

a fine **FACTA**



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THE ALBERTA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

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MADD About Town

Editorial

Bonnie Cohoe

*Bonnie Cohoe is no stranger to teaching art, nor is she a stranger to Calgary. Her life circle started in Calgary and has included living in Halifax, Montreal, Saskatchewan and various places in Alberta. After life changes, including marriage and children, she has returned to her origins. Bonnie inspires, encourages and guides students as they create works of art that combine their imagination, skills, knowledge and individuality. Students in her classes have won local, provincial and national awards. Her passion helps others find joy in personal expression through art in a variety of media. She looks forward to renewing and making new connections with colleagues in the Calgary area and across the province in her roles as FAC art representative and editor of A Fine FACTA. The phrase *nodum in auge* (“not yet famous”) inspires her journey, for herself and for her students.*

Just as spring is declaring its arrival with daffodils and spring snowstorms, my duty as editor of this journal requires me to look ahead to the Fine Arts Council (FAC) annual conference, which will mark the transition from fall to winter, and its theme of timeless arts.

We begin this issue of *A Fine FACTA* with a review of our conference last fall, a truly memorable and worthwhile event for all who took part. Then, we invite you to Conference 2010, to be held this November in Calgary. We look forward to seeing as many of you there as possible. Please watch the Fine Arts Council website (<http://fac.teachers.ab.ca>) for updates and registration information.

We then move on to the task of developing artists who produce timeless art. Shelley Robinson’s article

serves as a guide for evaluating the effectiveness of our art programs. Karen Schweighardt describes how art enhances the rest of the curriculum at her school. The next three pieces are all by Lindsay Krzepakowski. Her article on the Royal Tyrrell Museum’s Prehistoric Arts Contest shows how to spark interest in paleontology—through art by the young, with themes older than even their oldest teachers. The article on the Calgary Stampede Showband reminds us that the fine arts contribute to cultural events—even events like the Stampede—while developing the musical skills and enthusiasm of young people. The piece on the First Calgary Savings Mentorship Program with Theatre Junction describes a mentoring program for today’s youth who wish to become tomorrow’s theatrical performers or behind-the-scenes workers. This article reminds us that, at one time, most artists were mentored by other artists, a way to encourage memorable art and memorable artists.

We conclude with Part 1 of an article by John W Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen on spirituality and art in the Aboriginal context. (Part 2 will appear in the next issue.) After an introduction by Lindsay Krzepakowski, this article explores the relationship between traditional Aboriginal spirituality and the purpose and production of Aboriginal art. It invites us to consider how spirituality could influence the work of other artists.

We invite you to submit ideas, articles or feedback on what you read and see in *A Fine FACTA*, or to let us know how you are involved in the arts in your area.

We wish you a relaxing, rewarding and refreshing summer.

Conference 2009 Highlights

Conference 2009: “Arts Education on the Move: Worlds United,” held October 29–31 in Kananaskis, was a great success from start to finish. The more than 100 delegates found inspiration as they listened to the keynote speakers, including playwright Marty Chan, fine arts specialists Lauren Gannon and Linda Dudar, and Alberta Education fine arts curriculum manager Katherine Deren. They participated in more than 35 sessions—acting, dancing, painting, drawing, weaving, drumming and exploring many other forms of the arts. With such a wide variety of sessions, it was difficult to choose which ones to attend. All were inspirational and practical, and they provided us with materials and ideas to take back to our classrooms.

Up Your Kilt, the president’s reception on Thursday evening, set the tone for the conference as delegates

socialized with old friends and new, and enjoyed good food and dancing.

The sessions filled our day, but many still found time to browse the wonderful student artwork and the displays from arts-related vendors.

On Friday evening, following our business meeting, we enjoyed the Island Fever dance. (Arts educators like to have fun!) Many happy delegates took home great door prizes.

Special thanks go to conference director Naomi McQuaid and her amazing planning committee, whose hard work and dedication helped make this conference so successful.

With such wonderful weather, the beautiful location and many great sessions, we truly were inspired to go back to our classrooms with “Worlds United.”



*The hard-working conference committee (and friends)
at the Island Fever dance*

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Handbells session



*Bonnie Cohoe
(art rep and
journal editor)
and Kelly Van
Sluys (dance rep)
at Up Your Kilt*

*African
drumming*



*David Fettes (president) and
Naomi McQuaid (conference
director) at Up Your Kilt*

*Fun
at the
Island
Fever
dance*



Conference 2010

“An Era to Remember: Timeless Arts”

November 12–14

Delta Calgary South, Calgary

Where ageless mountains frame a city rushing into tomorrow, your spirit can sing gloriously and dance magnificently as dramatic sessions and art adventures expand your mind and your senses.

