Perception of modern art and evaluation of children’s art products in the primary school


Network 27 Didactics – Learning and Teaching (contribution number 220)

Abstract:
The art expression is one of the child’s most honest and sincere dialogs with the environment he/she lives into. That should value also for school art expression. Since the Visual arts is contemporary subject in primary school which is also evaluated it is very urgent that teachers have sensitive relation to the children’s visual art expression. Teachers’ relation to the child’s expression is seen during all expressing process at visual arts, through the final evaluation at the end of the unit and sometimes even by assessment of the art product (evaluating criteria are created by teachers). In the research made on group of students (future general teachers) we were looking for the connection between their perception of different art-masterpieces and their sensitiveness at evaluation of the children’s art products. We predicted that sensitiveness at evaluation mostly is not any particular issue at the students with a general sensitive and positive relationship to different art expression (older and modern art masterpieces). The exposed art period, containing stylistic diverse modernism and somehow neo-stylistic postmodernism, is still relatively strange to most students. But particularly those masterpieces enable qualitative superstructure of lessons, therefore they shouldn’t be neglected nor should the lack of knowledge about this art period represent a justified reason for the teachers not to use them at teaching art lessons. Not only the modernist art pieces seem to be urgent for general knowledge of each student but they are incredibly appropriate and appreciated for the teaching issue. They namely represent a useful starting point for planning, explaining and teaching different art challenges in more flexible manner (experiment, response and contextualization of art work). The article shows the starting points, the researching process, the main results and conclusions of the research, but it also contains contribution about the reasons why actually negative attitude appears or where it arises from.

Key words: perception, visual arts, planning and teaching art contents, teaching preparation

Preface
Ordinary (occasionally) audience mostly have specific pre-formed judgments about the art and its protagonists which could even be defined as prejudices, particularly when some fears of unrecognizing or misunderstanding about the object of art are included. At all kinds of modern art this is primarily obvious, while in the relation to the older art styles the exposed
art period (20th century art) is often treated as less likable and “too artistic” to be readable and understand properly. It is the prejudices that represent one of the main reasons for a prior rejection, without any arguments and non-rarely an underestimate valuation of modern and postmodern masterpieces.

Unfortunately according to the results of the present research a significant number of students (future general teachers in primary school) also belong to the kind of audience which still accepts and positively values mainly the objects portrayed in the exclusively realistic form (means objects painted in the form as seen in reality or at most adorable). In that case the presence of any deeper massages or contents of the art piece often has no importance what so ever. The problem which seems to be disturbed is that repulsive attitude towards exposed art mostly hindrance the application of it in the teaching. While it represents unjustifiable impoverish of visual arts in primary school we find that inappropriate and necessary to convert. If we follow the deliberation of Norman Jackson (2006) the higher education shall not only be the place where the world tries to be understood in all its rich complexity and glorious details, but it shall also be a place where “we prepare students for a lifetime of working with their own complex issues and problems” (Jackson 2006:6). Since one of the future task of students future general teachers in Primary schools will also be teaching visual art and valuating children’s artistic expression it is of a great importance to increase their artistic sensibility. The early grades of primary schools are full of curious and artistically creative pupils, who shall be allowed to also be artistically autonomous, if only the conditions provide that, but it looks that too many teachers do not take benefit of that prospect. And therefore it seems to be of a great importance the offering real-life experiences to the future general teachers as Swift and Steers exposed in their Manifesto for Art in School (1999, 2006) while it might represent one of possible superstructures of their knowledge about the theme and increase their application in practice.

So the present research represents the first small step into that direction of changing replicate and unimaginative but checked and comfortable way of teaching art in early school periods. Therefore we started with examination students’ knowledge of modern visual art essentials and pushing efforts into its increasing. We believe that if they are familiar with the modern and postmodern arts, its application increases at the art lessons and contribute to more creative planning and teaching visual arts contents. The recent results of present research confirm that. Knowing the influences of children's images to the modern art and the attitude of the modern artists towards children's art images also helps at improvement students’ perception of children’s art products. It seems that it even improves their relation to artistic diversity and enables a more founded argumentation of their own relation even to stranger art images. Therefore eventually we shall expect that their general aspects and principal priorities at Visual arts will become different, more artistically sophisticated and creative oriented. But of the same importance it is the fact that they start to include modern art pieces at their teaching and therefore started to bring modern arts closely to the children, so they can perceive it better, get familiar with it and evolve different attitude towards modern images.

