



## Creatively Teaching Multicultural Art

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Can I teach art in a ways that makes my students take pride in their own cultural identity while gaining respect and appreciation for the art of other cultures? Those teaching in international schools are likely to have students with more diversity or at least more understanding of cultural diversity than an art teacher in a national school.

In North America, I frequently see school displays of projects based on tribal art of Native American Tribes. Some of these are dolls that are felt to have magic powers in their traditional settings. Some are totem pole projects that are copies of Native American Totems.

### **OWNERSHIP ISSUES**

Is it right to imitate what might be sacred or at least traditional in another culture? How do I teach art in a way that makes my students take pride in their own culture while gaining respect and appreciation for the art and customs of other cultures? Is imitation really flattery? Might there be more authentic ways to be creative while developing appreciation for the art forms and artworks of another culture? What does imitation teach about the role of artists? What should be the role of artists in today's world? What is critical thinking in art? Shouldn't we teach that artists interpret and create meaning rather than copy that which is already created?

### **WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING CONCEPTS?**

May I suggest some ideas about how we might teach about multicultural attitudes while teaching art with integrity? As a teacher, I must first familiarize myself with the intention of the "other" artist. In the case of the



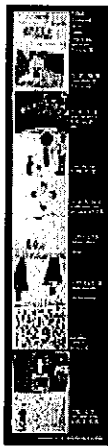
Northwest Native American Totem Pole maker, I must understand the role of the Totem pole as an identity symbol for the family or tribe that it represents. I must have some appreciation for the Totem's cultural role in helping tell the spiritual stories of the tribe's interdependence on nature, animals, and their deep respect for their ancestors. If I know the artist's intentions, I have prepared myself to motivate my students to create art based on similar intentions related to the culture of the students in my class.

Many art lessons are started by the teacher employing what is called image flooding. In image flooding the teacher shows many examples of completed work by artists and former students. I do not think much of image flooding because it works by giving many answers to the problem before the students have even considered the problem or worked at their own solution finding skills. Image flooding results in skillfully produced imitations, but does not teach much about problem finding and problem solving. Teachers who depend on image flooding may pride themselves on achieving skillfully slick student artwork, but I wonder whether students are learning how their art can create visual meaning and feeling in response to their own lives.

### USING WHAT WE OWN

In the approach I am suggesting, we might begin the lesson with some self-reflection. Who are we? Students individually list things important to their identities. Lists are not only words. Lists can be made with small sketches. Several groups made up of students with common interests might be formed in the class. The groups brainstorm and add things to their lists and sketches. They emphasize things that they can agree to represent themselves, "Who We Are and What We Like."

### SPECIFIC IDEAS



Youth culture has lots of popular arts, sports, pets, hobbies, music interests, brand names, clothing, hair styles, jewelry, foods, makeup, heroes, and so on that they can list. In some schools they might be encouraged to articulate values and beliefs. A particular classroom might have a very nationalistic group and a very international group. As a high school student, my social studies teacher encouraged me to be in a group to take a world government position against another group that took an isolationist position. We learned the arguments for each position. We didn't create a sculptural assemblage or a collage, but if it were an art project these would be logical outcomes.

Click the image for a larger view of it.

### CREATIVE COLLABORATION

For the art projects each group could work together to develop an assembled sculpture that would represent the important aspects of their particular set of interests, values, or beliefs. Media might be heavy paper or card stock that is

cut, folded, and glued into three dimensional forms to represent the symbols. Their colors, sizes, textures, shapes and their juxtapositions would help produce dominance and subordination of various inclusions. Artistically and aesthetically they should strive for unity with interesting variety.

### DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING AND CREATIVITY

I admire art teachers who discourage trite cliché symbols. These teachers do not give suggestions or answers when students are having problems. These teachers use questions that move students to invent experimental and expressive ideas. These teachers are pleased with a variety of unexpected outcomes. These teachers help students become independent critical thinkers, problem solvers, and self-assessors. When teachers make suggestions and answer student questions they may be teaching students to become dependent on “experts.” Students do not find the joy of thinking, researching, experimenting, and solving problems for themselves.

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When the groups complete the artworks, they could be given a writing guide and asked to write a statement or viewer’s guide articulating the work’s intentions. Other class members should be asked to respond without seeing the statement to point out what they first notice and explain why they notice it.

