

Teaching Southeast Asian Ethnographic Arts and Crafts

for the Development of Aesthetic
and Cultural Experiences in Schools

by Bertoldo J. Manta

The study of crafts in Southeast Asia is one of the possible ways of communicating with our past, present, and future heritage. Crafts programme in schools are especially appropriate for instructing the poor and handicapped youth, who, by reason of economic and social conditions, have been kept out of the mainstream of public education.

Many of these youths do not possess the standard language skill. But they respond readily to visual and sensory signals as learning tools. By utilizing the rich arts and crafts heritage of the Thais, Malaysians, Indonesians, Filipinos and the diverse culture of Singapore, classroom teachers can establish a framework for educating students, through perceptual and artistic vision.

Crafts, like other subjects, has its own course description. This identifies it as part of a subdiscipline within the broader subject of art. Artisans and craftspeople have utilized formal art elements for centuries to distinguish a beautiful form, texture, colour, and space. Assembling a crafts work together necessitates the correct, intuitive use of these formal elements. Craftspeople and students incorporate the elements of art into their work by applying the principles of balance, harmony, rhythm, proportion, and organization.

Any discussion of art elements and the principles of their application as well as the actual working and building in craft media, must be carried out in the language of crafts. Teachers should regularly include the study of local craft terms in the classroom programme. Other contents for crafts include the medium used, the function of the form, the cultural influence within which it was produced, and the subject.

In the past, much emphasis was placed on the value of art processes. Contemporary research in arts and art education suggest that both process and product are parts of the student's education, not only through art, but more significantly to the wide wonderful world of arts and crafts.

Today, it could be observed that in some rural areas, and even in the urban sectors, there are artists excelling in every area of crafts. They have made notable contributions in their particular fields. In knowing and discussing the contributions of these artists, models are established for students. Innovators in the arts and crafts fields should be studied. This is like studying the lives and works of presidents and scholars and figures in politics, medicine, and sports are being studied in schools.

It is important to bring the student to understand that crafts can be a moving force in his life. It is



Young students from various school levels
Skills and techniques in crafts making can be

through and within art that the refinement of the sensibilities is possible. This refinement indicates that a person is richer in his cultural and humanistic approach to his experiences. And this could be done by making arts and crafts a part of his life.

Surprisingly, it is not unusual for a college educated person to have an extremely limited understanding of the arts and crafts. Many adults, unfortunately, go through their entire lives with little understanding or non-



enthusiastically observe a handicapped craftsman, demonstrating his skill in gauging a twine, organized in schools through workshops.

enjoyment of the richness of their own culture. Owing to their lack of experience in the critical appraisal of the arts and crafts, many individuals shy from attending cultural activities. And while they do not understand art they do not contribute to society.

As students in various school levels are provided with a meaningful curriculum, in critically understanding as well as in engaging in art, wider attitudes toward arts and crafts is encouraged. Past experiences in the study of folk arts provide a basis for the present evaluation. Barkan states:

“We see things through our past experiences. Our past experiences determines our “readiness” and our “point of view” from which we create our interpretations. For the active developing individual, point of view is always temporary; it is always contingent upon on going active experience. The thing we “see” are those that have been meaningful in our past experiences.”

Goals that cross over learning areas include finding relationships, building awareness, recall, improvisation, classification, logical thinking,

organization, visual memory, visual discrimination, expression, and kinesthetic responses. Arts and crafts offer important ways in the study of cultural differences at all levels. The curriculum could include the study of pottery, weaving, and jewellery of the Thais, Bruneians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Filipinos, and other peoples. The religious meaning and lore behind the adornments can be studied together with the ancient practices of making utensils and textiles, and other covering for the body. Suggested activities could also include the following:

Study of the bases of our cultural heritage. This is the study of how man has expressed his behaviour through objects, like the ornamental motifs done by the Dayaks and the Ibans in the Ikatted textiles of Indonesia, like the Hanunoo’s chiseled motifs on bamboos in the Philippines, and other utilitarian crafts with ethnographic significance.