The goals of the research:
Specific goals were related and distributed to three parts of the research.
- In the initiative part the present condition about the students’ knowledge, valuating and their relationship to the modern and postmodern art was established. I was also looking for the reasons for the present state with regards to the students’ knowledge
and valuation of the particular art period as well as its influence on planning the visual art tasks and teaching visual art contents at the early childhood education. One of the goals was also to see if the pattern of perception of the modern masterpieces has any harmful influence on valuating the children’s art products.

- The central part was intended for teaching additional contents from the modern and postmodern art with the main goal to approach that part of the art history and to increase the students’ knowledge of modern art. It was not our aim to teach useless data (date and place of author’s birth, exact year of origin etc.) but rather to thrill the students upon modern art and to explain them the starting points and circumstances that led to the precise images. The main goal was to excite the students to use modern masterpieces in practice at their planning and teaching art contents (as an illustration of some specific art content or for getting the idea of interesting art motive, art technique etc.).

- At the final part the results of the education were checked to see the actual effect of teaching.

**Researching problem:**
During my teaching practice on the Faculty of Education I have found out that most of the students (future general teachers) are rather unfamiliar with the essentials of modern visual arts and have quite a retained or even scornful attitude towards the modernistic and post modernistic masterpieces. Planning their own teaching preparations they usually don’t use those art pieces although this could enrich art lessons a lot. Such art pieces namely represent the excellent didactic illustration of different art contents. The application of mentioned art pieces would affect another parameter of education – it would bring modern masterpieces near to the youth and increase their familiarity with them, which would evolve different, more positive attitude towards modern art (the prediction is based on the simple fact, that well-known objects are usually valuated slightly differently than unfamiliar ones, namely pupils treat them with larger empathy and also argument their valuation more specifically). The main questions that were brought up during the research and influenced also on forming researching hypothesis were:

- How well-known are the essentials of modern and postmodern arts to the students (future general teachers)?
- How do they treat the mentioned art period and how do they value it with regard to the older art history periods and with regard to non-artistic visual images?
- Is it possible with the specific proceeding to influence on a more positive relation to the modern and postmodern masterpieces?
- How often do students use modern and postmodern art pieces as the illustration of specific art contents (in the initial and final state)?
- Is their attitude towards the modern and postmodern art shown also at the treatment and valuation of children’s art products (in initial and final state)?

**The researching hypothesis:**

**H1 –** students (future general teachers) are in general unfamiliar with the essentials of modern and postmodern art pieces – the majority does not even know more than 3 masterpieces of that particular art period.
H2 – the relation of the exposed population to the mentioned art period is mostly negative and they evaluate the art pieces with lower assessments than the masterpieces of older artistic styles and even of non-artistic paintings.

H3 – with the familiarity of the exposed art period it is possible to influence their attitude to become more positive.

H4 – the application of the exposed masterpieces in teaching purposes increases as the result of additional education.

H5 – knowing the influences of children’s images to the modern art and the attitude of the modern artists towards children’s art images improve students’ perception of children’s art products seen in different aspects and priorities of Visual arts.

Pattern:
The research was carried out on the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana. There were 66 students (future general teachers at their last year of study) included.

Researching instruments and process
1. The research started with the checking of the initial state of:
   - Knowing and valuating the modernist and postmodernist masterpieces (using the questionnaire)
   - Applying the exposed art period’s masterpieces in planning, structuring and teaching art contents (checking their teaching preparations)
   - Valuating the children’s art products (using the questionnaire with the range list for analyzing and valuating the children’s products).

2. After that the interactive additional education was taken. Students got some fundamental information about the essentials of the different phases of the modernist period with the presentation of few exposed masterpieces¹. They were actively included into courses while they had to prepare individual presentations of the masterpieces they had chosen themselves (I prepared the list of 70 different masterpieces and they chose whichever they wanted).

