

Students cross boundaries of culture through art

By Teresa A. Parsons

A leaf is more than a mere twist of the paintbrush in the hands of a Japanese artist. Objects and animals are regarded as having spiritual as well as physical characteristics, existing in harmony with one another.

That concept was no more innate to black artist Connie Cresswell, when she began studying Japanese watercolor techniques two years ago, than it was to the students at St. Monica's School to whom she explained those techniques. But Cresswell has found in the Japanese style of painting her own best means of artistic expression.

More than a few people would probably regard a class on Cresswell's specialty as less than relevant to the needs of students at an inner-city school like St. Monica's. But transcultural learning is an area that has already been too long neglected — at least in the opinion of the woman who organized the class, Ruth Hauser. In her view, art is a prime vehicle for communicating the values of one culture to another.

"Art can be an ongoing experience in (students') lives," she explained. "It's a way of entertaining ourselves, but it also helps (students) get to know themselves. It's something that enhances life."

For the past three years, since Hauser became an art teacher at St. Monica's School, she has provided students with learning experiences that have crisscrossed the boundaries between cultures, using artistic media that have ranged from African and native American masks to graffiti and cartooning.

A watercolorist, Hauser has also brought in other guest teachers, including Cresswell and Sheldon Fisher, a specialist in native American art and culture. "I think kids learn a lot when someone demonstrates and then gives them a chance to try something themselves," she said. "I think we do teach children who we are, not just what we know."

Hauser has learned that believing in the importance of art and transcultural learning is not, in itself, enough to spark the interest and imagination of students. Her biggest challenge has been to find ways of relating new information about art to her students' lives. She has capitalized on their love for song and dance, for instance, by asking them to try drawing their music and movements.

One device she has found particularly effective has been to read students a poem or story, then ask them to illustrate it. "That allows them to take their own interpretation and create from it," she said.

Another successful lesson began with graffiti. "I wanted (students) to broaden their experience into wider areas and ways of doing things," Hauser said. She brought in a guest cartoonist who helped students to refine some of the same skills they used in graffiti art.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Artist Connie Cresswell introduced kindergarten students at St. Monica's School to the techniques and the concept of Japanese watercolor painting. Cresswell visited St. Monica's last spring as part of a transcultural art program organized by teacher Ruth Hauser.

Later, she expanded the idea still further by teaming street art with a social studies unit on drug education.

From teaching at St. Monica's, Hauser has also gained a new appreciation for the black community and culture. "I have learned a little bit of an Afro-American sensibility. I have come to the point where I'm very comfortable being with a group of all or mostly black people, and that wasn't always the case.

"They have a beautiful communitarian spirit," she added. "I'd like to see the Christian community celebrate that more. To me, that's Eucharist."

Hauser's aptitude for art showed up early in life, as did her love for teaching. In elementary school, she recalls helping a fellow student who was terrified of art class because she feared making a mistake.

That incident has continued to affect her teaching methods. "For me, teaching is a quest to find out more deeply, rather than a competitive scenario," she said. "I try by inference to say that we all have gifts to give, so let us not judge one another, but let us listen to

and learn from one another?"

Hauser reinforces her teaching philosophy in still more subtle ways — by using red clay instead of white, for instance. "We're always holding up white as a value above anything else," she said.

Her Afro-American education began in 1980, when she first met St. Monica's principal, Gaynelle Wethers. Both women were then serving on the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Several years later, they met again at St. Bernard's Institute, where both were studying theology. Coincidentally, Wethers had an opening for an art teacher at St. Monica's and Hauser, who had earlier earned a master's degree in education from RIT, was seeking a job.

It was the Upstairs Youth Agency, headquartered at St. Monica's, that actually hired Hauser in 1984 to teach art classes for neighborhood youths during school hours. Funding

for her job was abruptly cut off at the end of 1985, as a result of crackdowns on the use of religiously affiliated buildings for publicly funded programs.

By soliciting grants from several parishes, Hauser was able to finish the school year. The following year, she applied for and received several other grants, including one from the Gannett Foundation, primarily because of the transcultural thrust of her curriculum.

Developing a transcultural curriculum is Hauser's long-term goal. In the meantime, since earning a master's degree in theology from SBI this spring, she has accepted a new job as a theology teacher at Nazareth Academy.

"I think that there are natural bridges between art and theology," she said. "For me, painting is prayer, and it always has been."

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