Your dedicated Conference 2010 committee is working hard to bring you a fantastic experience at the Delta Calgary South, in Calgary, November 12–14.

Registration information will be available soon. Please watch the Fine Arts Council website (<http://fac.teachers.ab.ca>) for further information.

This year the \$250 registration fee includes all meals, snacks (including a smoothie bar), and a Fantastic Friday evening reception with good food and music.

We look forward to learning, sharing and celebrating the arts with you in November.

Our hope is to hold next year’s conference in the north, which will be possible if we can find more volunteers from the Edmonton region and potential organizers in the area. With your help and support, it can happen.



Arts-ful Features

How Do We Know When Students Are Benefiting from the Arts? A Personal Response Supporting Advancing Arts Programs

Shelley Robinson



Shelley Robinson is the assistant principal of the Calgary Science School, and from 1998 to 2005 she was an English coordinator, a fine arts coordinator and a curriculum facilitator with Rocky View Schools. She has taught music (at Mount Royal University) since 1983, and K–12

fine arts (music, drama and art) and humanities (English and social studies) since 1988. In 2007, she earned a PhD in curriculum, teaching and learning from the University of Calgary.

*A*fter writing the literature review *Promising Practices and Core Learnings in Arts Education* (Robinson 2008) and then reviewing Alberta Education's draft K–12 arts education curriculum framework,¹ I pose the following questions: What is our essential goal as educators when offering the arts in public education? And how do modular programs compare with advancing programs (which require some prerequisite skills) in achieving this goal?

What seems most natural for me when considering these questions is to personalize my understanding of what both documents raise as key values in the arts. Although my personal experiences and conclusions cannot be generalized to all who have experienced the arts in education, they may resonate with some.

The further away I get from my own experience as a student of the arts in my formative schooling (predominantly curricular and extracurricular music, with some exposure to art and drama), the more I ask myself, *What*

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did I learn and retain from my formative schooling in the arts? What made it engaging and powerful enough for me to believe that I could enjoy and succeed in the arts back then, and have enough confidence to participate in and appreciate the arts throughout my lifetime? I believe that this question of engagement and sustainability is woven throughout most of the research on successful programs and experiences in the arts.

Much of the literature on the fine arts is concerned with their impact on cognition and the various learning domains (affective, connotative, spiritual, kinesthetic), as well as their benefits to learning as a whole:

Social scientists have postulated that students who participate in the fine arts tend to experience greater academic achievement and are less likely to have social, emotional, or behavioral problems. . . . Music, painting, dance, and drama have been cited as essential to academic and emotional development. (Respress and Lutfi 2006, 24)

There are many findings that indicate that the arts promote positive learning experiences and critical and creative thinking across the subject areas. As Eisner (2002, 4) writes, “The arts have an important role to play in refining our sensory system and cultivating our imaginative abilities . . . and provide a kind of permission to pursue qualitative experience in a particularly focused way and to engage in the constructive exploration of what that imaginative process may engender.”

There is less research on *how* we teach the arts, and on which methods are most engaging and hold the greatest potential for achieving the indicators of success now and into the future in the various fine arts disciplines.²

What seems most valuable to me is to get to the essence of the arts. Elliot Eisner has been writing on this topic for almost three decades. True and deep fine arts experiences, he says, “provide permission to engage the imagination as a means for exploring new possibilities. The arts liberate us from the literal; they enable us to step into the shoes of others and to experience vicariously what we have not experienced directly” (Eisner 2002, 10).

When we are “authentically engaged” (Schlechty 2002, 5) in the powerful rush of the “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) of an experience, we encounter something very special. We embody creativity in new ways and we become present, intentional and, in some cases, lost to the incredible focus required by the

experience. While there, we can lose track of all time and external distractions.

After being in the grips of playing the piano, where I achieve flow best, I have found myself thinking, *Hey, I like this experience! How do I do it again?* And as an educator, I have asked myself, *How can I recreate this special state of mind and spirit with my students through the arts?*

Here I get to the crux of the point I wish I had expanded upon more in the *Promising Practices* research (Robinson 2008). The experiences where I achieved flow were those where I (1) participated fully, (2) rigorously and (3) creatively, with (4) a solid skill base and (5) ongoing feedback from significant “connoisseurs” (Eisner 2002), as well as (6) multiple opportunities and time to learn the language of the discipline. It is in such experiences that I was most influenced by the arts. That place is where I have returned over and over again as a pianist, an accompanist, a composer and a member of the audience—and, now, as the mother of a musician.

