



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1993 Volume IV: The Minority Artist in America

Visual Arts, Literary Arts, and Performing Arts: Their Connection and Place in America's Minority Culture

Curriculum Unit 93.04.06
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Introduction

The story of America's minority culture, is both long and varied. In fact, cultural members of at least one of America's minority groups were at one time, members of America's majority group, and in fact, its only ethnic group.

Long before the white man ever ventured to America, the Native Americans were here. Their history in this country can actually be traced back approximately 25,000 years to their ancient ancestors. The reason why this link can be made is because like most ethnic groups, the Native Americans had a rich, unique, and diverse cultural heritage. Through many ancient artifacts, mostly recovered in the Southwestern United States, the story of their life here in America can be told. Fortunately for us, the Native Americans, within their own communities, have learned to preserve and transfer their culture to others for many, many generations. This feat they were able to accomplish despite the fact that they had no formal written language.

Many thousands of years later, but before the arrival of Afro-Americans, the Spanish explorers began to find their way to our shores. With them came their culture, and because of navigational reasons, they settled in the southern part of the United States, the Caribbean Islands, and Central America instead of India. Once on the mainland shores of North America, they gradually migrated to the southwestern portion of the United States. Once settled there, these Spanish explorers found the Native American's culture and climate of the southwestern part of the United States, to be very similar to theirs. So, after many years of struggles, wars, and eventually slavery, of the Native Americans, the groups began to mix through marriage and before long, there was a sharing and mutual understanding and acceptance between the two groups.

These first two stories may be foreign to some, but virtually everyone knows of the plight and struggles of Afro-Americans here in America.

The last of America's minority groups to reach its shores, tells of a different story. Here, this group arrived not of their own free will, but rather forced through one of the cruelest punishments know to mankind ever, slavery. Different from the Native Americans who were original inhabitants of America, and still different from the Spanish who came of their own free will, Afro-Americans were forced under subhuman and horrible conditions, to work for the white men who purchased them, not as hired hands or indentured servants, but, as

slaves until they were either sold again, traded to another owner, or died. This type of slavery was much different from other types of slavery where the slaves were able to either work, buy, or marry their way free.

These three groups, America's cultural and ethnic minorities, are alike in so many ways, and yet, so different in many others. As pointed out previously, all three cultural groups presence in America was arrived at through different ways. The Native Americans, were always here, the Chicanos who are of Spanish descent, began to arrive here in the early sixteenth century, after many previous explorations by Columbus who sailed under the Spanish flag. Finally came the Afro-Americans, who began to arrive here in America as slaves in the early seventeenth century.

A second major difference among the groups has been their attitudes and goals with respect to assimilation with the mainstream culture. In this respect, the three groups can be divided into two.

The Native Americans and Chicanos have both preferred to stay within close knit communities away from mainstream American culture. The Native Americans have done this by choosing to stay on reservations or in homogeneous communities with members of their own tribe(s). The Chicanos, many of whom live in major cities and urban areas, still prefer to live within their own ethnic communities, thus preserving their festivals, foods, and culture. The Afro-Americans however, have chosen an "alternate route", they have tried unsuccessfully, to assimilate with mainstream America's culture, and have met obstacle after obstacle in this endeavor. This stumbling block happens to be one of the major similarities that all three groups have in common, their treatment and virtual ignorance by the mainstream culture has remained constant. It is here, at this point, that the three groups are similar whether they chose to be or not.

Purpose

The purpose of this unit will be, to explore the rich, varied, and yet full artistic culture of each of these three minority groups, Native Americans, Chicanos, and African Americans. This study will explore "art" through dance, music, literature, and many other different mediums. The unit will begin with an exploration of the Native American musical culture as seen through the eyes of the Pueblo Peoples, ("village dwellers") in particular, the Zunian people of western New Mexico. In the area of literature, I will focus in on a noted female Chicana writer, Sandra Cisneros. This exploration will be conducted using several of her works. Finally, I will explore Afro-American visual art as seen through the eyes and "brush" of Henry Ossawa Tanner.

This unit is specifically designed for the student population of my current teaching assignment at The Roberto Clemente Middle School. In this situation, I currently teach approximately 400 students in grades five through eight. Currently, our student population is approximately fifty-one percent Hispanic, forty-eight percent Afro-American, with one percent falling into the "other" category.

What I would like to accomplish by teaching this unit is, to develop pride and self-esteem for each of these groups within our school as well as an appreciation of other cultures by each of these minority groups. It is also anticipated that, (my) students will develop a deeper understanding for visual art, literary art, and performing art, and realize that although these three subjects are currently taught separately, there is an underlying theme or connection within all of the "arts". It is further anticipated that, students will become more knowledgeable about the world we live in, the circumstances that "minority groups" have in common and have had to face or overcome, and develop a general tolerance for a different or "foreign" culture group.

It is anticipated that teachers in the following disciplines could benefit from the creation of this unit: Visual Art, Music, English/Literature, and History/Social Studies. Other teachers of middle school students could also successfully initiate lessons based on the material given. Ideally, this unit is geared to the middle school child, but it could easily be adapted for elementary or high school students usage. This unit could be used at anytime of the school year and in any sequence of activities.

