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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1985 Volume VI: Time Machines: Artifacts and Culture

The Invented Kingdom, or What To Do When a Sixth Grade Class Is Giggling At An African Fertility Figure

Guide for Curriculum Unit 85.06.09
by Sandra Willard

This unit is a teaching device designed to introduce art work from cultures that are unlike any experienced by 5th-7th grade students. In order to study African art in depth and with serious intent, the students have to put aside their cultural bias. They have to develop an understanding of the culture that created the art. African art exists within its cultural context and cannot be understood without some preliminary groundwork in the study of the tribal life.

The device is a dialogue conducted by the teacher in which the class creates an imaginary culture that emulates an African culture. The use of a dialogue allows the class as a whole to participate in the development of an imaginary kingdom and ultimately to realize that the key to understanding the art of a culture is to understand the culture, and understanding the culture is a key to receptivity of its art.

This unit also contains a systematic approach to exploring the aesthetic and cultural aspects of an African artifact proposed by Jules Prown in his paper "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," Spring 1982 issue of "Winterthur Portfolio."

(Recommended for Visual Art classes, grades 5 through 7)

Key Words

West African Art Dogon Culture Teaching Principles Education Africa

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