In contrast, I have also had fleeting and rudimentary arts-and-crafts *experiments* with fine arts “technicians.” (I have some awkward memories of working with clay, doing oil painting and acting.) I was entertained for the duration of each experience; however, I came away from them feeling unsatisfied and, more often, a bit inadequate.

Only where I have had substantial skill and confidence have I been carried away by the flow of the experience. Stumbling over rudimentary skills breaks my flow. Some might argue that I am passionate about music because that is where my talent lies. I would respond by saying that in other disciplines where I have less talent (such as writing and drawing), I have nevertheless been capable of moving into a higher learning state (flow) with sufficient mentorship. Again, it was only where I was able to develop a working level of competence and confidence through (1) sufficient engagement, (2) repetition and rehearsal, (3) an ever-expanding gradation of learning targets and (4) multiple forms of feedback that I came to see myself as an aspiring artist (or at least participant) in that discipline. Creative thinking (Gregory 2005) and creative problem solving (Sousa 2003) *can* be taught.

Therefore, I would postulate that authentic, rich, ever-advancing fine arts programs provide students with the *opportunity* to love the arts. We may not ever be able

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to teach students the love of the arts as we experience it, but we can foster creative environments for it, model it, hook students into it and embrace all aspects of it (Robinson 2009). At the least, we need to encourage a respect for the arts so that students will be “ritually engaged,” and this can lead to “authentic engagement” (Schlechty 2002). With a strong art foundation and proper training, students who are initially reluctant to learn might open their creative doors in the future when they find their own meaning and voice.

Finally, students can sense when they are in the presence of real artists. There is an awe and wonderment that captivates them, and they appreciate the passion and the critical eye (or ear) of artists who know the discrete and sophisticated language of the discipline. An arts program that involves inserting a series of curriculum outcomes into isolated islands of experience (modules) lacks continuity and breadth, and pseudo-arts experiences, with teachers only hosting programs, hold less magic and less potential for students to truly love the arts.

Therefore, we need to help schools to both foster multiple entry points in solid school arts programs (as described above) and develop programs that allow students to pursue higher levels of achievement over time. These programs need to be led by capable fine arts teachers who can knowledgeably collaborate with other teachers (in the fine arts and in other content areas) to build the profile of arts in the school and begin to seamlessly infuse the arts into all areas of teaching and learning.

Notes

1. See <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/program/finearts/program-updates.aspx> (accessed May 12, 2010).
2. For the indicators of success in fine arts programs, see Robinson (2008, 29-31).

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Learning Through Arts-Based Activities at St Philip Fine Arts School

Karen Schweighardt

At St Philip Fine Arts School, in Calgary, the focus is on learning Alberta curriculum through arts-based activities. Our teachers are mostly elementary generalists who are becoming very adept at engaging students in curriculum outcomes by designing engaging projects. As staff members, we have developed our own arts skills through the activities we have participated in and brought to our students.

Four years ago, our school officially received the fine arts designation. We have always had teachers on staff with many talents in many areas, and we have always been backed by an administration that values arts projects. With this fine arts designation, we really had the chance to become a fine arts school.

We began by choosing a focus for each term. Our first theme was “Time.” This broad theme allowed teachers to choose curriculum outcomes they wanted to develop in creative ways. We have since had many themes, including “Canada,” “Play” and “Earth.” Having a theme for the whole school allows us to create beautiful displays of our classroom work that are coordinated throughout the school. We often make a tour brochure that explains the curriculum fit with our theme.

One of our favourite themes was “Heroes.” This culminated in a school musical called *The Hero in Us*

All, which celebrated the many kinds of heroism and, most important, the everyday things we do to help make the world a better place. This theme also made for a bright visual and interactive display that unified the look of the whole school.

Our professional development is often based on arts experiences to help teachers become involved in art forms they may not have much experience in. We have had sessions on felt art, mosaic art, drama games, drama curriculum integration, physical theatre, visual journalling, photography and the potter’s wheel. All of these experiences help us become better arts teachers for our students.

Another component of our arts-based program is the use of professional artists in all the disciplines. We regularly bring in performers so that students can learn about the world around them through the arts. How lucky are students who are regularly exposed to professional performances! They come to see the arts as something that can be shared by all, as well as a viable career option.