Study of the murals of the past and the present. This study entails knowing the significance of the mural stories like the ones found at Angkor Wat and Borobudur. A comparative study of these murals could enhance the students’ understanding of the past and the present society. These murals could provide immediate motivation and excellent media source for integrating the various components of aesthetic education. Murals found in ancient Southeast Asian cities depict the artistic and cultural heritage integrated into the living and harmonious expressions of the country. These components of arts are seen in murals paintings, low relief sculpture, costumes design, the movement of traditional music instruments, drama and literature.

Study of the architectural forms and how space has changed with the passing times and culture. This is a survey of the various designs of



A young student working on a surface ornamentation, using the “Repousse” method. This is an ancient way of decorating metals. Floral and animal designs are aesthetically done by using traditional techniques of embossing. This techniques is commonly found in Southeast Asian countries, practised by rural metal craftsmen.

houses in Southeast Asia. It provides a student with an array of different cultural practices of the peoples in the region.

Study of religious themes and the history of traditional festivals and holidays. This study involves crafts procedures and objects used during festivities. They are symbols connected with religions, for example, lotus flowers of the Buddhists, the crescent and the stars of the Islams, and various animal figures of religious group. Special celebrations and festivals provide us with costumes, folklore, ceremonies, dances, processions, foods, and decorations that are descriptive of peoples throughout Southeast Asia.

Study of various customs and traditions. This study can excite the imagination to create related costumes, headdresses, banners, masks, shields, musical instruments, body paintings, food trays, like basketry, jewelry, games and outdoor theatre, like the

Wayang Kulit, Nang Ya or the Sarzuela. To the student, these activities bring history to life.

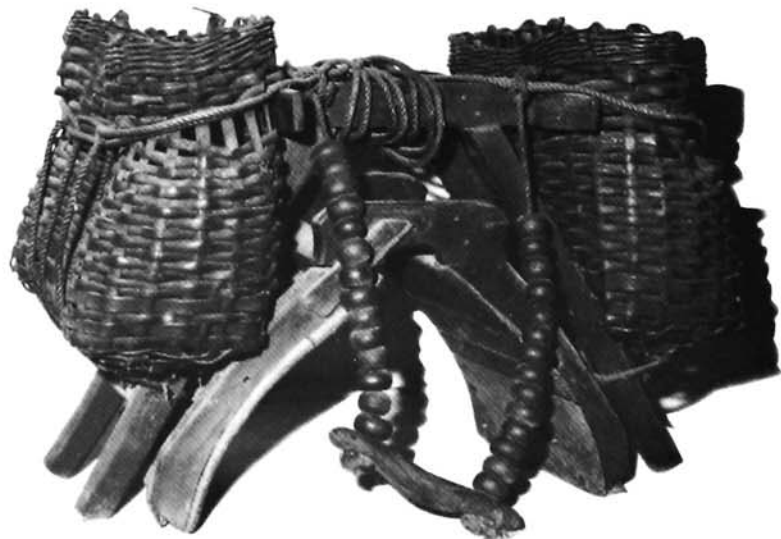
Arts and crafts can be integrated into other learning areas. In education, teachers process information, skills, materials, and learning exper-

iences to the student with the hope that he will assimilate, internalize, and express his thinking in an individual way, to build a new form or fresh insight. By integrating arts and crafts, with other subjects, the classroom can be an adventure platform for all kinds of interdisciplinary learning. Art serves as a catalyst for crystallizing thought in both the conventional and imaginative realism. By integrating arts and crafts study with other areas of the school curriculum, visual thinking can expand traditional modes of instruction.