3. After that the checking of the final state was taken upon the same parameters as in the initial state.

The instruments used were authored, formed especially for the present research and previously checked on the pre-test. There were the following instruments used:

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¹ During the research students followed besides their regular contents a condense lecture about one of the chosen modernistic art pieces from various phases of modernism (summed up by Bocola, 1999): pre-classical modernism between 1870-05 (Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch), and 1905-15 (cubism, fauvism, expressionism), classical modernism 1910-30 (Mondrian, Kandinsky), anti-classical modernism (Duchamp) post-classical modernism 1914-20 (futurism, constructivism, Dadaism) and 1929 (Klee, Picasso, Giacometti). The lecture contained: a short introduction of the artist (an anecdotic presentation which was far more remarkable for the students than uninteresting factual data), a short description of the chosen particularities of a specific art piece (inspirations and influences which led to the final image) and the formal analysis of the art piece (art elements, variables, composition etc.). During an open discussion we tried to point out the possibilities for the use of the chosen art piece in planning and teaching specific art content. During each session some students tried to present their own choices of modern art piece in an interesting manner to their fellow students. After that a discussion followed.
questionnaire about students’ knowledge and perception of the masterpieces which included the rang list for valuating modernistic and post modernistic art pieces and a special questionnaire with the rang list for valuating and analyzing children’s art products. The comparison was taken also upon students’ teaching preparations. The research was taken as the pedagogic experiment.

The results and interpretation

H1 – the students were asked to autonomously point out all the masterpieces they know (the authors were not necessary to include). As the results showed the knowledge is rather poor. More than half of 66 students (34) exposed maximum four masterpieces (nine students exposed maximum 2 art pieces), 26 students appointed between 5-7 art pieces, and only six students knew more than 8 masterpieces (max. 10). Two extremely exposed masterpieces were: the renaissance Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci (60) and the Sower by Slovenian impressionist Ivan Grohar (54); they were followed by The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci (35), Lady with the coffee cup by Ivana Kobilca (28), sculpture of David by Michelangelo, The Scream by Edward Munch (10), The birth of Venus by Botticelli (9), The Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo (7), the Summer by Ivana Kobilca (7) and Guernica by Pablo Picasso (7), Sun roses by Vincent van Gogh (5) and The kiss by Gustav Klimt (5).

Table 1: The number of autonomously enumerated masterpieces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF ART PIECES</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1 or 2</th>
<th>3 or 4</th>
<th>5 till 7</th>
<th>8 and more</th>
<th>TOGETHER MENTIONED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENTIONED x</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>57 different art pieces</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE LIST OF ART PIECES
- Mona Lisa
- Sower
- Last supper
- Lady with coffee cup
- David
- Scream
- Birth of Venus
- Guernica
- The Sistine chapel

MENTIONED x
- 60
- 54
- 35
- 28
- 15
- 10
- 9
- 7
- 7

Among the exposed masterpieces the domination is on the renaissance masterpieces (mentioned 130 times) and masterpieces of Slovenian impressionism (mentioned 103 times). The Slovenian impressionism represents an exception in the manner of inauguration into mentioned art era, while it in fact appertains into the beginning of 20th century, but in the same time other parts of the Europe already devolved into further phases: expressionism, fauvism, cubism. Even though the impressionism appertains into very beginning of modernism, I was in the present research more focused on other, generally more typical 20th century images. And those kind of modernist art pieces were extremely rarely mentioned (cubism, jugendstyle and surrealism were together mentioned less than 20 times, other modernist styles were mentioned not even once). That confirms the first hypotheses – most students didn’t mention even a single modernistic or post modernistic masterpiece.

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2 They were not asked to point out just modernist masterpieces, but rather all they know.
3 Although it seems to be a fine list it has to be pointed out that most of those works were exposed by only few individuals.
H2 - The examination of the second hypothesis was based on several levels of searching.
   a) First students had to expose the masterpiece they liked the most among all they had
      enumerated and to explain their choice.
   b) Then they had to express their relation to twelve chosen pictorial examples\(^4\) by
      descriptive and numerical grade and valuate the artistic value with their own opinion.
   c) After that they were asked to answer some general questions about the masterpiece
      (what do they find important at valuating: the content, the nice visual image, its
      importance, how famous it is, the price etc.)

