

A Summary of  
THE GETTING OF TASTE: A CHILD'S APPRENTICESHIP

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Childhood art experience reflects an apprenticeship to the taste systems which a child's family and the public school subscribe to. This paper sketches my own taste experiences as a school child advancing from age six to eleven. Taste is used here to mean a person's ability to discern among alternatives (Randel, 1978, p. 12). Taste judgments rely on not only aesthetic criteria but also status and economic criteria that are part of the social context in which one makes choices in objects and images. Understanding this childhood apprenticeship reveals some of the factors influencing participation in art activity and aesthetic choice. I will outline a range of insights gained in a year-long study of a collection of childhood artifacts that were made at home and in school (some 400 in all, retrieved from storage in my parents' attic). The study proceeded within the method of phenomenological description and the structure of hermeneutic theory (Brooks, 1980). Although they will not be detailed here, several consistencies, relationships and meanings that shaped the event of childhood art experience were identified, among them the implicit taste systems that underly family and teacher choices and judgments.

The setting of the apprenticeship

I grew up in the 1950's and 1960's in one of the steel towns that line the Ohio River as it flows north and west from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Like the other families in the neighborhood, ours was upwardly-mobile, middle class. Family heads were likely to be teachers, insurance salesmen, small businessmen, and middle-echelon managers from the steel companies. Many of the men and women were the children of European immigrants who had come to the area a generation earlier, to be laborers in the steel mills.

Learning taste at home

The majority of objects and images available for discernment were those of consumer goods and popular culture, found in TV programs and commercials, department store merchandise and window displays, the pages of Women's Day and Good Housekeeping, greeting cards, and the Sears and Roebuck Catalogue. As a daughter, my attention was directed largely to tasteful selection of things for domestic use and display: houses, furniture and room decoration, clothing.

My parents' taste reflects the social and economic advancement they accomplished in adulthood. Many of their judgment criteria disparaged signifiers of lower income and social status which both had experienced in their childhoods. It is not surprising that they showed no appreciation for the culture of community ethnic groups, for it represented the disadvantages of being

identified as poor, foreign, and of low social esteem. A folk group they did appreciate was that of general Anglo-American rural culture, seen as representative of essential American exemplars for social and ethical behavior. Generally, my parents looked to either that model of homespun Americana, or to the affluent social groups for models of good taste.

While the ability to buy something demonstrated that one need not be restricted to making-do with a homemade substitute, there were times when being able to make something rather than having to buy it could be the source of pride. If a person could make an attractive and convincing object or image equal in quality to what could be bought and do so for less money, then she or he had beaten the game, so to speak. I saw each of my parents engage in this making behavior in building and remodelling their home, in making decorative objects, and in making items for me, such as doll clothes and furniture, and a backyard playhouse.

Play was my practice ground for taste behavior. I practiced selection of household goods, fashions and other choices by making doll clothes, furniture for my doll house, and toys, and by playing dress-up and drawing pictures of pretty things. Most of the materials to which I had access were easily purchased in a supermarket or dime store, e.g., colored pencils and activity books, or available free as discards from household routine, e.g., empty boxes and fabric scraps. As my interests and abilities grew, I was allowed to buy more sophisticated art and craft materials, such as oil paint and modelling clay.

Learning taste in school

The taste system to which my school subscribed was also that of the mainstream American ideal. Curriculum activities stressed recognition and production of emblems and symbols of the national ethos. The objects and images teachers chose for art projects derived from popular and commercial art. Models of tasteful imagery usually consisted in romanticized portrayal of ideal situations, e.g. a picturesque landscape, a realistic likeness of attractive people with easily recognizable expressions. Subject matter often favored sentimental appeal, or related a story with a moral. Words used to describe preferred qualities included "pretty," "cute," "nice," and "adorable." Common classroom sources for the images included pictures from Ideals magazine--often used to decorate bulletin boards, and the illustrations in textbooks and readers.

Although the time allotted to art activities consistently decreased after third grade, the teachers maintained some art activity related to the holidays celebrated in school. Art retained its place in the school through its function as a means for communicating valued meanings at times of festival and commemoration. These decorative occasions provided a pleasure that balanced the compulsory aspects of school life, but they remained primarily a means for illustrating socially-directed, conceptual information.

My apprenticeship consisted in making things as they were scheduled or assigned. I made pictures of flowers, birds, a landscape with mountains and a sunset, a poster of good health habits, of the way pioneers and the Indians were supposed to have lived, and much more. I made things that marked the year's holidays: jack-o-lanterns and pumpkins, Pilgrims and turkeys, Christmas trees and Santa Clauses, Valentines, Washington and Lincoln silhouettes, Easter

baskets, Mothers Day cards.

Art materials provided were crayons and manilla or white paper, colored construction paper, and paste. Unlike home materials, school materials remained constant rather than changing to meet increased individual competence or interest. The qualities preferred in a student's work included use of clear, bright colors, achievement of manual dexterity, neatness, no mistakes, appropriate use of emblems and symbols, and literal and rational depiction of subject matter. School art activities focused almost entirely on the viewing and production of pictures. Three-dimensional work was rarely done. Unlike taste experiences at home, school did not concern itself with criteria for selecting merchandise or popular art. It's focus remained within the narrow spectrum of the taste system of an ideal "average American", without the dynamic of a status hierarchy.

#### Taste and teaching

Through art activity and the selection of objects and images, a child appropriates a taste system. The social context of taste judgments include aesthetic preferences, social ideals, status and economic criteria. There are similarities and differences between taste systems learned at home and in school. The experiences described here were but the early part of an extended taste apprenticeship that included continued education, social experiences, and, in my case, professional art training. In relating my childhood taste apprenticeship I do not assume it to be typical, but I expect that some aspect or other may strike a familiar cord in the reader's own experience. Every art teacher has a personal history from which to draw important understanding about the social context of learning taste. A child's apprenticeship to taste systems seems to proceed as a process of learning the values and preferences by which adults articulate a social identity. The interconnection between taste behavior and social identity is a fundamental part of social existence ( Gans, 1974; Geertz, 1979). It is important for art educators to understand this relationship, especially from the point of view of one in the process of acquiring social identity.

Understanding taste apprenticeship has affected my approach to teaching art. I listen more closely to students' taste judgments, for they tell me about their social identity outside of school and the taste system to which they subscribe. I understand their art and aesthetic behavior in relation to non-aesthetic values that shape their lives and are important to them. Often, their taste differs from the one which I currently subscribe to, but I draw from my own apprenticeship history in order to understand, appreciate and respond to their taste criteria, helping them achieve critical understanding within that context. The lesson content I now choose is that which pertains to a broad range of popular, commercial and folk art, as well as fine art. I am convinced that art schooling must be conversant with the social dynamic of taste systems outside of school in order to offer knowledge that is relevant and meaningful for living in a pluralistic society.

#### References

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