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Visual Art in Nursery Schools

Abstract: This paper focuses on the possibilities of applying an interpretation of visual art in a nursery school. It defines the concept of visual arts and briefly deals with the issue of an interpretation of visual arts. It presents a preview of the educational project for the children, called Umělci v mateřské škole (Artists in Nursery School), which was published in a complete form within a separate publication. It stresses the importance of implementing visual arts in pre-primary education.

Keywords: pre-primary education, nursery school, visual arts, fine arts, educational program.

Introduction

Playing has an eminent position within a nursery school and the perception of Art and Art Education can be implemented best through play. There are many incentives that can positively shape the inner world of a child by applying the methods of play, and such incentives undoubtedly include fine/visual arts. Aesthetic activity is one of the most natural things in the world for a child, just like playing. If the child is in a free environment and feels happy, nothing prevents their aesthetic expression. That is the most important factor which the teacher in a nursery school should bear in mind when designing an artistic educational activity. A fine art education of pre-school children is necessary for directing not only towards

developing the skills of drawing, painting or modelling, but also for developing more complex skills. We especially mean creative thinking and visual literacy. In the presented paper, we have focused precisely on an interpretation of visual arts, because we consider such an encounter with a work of art as a unique way of developing all aspects of a child's personality.

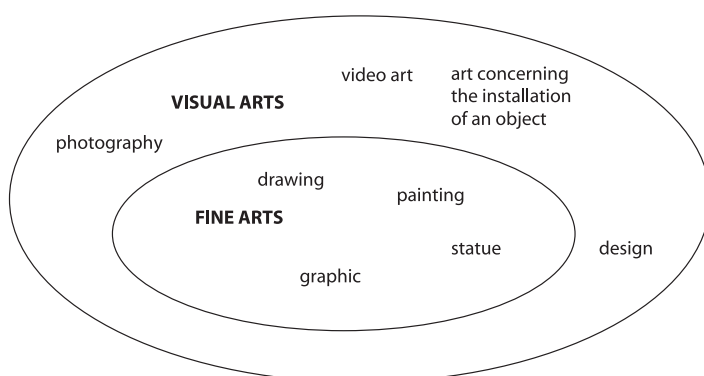
Definition of the concept of visual arts

In the current time, we meet with the term visual arts which is commonly used abroad and is also gradually replacing the common term of fine arts. An explanation can be found in professional literature (e.g. Kožušková, J., et al., 2006). It is explained therein that the concepts of visual and fine art can be understood as synonyms, but in our language environment the concept of fine arts (comprising classical forms: drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture and so on) is narrower than the concept of visual art, which in addition to these classical forms, also encompasses non-traditional forms, for example, photography, video art, the installation of an art object and also a wide area of design. According to the Encyclopaedia of Art Education, visual art is a modern, but not very clearly defined concept, covering a broad category of artistic disciplines and various subcategories. The wide scope of this concept prevents any attempts of a precise definition, therefore, it is preferable to define the concept of visual art through the appointment of its basic disciplines, which include:

- *Fine Arts* – belongs in its entirety to the basic categories of visual art, includes drawing, painting, printmaking and sculpture, but also calligraphy, illustration and architecture or design.
- *Contemporary art* – includes a host of modern art forms such as assemblage, collage, conceptual art, installation, happening, performances, body art, but also photography, video art, land art, animation or their various combinations.

- *Utility art* – includes, for example, pottery, tapestry, painting on glass.
- *Other forms of visual arts* – in a broader understanding, to visual art we may also assign graphic design arts, fashion design, interior design, computer art, but also tattoos, body and face painting and others.

Fig. 1. Graphical presentation of the relationship of concepts, fine arts and visual arts



A definition of the concept of visual art interpretation

The aim of education towards art at all school levels, including pre-primary education, should enable children to perceive an artwork, think about it and look for context, in order for them to be able to formulate their ideas into both a verbal and visual form. Education through art is carried out mainly through interpretive activities. We recognise works of art at the level of perception, however, it is still not enough for an understanding of them. Understanding is possible at the level of reception, which is one of the objectives of Art Education (Gero, Š., 2002; Zezulková, E., 2013). Without the reception process, a piece of art would be meaningless. Š. Gero (in Gero, Š., Husár, J., Sokolová, K., 2004) divides the process of the reception of artwork into several stages:

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- The first stage is *motivation*, for example, aesthetic needs, the need for relaxation, entertainment, knowledge, abreaction, shortening boredom, and so on.
 - In the next phase, *perception* follows – the reflection of shapes, colours, lines and their configurations, while at this stage decoding is important too, which would allow us to reveal what the artist has “put” into the work.
 - *Decoding* is possible, if we know the iconographic and formal language of fine arts (similar as to when we read a literary text, we cannot understand it if it is written in a language that we do not know).
 - This is followed by *reflection* – thinking about the work.
 - *Response* – its re-experiencing.
 - These processes culminate in *interpretation*, thus in an artistic experience, formulated by verbal language. The same picture can be interpreted differently each time, similarly each person brings their own opinions to the interpretation.