To fund artist residencies in our school, we use fundraising, Alberta Foundation for the Arts grants and a program fee paid by parents. We have had many guest artists in our school who work with teachers to help us teach the Alberta curriculum. These residencies have

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been key in helping students and teachers develop their skills as learners and artists. Again, students regularly see talented adults who work in the arts and who model a passion for lifelong learning.

Our school has a fine arts committee made up of teachers and administrators who are interested in planning our school themes and events. A lot of brainstorming occurs at these meetings, and much of our planning comes from the seeds planted there. This year we decided to make more visible the curriculum outcomes being learned through the arts.

Long before we became a fine arts school, we began holding arts afternoons, where the children were cross-graded and chose an activity from a descriptor. This was a way of planning options for arts learning at the elementary level. But these afternoons were not necessarily integrated with the curriculum, nor were the curriculum outcomes clearly stated.

We decided to have three sessions for which each teacher planned arts-integration activities that the students chose. During these sessions, students were actively engaged in many interesting projects, and their learning was recorded in their own words. The learning

outcomes were clearly stated and discussed. Teachers chose outcomes from various areas of the curriculum that they wanted to address. We displayed our projects and our learning outside our classrooms during March interview time. It was very interesting to wander around and read the students' own reflections about their learning.

The projects at the Grade 4 level were as follows:

- Jest for Fun—Students learned about medieval times through drama, dance and music. The learning outcomes were from English language arts, physical education, drama and music.
- Play On—Students learned about medieval times through scriptwriting, improvisation and putting on a drama. The learning outcomes were from English language arts and drama.
- Medieval Keepsake—Students learned about geometric concepts by creating two- and three-dimensional shapes with their bodies and by creating a five-sided pentomino keepsake. They also modelled from artist M C Escher when making their pentominoes. The learning outcomes were from math, physical education and art.



Prehistoric Arts Contest at the Royal Tyrrell Museum

Lindsay Krzepkowski

Every year schoolchildren from around Alberta travel to Drumheller to visit the Royal Tyrrell Museum. When we imagine these visits, we see children receiving paleontological information, digging for dinosaur bones and learning about the prehistoric eras highlighted at the museum. In addition to all this, however, children can take part in the museum's annual Prehistoric Arts Contest. For 10 years, the contest has sought to integrate art and paleontology.

"It's an opportunity for students to learn more about what we do at the museum," says Earle Wiebe, head of education. "We know from our past entrants and winners that the Prehistoric Arts Contest is a great way to spark children's interest in paleontology."

The contest is promoted to schools throughout Alberta and the rest of Canada—and even throughout the world. Wiebe says that teachers often integrate the contest into art or science classes, and offer it as a marked assignment. Some schools even use the artwork for fundraising, by producing note cards and calendars to be sold to parents and other community members.

The contest includes age categories from kindergarten through high school. An average of 2,000 entries

are submitted per year, including pencil drawings, pastels and canvas paintings, among others. Each year the contest closes on **December 31**.

The 2009/10 contest winners were recently announced. You can view the winning student artwork at www.tyrrellmuseum.com/media/P.A.C_2010_web.pdf.

This art contest is an example of how art contributes to a child's development. "This contest is a great opportunity for children to develop and enhance their artistic skills. [It] allows kids to think creatively about paleontology," says Wiebe. "Children can learn more about science in a fun way. Some science may not be a favourite, but kids can use art to learn more about science in a different format."

The contest also illustrates the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. "The Prehistoric Arts Contest combines art and science in a way that's been done historically—artists and scientists working together. Put these two groups together and we have amazing reactions."

For more information, visit www.tyrrellmuseum.com/programs/school/prehistoric_arts_contest.htm.

Calgary Stampede Showband

Lindsay Krzepkowski

Mike Jewitt sees himself as passing the torch of the Calgary Stampede Showband—from one performer to the next.

Jewitt began performing with the show band when he was in Grade 11. He spent five years with the group, performing around the world—and he is now marking 16 years of involvement.

His latest role is director of bands. As director, he's responsible for all aspects of the Calgary Stampede Showband, A Band of Outriders (the alumni band) and the Calgary Round-Up Band (for junior high students).

“Many of the people working with the Calgary Stampede Showband were [involved as] students themselves—and we get to give back to the students of today's generation,” says Jewitt. “We know that we're involved in making students into great and talented artists. It's very rewarding, and a reason why so many students come back later in their lives.”

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, the Calgary Stampede Showband involves more than 100 students in delivering exceptional musical experiences to Stampede attendees. The band was formed in 1970 to represent the Stampede and Calgary through local youth musicians, and it first performed at the 1971 Stampede. Today it has grown to include a marching band, a choir, chamber groups and a winter guard line.

