Including Lesbians and Gays in Art Curricula: The Art of Jeanne Mammen

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Abstract

Teachers can focus on art instruction that recognizes lesbian and gay relationships. The work of Jeanne Mammen provides art teachers with suitable imagery that sensitively depicts candid relationships between women. Providing our students with an inclusive and balanced curriculum will ensure that all students see something of themselves in the art lessons and may help them to understand the meaning of living in a democracy.

Many of today's news headlines focus on lesbian and gay issues. It seems one cannot open a newspaper or turn on the television without hearing something about the movie Brokeback Mountain, same-sex marriages in Massachusetts and Canada, or the President Bush's push for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. As Lipkin notes (1999), homosexuality has gone public and public and teachers can no longer silence the discussion. We owe it to our students to address lesbian and gay issues in school in professional and educated ways thereby providing them with a complete education.

For the past 10 years several art educators (Check, 2004; Cosier & Sanders, 2004; Lampela, 1996; Smith-Shank, 2004) have been calling for such discussions in the schools. Check (2004) insists that the National Art Education Association (NAEA) take a pro-queer stance and encourages readers not to choose between color wheels and social issues. Cosier and Sanders (2004) in the NAEA News, a publication that all members of the NAEA receive, call for further discussions about what art educators can do to teach about lesbian and gay issues in the schools. Two art educators (Check & Lampela, 1999) provided NAEA members with resources to address lesbian and gay issues in the classroom and another art educator encouraged art teachers to include the study of lesbian and gay artists as part of an inclusive curriculum (Lampela, 1996).

Some art teachers, who are members of the NAEA, have indicated they want more information about the lives and work of lesbian and gay artists and are willing to address issues of sexual identity in the classroom (Check & Lampela, 1999; Lampela, 2001; Pierce, 2001). In this article I provide interested teachers who want to learn more about lesbian and gay art with information about the life and work of Jeanne Mammen, a 20th century German artist who created striking and sympathetic images of lesbians. I present lesbian art as an example of the ongoing process of curricular revision, and as one of seven objectives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues Caucus (LGBTIC), an affiliate of the NAEA.

Lipkin (1999) provides a strong argument for an inclusive curriculum that addresses the lives and accomplishments of lesbians and gays. He notes that to prepare students for democracy they must learn about lesbians and gays as part of the American patchwork, and further contends that educators are obligated to impart accurate and complete information in their classes (Lipkin, 1999). In the art room, accomplishments of all groups of artists including lesbian and gay artists should be addressed.

For 30 years art educators have advocated teaching art from a multicultural perspective. Beginning in the late 1970s attention was drawn to creating art curricula that were sensitive to the various ways people were identified or self-identified. Those identified included race, gender, religion, age, ethnicity, and physical/mental abilities. McFee and Degge (1977) promoted the understanding of cultural diversity and how culture and art are related. Collins and Sandell (1984) encouraged art teachers to embrace an art curriculum that included the accomplishments of women artists. Blandy and Congdon (1987) focused on cultural pluralism and the need for a diversity of art forms. Wasson, Stuhls, and Petrovich-Mwaniki (1998) advocated for art curricula that recognized and respected the sociocultural diversity of every student in the classroom. Yet it wasn't until Cahan and Kocur (1996) published Contemporary art and multicultural education, that attention was given to including sexual identities in discussions of a culturally inclusive curriculum.

It is understandable, then, that in the new millennium the translation from theory to practice has included little or no mention of sexual identities as part of culturally competent art curricula, as evidenced in articles written by practicing art teachers and devoted to diversity and tolerance. Beginning in 2000, School Arts began to include articles that focused on diversity or tolerance, but no article mentioned sexual orientation as a cultural identifier.

Why Include Lesbians and Gays in the Art Curriculum?

There are other reasons for advocating teaching about lesbian and gay artists in the art classroom. To exclude study of lesbians and gays is to knowingly provide an incomplete, inaccurate, and unbalanced curriculum. Students are well aware of lesbian and gay characters on network and cable television shows, in movies, in books, and in newspaper articles. Just by turning on the television, students can find gay or lesbian characters on Will and Grace, The Ellen Show, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. The L Word, and Queer as Folk. Wyatt (2001) compiled a list of both network and cable television programs in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia since 1961 that have included lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters as a part of the regular or semi-regular casts. Of those, at least 65 were run on U.S. television stations, including some contemporary shows as Big Brother, Boston Public, Friends, My So-Called Life, The Real World, Seinfeld, and Xena: Warrior Princess.