THE FUNCTIONS OF TEACHING ARTS & CRAFTS IN SCHOOLS

Crafts are close to the earth and to natural things. Crafts activities vigorously inquire into the aesthetic nature of man. In this respect crafts are bonded to human conditions and are a reflection of the cultural fibre of a society. For example, a mat is

Below: A traditional food basket known as “Krachu”. It shows the functions of its design and usage. Usually mounted on horseback during long journeys, this food carrier is popular in the rural areas of Thailand.

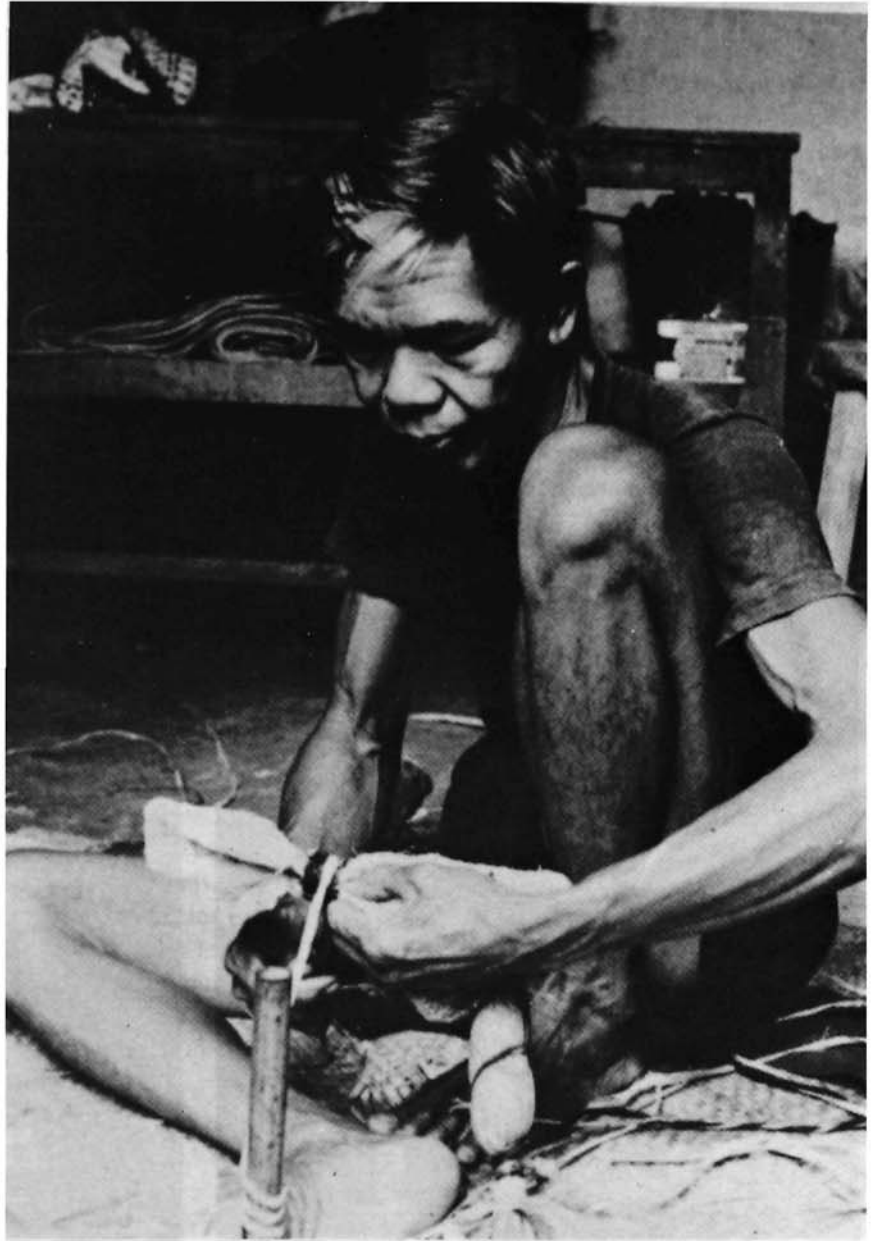


used for sleeping, for ceremonial purposes, or for sitting on. A terra cota clay is used as material for religious icons, containers and dish-ware. Wood is used for furniture and architectural dwellings, fabrics for clothing, and metals for tools, jewellery, and adornment. In fact, all these vast arrays of arts and crafts in the South-east Asian countries owe their origin to daily human needs.