Table 2: The likeness of autonomously enumerated masterpieces and the likeness of art styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE LIST OF ART PIECES</th>
<th>Mona Lisa</th>
<th>Sower</th>
<th>Last supper</th>
<th>Lady with coffee cup</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Scream</th>
<th>Birth of Venus</th>
<th>Guernica</th>
<th>Sistine chapel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIKENESS (x)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIKENESS OF ART STYLES</td>
<td>Impressionism</td>
<td>Renaissance</td>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>Jugendstyle</td>
<td>Surrealism</td>
<td>Cubism</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENTIONED (x)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the findings the impressionism, the renaissance and the realism are the art styles
the asked population likes the most. The 20\(^{th}\) century art was exposed only 8 times but if
excluded Jugendstyle it would be only 3 times left. That seems to be the first serious indicator
that the acquaintance of art pieces is very important. People cannot like nor dislike something
they do not even know it exists, but they can make their own judgment about it nevertheless it
is based on limited experiences. The results which followed showed that not knowing
anything or not much about modernistic and post-modernistic art students often valuate such
art pieces on general, based on their own judgments which seems to be in the period of
modernism mainly negative. And those kinds of judgments are often not even clearly
articulated\(^5\).

Anyhow the answers show that students clearly wish to recognize the artistic form\(^6\) which
enables them also to “read” the purports of the masterpiece. The shapeless, deformed art
images and the contents which are therefore unclear, divert the students from the masterpiece

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\(^4\) The reproductions of images were distributed into three parts: 1) the part of modernist and postmodernist art
pieces with typical characteristics (expressionism, cubism, art-brut, neurotic realism, ...); 2) the part with
eamples of pre-modernism periods (romantic, renaissance, classicism, ...); 3) the part included non-artistic,
daub images without any artistic value; the “suggestible advice” which show how to paint, the images of
amateurs and examples from the handbooks which teach “artistic skills”.

\(^5\) »I don't like it. It's ugly«. Explanation: »I don't know, I simply don't like it« or »I don't like it while it presents
nothing. It's absurd«. Explanation: »Everyone can do that«.

\(^6\) Motive should be painted in such shape that it is recognizable at the first sight.
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or from the positive valuation of it. That was clearly recognized at the valuation\(^7\) of the exposed art pieces and non-artistic images. As the following detailed representation will show non artistic daub images are extremely positive valued which is of great concern.

As the results of the initial state show the students valuated with a high score especially those art pieces which are generally valuated as a great masterpieces (or at least give that impression) but at the same time keep a very close and secure connection with the realistic shape of images. The most adequate to that “criteria” is the Impressionism. Both the assessments (assessment of liking and prediction of artistic value) are very high (the average assessment is 4.4 upon the max. 5). Their relation to impressionist art work is also seen at the descriptive assessments (nice, artistically, esthetically, excellent).

However, if we probably still can understand the high scores of the impressionist masterpieces (because of their general prominence), the extreme overvaluation of the naïve paintings, non-artistic photo-realism and daub images is of great concern. Even the fact that liking assessments were higher than the artistic prediction\(^8\) does not reduce that concern, because the difference between the artistic and non-artistic images scores is incomprehensibly large.

a) The naïve arts were described as beautiful, nice, decorative, colorful, bright, warm and domestic; the average score of liking was 4.3, the artistic prediction was scored on 3.9.

b) Non-artistic photorealistic images were described as unbelievable, fascinating, artistic(!) and were scored with 4.1 at liking and 3.9 at artistic prediction.

c) The daub images and “suggestible advices” were described as peaceful, pretty, beautiful, gentle, lovely, decorative; liking was scored with 4.2 and artistic prediction 4.1.

As it was predicted those were also the images that most students exposed as attractive. In their argumentation of choice students often allege their wish to have an art product of that kind or express a wish to have an ability to paint like this. Most students define the word likeable art piece as a pretty motive, exact use of the art technique, some expose also the criteria of clearance of the motive and understandability as important.

In the same time students exposed as the most disliked art pieces:

a) The neoexpressionist, radical naturalism, neurotic realism, which were described as provocative, grotesque, unethical, morally disputable, shocking, repulsive works with the delicate content; the liking was scored with 2.2, meanwhile the artistic prediction is surprisingly high 3.2.

b) The art-brut and other images with primitive essentials were described as unprofessional, amateur, childish, bizarre, demolished; the liking of these works was the lowest, scored with only 2.0; artistic prediction was also one of the lowest scores 2.5.