The recruitment process begins in late May or early June of each year, when the band gets an opportunity to review the students who are looking to join. Once

auditions are complete, rehearsals begin at the end of August, and in early fall the band rehearses weekly, with one weekend camp per month geared to team-building and creating cohesion within the group.

Late fall is dedicated to gearing up for the busy Christmas season, when the young musicians perform small concerts throughout the city. In 2009, the band also participated in the Grey Cup parade.

From January, the time is spent gearing up for the Stampede in July and all its responsibilities. Following the Stampede, the band starts travelling, often to Europe for international competitions and performances.

“More than 100 students are involved in the show band, and it's a full-year commitment,” says Jewitt. “Students who are involved in the show band need to be able to manage their time and deal with a gruelling schedule—and they continue to amaze us every year.”

The ultimate goal of the Calgary Stampede Showband is to provide a setting where students can learn more about themselves and the arts, develop their skills and confidence, and become the best version of themselves.

“Beyond the musical side of things, the show band offers camaraderie, family and a sense of belonging that can be tough to achieve when you're in high school,” says Jewitt. “Students learn about their role as an individual, and how they can make a difference and impact the broader group with their performance and commitment.”

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Jewitt says that students participating in the band are taught values, and they benefit from educational structure—core building blocks of learning through the arts. The focus is on developing ways to blend educational and artistic experiences for students.

“Most of our staff have educational or development backgrounds, which allows us to think of the ways that we can keep enhancing experiences for the students that participate in the Calgary Stampede Showband,” says Jewitt. “On a daily basis I’m constantly thinking about how I blend all of this together, are the kids getting the highest educational value, and how can we teach better and more efficiently?”

The impact of participating in the band—not to mention performing each year for 1.2 million people—has a lasting impression on students.

“The show band creates a place for students to come together for a common goal and promote western heritage and values,” says Jewitt. “The skills instilled by participating in our programs [include] communication skills, perseverance and time management. You watch these kids develop into incredible people. It’s really truly special to watch and be a part of.”

For more information, visit www.stampedeshowband.com.



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Until recently, Mike Jewitt was the music director at École Fairview School, in Calgary. Prior to teaching at Fairview, he was one of two music directors at Dr E P Scarlett High School, in Calgary, where he taught instrumental, choral and jazz studies; he was also an active clinician, working in both Australia and Canada. He holds a bachelor of music degree from the University of Calgary and a graduate bachelor of education degree from the Queensland University of Technology, in Brisbane, Australia. He is also an alumnus of the Golden Rams music program at Central Memorial High School, in Calgary.

Over the past 14 years, Mike has been involved extensively with the Bands of Calgary in a variety of roles, from performer to instructional staff. His marching career began with the Calgary Round-Up Band in 1992, and he has since performed with the Calgary Stetson Show Band, the Calgary Stampede Showband and A Band of Outriders. Mike has also played various roles on the instructional staff for these bands.

After three years as director for the Calgary Stetson Show Band and two years as a marching instructor for the Calgary Stampede Showband, Mike recently accepted the full-time position of associate director of bands with the Stampede Showband.



Theatre Junction and First Calgary Savings Mentorship Program

Lindsay Krzepkowski

Behind the scenes of such Theatre Junction performances as *7 Important Things*, *The Country* and *The Spaghetti Western Orchestra*, you'll find all the people who make a production come to life.

Look a little more closely, and you'll notice that some of those people are students. These young people are part of the First Calgary Savings Mentorship Program with Theatre Junction, which takes 16 students from Calgary-area high schools and involves them in a year-long program learning various aspects of theatre life.

"We run a series of workshops throughout the school year, taught by our resident company of artists at Theatre Junction," says Erin Jenkins, education coordinator. "This includes working with actors, writers, musicians—people with many talents and perspectives."

The partnership began more than 10 years ago, as part of the local credit union's commitment to developing the arts in Calgary.

"For us, this program is a really good match—the pairing of education and lifelong learning, and arts and culture," says Dani Deboice, manager of corporate citizenship with First Calgary Savings. "We're committed to creating a vibrant community for Calgarians. For the students who participate in this program, we're creating engaged citizens who want to be part of creating this vibrant city."

The recruitment process begins with the theatre company sending brochures to all schools in Calgary and surrounding areas, followed by in-class presentations about the program. Jenkins then meets one-on-one with interested students to discuss the program and their interest in the arts. Students submit a letter about themselves, along with an artistic representation of who they are—be it a painting, a song, a video or a collage. The theatre company is looking for students who are enthusiastic and passionate about theatre, not necessarily those who are theatre experts.

