist framework which both clarifies the distinctiveness of particular art and design traditions and reveals the common transcultural themes underlying art and design in different societies.

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Figure 1





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First place junior winner of the Young Electronic Designer Awards, organised by Studies in Design Education, Craft & Technology, Daniel Rodenhurst is pictured demonstrating his project, an egg dipping control device to HRH The Duke of Edinburgh (far right), international singing star Miss Petula Clark (2nd right), Chairman of Cirkit Holdings PLC Alistair MacDonald (3rd right) and Daniel's teacher Mr D. Morgan of the Maelor School of Wrexham. The final awards ceremony took place at Westminster School on 29th May.

