

The Importance of Self-Identification in Art, Culture, and Ethnicity



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Personal Connections to Lowenfeld, Art, Culture, and Ethnicity in the 21st Century

When I was informed that I had received the 2012 Lowenfeld Award, I was of course honored to have such an award presented to me on behalf of my colleagues in the United States and abroad, and the NAEA Board of Directors. Immediately after receiving the letter I ran into a graduate student in art education and when I told her that I had received the Lowenfeld award, her response was, "Who is Lowenfeld and what does all this mean? And by the way, Congratulations." I am mentioning this in case there are a few readers that need to know who Lowenfeld is to the field of art education. According to Laura H. Chapman in the foreword of the book, *The Lowenfeld Lectures*, Viktor Lowenfeld is widely acknowledged as the most influential art educator of the 20th century (Chapman, 1982, p. ix). Lowenfeld was regarded as a great teacher and humanitarian. Of course everyone knows of his most widely read classic in art education, *Creative and Mental Growth*. More than a half-century after his death, Lowenfeld is still regarded by many as one of the most influential art educators of the past century. According to Day and Hurwitz (2012), the work of Viktor Lowenfeld emerged as the single most influential force in shaping the field of art education from the early 1950s into the late 1980s. His classic book *Creative and Mental Growth* continued to be published, extensively revised, and updated long after his death by the late W. Lambert Brittain.

What does this all mean to me? First, it is a humbling experience to receive this award in the 21st century. The award demonstrates that the importance of art for children still has value in our field. It is also meaningful to me because I have been connected to the work of Lowenfeld from the beginning of my career

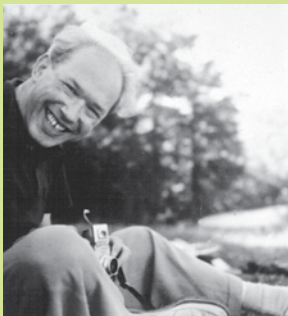
and I will discuss some of those connections in this article. I will not go further in describing the significance of Lowenfeld because I trust most of you already know his importance to the field of art education.

In Lowenfeld's words, one of the goals of art education is "not the art itself or the aesthetic product or the aesthetic experience, but rather the child who grows up more creatively and sensitively applies his experience in the arts to whatever life situations may be applicable" (Michael, 1982, p. xix).

Everybody Has a Story to Tell

Everybody has a story to tell and I will tell you a brief part of my experiences and formal development in art education. The beginning of my story will describe my relationship to the legacy and scholarship of Viktor Lowenfeld and how my research has stood on the shoulders of three of his former students. Throughout this story I will explore the importance of "self-identification," a key concept in Lowenfeld's teaching. Lowenfeld believed that all young people had the inherent potential to develop their own individual voices and to pursue the complexity of their identity. My connections to Viktor Lowenfeld are indirect: two are with former students at Hampton Institute, and one is with a former Lowenfeld student who was the mentor of my doctoral studies at Cornell University. Each assisted me in identifying developmental perspectives in teaching, studying art, art education, and other interdisciplinary studies related to the field.

I was certainly influenced by studying his research and making efforts to uncover connections of culture, children, and diversity in art education. Before entering into the field of art education, I worked with children teaching art in intercity communities and I further taught through a program called



Viktor Lowenfeld, 1903-1960

The Lowenfeld Award was established in 1960 by friends and former students of Viktor Lowenfeld to honor an NAEA member who has made significant contributions to the field of art education through the years. The award winner presents a lecture on a topic of his or her choice at the annual NAEA National Convention.

Urban Outreach at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I had a strong interest in the unique art and educational abilities in these children and how these characteristics could be enhanced. From an early age I believed that it was the responsibility of our communities and the nation to make our children a priority in their education and development. And because of my background and experiences I have always been interested in children who are often referred to as *underserved*. Expressed in another way, here is an excerpt from the College Board's The National Task Force on the Arts in Education that I served on as a member:

One of the greatest challenges for this nation is to ensure that achievement gaps in all areas of education among racial and ethnic minorities are eliminated. This includes the improvement of the high school educational experience, preparation and admission to colleges, and graduation rates of students from low-income backgrounds. The National Task Force on the Arts in Education believes that greater access to arts education can serve as an effective tool in closing the achievement gap, increasing the number of underserved students that achieve at the highest levels in education. (2009, p. 11)