An interpretation of works of visual art is perceived on two levels – as a *verbal* and a *visual* interpretation. A verbal interpretation uses verbal means of expression. It is directed from a narrative description towards an interpretative interpretation. In order for the penetration into a work of art to result in an adequate interpretation, the observer should be visually and artistically literate, and should perceive the works not only on the basis of normal thinking and normal visual reference. Each process of interpretation is lively and inimitable, and is encouraged and supported by the work through its gradual detection in subsequent reception (Gero, Š., Tropp, S., 2000). Children at a preschool age are just learning to verbally express their thoughts, so it is necessary to thoroughly exercise care in selecting the works which we want to verbally interpret with them. We begin with simple works. in which they can find a story. Later, we may choose more difficult works to understand, but in no case do we force children towards a verbal expression. We let them perceive art works and encourage the spontaneous reactions of children.

When selecting works of art simultaneously, we make sure that we do not work with works that could interfere with the child's emotionality. R. Pondělíková (2015) states the verbal interpretation algorithm. More about the verbal interpretation of visual arts in pre-primary education may be seen in the publications: *Využívání interpretácie vizuálneho umenia v predprimárnom vzdelávaní* (The Use of an Interpretation of Visual Art in Pre-primary Education) (Krupová, I., Krupová D, Akimjaková, B., 2010), *Umelci v materskej škole* (Artists in Nursery School) (Rochovská, I., Krupová, D., 2016), and in publications by E. Zezulková (2013, 2014). According to J. Geržová and I. Hrubničová (1998, p. 114), we understand artistic interpretation (from the latin *interpretatio* – interpretation, explanation) as "...an artistic process based on a reflection of art through arts, artistic works through artistic work, using a wide variety of other artistic procedures (allusion, citation, appropriation, etc.)". According to Š. Gera and S. Troppa (2000, 2002), visual interpretation is implemented through creative art activities – copies of art work, free mimicking of art work or of the completing and the special feature of the work of art. Visual interpretation is followed by artistic paraphrase and reinterpretation. The authors further characterise artistic paraphrase as a creative process, based on a reflection of the work of art through a work of art. Here various art processes apply, e.g.:

- allusion,
- citation,
- appropriation,
- invocation,
- camouflage,
- commentary,
- persiflage,
- repaint,
- destruction,
- recycling,
- reinterpretation.

A further explanation of the listed concepts, together with illustrations of specific examples, may be found in the publication, *Umelci v materskej škole* (Artists in Nursery School) (Rochovská, I., Krupová, D., 2016). The authors, B. Akimjaková and M. Oravcová (2011), have also written about visual interpretation.

Project: Artists in Nursery School

The objective of the proposed art project was to bring different types of visual art to children at a preschool age through the interpretation of specific works of art. At every stage of the project, we present partial objectives, material and technical support, the course of the activity and observations from a verification of the proposed activities in a nursery school, completed with photo documentation. In one part of the project, we focused on the works of world artists and their interpretation. We have chosen the works of world-famous authors such as Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Leonardo da Vinci, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Edvard Munch and Pablo Picasso. Each activity for the children started with a verbal interpretation of the works, from which we made a PowerPoint presentation. We continued with a visual interpretation and the final products we processed within a separate publication (Rochovská, Krupová, 2016). In some suggestions on the interpretation, we mentioned also interesting facts about the life or work of the author, which are primarily intended for teachers. However, it is up to them whether and how they will situationally use this information when working with children, in the case where they will show a greater interest in the artist, his work and his interpretation. Here we present a sample of one activity, which focused on the interpretation of the art work, *Sunflowers*, by Vincent van Gogh.



Fig. 2. Sunflowers

(Image Source: *Wikipedia*)

Vincent van Gogh is considered the father of Impressionism¹⁴. Although the other Impressionists influenced him, his style, however, was individual and original. While he was regarded as unimportant during his lifetime, today, he is a recognised artist who even has his own gallery in his home country, the Netherlands. This unforgettable artist had a favourite flower – sunflowers – to which he devoted a major focus of his work. One of these pictures (Fig. 2), we have chosen for the interpretation by children, and we wanted to draw the attention of the child to the mastery of the use of colour and technique, using impasto paints, applied by the artist in his work.