"During their mentorship year, we match students with our resident company of artists, to provide one-on-one support throughout the program," says Jenkins. "These instructors also teach workshops, where students learn everything from writing text, acting skills, set design, production, directing and dance movement workshops. It's really broad."

Students paired with mentors get to job-shadow, work with stage managers, take part in open rehearsals and more.

"The resident company of artists really enjoy working with the students and love to teach what they know and love," says Deboice. "The artists get to directly impact the futures of the next generation of artists."

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Deboice says that the mentorship program is a key partnership for First Calgary Savings, and employees have the opportunity to engage in the program.

“We are able to attend performances, meet the students involved in the program and see how the program makes a huge difference to those participating,” says Deboice. “We get to see the active engagement of our mentors and mentees, and how we are contributing to a student’s future.”

The program benefits students in multiple ways. “Many of our students are those who are considering pursuing a career in the fine arts, and we hope to give them the tools to work with,” says Deboice. “Even if students don’t choose to pursue a career in the arts, we hope to give them an appreciation for

theatre, to [allow them to] meet like-minded people, and [to help them] build relationships and their confidence.”

Ultimately, the goal of the program is to inspire future generations of performers. “We’re looking to teach people about the arts and hope to build further appreciation of contemporary theatre. The people we meet are really amazing and incredibly talented, intelligent and artistic,” says Jenkins. “After all, we’re creating future theatre professionals and audiences. It benefits us to encourage young people in continuing their careers in theatre.”

For more information, please visit www.1stcalgary.com/Personal/CorpCitizenship/CommPrograms/TheatreJunction/ or www.theatrejunction.com.



Art and Spirituality

Lindsay Krzepkowski

The impact of art on students' learning has been well documented, and we know that art is an integral part of the educational experience. What's less clear is the role that art and spirituality play in the lives of those who experience them.

John W Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen, of the University of Calgary, have written an article discussing the neglected link between Aboriginal art and spirituality. "Aboriginal Art and Spirituality: A Neglected Link" will appear in *A Fine FACTA* in two parts, starting in this issue.

The authors outline the four bases of art: technical, simple aesthetics, ideographic and sacred. The first two categories pertain to form (art for art's sake), while ideographic (or pictographic) art has the goal of sharing stories or cultural tales. Sacred art best describes the traditional art of the North American Aboriginal peoples, who expressed spiritual relation and obligation through their art.

Traditional Aboriginal art was characterized by the symbolism of its design, which was meant for the use, benefit and appreciation of the wearer or user. With European contact, a major transformation of Indigenous art took place. New materials (such as ribbons, beads, cones and dyes) were brought in, replacing the materials and muted colours of the past.

Key to traditional Aboriginal spirituality was the belief that the earth is the spiritual epicentre for activities and being—that all of

the planet's creatures and inhabitants play an integral role. Spirituality was integrated into daily life: there were no Sunday-only spiritual journeys. In fact, spirituality was seen as constituting life itself.

With the current return in society to prayer, reflection and spirituality, there are lessons to be learned from traditional Aboriginal spirituality—and, indeed, its various art forms.



Aboriginal Art and Spirituality: A Neglected Link (Part I)

John W Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen



Through many visits to Aboriginal communities, from Alberta and Saskatchewan to Texas (including 14 visits to the Native American southwest), researchers John W Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen have pursued their interest in Plains Indian and Métis history. Their special interests include art, education, Aboriginal spirituality and theology, and Aboriginal legends. Their scholarly repertoire includes teaching, conducting workshops and publishing. John is a professor in the Graduate Division of Educational Research and Virginia is an instructor in the Faculty of Communication and Culture, both at the University of Calgary.

They extended symbolic thinking to many everyday acts; for example, when a woman did some bead-work or painted a skin bag to beautify it, the designs she used were given names suggesting hidden meanings and sometimes ideas of deep religious import. (Wissler 1966, 110)

For North America's traditional Aboriginal peoples, spirituality and art were intimately linked. They believed that art could be used to make visible the

spiritual elements of a way of life; the arts were also an avenue for expressing one's respect for the earth and the spiritual mysteries of the universe. It could be argued that our society today could benefit from exploring and incorporating elements of this world view—in the realm of art and beyond.