One of the greatest merits of crafts experiences is their value in non-verbal communication, that is, visual and tactile communication. All communications are not necessarily in the spoken form. For example, when a student creates a product in crafts, he expresses his own conceived idea. The artistic product becomes an *extension of himself*. He looks at his work and says, "This is what I have done, this was my idea and my creation". In examining his efforts, he reinforces himself and continues to give out and express further ideas in the visual media.

As most Southeast Asian crafts are used by rural folks, they serve as a mode of communication, between the student and his teacher. The craft process and the resulting product make possible searching, analysis, feedback, discussion, comparison, and evaluation. The entire class can discuss and share ideas pertaining to what was created in a particular craft medium and its cultural values. In sharing these ideas, communication takes place. Thus, crafts serve as a vehicle of expression that help a student answer questions on his cultural identity.

Many past cultures in Southeast Asia utilized arts and crafts to record and chronicle their achievements. Craft was also a basic part of their religious and civil ceremonies and of other aspects relating to their society. Surviving arts and crafts reveal that man has always created beautiful



A craftsman carrying on the legacy of a Southeast Asian traditional handicraft by using local materials and indigenous tools.

forms for his fulfillment and enjoyment. Apparently they are the result of a continuous aesthetic instinct. The need to express visually is evident in folk art, a universal form of craft expression.

In most cases, folk art in Southeast Asia is made up of art forms created by unschooled artists. The

skills and designs that are now common in every rural crafts centres have been transmitted to the craftsmen by their ancestors. As practiced, folk art is closely linked to crafts. The materials used are actually available in the artists' place: bamboos, rattans, silk, teak wood, metal, soft stones, cowhides and grass. The folk artist and craftsman

should thus be a resourceful and innovative person.

Hundreds of items created by folk artists, from religious artifacts to everyday life usage, are crafts symbolizing cultural values. These beautiful and crafted forms are a part of the religious, moral, musical, and recreational customs of the respective cultures in which they are made. Simple and complex, they serve to foster traditions that identify Asia's cultures. They can refer both to the historical study of crafts and to the appreciation of crafts, through analysis or art judgment.

APPROACHES ON TEACHING ARTS AND CRAFTS

In order to grow in their appreciation of art, students need to learn specific art skills required for each craft medium. Art skills in this sense refer to the process of making a craft. For example, skill in constructing a weft Ikat loom, in tying a weft thread, in handling a canting batik tool and in using various wood carving tools, like in Balinese carving, and in assembling a bamboo umbrella--as practiced by the artisans of Chiang Mai.

Each craft medium has a definite procedure. This must be learned by

appreciating the work of other people's crafts. Artistic awareness deals with aesthetic content, art judgment, and skill development.

