

The practice of having artists decorate molded creatures that represent a particular place has certainly become prevalent in the U.S. This longhorn is found in Southlake, Texas. Have any similar public art projects occupied your city or town? How might you have your students judge their worthiness as works of art?



Visual Culture

Two recent international art competitions—the Red Bull Art of the Can (www.redbullartofthecan.com) and the Translations in Tupperware Global Design Contest (www.translationsintupperware.com)—recently caught my attention. The first one I saw advertised on a billboard, and the second one I learned about from a television newscast. Both seemed to be intriguing topics for discussing visual culture with students.

Visual culture—this issue’s theme—and visual literacy are two related terms that have become hot topics in art education. In fact, the theme next month’s National Art Education Association 2007 conference in New York City is “Blurring the Lines: Art Education and Culture in the Conceptual Age.”

Visual Culture Defined

It was only natural for me to look to the the Internet for further insight on these concepts. After searching on “visual culture,” I found multiple meanings for the term. Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_culture) defined it as “a field of study within

cultural studies focusing on aspects of culture that rely on visual images. Among cultural studies theorists working with contemporary culture, this often overlaps with film studies and the study of television, although it can also include video game studies, traditional artistic media, advertising, the Internet and any other medium that has a crucial visual component.” Quite a mouthful.

VC and Visual Literacy

I liked another explanation better from the Web site for Visual Culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (www.visualculture.wisc.edu/whatisvisualculture.htm). “Anything visible is a potential object of study for Visual Culture, and the worthiness of any visual object or practice, as an object of study, depends not on its inherent qualities, as in the work of art, but on its place within the context of the whole of culture.”

John Debes coined the related term “visual literacy.” He explains: “Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating

other sensory experiences.... When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols—natural or man-made—that he encounters in his environment.”

In This Issue

As an art teacher and a former graphic designer, it makes sense to me that visual images can be read and interpreted, and that our students will benefit if they become visually literate. This month’s articles consider several approaches to visual culture, from guiding kindergartners’ making of texture tiles (as they explore the tread designs on the shoes they wear) to encouraging older art students’ to engage with today’s news and events. A special three-part article on art-making, selection, and critique proposes a welcome model for increasing visual literacy. The model’s basis? An active consideration of social values in visual culture.

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