Lipkin (1999) states that young people are turned off by a curriculum that does not reflect the real world. Students want opportunities to think critically about their own experiences and those around them. By providing students with information and lessons that address the work and lives of lesbian and gay artists, teachers can impart accurate and complete knowledge in their classes, provide a more balanced curriculum, and reflect the real world in their teaching.

Knowing about lesbian and gay artists and art is also very important for lesbian and gay adolescents, as well as for others. These adolescents need role models. Lesbian and gay adolescents need to know that there were others like them who were lesbian or gay and artists had/have great success. An LGBT-informed curriculum is about uncovering the past and about learning that there have been some artists who lived openly, as who they were. If lesbian and gay adolescents receive information about accepted and productive lesbian and gay artists who could serve as positive role models, they may feel relieved they are not alone and can accept who they are. Learning about historical lesbian and gay artists in the classroom also can help students recognize that same-sex love has existed for centuries.

Depictions of Couples in Art

In a school environment, students can see depictions of heterosexual identity scattered throughout the curriculum and at
extracurricular events. Students may read *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *The Scarlet Letter* in English class (Applebee, 1990) and learn about heterosexual relationships. During the rituals of homecoming and prom, male kings and female queens are crowned and primarily heterosexual couples attend the dances associated with these rituals. Schooling is set up with a heteronormative bias, but there is a need for a balanced curriculum that depicts more than the heteronormative examples.

For lesbian and gay students who are also beginning to develop their sexual identities, the process of identity formation is a struggle because they generally do not see obvious examples of their own identities. In order for lesbian and gay students to develop a more positive self in relationship to their sexual identities, they too need to see expressions of others like themselves in social situations. By including such examples of life experiences, every student will see and hopefully learn that all people have strong emotions and complex relationships. The school curriculum and more specifically the art curriculum can provide a more balanced and complete picture of the kinds of connections a variety of people have with each other.

Art often shows depictions of human relationships. Depictions of couples in paintings or sculpture have been avenues for adolescents to see such expressions of others in social situations, albeit most often with a heteronormative bias. Many art teachers are familiar with portraits of heterosexual couples in art including Picasso's *La Vie*, Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, and Rodin's *The Kiss* and may use these portraits in their classroom instruction. But teachers may not be as familiar with portraits of lesbian and gay couples—understandably so. This is because most mainstream art history texts do not include such portraits or provide information about them as portraits of couples. Teachers can obtain information about portraits of lesbian and gay couples by such artists as Gluck, David Hockney, Paul Cadmus, and Jeanne Mamman if they are willing to search for them in books that specifically address art by lesbians and gay men. Many teachers may not have the time to do such research which is why the LGBTIC has as one of its goals the promotion of quality instruction relating to the understanding of lesbian and gay content in artists' works (LGBTIC, 2003). Producing such resources that would be available to teachers for use in their classroom instruction will take time since many mainstream publishers of art education materials are not averse to such ideas. Yet, if students are shown only portraits of heterosexual couples they may begin to assume that there are no portraits of lesbian and gay couples. This would comprise an incomplete and inaccurate education in art.

In an LGBT-balanced curriculum, students would be introduced to positive portrayals of lesbians and gays to counteract biased curricula and to combat many negative and homophobic comments that students hear throughout the school day. Sadly, this is generally not the case. Often schools promote only a heteronormist curriculum, one that "confers privilege and dominance on heterosexuals and those who match society's expectations with regard to gender" (GLSEN, 2002). Providing students with positive information about lesbians and gays is not only necessary but also crucial. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN, 2002) notes:

- For LGBT youth—many of whom lack support systems at home, in their places of worship, and in the community at large—school may be the only hope for a safe haven. When that refuge is marred by prejudicial practice, our educational system cannot fulfill its promise of protection... (para. 12)

This is exactly the reason why schools should face the issue of heterosexism head on and level the imbalance; first by naming it and then offering alternatives (GLSEN, 2002).

