

Traditional Art Has an Important Role in Shaping Our Contemporary Identity

Research Brief by Sheri Majewski

Ellen Dissanayake is a leading scholar, author, and lecturer on art from Washington University. She elaborates on what we as art educators typically endorse, and I quote,

"For individuals, the arts display and even help to create a sense of identity and belonging. Additionally, they articulate and affirm personal and collective meaning, [and] build community..."

Dissanayake's statement underscores how art educators are in a position to realize the social opportunities for art making and the benefits that the arts offer to the individual and the community at large. This could not be more true when considering traditional arts that have unique cultural value and social contexts. I hope to discover through my research and practice, how the social environment is a powerful learning component at work in these traditional settings.

The world view and social construct that is rooted in indigenous cosmology and social order have historically been upset by globalization and popular culture that tends to diminish traditional culture over time.

In the Hawaiian Islands, this has been the case and has caused a great deal of cultural knowledge to be lost over the past two centuries. A particular instance of this happening is with the Hawaiian art form of kapa. Kapa is made through a process of pounding tree bark, called wauke, into sheets, which could then be used for multiple purposes. Kapa was standard women's work, back in the days before Western contact and modern textiles. The labor intensive production of kapa was fully integrated into the social order of Hawaiian life, as each woman produced kapa cloth for her own family in a setting where values and culture were perpetuated.

The loss of traditional kapa practice has caused a desire in some artists and cultural practitioners to reconstruct their knowledge about this art. The process of reconstruction has been to articulate cultural heritage that includes language, social life, and the arts.

Reviving this cultural treasure in Hawai'i not only ensures continuation of an ancient art form, but also the survival of ethnic identity.

In our current globalized world, art based on cultural identity synthesizes old practice with new perceptions. The preservation of kapa-making combined with creativity, has the potential to form new hybrids of art that move forward with the times.

Resources

Dissanayake, E. (2011). What is the (Adaptive) Value of Art? The Official Blog of the National Endowment for the Arts. Retrieved 4/21/2012 from <http://www.arts.gov/artworks/?p=8960>

Flores, J. (2002). Art and identity in the Mariana Islands: The reconstruction of 'ancient' Chamorro dance. In A. Herle, N. Stanley, K. Stevenson, R.L. Welsch (Eds.), *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning* (pp. 106-113). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.