TRANSLATING THE LANGUAGE OF ART

BY SHEILAH BRITTON

Explained.
Mary Erickson talks about her grade school experiences in a small farming community in Illinois, one can almost see the woman as a child discovering the gifts that would lead her into a career of teaching art. Her voice is that of a storyteller—developing her plot, imagining her characters, and setting the scene.

In fourth grade she was given a 4-inch by 4-inch square of glass. The assignment was to make a simple drawing of a bird or animal. She chose the cedar wax wing, a common bird of the region. She commanded her small hands to replicate the image on the glass.

Her voice rises as she reaches deeper into memory. “Our teacher transformed our drawings by presenting them as a lantern show,” she recalls. “She illuminated them through projections. Our little drawings became magical.”

Erickson spent her entire young life in that farming community. “It was not just Scandinavian,” she explains. “It was Swedish. Even the Germans were a little suspect where we lived.”

When she fled its safe, monocultural boundaries for the University of Illinois, she was certain she would pursue art. Her Swedish father was not happy. “That’s about as frivolous a thing as a farmer could imagine,” she says. “He asked me how I’d earn a living. I told him I’d be a teacher. I always loved teaching.”

More than three decades later, Erickson’s passion for teaching art hasn’t wavered. As a professor of art education at Arizona State University, she describes her work as that of a storyteller, one who writes, art-making, and art history,” she says. “They also must know about accountability and measurement in teaching.”

Erickson arrived at ASU in 1990 after spending 16 years at Kutztown University, the birthplace of the National Art Education Association. She was attracted by ASU’s research accreditation and the opportunity to work with the Getty Center for Education in the Arts in California. Total accessibility to the Getty collections and other scholars involved in the Center gave Erickson much of what she needed to evolve her direction in art education. “The Getty was promoting something called discipline based art education,” she explains. “It was an approach devised by art educators that said art learning should come from what artists do, what critics do, what historians do, and what art aestheticians do. The Getty did an extraordinary amount of work; they supported a lot of programs, books, curriculum, and online networks.”

At the Getty Center, Erickson explored more deeply the issue of art conservation and the opportunity their collections provided. The Center was interested in Internet instruction. At the time, on line instruction was in its infancy. Erickson was reluctant to enter into the realm of digital technology. She avoided it until she thought it was too interesting to ignore. Then she went to work with an educational psychologist who was an early master of the technology. Together they created a curriculum unit called Our Place in the World. Erickson served as conceptual director for Worlds of Art, which included four multicultural units. She authored Mexican American Murals, coauthored Understanding Artworlds, and edited The Development of Navajo Art.

Lani Lattin Duke was director of the Getty Education Institute during that time. “Mary’s contributions helped insure that the on line materials developed for teachers were pragmatic and relevant,” Duke says. “She has such a strong sense of what teachers need and will use, and her insights were invaluable to our endeavor to make ArtsEdNet a model site for teachers.”

Erickson’s work in developing curriculum-based web sites led her to pursue grants in collaboration with the Getty and with ASU’s Hispanic Research Center. Gary Keller directs that center. “The work we did led to other collaborations and to the creation of the art education web site, ‘Chicana and Chicano Space.’” (http://mati.eas.asu.edu/ChicanArte/)

The collaboration also led to Erickson’s innovative Internet course, Art Appreciation and Human Development. The sites serve teachers, students, and communities around the world.
Erickson knows that her work in arts education is meaningless if it doesn’t inform practitioners. She began working with Arizona teachers soon after she arrived in the Sonoran Desert. Developing curriculum materials and web sites, she shares them with teachers who then use them in the schools.

Erickson evaluates the materials and receives valuable, instant feedback that she shares with her students at ASU. The key, she says, is to have an objective and know what you are trying to teach.

“I want students to be able to make sense of an artwork. I want them to effectively use evidence from the artwork and elsewhere about how they look at a particular work. I set out to teach them how to do that,” she says. “It’s not as easy as being able to measure what date the artwork was made—or if Van Gogh made it—the factual stuff. I’m much more interested in teaching the interpretive skills.”

Sue Raymond is a teacher at Horizon High School in Paradise Valley. She is one of many art educators Erickson has worked with for more than a decade. “The group around Mary has grown and changed over the years. Her role has changed as well. She has gone from being the one with all of the ideas to being the leader who throws out ideas and allows the group to run with possibilities. The teachers have input into the design of projects,” says Raymond. “The objectives are still Mary’s, but the paths we take use several very talented teachers. The results sometimes seem like chaos until everything comes together. Then magic is created.”