- How can schools, and more specifically art programs in schools, dismantle institutionalized heterosexism? One way is to focus not only on the art that honors heterosexual relationships (Picasso, Wood, and Rodin) but one that also focuses on art instruction that recognizes lesbian and gay relationships. The work of Jeanne Mamman provides art teachers with suitable imagery that sensitively depicts candid relationships between two women.

Recognizing Lesbian Relationships in Art Instruction: The Art of Jeanne Mamman

It has been noted (Förderverein der Jeanne-Mamman-Stiftung e.V., 2003) that Mamman is one of the most versatile and unusual artists of her time. She often is mentioned in connection with Katha Kolwitz and Hannah Höch whose most successful years also date to the Weimar era (1919-1933). Mamman is also compared to two other German artists of the same period, George Grosz and Otto Dix, but in a different light. Mamman's works are not marked by denunciation or pity of those she depicted, as Grosz and Dix were inclined to do (Lüttgens, 1994; Tripper, 1998). Rather, Mamman conveyed sympathy for the women she portrayed (Tripper, 1998). I will argue here that she went as far as empathizing with the lesbians she depicted in her *Songs of Bilitis* series of lithographs.

Mamman's watercolors and drawings from 1927 to 1933 focus on gender roles and on the theme of lesbian love. Mamman unabashedly depicted lesbians of her time in intimate relationships and "disrupted conventional readings of women... by including images of lesbians... different from the norm." (Tripper, 1998, p. 41). Yet, Mamman's work has been virtually ignored or possibly censored in books that address women artists. Mamman is mentioned in Emmanuelle Cooper's (1994/1986) *The Sexual perspective.*

Mamman portrayed loving relationships quite boldly in her painting of portraits of lesbian couples. Many, if not all of Mamman's works could be used in a secondary classroom since she created portraits of lesbians together that can be suitable for use at the high school level. I say "suitable" since her work differs greatly from the work of Delta Grace and Nicole Eisenman, who have created artworks that could be considered too provocative for adolescents. Both Grace and Eisenman depict blatant sexual imagery of lesbians that would not be appropriate for art instruction at the high school level. Similarly, some of the work of artists such as Jeff Koons and Eric Fischl, who depict blatant sexual imagery of heterosexuals, would not be proper for this level, as well.

An Overview of Mamman's Life and Work

Jeanne Mamman was born Gertrud Johanna Mamman on November 21, 1890, in Berlin to a well-to-do family, who moved to a suburb of Paris when she was 5 years old. At an early age, Mamman started to draw and paint people and scenes. She later attended art schools in Paris, Brussels, and Rome. In the 1920s, Mamman was well known as an artist in Germany. She received commissions from fashion magazines, a German movie company, and journals. She compassionately portrayed her female subjects as involved in intense relationships with other women and who also chose to live without men (Sykora, 1989).

Mamman created several portraits of lesbian couples, but her portrayals vary in approach. For example, some couples are less obvious and more covert than others. In two of Mamman's paintings we see restrained and possibly coded portraits of lesbian couples. In *Zeebruggen* two women lean together against a seaside railing; one appears more masculine and somewhat forceful with short hair, wearing pants and a turtleneck sweater. The other appears more feminine with shoulder-length hair wearing a skirt under her coat. In *She Represents*, or as some refer to it, *Masked Ball,* we first are confronted with what appears to be a heterosexual couple, but soon realize both figures are female. Mamman depicts one figure as more mascu-
This came about for two main reasons. Many German women were left alone without the companionship of their husbands or boyfriends since millions of men were called to serve in the German military during World War I (Blackbourn, 1998). This loss left huge gaps in the labor force and women were allowed into the workplace in record numbers. Widdig (2001) notes that by 1917 over 700,000 women worked in the engineering, steel, chemical, and mining industries. Women were able to leave home, support themselves, and make new friendships. They found the freedom to visit bars, nightclubs, and cafes. The need for love, tenderness, and understanding were no longer provided only by men, but from the support of a girlfriend.

More overt portraits of lesbian couples can be seen in several watercolor paintings by Mammen. Café Nollendorf depicts an interior of one of the women's clubs popular in 1920s Berlin. In the foreground, there are three women with any visible connection to each other. Two appear to be servers and the third sits alone at a table. But our eye moves to the two women in the back who are embraced in a dance and we witness their intimate relationship. One woman rests her hand on the other's shoulder who in turn rests her hand on the woman's hip.