\(^7\) With a question: do you like the image? (1- I don’t like it at all; 5- It’s excellent, I like it very much) and the question: Does this work represent an excellent piece of art with a true artistic value? (1 – The work is absurd and it’s worthless; 5 – It’s an incredible image with excellent artistic value).

\(^8\) The majority of the interviewed students expressed their uncertainty about their own objectiveness of valuating modern art pieces, so I assume that the values are even higher than it would be if they were totally honest. Meanwhile they evaluated those art pieces which they really liked (especially non artistic ones) with slightly lower values for the same reason.
c) Expressionism works were described by the following adjectives: disliked not nice, not pretty; the score of these works was also very low 2.1, meanwhile the artistic prediction is surprisingly high, scored at 3.3.

d) The abstract masterpieces, action paintings, classical modernism and constructivism were mostly described as: absurd, boring, too simple, unmeaning, uncreative, irrational; liking was scored at 2.4; artistic prediction was assessed with 2.8 for abstract art and 2.3 for classic modernism and constructivism.

Those works were exposed as the most disliked images; students even expressed their surprise concerning the fact that these images represent masterpieces and asked about their purposes and mission9. There can be two categories exposed with regard to the disliked paintings:
- the art pieces where the shapes seem to be disliked
- the art pieces that shock with their contents.

**H3** - One of the purposes of the present research was to define whether it is possible to change the negative relation to exposed art period and how this can be achieved. Therefore students got familiar with:
- analyzing art pieces (formal analysis of artistic elements)
- the basics and backgrounds of rising some masterpieces and interesting particularities (what was the reaction of the publics at the exhibition, critics)
- the authors; anecdote(s) and interesting information which influenced their way of expression.

As it was find out just a direct connection with the masterpiece (although the origin) does not change the students’ perception and acceptation of art. Students need to be “taught to look so that they can see and need to get some cognition in order to become able to recognize.” (Tavčar 1992: 6)

The cognition of art pieces was taken upon an interactive activity. At the beginning they got some condensed10 information about a particular modernistic phase with the special accent on the historical background. I exposed the typical representative and one of his art pieces. The students had to be active during those additional contents. It namely stimulated them to use their new cognitions. They got two tasks right at the beginning. They had to:

1. choose one of the reproduction of a particular masterpiece (there were 70 different masterpieces of modernist and post modernist art period)
2. visit one of the gallery with the accessible collections of Slovenian modernist and/or post modernist art pieces and choose one of them.

Students were suggested to choose the masterpieces which they found useful at forming the teaching preparation and enabled them planning the art task, teaching the specific art problems etc. Based on of both chosen art works they tried to find as many attractions as possible (with the help of literature and internet resources): about the pictures, its author, reasons and circumstances for the beginning, it’s background etc. The accents weren’t focused on the factual data (year of origin, year of authors’ birth, place of exhibition etc.) but

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9 Where can that kind of work possibly be exhibited? Bizarre, grotesque and morally questionable images cannot decorate the place where they are exhibited, while they irritate people and have a negative, morbid influence on them.

10 Unfortunately, there was no additional time assured because of the research.
rather on interesting attractions on the picture (formal analyzing of art elements) and other curiosities, even details which enable remembering the general specifics of the masterpiece. After that students prepared short excurses upon their choice of art pieces and made an interesting presentation for their schoolmates. After each presentation the discussion followed. The audience was invited to expose their own suggestions how the chosen art piece should be applicable at the school lessons.

The knowledge of the masterpiece influenced on the valuation of the art pieces, students namely assess them with obviously higher scores than in the initial state, however it didn’t particularly influence on higher score of liking (students didn’t like modern arts any better than before). It also didn’t influence on easier recognition of the true art piece and the daub one. Since the students didn’t know which particular examples are truly artistic and which are not, the scores of non artistic images stayed in nearly the same level than in the initial state. That is the consequence of a relatively short period of education, since there was not enough time to make a deeper comparison between those two shapes of expression, but at the same time it may represent the goal for future research. Anyhow it is delightful that students after these additional education at their planning and forming the teaching preparation used many more expertly confirmed masterpieces, especially those from the prepared list (70 masterpieces collection), but there were also some students who used the examples which they “discovered” themselves.