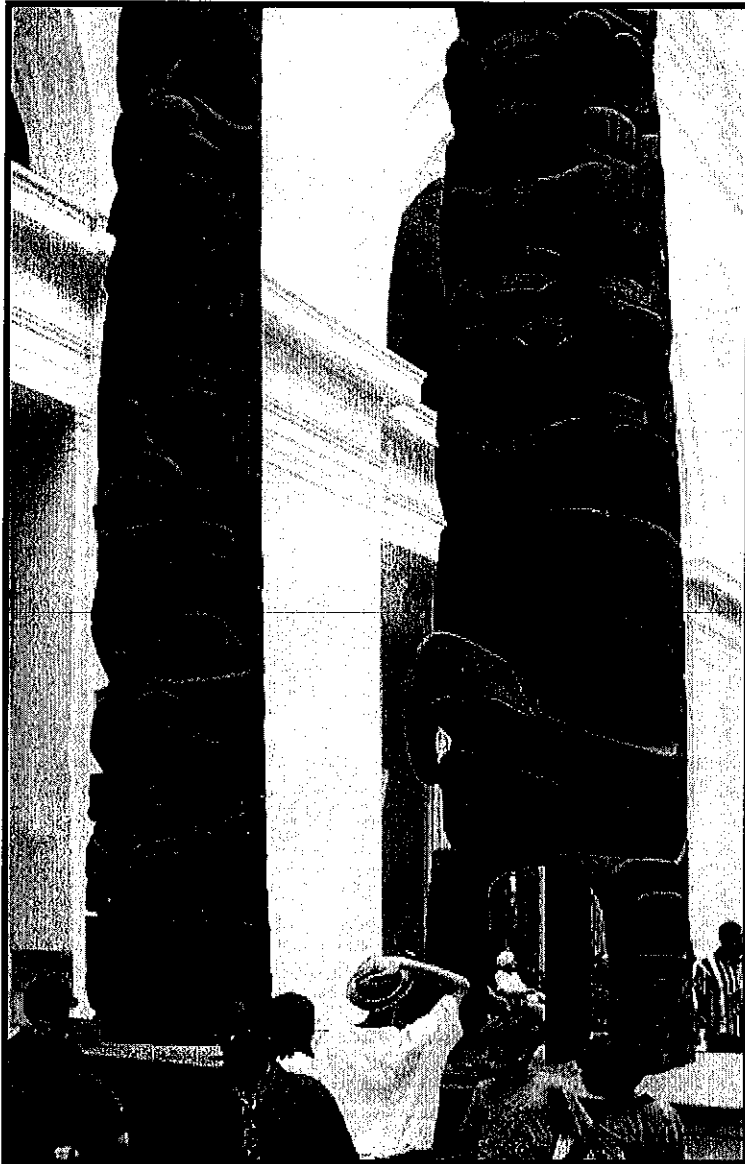
### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

Finally, near the end of the unit, the teacher should feel free to provide a lesson about Totem Poles. Think of it as image flooding at last. Students should now be able to respond to the teacher’s questions about the possible meanings of Totems within Native American culture. They will have a better appreciation for the how the artist must have struggled to decide on each part of the project.

Better yet, a group of students does research. They then write and present a drama they have written about being members of the culture. Their roles include art-makers and art-users in the selected culture. Art education research has shown that this method of learning art history and multicultural art is one of the favorites among high school students.

Detail of two  
Haidia Totem  
Poles on  
display in The  
Field Museum  
of Natural  
History,  
Chicago.  
photos by  
Marvin Bartel  
2000

A small  
complete  
view of the  
same totems  
is shown at the  
beginning of this



article.

### Totem Poles Tell of Human Wealth and the Power of Animal Spirits

**“Like European family crests, these totem poles herald prestigious clans among the Haida Indians of the Northwest Coast (of North America). Because food was abundant in their homeland, the Haida didn’t have to farm to survive. Instead they traveled, traded and waged war to increase their wealth. They built fine homes and held elaborate feasts called potlaches to advertise their prosperity and social rank. And, with iron tools gained through the fur trade with Europeans, they carved immense totem poles like these.**

**The Haida believed that a superior, spiritual animal world ruled their own. By letting themselves be hunted, animals fed human beings. And animals were the ancestors of all humans, as well as the founders of family clans. The carvings on these totem poles tell stories about the animal spirits who acted as guardians to the clan.” --- This educational text is copied**

from the decriptive plaque at the Field Musuem of Natural History, Chicago. June, 2000. -mb

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## IDENTITY AND EMPATHY

We live in an age of spectator sports and spectator culture. There is too much indiscriminate learning by imitation. By learning to be creators with integrity about ourselves and our own identities, we can better understand, empathize, and respect the honest efforts of those other than ourselves.

Scroll down to see one student's self-identity totem. It is created on 4 x 6 cards with markers.

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The image shows a vertical strip of four children's drawings, each with a handwritten caption and a printed text description to its right.

- Top drawing:** A drawing of a board game, possibly checkers, on a patterned surface.
  - Handwritten caption: "I like to play sports and board games."
  - Printed text: "Child's Drawings as a Totem"
- Second drawing:** A drawing of a person's face, possibly a child, with a textured background.
  - Handwritten caption: "I'm one year old. I just woke up from a nap."
  - Printed text: "I like to play sports and board games."
- Third drawing:** A drawing of a large fish, possibly a shark or a similar large fish, with a dark background.
  - Handwritten caption: "On this fishing trip I caught a three pound fish."
  - Printed text: "I'm one year old. I just woke up from a nap."
- Fourth drawing:** A drawing of two people playing soccer on a field. One person is kicking a ball towards a goal.
  - Handwritten caption: "I learned how to play soccer."
  - Printed text: "I learned how to play soccer."

Below the fourth drawing, there is another drawing of a circle with four small figures or objects around it, and a caption: "On my first day of kindergarten we got paper and drew." Below that is a drawing of a person and a soccer ball with the caption: "I joined my first soccer team."

back up to [thumbnail image and text](#)

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back to [top of article](#)

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Haida Tribe Information and Images can be found at these links

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[Virtual Museum of Canada](#). This is a project of the The Winnipeg Art Gallery,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
[http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/English/index\\_flash.html](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/English/index_flash.html)

An [essay](#) on the life of the Haida Tribe

Some [images](#) and information about the making of Haida Totems. This is  
a Washington State University site.

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[Online resources](#) about the Haida Tribe

<http://www.ipl.org/cgi/ref/native/browse.pl/t158>

[Links to other essays](#) by Marvin Bartel

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