Other issues studied by the Task Force included how opportunities in the arts are not equally available to underserved students. These students have fewer opportunities to participate in consistent high-quality art courses compared to their counterparts who attend schools with greater access to resources (College Board, 2009). When Lowenfeld arrived at Hampton Institute in 1938—which later became Hampton University, a predominantly African American school—he was keenly aware of segregation, racism, discrimination of minorities in the US, and the lack of a high-quality art program at his new place of employment. Even the aspiration of studying art at Hampton and having courses in place was not a priority. In a short period of time after his arrival as a new teacher at Hampton, he built an impressive art department in which his distinguished students John Biggers, Samella Lewis, and others prospered both artistically and academically. Lowenfeld had complete confidence and insight that if he instructed his students in not only visual arts

but also the arts in general, that these experiences would benefit his students in numerous ways. Lowenfeld and other scholars of his time believed that the Arts could assist in developing students' critical decision making, creative thinking, and confidence that their own thoughts were valuable, along with the knowledge of their cultural heritage (Theisen, 2010; Torrance, 1965). These scholars believed that creative thinking and creating an educational environment that supports creative thoughts had the potential to lift individuals to higher levels of intellectual functioning, human dignity, and achievement. Lowenfeld did not pursue the study of the effects of socialization or culture on artistic experiences and this was one of the common criticisms of his work (Smith, 1996; Burton, 2001). On the other hand, while at Hampton Lowenfeld experienced the unfamiliar conditions of the African American students and was conscious of the importance of the social status and civil rights of his students. He further encouraged his students to stress the importance of the social status of their personal and historical experiences in their art. In *The History of American Art Education*, Peter Smith (1996) notes Lowenfeld's thoughts on social status concerning art and his students: "When the African American really considered his or her own experience, a different style of art was produced..." (p. 172). The discovery of self, culture, and having the confidence that your creative thoughts are important, was emphasized and encouraged by Lowenfeld.

Hampton University and Cornell University

During World War II, Lowenfeld taught psychology and an art class at Hampton University in Virginia. Two of his many prominent students from Hampton significantly influenced my career direction and research: John Biggers, artist and art educator; and Samella Lewis, art historian and artist. Both of these special people gave me wise counsel before entering my PhD program at Cornell University. The third person who influenced my development as an art educator was W. Lambert Brittain, also taught by Lowenfeld. He was my advisor and mentor at Cornell University, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies (currently the College of Human Ecology). Brittain was the first person to graduate from The Pennsylvania State University

with a doctorate under Viktor Lowenfeld in 1952. Under Brittain's guidance and mentorship, I experienced working with the person that edited and rewrote five editions of Lowenfeld's influential textbook, *Creative and Mental Growth*. It was also important to my professional growth to read the manuscript of *Creativity, Art and the Young Child* written by Brittain before its publication. Lowenfeld and Brittain spent decades writing about the importance of art for children. These two scholars were great teachers, thinkers, and courageous leaders. Brittain was extraordinarily dedicated to his students and I was one of his doctoral students, who benefited greatly from his mentorship and research. My years at Cornell were filled with rigorous courses, a respect for diversity, student protests, and an impressive range of academic resources and facilities. The foundations of my work with children and diversity began long before attending college—but serious research began at Cornell. I have been greatly influenced by Lowenfeld, Biggers, Lewis, and my friend and mentor, Brittain.

Lowenfeld and Self-Identification

According to Smith in his 1983 dissertation on Lowenfeld, self-identification was one of Lowenfeld's key concepts. This concept is also evident in Lowenfeld's book *Creative and Mental Growth*. The term is used throughout his text in reference to many situations but as Smith states, "each use was related in some way to self-identification with one's own experience" (p. 384). In Smith's research, Freyberger (1983) reported that **Lowenfeld had said that a person should never deny her or his background, which seemed to be an extension of Lowenfeld's conceptualization of self-identification** from his own personal experiences.

People all over the world search to find meaning; as a young man I searched to find meaning in art and the discovery of artists that shared my ethnicity, other commonalities, and interests in art and culture. There are complex processes in developing the self, and it is further complicated to discover self-identification in the arts. How a person will function and how the interactions of culture, social influences, and individuals' psychological perspectives will play in the mix of self-development and self-identity is usually the beginning of a long journey (Jenkins, 2001).

Lowenfeld believed self-identification was one of the basic factors important for creative expression. From a cultural perspective, self-identification includes self-knowledge, self-affirmation, and self-empowerment of ethnically and culturally different individuals and groups (Gay, 2004). Part of self-identification comes through relationships and social encounters with others. This article will describe a few of my influences.

