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Art Education and Manga

Modern style manga has been around for approximately sixty years. It is popular with many young adults, teens and pre-teens, but it seems to be a hidden phenomenon to people over thirty years old. Many teachers and educators do not realize how significant it is in the lives of our youth. Most art teachers do not consider it a valid art form for study and they admonish their students for copying. However, if one is willing to push aside their preconceived ideas of manga and research it's history, meaning and value, one will find it has a lot to offer to our students, including art skills, visual culture components, multiculturalism and social awareness.

Incorporating aspects of manga into the curriculum of students could help to make their art learning experience more meaningful and relevant.

What is Manga?

Manga is a Japanese comic or graphic novel. They have been around since the twelfth century and they were originally humorous pictures (Toku, 2000). After WWII, manga was development increased due to influences of Disney and American comic books. The art style is original to Japan. It's characteristics are line based images, stories based on good and evil, limited text, strong visual cues and unusual frames for the panels (Toku, 2000). Manga is written as a narrative and the reader follows in the footsteps of the main character. When rendered traditionally, manga is read from back to front and right to left (Woods, 2010).

Manga has specific characteristics that define it globally as a unique art form; it is called *kawaii* (cute). Figures are depicted with large bulbous eyes and small pencil lined lips and nose (Johnson-Woods, 2010). Proportions are not realistic. Manga drawings, as is true with American

comics, both use idealized and exaggerated features (Gray, 2012). Manga is also written to appeal to certain demographics, such as, shojo, manga for girls/young women and shonen, manga for boys/young men. Many different genres appear to be popular in manga, such as fantasy, horror, humor, politics and spirituality to name a few (Woods, 2010). This array of topics along with striking images appeal to many readers, particularly young adults.

There are visual and narrative differences between manga and American comics. Often American heroes are not completely human, they have gone through some transformation. Readers typically meet the hero after the transformation, when the hero is fighting off evil or the villain. In manga, the heroes tend to remain human and they are introduced to the readers before they embark on their journey to become a hero or to overcome evil. Much of the narrative in manga is based on the characters trials and journey to becoming a hero. The reader is taken on the journey with the character and the character is learning life lessons along the way, as is the reader (Woods, 2010). This difference between American comics and manga is one reason many young adults like to read and participate in manga activities (Manifold, 2009).

Students' Attraction to Manga

Globally manga is popular; there are books, magazines and Internet series along with anime movies that all promote the manga style of visual art and writing. The most popular manga series of all time is titled *One Piece* and it has sold over 345 million copies worldwide since 1997 (Woods, 2010). Manifold, an associate professor at Indiana University has done extensive research on why young adults are so attracted to manga. Her interviews and statistics are compelling and they pique interest for further inquiry into the attraction of manga in the United States. She interviewed 101 people and concluded that: a) people resonate with the characters in manga, b) people find drawing the characters helps to develop their skills and

explore their own abilities, c) people can find like minded people in this community and get a sense of belonging and d) it allows people to have fantasies which can balance out real life issues (Manifold, 2009). Many students she interviewed said they had an immediate attraction to the art of manga and many said they were initially attracted to the fantasy. Some mentioned they liked the complexity of the characters and some used the escape into the story as a way to deal with their own life problems (Manifold, 2009). Teens are aware of sorrow, loss, disappointment, moral dilemmas and identity issues which are topics that can be found in manga stories (Graham, 2008).

Can Manga be Part of Art Education?

As I spoke with my colleagues about this project, I found that none of them valued manga and that they did not see the attraction to it. They had never used it in their lessons and had no desire to do so. In fact, they all seemed to cringe, but I discovered they were all unfamiliar with the subject. It is noted that many teachers feel that copying manga characters is derivative, juvenile and immature (Manifold, 2009). This made me wonder if we were so out of touch with our students' interests or were we just art snobs. Speaking for myself, I feel that it is a bit of both. However, knowing that many of my students are interested in this art form, we even have a manga club at school, I decided to study manga to determine it's relevance in art education. I have concluded it has validity in art education. My first piece of evidence is this: it is meaningful to our students. For many years art educators have been pleading with teachers to make their lessons meaningful and relevant to the students because the students will be engaged and the learning will be significant (Lanier, 1969). Manifold (2012) cites research confirming if students are encouraged to read books they like, they will have better reading habits, so why don't we encourage students to draw what they want to foster their love of drawing. Although

most art teachers promote originality in art class, copying has its benefits. Throughout history artists and students have copied the masters. When students copy their favorite manga characters they are learning visual elements, gesture, form, proportion, perspective and aspects of composition. Manifold's (2009) research cites that as teens acquire skills and confidence through copying, "they will eventually begin to create their own compositions and ultimately adopt their own personal style" (Manifold, 2009 p.265). In Japan, 8th and 9th grade art students have manga as part of their national curriculum and the studies show that these students do not lose their interest in art as do their U. S. counterparts (Graham, 2008). Due to the narrative nature of manga, Japanese students can explore issues and thoughts that may help them relieve stress or anxiety (Toku, 2001). When students are tasked with creating a manga comic, they must use complex thinking to incorporate image and text to create a visually appealing and interesting story (Graham, 2008). Although not every student may be interested in manga or comics, having an open mind to the use of this style of art may keep students in art classes because they feel accepted (Toku, 2001).

Fine Art?

Manga is part of visual culture and art educators need to be current with these trends so they can engage and connect with their students. Manga may not be considered high or fine art, but with all types of art formats being used today, performance art, installation art, recycled art, garden art, educators must not ignore comic art. However, for those still in need of convincing there are fine art artists using manga style elements in their artwork. Murakami is one such artist, his work has been in galleries and museums around the world and it is all inspired by manga. He does colorful sculptures and two dimensional art works. Another fine art artist is Yuichi Yokoyama, he does large-scale manga paintings. He too is world renowned for his work and his

connection to visual culture. Both of these fine art artists could be incorporated into a lesson on manga.

Conclusion

In conclusion, manga has validity in the art education classroom. There are numerous reasons for an art educator to include manga as an option for students in art, but the most important reason is that if students value it and connect to it, we should allow them to explore it because they will learn more and try harder. Manga contains aspects of visual culture, multiculturalism, social awareness and it helps to develop art skills through observation and practice drawing. Clearly it offers all of the components that an art teacher would want to expand upon in a lesson. Art educators need to re-examine their motives in education and open their eyes to what our children value and want to learn about in art class. As Manifold states:

Art educators should pay attention to those qualities that render art meaningful in the lives of their students by employing strategies that (a) explore narrative ideas, (b) encourage self-exploration and skill development through research, repetitive artmaking, and sharing of knowledge, (c) support positive social interaction among students from many different cultures, and (d) provide balance between fantasy and the ordinariness of everyday life (Manifold, 2009).

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