The three cultural groups will be discussed individually at first, then through the works or mediums of a representative cultural group or group member. The activities will be both intergrated and multicultural in nature.

The activities include teaching students skills in writing and communication. Students will be able to communicate to Native Americans by mail and learn significant portions of their culture in this manner. Students will also be able to explore through music and song, other aspects of their culture. Students will also be able to create a "Blues" based on the writings of Sandra Cisneros as well as create paintings based also on some of the themes mentioned in her writings. Lastly, students will view slides featuring the works of Henry O. Tanner, and write short stories or essays based on their themes.

I will begin my study with a look at America's territorial minority, the Native Americans.

Unit Conclusion

At first glance, it is hard to conceive how many contributions can be attributed to these three minority groups. If the entire "Hispanic" population of America is added, then the contributions by these same three minority groups increase more.

Not only have these groups contributed to America's art culture through visual arts, literary arts, and performing arts, but they have also made numerous contributions to creative arts such as drama, theatre, dance and acting.

The entertainment world would be quite different if minorities were still banned from participating, or still given only subordinate or non-essential roles, that often portrayed them as silly and uneducated. Minorities participate in the majority of the major sports in America, and are also important elements in America's, as well as their own native land(s) Olympic Team(s).

Politically, mainly through the effects of the Civil Rights Movement, many great leaders have emerged. Minorities now occupy many elected political offices, in addition to appointments to major political and court positions. All of these things have occurred, despite numerous attempts by mainstream America, to keep each of these minority groups down.

It is important to mention, that, even though gains have been made by minority group members, the gains have been minute in comparison to accomplishments and gains made by other ethnic groups. Throughout America's two-hundred and seventeen year history, each ethnic group has assumed its place, at the bottom of America's "melting pot." The tragedy with the three groups discussed in this unit, has been that, it has taken them a longer time to "rise up" from the bottom, and in terms of Afro-Americans particularly because of their skin color, they have only been allowed, to reach a certain height within the melting pot, and then, are pushed back down by either Anglo American's restrictions placed on them, or by gains made by other groups such as

Hispanics, which seem to push them past the place(s) occupied by AfroAmericans.

So clearly, mainstream culture is better because of the contributions made by The Pueblo People, Sandra Cisneros, and Henry O. Tanner. Their status within our society, has helped to make life easier for members of their own racial group(s) here in America.

Still, all in all, these three cultures, with both their similarities and differences, are connected to America's culture, and should have a place of prominence within our society. Given the struggles that these groups have already encountered, and the battles previously fought, (both won and lost), these minorities groups will always be apart of our society add -will continue to contribute to Anglo culture, whether they are welcome or not.

Appendix A.

Tribes of the Pueblo People(s).

The following are the tribes that make up the Pueblo People(s) who currently live in the southwestern part of the United States. The tribes are, The:

Taos

Picuris

Nambé

Tesuque

Cochiti

Jémez

Zia

Sandia

Hopi

Laguna

Acoma

Santa Clara

San Ildefonso

Santo Domingo

Santa Ana

San Juan and

Zu-i.

Appendix A2

Native American Publications of Interest

Southwestern Association on Indian Affairs

Box 1964

Santa Fe, N.M. 87501

Zu-i Tribal Newsletter

Zu-i, N.W. 87327

Ethnohistory, American Society for Ethnohistory

Amherst, N.Y. 14226

American Indian Crafts and Culture

Box 3538

Tulsa, Ok. 74152

Newsletter

Indian Council

150 Tremont St.

Boston, Ma. 02111

Native American Tribes and Reservations

“Pequot” Ledyard Station

New London County, Ct. 06339

Stonington

New London County, Ct. 06320

Native American Organizations

American Indian Club

Box 251

Willimantic, Ct. 05226

Save the Children Foundation

Boston Post Rd.

Norwalk, Ct. 06850

Association on Indian Affairs

432 Park Ave

N.Y. N.Y. 10016

Commission on Indian Affairs

1450 Western Ave.

Albany, N.Y. 12203

Southwestern Indian Organization

334 N. Rider

Pampa, Tx. 79065

(figure available in print form)

Appendix B

The Works of Sandra Cisneros.

The following are books written by Sandra Cisneros. These books could be used as reference, or with the activities designed around Ms. Cisneros's books by this unit. They are:

"Bad Boys," San Jose, Ca.: Mango Publications, 1980.

"The House on Mango Street," Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1985.

"My Wicked, Wicked Ways," Bloomington: Third World Press, 1987.

"Woman Hollering Creek and other stories," New York: Random House, 1991.

Appendix C

The following is a partial listing, of some of the major works of Henry Ossawa Tanner. They include:

“Harbor Scene” 1876

“The Banjo Lesson” 1893

“The Thankful Poor” 1894

“The Resurrection of Lazarus” 1896

“Portrait of the Artist’s Mother” 1897

“Portrait of Father, Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner” 1897

“The Annunciation” 1898

“Nicodemus visiting Jesus” 1899

“The Good Shepherd” 1902-1903

“Two Disciples at the Tomb” 1905-1906

“The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water” 1907

“Fishermen at Sea” 1913-1914

“Daniel in the Lions’ Den” 1914-1917

“Portrait of Booker T. Washington” 1917

“The Three Wise Men” 1925

“The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah” 1928

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