Theories of Art

Freeland (2001, xvii), a professor of the philosophy of art, outlines various theories of art, including ritual theory, formalist theory, imitation theory, expression theory, cognitive theory and postmodern theory. Difficulty arises, however, when a specific art form cannot immediately be interpreted through the channels of a single theory. This is particularly true of current Aboriginal art, because it has had a variety of influences, from colonialism to postmodern developments. Traditional Aboriginal art, while it may seem easier to categorize, no longer exists in pure forms.

Gebhard (1974, 9) outlines four bases of art: (1) technical, (2) simple aesthetics, (3) ideographic and (4) sacred. The first two categories, technical and aesthetic, pertain to form—art for art's sake.

Ideographic (or pictographic) art is intended to tell a tale or relate an episode of history. This art form is therefore instrumental as an avenue of expression and a vehicle for cultural maintenance. Analyzing an ideographic work should help viewers gain clarity about or enhanced appreciation of specific cultural aspects, such as beliefs and values.

The fourth category, sacred art, perhaps best describes traditional Aboriginal art. This category poses some difficulty unless it is understood that the original inhabitants of North America believed that every behavioural enactment, including art, had spiritual implications. In fact, their works of art were often expressions of spiritual relation and obligation. Understanding Aboriginal art, then, requires delving into their spiritual beliefs.

Traditional Aboriginal Spirituality

The First Peoples viewed the universe as an inter-related entity with all parts and processes closely

intertwined. Its workings were to be honoured in all human activities, and interfering with one component would affect the others. As part of this interconnectedness, spiritual power was not limited to human beings. It was believed that spirits infused everything—even inanimate objects. Animals, birds, fish and plants were all considered to possess spirits with which humans could communicate. The Aboriginal peoples did not regard lightly the diversity of creation, because the interrelationships of these various entities were considered complex.

Traditional Aboriginal societies regarded the earth as a foundation for spiritual activities and even for being itself. Mother Earth was the provider and caregiver, the sustainer of life. As Paula Gunn Allen (1986, 119) describes it,

The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really a place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies; the witchery makes us believe that false idea. The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us, nor is it to be considered an inert resource on which we draw in order to keep our ideological self functioning, whether we perceive that self in sociological or personal terms.

Walters (1989, 18) writes,

To the Indians, all life is sacred, part of the infinitely renewable cycle that permeates and defines their cosmology. A critical element in this cycle is their relationship with the land—their reverence for Mother Earth. . . . They viewed themselves as caretakers of a realm that defied individual ownership and, more important, was beyond value.

Thus, the earth was perceived as a unity in which the individual played only a small part. The role of people was to be good stewards of the resources available to them, and to show respect and appreciation in every human enactment—including art.

Aboriginal Art as Sacred Art

Traditional Aboriginal artists did not see their cultural obligations as being separate from their spiritual obligations. The concept of interconnectedness, so

deeply embedded in Aboriginal thought, mandated that people were spiritually accountable for their every thought and action. Creating art for art's sake or engaging in purely technical acts would clearly violate this belief.

Thus, although traditional Aboriginal art would generally be considered representational, it was much more than that. All drawings, designs and other forms of artistic expression (whether embedded on rocks, teepees, clothing or war axes) were indicative of something—but they also had spiritual implications.

Artistic designs on everyday items were not intended for the aesthetic enjoyment of others; rather, their symbolism was intended as a reminder of deeper truths to the user. Thus, designs were positioned for the user to see, not others (Ewing 1982, 20). This was true of decorated moccasins, birchbark dishes, wooden bowls, pipe bags, drums, woven bags, flutes and other items. The Iroquois, for example, carved effigies on pipes that were directed toward the smoker. Smoke was believed to be a kind of incense or intermediary avenue by which to connect with the spirit world, and the effigy represented the individual's guardian spirit. Therefore, it behoved the smoker to maintain as close a connection to the effigy as he could.

Although sacred in focus, traditional Aboriginal art was not without technical awareness or embellishment. The cosmological principle of balancing antithetical elements was hinted at subtly in the asymmetrical use of colour in decorative designs on formal clothing. Contrasting colours could be used on either side of otherwise symmetrical designs, or pairs of designs might alternate colours (Penney 2004, 67). Interestingly, Blackfoot male artists, for example, usually painted life forms related to war or hunting, while women created geometric designs such as borders, boxes, hourglasses or feathered circles.

Moreover, art could imply a multiplicity of meanings among the First Peoples of Canada. The artistically decorated garments of the Plains Indians, for example, symbolized community identity, but they could also be used to express personal wealth and accomplishment.