A similar intimate relationship can be seen in another of Mammen's watercolors. In Two Women Dancing the women, both with short haircuts, are entwined in a dance. One woman has placed her hand on the shoulder of the other who places her hand around the other's waist. They clasp their hands together and dance with each other in what appears to be a mixed bar. In the background one can see a man dancing with a woman.

Mammen's depictions of lesbian couples are most aptly and overtly documented in a series of lithographs that beautifully portray homage to the many lesbians with whom she obviously interacted. I would go so far as to say that these images make a strong case for Mammen's lesbianism. Unfortunately nothing is known about her own sexual identity. She never married and there is no information about intimate relationships other than with the artist Hans Uhlmann, whom she had met in the late 1920s. Yet, by their very nature, these intimate portraits of lesbian couples seem to clearly delineate Mammen as a sexual being and a lesbian. Although some may disagree that Mammen was a lesbian, she clearly was empathetic towards the lesbians of her time.

In The Morning is a color lithograph that depicts the intimacy of two women sitting together on the edge of a bed. One woman with long hair and dressed only in a light negligee top puts her arm around her partner's shoulder. Mammen depicts a softness and warmth emanating from the two figures, which exemplifies her skill as a drafter. She shows more than support in this work and expresses identity with the subjects. This identification with her subjects that moves beyond sympathy strongly identifies Mammen as empathetic towards lesbians.

In 1930 Mammen was commissioned to create two-tone lithographs which were to be published in a German edition of The Songs of Bilitis by Pierre Louys (Lütgens, 1994). When the Nazis seized power, however, publication of the book was impossible. Of the eight lithographs that were destroyed by damage from bombs seven proofs survived. The Songs of Bilitis is considered a classic of erotic literature. It was originally published in Paris in 1914 by Pierre Louys, and in 1926 an illustrated English edition was published in New York.

Another two-tone lithograph in the Bilitis series is Jealousy, in which Mammen clearly shows the intense emotion coming from the woman who kneels behind another woman standing at her dressing table. The kneeling woman grasps the other around her waist and looks pleadingly up at her while the other woman looks off in the distance seemingly unaffected by the woman’s insistence. Nearly everyone,
female/male, lesbian/gay/straight, adolescent/adult, can identify with the intense emotion in this work. What more appropriate work of art to use when discussing emotion with students and how best to depict that through art than Mammen’s Jealousy? In another color lithograph from the Bilitis series, Mammen again depicts with skill and empathy the intense bond between two women. In Siesta we see two women sitting together in an embrace. They are clearly a couple as one cradles the other in her arm. The closeness and intimacy between the women is evident. Sykora (1989) observed that both wear delicate undergarments, which she believes heightens the attractiveness of the two. Both are content as they sit together.

Mammen continued to make art after the Nazis came into power in 1933 Germany, and since she pursued her art work in the seclusion of her apartment studio she was not harassed by the Nazis. She survived the war by becoming an itinerant book seller, selling old books from a cart that she wheeled around Berlin, and doing all sorts of odd jobs. Her art work went through dramatic changes. She experimented with Cubism and later turned to creating oil paintings consisting of layers of color with surface marks. Mammen died in 1976 at the age of 85. The apartment studio in which she lived for 57 years remains today almost the way she left it and is now operated by the Fördervereen der Jeanne-Mammen-Stiftung e.V.

Mammen was able to empathize with the women and lesbians because she too was a woman and a woman-identified woman, which gave her an advantage over male artists of her time in her ability to represent her own gender. She portrayed women in a gentle and understanding way. Lüttgens (1994) notes that the 1920s were the happiest times in Mammen’s life, possibly due to the fact that the art and culture of the time were infused with dreams about a new world in which German women could freely move about town and earn a living to support themselves.