Samella Lewis' Influences

One of the first professional art educators I met was African American scholar Samella Lewis, a former Lowenfeld student at Hampton Institute. Lewis had a unique relationship with Lowenfeld, one that demonstrated his understanding of the racial discrimination of his students in the South during the time he taught there. Lewis graduated from Hampton and later other universities to eventually become a prominent scholar, educator, historian, critic, and collector of art (especially African American art). She is the author of seven books and the creator of a large body of art. On one occasion I met with Lewis when she was a critic of an African American exhibition in the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell, while I was a student there. I later wrote to her and learned a great deal about her humanity, her civil rights work, and her writing of the book, *African American Art and Artists*. Lewis (2003) states that

The challenge to African American artists is to find ways to use both the spiritual and material powers of art in such a way that their expressions become a vehicle for the understanding of people. This will be possible only when the arts reflect the true spirit of differences and make explicit the African roots that enrich and strengthen African Americans. (p. 4)

Lewis clearly believes in the importance of self-identification and part of this identity for African Americans has to be found by learning more about their African roots. African Americans need to learn about their roots before slavery in America in 1619 in addition to the years that followed. Self-identification, culture, and history are all hallmarks of Lewis's research and of discussions she had with Lowenfeld during her years at Hampton. It can be argued that she had a strong sense of self-development before meeting Lowenfeld, but her discussions with

him and even disagreements with him as a student contributed to her individuality and education.

New American and Ethnic Identity

I learned that the self-identification of African American artists was often influenced by the history of African Americans in the US and their struggles with education, culture, and economic and social deprivation. Lewis made available to the public one of the earliest reviews of the history of African American art. She gave us lessons on the New Americanism and Ethnic Identity, 1920–1940; and the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural movement that spanned the 1920s and 1930s. She documented how the issue of racial representation through art became dominant for African American artists in the first quarter of the 20th century. Self-expression, identity, and ethnicity as art themes vs. taking the security of reflecting and adopting the European artist traditions rested heavy in the minds and creative expression of African American artists. As Lewis's research explores the artistic search for identity in history she encourages African American artists to search their consciousness in discovering their identity.

She further inspires and takes the position that through art and self-expression the hopes and ideals of African Americans and other multicultural groups can be achieved. Her research continues through the 21st century and makes a significant contribution to the progress of understanding African Americans and their art.

John Biggers' Influences

John Biggers studied under Lowenfeld at both Hampton Institute and The Pennsylvania State University. Lowenfeld influenced Biggers's artistic development; Biggers obtained a PhD from Penn State in 1954 under the guidance of Lowenfeld. Biggers was internationally known as an educator, muralist, painter, printmaker, and the founder of the art department at Texas Southern University, where he served as the department's chair for many years. Maya Angelou said of him, "John Biggers, one of America's most important artists, leads us through his expressions into the discovery of ourselves at the most intimate level..." (Wardlaw, 1995, p. 14).

I first met Biggers over the telephone as I contemplated remaining at Cornell to work

on a PhD after having obtained an MFA in painting. At the time I was fortunate to have won a National Fellowship from the Ford Foundation. I called Biggers and we discussed his work with Lowenfeld and what it meant to be an artist, African American, art educator, professor, and head of an art department, along with his numerous research and art activities. Generally, we discussed his life experiences and what it meant to be African American in art education.

During Biggers's time at Hampton Institute he worked under Viktor Lowenfeld and began to develop his art and themes that would remain with him for many years, including: the Black family, the Black woman, the Black man, man's connections to nature, the working community, and spiritual renewal. These themes, singly and in various combinations, would characterize the future work of John Biggers (Wardlaw, 1995). Lowenfeld, unlike other European instructors of the time, acknowledged the influence of African art in the work of early Modernists and introduced African art to Biggers and his other students. Although Biggers was influenced by Lowenfeld, he continuously developed his Black visual memory (Wardlaw, 1995) and social aesthetic while representing his self and community. Over time Biggers's memory became an African American aesthetic that was in conflict with his Western training. In his paintings of *Shotguns* he combines three worlds—Europe, Africa, and America.

In search of his self-identity and to increase the depth of his ancestry, Biggers and his wife, Hazel, went to Africa in 1957. He had won a UNESCO fellowship, and they traveled to Ghana, Togo, Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), and Nigeria. The trip to Africa had an enormous impact on his thoughts and the consciousness of both Biggers and his wife. In fact he referred to the experience as a "positive shock" (Wardlaw, 1995, p. 47). He said it was not possible to really know Africa by reading about it from abroad. Its cultures, its people, the vast complexity of the African culture influenced his future works of art and life in America (Wardlaw, 1995). While in Africa, Biggers began his travels with the search for *maame*, a word in Akan—one of the principal languages of Ghana—for the Great Mother, the maternal spirit in all things. In furthering his self-identity, Biggers was influenced not only by Lowenfeld but also by Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett, two extraordinary art

instructors at Hampton. Catlett is one of the best-known African American sculptors and printmakers. She is best known for the black, expressionistic sculptures and prints that emphasized her involvement with the Civil Rights movement and her concern for struggling people. White was known as a superb draftsman, artist, and visual communicator who depicted the heroic contributions of African American historical figures.