The Aboriginal concept of the god of the universe, the Creator or Great Spirit, did not provide for any notion of the supreme being as a personal friend, protector or comforter; rather, the Creator was regarded from a distance and with awe. Thus, the First Peoples saw their works of art and craft as originating from

what they had been shown in dreams and visions, which were somehow connected to the Creator. Something about the form and decoration of each item always moved the user to a point beyond its earthly purpose (Mails 1997, 5).

Aboriginal Art: Influences and Evolution

Contact with the Europeans brought about a major transformation of Aboriginal art. The fur trade introduced brightly coloured glass beads, silk ribbons, rolled copper, tinned cones and aniline dyes that replaced the more pastel pigments. Aboriginal women adopted European methods of weaving and needlework, manipulating them to suit the needs of their people. The introduction of beadwork enabled a greater variety of artwork because beads were easier to work with than materials such as porcupine quills.

Also, European contact brought about a shift in the placement of designs on everyday items. As discussed earlier, in traditional Aboriginal art, designs had symbolic import for the user and were, therefore, positioned so that the user could see them. According to the European view, decorative designs should be placed in view of others, so that they could be admired for their aesthetics.

The arrival of explorers, fur traders and settlers motivated many Aboriginal artisans to adapt their craft to meet the demands of trade and, later, tourism. For example, the widespread use of whole animal skins as containers all but disappeared after the First Peoples acquired steel pots and were exposed to a variety of European pouches and bags. Parfleches, beautifully decorated envelope-like pouches with triangular flaps, became popular among the Delaware, Shawnee and Cherokee tribes. These pouches were desirable items of exchange among First Nations bands and were frequently found far from their place of origin.

Many of the materials introduced had no prototype in traditional Aboriginal culture. New products translated into art forms required new and often manufactured visions and interpretations. Some new art forms were simply copies or downgraded versions of traditional forms, but were entirely devoid of tradition or spiritual overtones.

Newcomers and visitors generally were not able to differentiate between valid traditional Aboriginal art forms and those that were invented and produced strictly for the emerging market. This shows the creative genius of Aboriginal cultures, although informed observers might interpret it as a weakening rather than a shift of traditional belief systems.

The introduction of the reservation system also affected Aboriginal art. The sedentary lifestyle eliminated the need for many traditional forms of interaction. Warfare was virtually abolished, thereby affecting the decoration of weapons such as shields and war clubs; hunting became a minor activity, reducing pride in hunting tools. The vision quest also became less important. Military societies were disbanded, and what remained of ceremonial life was transported underground.

Alfred Young Man (1992, 81) posits that it is virtually impossible to comprehend the meaning of Aboriginal art unless one understands the arguments that rage around it. He insists that when judging Aboriginal art, an Aboriginal perspective should be applied, rigidly and boldly, and should be made an integral part of the various critical, analytical and historical instruments that make up the lexicon of art.

This is particularly necessary whenever the edges of the Aboriginal art world rub against those of dominant society. Some are reluctant to acknowledge that Aboriginal cultures, like any others, are apt to change with the times. The perspective seems to be that dominant society is expected to change, but Aboriginal cultures are best left as they are. Too often the view is that classic forms of Aboriginal culture should be maintained not only as a token of the past but also to provide perpetual subject matter for historians of the First Peoples past. However, evolution is a basic right, and Aboriginal cultures should enjoy the right to change just as any other society does.

Aboriginal artists now face hard decisions about their role and opportunities. Many of them have been trained in modern art institutions and are very familiar with recent global art movements. They feel an obligation to stick to the forms of their traditional culture, but they are also attracted by postmodern developments (Freeland 2001, 81). Aboriginal peoples may add elements and meanings to their cultural repertoire or amend them at will, and their art will reflect those changes. For example, Aboriginal artists are now doing pen-and-ink drawings to represent an art form that

traditionally used porcupine quills and birchbark. Thus, there is no such thing as authentic Aboriginal art, because each example is authentic only in so far as it reflects a particular historical moment (Berlo 1992, 4).

Young Man (1992, 86) believes that artists of Aboriginal descent should be encouraged to infuse the current scene with the fruit of their own visions, not too much bothered by the philosophies, language, dance, drama and world view of the dominant society. Too often there is a real conflict between the values of a conquering, consuming society and one that has descended from a more naturalistic view. As Young Man states, "There is a deep-seated need in Western and Native American thinking to resolve these conflicts to our mutual satisfaction" (p 86).

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Part 2 of this article, which will examine traditional Aboriginal spirituality in greater depth and consider the benefits of incorporating this world view in today's society, will appear in the next issue of A Fine FACTA.

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