¹⁴ The endeavour of Impressionism was to show a landscape or object as it appears to the eye, exactly at a given moment; the picture of an object or landscape changes at every moment, so the most accurate is the picture in the moment, which leaves in us the strongest impression - IMPRESA; the impressionist picture mostly appears like a mass of marks and blurred areas, only in the distance does it get its correct impression (Guillaume, 2012, p. 29).

Partial objectives:

- To describe the image, the *Sunflowers*, in their own words and think up their own name.
- Express their views on why Vincent van Gogh liked to paint sunflowers.
- To paint a sunflower, using impasto colours (undiluted tempera).
- Visually interpret the picture of the *Sunflowers* – to create a collective work from the individual work of the children, to make the background and vase for the sunflowers.

Material didactic resources: a reproduction of the picture of the *Sunflowers*, a PowerPoint presentation (available at <http://ulozto.cz/x6JBCLAr/umelci-v-materske-skole-rochovska-krupova-prilohy-rar>), tempera paints, tools for painting (tablecloths, glasses with water, paint brushes, sponges for wiping brushes, etc.), scissors, glue.

The course of the activity: We have started the activity with information about the history of the work. Children were introduced to Vincent van Gogh, the teacher showed them his three self-portraits (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Self-portraits of Vincent van Gogh

(Image Source: *Wikipedia*)

- T: Do you think that it is the same artist in all three images?
- CH: I know. This one on the side is the same as this one.
- CH: No, they are not the same.
- CH: They are all the same.
- T: Children, in all three of these images is the same artist, called Vincent. Look at his face, how does he look?
- CH: I can see, like this (she makes a frowning face).
- CH: I can see like this...
- CH: They all have a mouth like this (shows with the corners down).
- T: Do they have it like Mona Lisa had?
- CH: No.
- CH: No.
- CH: No, they do not have such lips.
- T: What does it mean when he pulls a face like this? Try to show, how he has his mouth.
- CH: I showed it, too.
- T: What could we learn about the painter according to that?
- CH: I think that they are ... I think they are frowning.
- T: And when someone is frowning, what does it mean?
- CH: That he is frowning.
- CH: That he is angry.
- CH: That he is frowning.
- CH: He is frowning.
- T: What do you think, why is this painter frowning and sad?
- CH: Because he did not do well at painting.
- CH: I think he forgot to put a hat here and there...
- T: If he forgot, can he still do it?
- CH: Yes.
- T: Could he solve the problem?
- CH: Yes.
- T: Children, this painter had a very sad life. He did not have a wife, nor kids and he had an ill soul.
- CH: He is sad, because he did not have a wife, nor a family and does not know how to smile, because he never tried.

T: Throughout his life, he painted pictures of mainly nature, flowers. He loved to paint sunflowers.

The teacher showed the children photos of the exterior and interior of the Vincent van Gogh gallery in Amsterdam, and told them that in this gallery there is a vast number of paintings by the artist. For the teachers, we report that the painting of the *Sunflowers* is currently located in the National Gallery, in London, and its reproduction is in Amsterdam, in the Gallery of Vincent van Gogh.

Furthermore, we looked at the *content* of art work. The teacher showed the children a magnified image of the sunflowers and asked them questions:

T: Do you know what these flowers are called?

CH: Something like dandelions?

T: It probably only reminds you of that, due to its colour. With what colour are they painted?

CH: Orange.

CH: And here is green.

T: Orange, green, what else?

CH: Yellow.

CH: Brown.

CH: Blue.

The teacher showed a real picture of a sunflower to the children.

CH: That is a sunflower.

CH: A sunflower.

T: And what do you think? What did the painter call his picture?

CH: Sunflower?

T: Do you think, he called it after this flower?

CH: A sunflower.

T: And is there only one sunflower?

CH: No.

T: So, how did the painter call his painting?

CH: The Sunflowers.

After the response to the last question as to why the artist liked to paint sunflowers, the children can be led towards the thought of how sunflowers feel – whether they are “happy” or “sad” flowers, when they love the sun. Also, their colour – yellow – was the colour of happiness according to Vincent van Gogh. In this way, he was seeking for happiness that he did not find in his life, at least in the pictures that he painted.