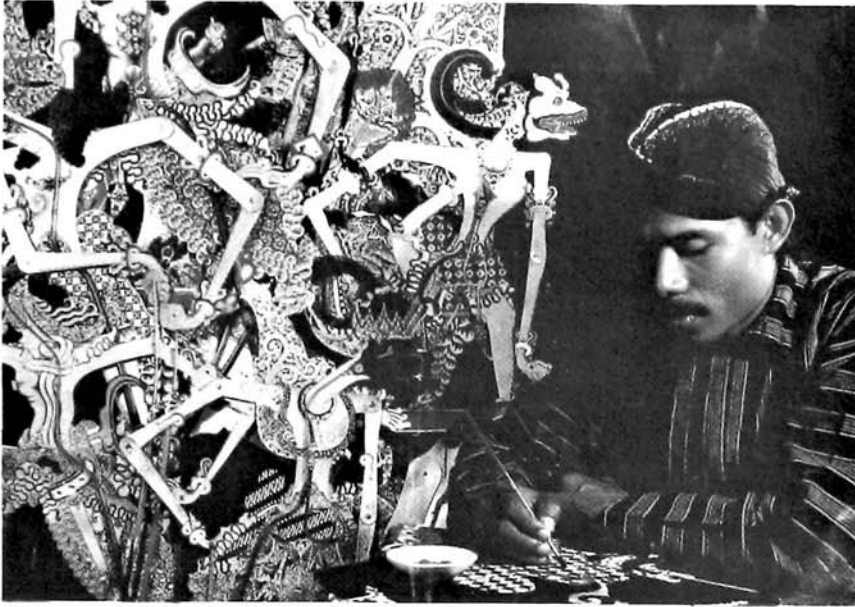
Skill development refers to the ability to make informed observations regarding the artistic properties of a product. We need to work toward developing our artistic eye. The craftsmen are our model in learning because artistic awareness is a combination of the creative eye and the cultured eye. When we teach a student to develop his crafts skills and teach him to comprehend what a pleasing craft form is, we increase his artistic awareness.



An old silver craftsman of Java, Indonesia, meticulously marking a design on his craft, using indigenous tools. This ancient method of metal ornamentation in low relief is no longer widely taught in school today.



An Indonesian folk weaver working on a double weft ikat weave, with the traditional backstrap loom. Traditional weaving in the various countries of Southeast Asia, is performed as a ceremonial activity, before any weaving start.



An Indonesian Wayang puppet painter creating his puppets in various characters. Shapes, colors and designs are creatively done by artists, whose skills and techniques have been handed to them by the old craftsmen.

The Thai Neillo ware, the Javanese batik ornamentation, the Malaysian Wayang puppet-making, and the Filipino muslim bamboo ornamentations in the south, all constitute varied and rich subjects for students to discover. With crafts as the base, the student can develop an art vocabulary. This could be used for discussing his own arts and crafts as well as those from the various periods of Southeast Asia. He can study the works of professional craftspeople and observe their roles in society. Through his knowledge of crafts, he can discuss the difference between pleasing forms and what, in fact, constitutes such artistic forms. With practice, looking and analyzing, he will learn to make informed art judgements.

Crafts enables a student to perceive the beauty of his natural environment by working with and searching for pleasing visual forms, in both nature and man-made forms. As a result of crafts experiences, in seeing things perceptively and artistically, in

building, creating, and in forming, the student receives a unique opportunity to translate his aesthetic vision. He can eventually crystallize this aesthetic vision and then use it to improve products for his society. An enlightened community can carry on such an educational programme, and it could be used in the design of its community.

Finally, it is envisioned that some of the finest traditional arts and

crafts of Southeast Asia will remain as living testimonies to the abilities of the crafts artisan. While many modern crafts in Southeast Asia are divorced from their cultural traditions, there are still many fine craftsmen producing high quality traditional artifacts. These crafts continue to be done meticulously, with proper attention to details, designs and forms.

It is hoped that the younger Southeast Asian generation of craftsmen will find inspiration to always keep their rich cultural heritage crafts in the region. National leaders, community heads, craft curriculum experts, and teachers throughout Southeast Asia should continue to encourage, promote, and give substantial patronage to the craftsmen, to enable them to continue their craft with dignity.

For the school curriculum, it is hoped that the new awareness and admiration for the traditional cultural heritage in arts and crafts could be a part of school programme activities. This will symbolize the urgency of preserving rural technology and traditional aesthetic values in the Southeast Asian arts and crafts, as it rapidly becomes an industrialized region. The main benefits will ultimately be for the enhancement of the students' understanding of the Southeast Asian culture. ■

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