W. Lambert Brittain's Influences

The person that I spent the most amount of time working with was W. Lambert Brittain, Professor of Human Ecology at Cornell University. He was one of the first students at The Pennsylvania State University to receive a doctorate under Viktor Lowenfeld in 1952. He was one of Lowenfeld's earliest and most capable students, which may be why he was asked to continue writing the widely acclaimed book *Creative and Mental Growth*. Brittain revised the classic textbook *Creative and Mental Growth* in 1964, 1970, 1975, 1982, and 1987. In the preface of the eighth edition of the book he makes it clear that it was written to provide an understanding of how cognitive development relates to creative and artistic expression in children. He emphasized the importance of the developmental changes in how children draw and paint. For Brittain the essence of his research was a concern for the importance of children in our society. His research and writing have profoundly influenced his students and the field of art education both nationally and internationally. I benefited greatly from his invaluable wisdom, consistent encouragement, numerous letters, and exchanges. It goes without saying that his generous mentoring and valuable criticism of my professional work had extensive impact on my research.

In 1979 Brittain's book *Creativity, Art, and the Young Child* was published. The focus of the book was on the potential for creative and cognitive behavior as a natural means of a child's organizing and utilizing environmental stimuli (Brittain, 1979). Cognitive psychology was gaining substantial influence at the time and Brittain devoted a chapter of his book on Art and Cognitive Growth, in which he discussed the constant interaction children have with their physical environments and how this behavior provides the basis for understanding the child's world. He affirms the importance of understanding children

through art: "Our thesis is that the production of art provides one of the best ways for a preschool child to understand, organize and utilize concepts" (Brittain, 1979, p. 183). I was greatly influenced by Brittain's research and his respect for the nature of how children learned and developed using art. Of course our discussions on children in general opened up my thinking on the possibilities of how children from diverse backgrounds use their cognitive abilities while creating with materials in art and thinking about self-expression.

These three educators, along with others, helped to construct my individuality in art education. As the social science literature indicates, to an important degree the sense of self is constructed by culture (Jenkins, 2001). Jenkins further indicates that **it takes more than culture for a person to obtain a better grasp of the complexity of individuality**. The dynamics of the self-concept discussed here does not imply the exclusion of other significant influences in my past or present, but rather that these three individuals—Lewis, Biggers, and Brittain—profoundly influenced and contributed to my growth, development in art, education, and culture. Further, these three scholars were individually mentored and influenced by Lowenfeld.

Art, Culture, and Ethnicity— and Future Research

My discussions with these three leaders in art education, art, and art history have encouraged and assisted me in developing my research. You can read more extensively on my views and those of contemporary art educators discussing multicultural issues in our NAEA publication, *Art, Culture, and Ethnicity* (2011). "One of the major aims of multiculturalism is to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, gender, religious, social class, and cultural groups" (Young, 2011a, p. 80). I have learned from my explorations the importance of self-identification. I have also learned that all students should know about their own heritages as well as the historical and art historical heritages of others. Challenging the Western canon can simultaneously lead students to learn more about the canon and the world of others. Teaching history and diversity is not common practice in our schools. In fact, in some states, such

as Arizona, teaching ethnic studies is not an accepted practice in all schools. And it has to be noted that teaching art history is not always a common practice in our K-12 schools. "It is important for students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and vision needed to function effectively in a diverse democratic society. Multicultural education attempts to reframe the educational problems faced by diverse groups that were ignored for generations by empowering these groups to influence the curriculum and practices in their schools" (Young, 2011a, p. 82). Eugene Grisby (2011) states in the book *Art, Culture and Ethnicity*, "When doors are opened, the walls of the 'White Ghetto' will come tumbling down" (p. 47). Through the study of others' stories, art, identities, cultures, communities, and ethnicities we will better understand the complex world we live in.

Educational equity and excellence for all children in the US are unattainable without the incorporation of cultural diversity in all aspects of the educational enterprise (Gay, 2004). Art teachers across the US should more deeply explore the interconnections of self-identification, art, culture, and ethnicity.

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AUTHOR NOTES

It is an honor and a humbling experience to be nominated for and to receive the 2012 Lowenfeld Award. I would like to thank the National Art Education Association (NAEA) Board of Directors and colleagues across the country in granting this honor to me.

I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Angela La Porte, at the University of Arkansas, for nominating me, and Professors Elizabeth Garber at the University of Arizona and Crystal Yang at the University of North Dakota for their generous support. Angela is a former extraordinary student of mine; some professors learn from their students and I have certainly learned a great deal from Angela. She has also made me proud over the years. Elizabeth is an exceptional colleague and dear friend and I feel fortunate to have her as a colleague in Arizona. Crystal is a scholar and colleague that I have enjoyed corresponding with about Chinese art and international issues in art education. I thank each of my colleagues for their encouragement and generous support.

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