Erickson built on her extensive experience with conservation, multiculturalism, and technology. She began a study of artist Luis Jimenez. The result is a DVD (digital video disk) of his work. Jimenez’s Southwest Pieta is anchored in the plaza of the Nelson Fine Arts Center at ASU. The sculpture’s vibrant colors and mournful figures are replete in the arms of Antoine Predock’s architecture. The work is captive in its open environment—the arid desert heat, the unrelenting sun, and skateboarders whose unbridled boards crash into it on occasion.

Erickson photographed the sculpture from every angle. She videotaped curators and conservators who studied the form and its damage. Finally, she went to the artist to ask a list of questions prepared for her curriculum. Jimenez indubitably her questions from his studio in New Mexico. He had his own agenda. An agenda, it turns out, that made Erickson’s inquiry all the more compelling. “Luis didn’t want to talk about process, he wanted to talk about ideas. He wanted to tell me what made him create,” Erickson explains. “He filled out the richness of what art is all about.”

Erickson used support from the Herberger College’s Institute for Studies in the Arts to hire Eric Miller, a doctoral candidate from the College of Education’s Educational Media program. Miller’s exceptional skills in media development meshed well with Erickson’s knowledge of curriculum development and organization. In one semester they created a DVD prototype, Who Cares for Art? The DVD will be used to develop and fund more work.

Miller now works as a research assistant in the Hispanic Research Center. He is developing a web site with the same materials that will be available to teachers all over the world.

Erickson’s passion for art education is constantly evolving. She is undaunted by the challenge to prove art’s worth in education. She points to current American culture which is based on imagery—computer games, the Internet, television, commercials, and films. “We need to understand imagery in order to function in a visually dominated culture,” she insists. “We have a responsibility as citizens and as teachers to help young people understand how we are potentially manipulated by aesthetics and the masters of the form.”

She continues to investigate the preservation of other cultures and the potential of art as a bridge of understanding. “I think the grasp of other world views is possible through art. That grasp can begin at a very young age,” Erickson adds. “Every culture invests their most creative endeavors in their art. What they have to say is relevant and important.”

In 2002, Mary Erickson was named Art Educator of the Year by the National Art Education Association. Eldon Katter, past president of the NAEA and a colleague with whom she has authored books, says, “Mary Erickson is one of the most thoughtful, well-informed, well-intentioned, well-educated, artistically illuminating educators that I have had the privilege of knowing. Erickson translates theory into practice, to reach out to teachers, to help young people understand how we are potentially manipulated by aesthetics and the masters of the form.”

Erickson’s enthusiastic voice rises as she describes Making Friends with Art, a new course she is developing. “I want to teach the well-meaning, well-intentioned, well-educated, artistically illiterate adults,” she laughs.

Erickson says that she was dragged kicking and screaming into technology. “One day I woke up and thought ‘this genie is not going back in the bottle,’” she adds. “I thought about the illuminated cedars were wing back at my grade school in Illinois and decided it was time to move on.”

Having believed in the traditional until she realized the potential of the virtual, Erickson’s research and stories now extend from ASU to the global community.
Luis...wanted to talk about ideas...what art is all about.

MARY ERICKSON DISCUSSES THE FLIPSIDE OF SOUTHWEST PIETA BY LUIS JIMENEZ.

CHICANA AND CHICANO SPACE
HTTP://MATTIEAS.ASU.EDU:8421/CHICANARTE/

Who Cares for Art:
www.asu.edu/NAEA

Intermediate and high school students completed the images of Middle and High School Students. The students worked with mass and space to create environmental sculptures or sculptures expressing themes of "Transformation and Identity." This unit includes discovering how to work effectively with mass and space.

JACOB: My sculpture reflects me trying to get away from home, school, probably hard to do what I want and be me.

LAURA: My coin has two sides with two expressions. I feel like changing into another person sometimes.

LATRISHA: My coin has two sides with two expressions. I feel like changing into another person sometimes.

AARON: My identity comes from my excellence with computers. My parents bought my first computer when I was nine years old.

LATRISHA: My coin has two sides with two expressions. I feel like changing into another person sometimes.

Latrisha: My coin has two sides with two expressions. I feel like changing into another person sometimes.

VALERIE: I wanted to show that I am shy, smart and unpredictable like a cat. The mouse represents my annoying little sister.

BROOKE: I like to spend a lot of time alone. I spend time with my cat. She doesn’t sit next to me, just close. She used to show me independence.

ERIC MILLER

"Luis...wanted to talk about ideas...what art is all about."

Mark Erickson discusses the muse of Southwest Peta by Luis Jimenez.