T: Children, I told you that there may be a riddle hidden in the pictures. What do you think, why did Vincent paint so many sunflowers when he was sad?

CH: He wanted to cheer himself up.

CH: Because he liked them a lot and he wanted to be happy, at least about this picture.

T: What was his favourite colour?

CH: Yellow!

CH: Yellow!

CH: Yellow!

For teachers, here are some notes about the picture, as characterised by J. Dolejšová (2012). The flowers are placed on a buttery yellow background, which is separated from the ochre table with a blue line. The flowers are in different stages of their life cycle. Angular yellow petals are painted with an incredible energy, while the grainy structure of dark orange ovaries consists of pointy touches of the paint brush. The piece is an expressive study in the colour, yellow, a symbol of sunshine and happiness, it reflects joy and hope.

In addition, the teacher also showed the children other paintings of the sunflower theme (Fig. 4). Children looked for their similarities and differences. They may also notice the colourfulness of the paintings and flowers in the picture, vases, background, the number of flowers or their shapes...



Fig. 4. A multimedia presentation on the interpretation of an image IV

(Image Source: *Wikipedia*)

The children could also think about the *form* of the interpreted art work. They watched the picture of real sunflowers, saying their views on how the work was painted.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the teacher gets familiar with the technique with which the picture was painted, and teaches it to the children in an appropriate form. Vincent van Gogh painted with *impasto* paints, thus used a thick oil paint, which was deposited in such a dense way that the images were, so to speak, plastic. The children could understand it better if we compared them, for example, to a rough wall, or if we had some picture painted with a thick layer of paint, which they could touch. They may make the visual impression by enlargements of the work in a presentation.

For the teachers, the artist's original artistic style can still be specified, characterised by applying glowing and bright colours, with quick and wide strokes of the brush. He thus created colour spaces, using the effect of complementary colours (for example, the blue colour in the picture with the sunflowers is a complementary colour to the yellow). His paintings did not respect the principles of deep perspective, with which

he achieved flatness. Also the colours used were not real and thus he achieved an expression of his inner restlessness and tension.

The conclusion of the activity consisted of a *visual interpretation* of the work, the *Sunflowers*. Each child focused on one detail in the picture – one flower, and then painted it on an A5 or A4 format, and tried to imitate the technique of painting of Vincent van Gogh. They watched a preview of the painting of the *Sunflowers* (Fig. 5) and we particularly drew their attention to the density of colours and brush strokes, which were fast and wide.



Fig. 5. A demonstration of the technique of painting with impasto paints



Fig. 6. Painting Sunflowers

Children painted with a dense undiluted tempera (Fig. 6). They cut out the painted flowers (Fig. 7) with the teacher helped the younger children. Since we had plenty of painted sunflowers, two children painted the background on an A3 card according to their imagination, and other two children painted vases. Finally, along with the teacher, they made a definitive work by sticking it together (Fig. 8.9).



Fig. 7. Works of the children



**Fig. 8. Collective creation
of the children I**



**Fig. 9. Collective creation
of the children II**

In reflection, the children expressed what they liked the most from the whole morning:

- *That we were painting flowers.*
- *That Ivanka cut out the vase and we painted the background.*
- *Sunflowers, that I painted the vase and background.*
- *I was making sunflowers, we were pretending to be artists.*
- *That I was looking at paintings and the painter. We were making flowers and he had an ill soul.*
- *The yellow colour reminded him of happiness. He did not have a wife or children, that is why he had a sad life.*
- *I was making sunflowers.*
- *We were playing at being painters.*
- *We were playing at being painters.*
- *That I was making flowers.*
- *I was making a flower.*



Fig. 10. The publication Artists in Nursery School

Conclusion

The implementation of interpretive activities in a nursery school requires guidance by a teacher who is competent both from the side of educational content, but also from the artistic side. As J. Belko (2001) claims, only a creative teacher in a nursery school is able to create a creative atmosphere. A creative teacher is able to make everyday things special and everyday phenomena seem new and thus to separate (a thing, story, phenomena ...) from the trivia of everyday life and place it at the centre of our (visual) course of events by making it seem different. Making something different also means story or motif telling, when the teacher gives the children the opportunity to discover the story or motif from a different angle, in a different light and another connection to that which they are used to. The interpretation of visual arts offers many stimuli that can enormously enrich the emotional world of children. In addition to getting to know a lot of theoretical information, they get to know great artists and their works, they learn about various art techniques, through interpretive activities, and they may experience adventures which will resonate in them for a long time to come.

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