**Classroom Applications**

Art teachers choosing to use the work of Mammen in their curricula could have students compare and contrast the many portraits of heterosexual couples that are readily accessible with some of the portraits of lesbians by Mammen. Students could begin by observing Picasso’s *La Vie*, Rodin’s *The Kiss*, and Gustav Klimt’s *The Kiss*. The teacher could ask students to describe what they see and what emotions are being depicted. Students could then be shown some of Mammen’s works including *In The Morning, Two Women Dancing*, and *She Represents* and asked similar questions. Students could be asked to discuss similarities and differences among works by Mammen and other artists. Ensuing discussions could include commonalities that all people share in relationship to love and intimacy and how artists portray such qualities in their work. Students could begin to see that all people share the need for love and intimacy. Students could then be given an opportunity to create works that speak about their relationships and how they might portray intimacy.

Accessing works by Mammen can prove challenging to art teachers. There are at least 15 images by Mammen that can be accessed on the Internet through the Fördervereen der Jeanne-Mammen-Stiftung e.V. (Foundation of the Friends of Jeanne Mammen, Inc.). Several books that focus on the work of Mammen including *Freundinnen* with five of the images from the *Songs of Bilitis* can be purchased directly from the Fördervereen.

**Engaging Students in Controversial Content in the Classroom**

However willing teachers may be to discuss the work of Jeanne Mammen and other lesbian or gay artists, they may encounter obstacles. Opposition to any discussion of lesbians and gays in schools is widespread throughout the United States. One of the main obstacles can be the administrators at the school who may object to discussions surrounding sexual identity. Similar objections may come from the school board, parents, and the community. As one art teacher noted, “Teaching about homosexuality as it pertains to the arts is prohibited” (Strickland, 2003, p. 95). Teachers who want to include the lives and works of lesbian and gay artists as part of a culturally competent curriculum are well advised to first check with the administration. If the administration is supportive, they will back the art teacher should the parents or community object. Should the administration prohibit any references to lesbian and gay artists, teachers must weigh keeping their jobs with standing by their principles. Teachers can choose to defend their position on scholarly and pedagogical grounds and face possible dismissal or abuse by the demands of the administration and instead work outside of the classroom to enlighten administrators and elect a more progressive school board.

**Conclusion**

Providing our students with an inclusive and balanced curriculum will ensure that all students see something of themselves in the art lessons. Art teachers can provide students with an inclusive curriculum that not only addresses the lives and accomplishments of heterosexuals, but also addresses the lives and accomplishments of lesbians and gays. This will ensure that our students understand that lesbians and gays are part of the American array and will help them to understand the meaning of living in a democracy.

By including the work of Mammen and other artists who address lesbian and gay issues, along with the work of artists who address heterosexual themes, teachers can provide high school students with an art curriculum that is relevant to their lives and provide them with art images that depict a range of human relationships. Mam-
Endnotes

1. At an NAEA conference I attended in 2001 I approached one of the more well-known publishers of art education materials about the possibility of producing visual images of works by lesbian and gay artists for use in the art classroom. My idea was not only quickly dismissed but I was laughed at. In 2006 I approached the same publisher of art education resources at the NAEA conference and was again dismissed. I was told there was no market for LGB resources.

2. At least two of the major texts that address art by women from the Renaissance through the late 20th century exclude mention of Mammens; these are *Women artists: 1590–1980* (Heller, 1987) and Making their mark: Women artists move into the mainstream (Rosen & Brawer, 1989).

3. This is where I first learned of Mammens. I was later to discover other writings and a website devoted to Mammens at http://www.jeanne-mammen.de/html/english/overview.html. I realized that Mammens was still living while I was in high school during the late 1960s and undergraduate school during the early 1970s. I was never given information about her and her work in art classes and this realization became a source of frustration. High school and, for some, undergraduate school, are times when adolescents begin to recognize their sexual identities. Had an art teacher or art professor provided information about Mammens and the fact that she so empathetically depicted the loving relationships of lesbians, I, and other lesbians who were undoubtedly in similar art classes, would have had an easier time accepting our sexual identities.

4. Works that address blatant sexual imagery of heterosexuals, including *Wolfman* by Jeff Koons and *Bad Boy* by Eric Fischl, could be considered to be too controversial for adolescents.

5. I use the 20th century term woman-identified woman to describe Mammens since she seemed to defy traditional definitions of a woman's identity in relationship to men. In the 1970s I and some other radical feminists used the term as a code to define who we were without coming out as lesbians.

References


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