

A Letter to the Editor of *Christian School Education*

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Recently I attended the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) convention in Orlando, Florida. There were many excellent seminars to attend that addressed current issues. From those seminars, I was able to bring back information that can be implemented within my classroom. However, there was one thing missing. There were no seminars specifically designed for art educators. Art education provides a way to intimately connect to student's lives helping them to "actively participate in a world that has reverence for life and values social justice" (Stuhr, 2003, p. 303). The great European Christian art of the Middle ages and Renaissance would certainly be a testament to the power of art in spreading the good Word and inspiring people (E. Delacruz, personal communication, 2013).

I believe failing to provide advice and information regarding contemporary issues facing art education overlooks an important part of Christian schooling. Therefore, I am sending an article to be reviewed for submission to the ACSI magazine, *Christian School Education*. This article provides a unit of study for Christian art educators on the issue of identity.

### **Addressing Identity in the Christian Art Classroom**

Currently, one issue that Christian art educators face is that of identity. Identity is defined by Merriam-Webster as the "distinguishing character or personality of an individual" (2013). When asked to describe their identity, a middle school student might respond, "I'm an athlete" or "I'm Hispanic" or "I'm David's girlfriend". However, identity goes much deeper. It not only refers to ethnicity or race but also includes diverse family configurations, beliefs, practices, values and social arrangements (Delacruz, 2012). Identity has multiple layers. Identity is complex.

In today's classroom, identity is an issue that brings new challenges and it is being addressed throughout educational curriculum. This includes art curriculum. In December's issue of *Art Education*, Tanisha Jackson (2012) states, "Now more than ever it is necessary for art educators to address the needs of the steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse learners" (p. 6). Art lessons need to "take into account the complicated nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans' multilayered, transcultural, and hybridized cultural identities and art practices" (Delacruz, 2012, n.d.).

Within private Christian schools, the definition of identity takes on an additional meaning. Christianity believes a person's identity is inseparably linked to their relationship with Jesus Christ: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In other words, once someone accepts Christ as their Lord and Savior their identity changes. According to *Ephesians 2:10*, a Christian is God's workmanship, his handiwork, born anew in Christ to do his work. Taking this into account, the question that is now presented for the private Christian school art educator is, "How do I effectively teach the subject of identity to today's students in a Christian school?"

Identity must be taught in such a way that students might recognize and embrace the fact that they all have different backgrounds and different stories. And it is okay. More important is how they become inspired to use their backgrounds and stories to impact other's lives. The following lesson plan strives to provide the Christian art educator with effective tools and lessons for teaching the subject of identity to students in grade four through eight.

### **Developing The Story**

The purpose of this unit is to assist the student in *developing* his or her story and then *sharing* it through art. The lesson addresses identity as defined within society in general, and then adds the dimension of Christianity.

This lesson starts with the students defining identity. After each student has established his or her idea of what identity means, the artist/missionary/educator Chè Orman Gardner is introduced. This is Chè's story (C. O. Gardner, personal communication, 2013). Chè is the daughter of a pastor and was raised in a Christian family. At an early age she committed her life to following Christ. After high school, she attended Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Upon graduating, Chè joined a missionary team and moved to South Asia. There her life was much changed due to cultural differences. At times, she was in danger because she was Christian and because she was a woman. Throughout South Asia women are treated differently, more subservient than in the United States. Furthermore, they have no rights, and for the most part are treated as slaves. Chè experienced first hand the vast differences between cultures. She witnessed how long-held beliefs and social arrangements can determine one's identity and opportunities.

As a Christian, Chè believed that each of us is created as a treasure, possessing different strengths, talents, and abilities. Her heart ached for the women of South Asia and she wanted to share her story with them. She wanted them to understand that they were important, not worthless like they were being told and treated. Her identity was founded in strength and love for all God's unique creations and she needed to share her story with them. Therefore, Chè learned the art of henna tattooing from other women missionaries. She understood this art form could connect her to them and easily communicate her message. Using symbols to represent different parts of her stories, she was able to explain her relationship with Christ and its effect on her life. Many hours were spent creating henna tattoos on women of South Africa, all the while Chè would tell them her story as she drew the symbols. Through her art she was able to share her love for Christ with many women and help them recognize their value, worth and identity. Below is a photo of one of the henna tattoos.

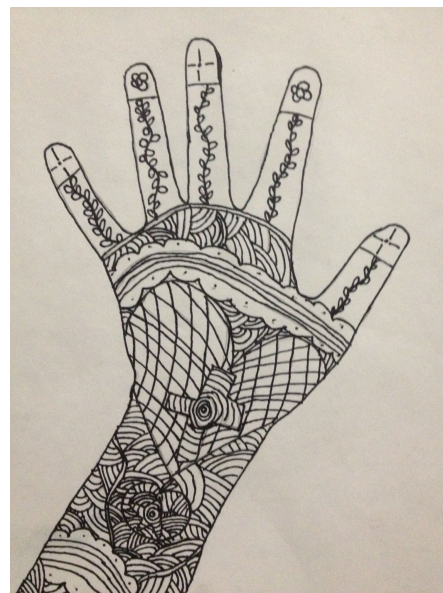


(photo from *The Henna Gospel*, 2011)

### **Sharing The Story**

After hearing the story of Chè, students will discuss as a class the ways in which she used her story to encourage others. They will then divide into groups of two or three to discuss their own stories. They will be asked to focus on the things that make up their story and their unique *identity*. Then they will discuss which aspects about themselves they feel would be most important to share with the women in South Asia. Feedback amongst the students will be highly encouraged. Next, each student will write the key points of their story and develop symbols that represent each key point.

Once their stories are developed and symbols sketched, the students will trace their hand on a piece of white construction paper. They will create a design within the outline of their hand using their key point images. Positioning of the symbols is very important since it determines the progression and way in which their story is told.



Students will discuss their designs within their small group and critique each other's work. Once they are satisfied with their design, they will use washable markers to draw their designs on each other's hands. As they move from one symbol to the next, they will share the key points of their story. This unit of study can be taken one step further by students making a plaster-cast of their hand and recreating their story design onto their plaster-cast.





The goal of this lesson is to help students gain insight into the many layers of influences and experiences that make up their identity and grow in their understanding of how to share their story with others. They will explore the role of art in self-expression and the use of symbolism. They will become more mature in their knowledge of the diversity of cultures and the treatment of women in other countries. Most importantly, they will learn art is a universal language and the age-old tradition of story sharing can create a connection with, and impact the life of, someone with whom you have little in common.

This following is a web link to the complete unit lesson plan:

<http://bmccullers.weebly.com/lesson-plans.html>. A free booklet, *Henna and the Gospel*, is available through IMB, the missionaries that taught Chè the art of henna tattooing. The IMB web link: <http://imbresources.org/index.cfm/product/detail/prodID/3210>. More information can be found at *The Jesus Question*, <http://thejesusquestion.org/2011/05/01/the-henna-gospel/>.

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