The important shift was noticed also at the argumentation of their own relation to the exposed masterpiece, while in the final state students were more precise and they explained much better why an art piece seems to be disliked. They didn’t declare it just as ugly but they at least explained what seems to be disturbing (for instance: dark, morbid colors or scary images on the motive) and more often connected it with the causes why the author made it that way (for instance: regarding to the time of origin it may be the consequence of the fear of war). It seems to increase the students’ sensitivity of perception and I only hope this won’t fade away very soon, especially that kind of sensibility is very much needed also at evaluation of child art products, with specific modifications of general didactic approaches to the child indeed.

**H4** – the problem which seems to be fundamental and which actually initiated the present research was the fact that students among plenty of approachable masterpieces (photo-reproductions), at their planning, forming and teaching the art contents usually don’t use them. Examining the teaching preparations in the initial state showed a no envious state in that area. Only 15 teaching preparations (from 66) in any part of it had mentioned the concrete art pieces.

**Table 3: Using the reproductions of masterpiece in the initial and final state**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using the reproduction of masterpiece</th>
<th>initial state</th>
<th>final state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quoted in the resources</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quoted at the didactic material</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere (motive)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Together</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the modernistic art pieces represent great didactic material which enables qualitative superstructure of visual art lessons they shouldn’t be left out. The masterpieces of the exposed period namely represent:

- undoubtedly artistically excellent material designed in high art qualities by all parameters of art esthetics (not daub, clumsy and technically or esthetically questionable), which enables the presentation of all different art problems to the pupils (for example: contrasts of all kind, composition, different art elements etc.);

- a very approachable material, gettable in printed or electronic versions, which enabled different manners of presentations (poster, Power Point etc.);

- a very important benefit: if the pupils get to know\textsuperscript{11} (at least some) modernistic art pieces, they might eventually treat them differently, for it wouldn’t be so strange any more, that they would reject them a priori.

The main condition needed for the realization of the presented expectations is of course that students (future general teacher) are acquainted with different art pieces and that they lose the unproductive fear and groundless prejudices concerning modern arts. As the initial state showed the cognition of modern masterpieces was very low, that is why their inapplicability of them was not surprising. With the increased number of different art pieces (especially modernist and post modernist) their usage also significantly raised. But there was another pleasing fact present – students started to look at the visual arts differently, more creatively (they were more relaxed even to unusual art techniques and strange useful materials and uncommon art-expressive possibilities, and also the list of art themes or motives was enlarged\textsuperscript{12}).

\textbf{H5} – One of the important hypotheses in the present research was based on the prediction that through envision into specifics of modernistic art-expressing tendencies, which are turning away from merely realistic shapes of images, also the students’ relation to the children art images is slightly changing.

\textsuperscript{11}The intention is not that a teacher should become an interpreter of art pieces and that they should present non essential data to the children. Teachers should use these art pieces to show and point out some particular features which enable them a simple and an appropriate exposure to art contents, for example to different art elements, shaping principles, artistic variables, etc.

\textsuperscript{12} Instead of standard motives which appear year after year in pretty much the same forms (a butterfly, a bunch of flowers, a fish, a snowman, etc.) and are quite safe for a teacher who doubt into their own art abilities, teachers started to expose different motives (animals in striped pajamas, a bird-like city of skyscrapers, an orange-red-purple spots jumping on a paper sheet etc.).
In the initial state students’ refusal attitude to art pieces with strong links to the primitive basis was obvious and in that manner they are somehow comparable to the children’s art images. They were convinced that those artists were actually incompetent to paint and they use the expression where no special effort is needed and “everyone is able to paint like that”.

It is outstanding how students mostly don’t even wonder about the causes for that kind of artistic shape and ask if it is really possible that more than 130 years of modernistic and post modernistic arts are in fact non-art? The explanation that sometimes it is simply about looking for spontaneous genuineness which is so typical for children’s expression was indeed surprising for some students, while before they didn’t perceive it that way.

Checking the H5 was based upon students’ point of view of the importance of particular parameters at child’s art expression process (Table 4) and their valuating the children’s art products in initial and final state \(^{13}\), before and after the additional contents of contemporary lessons. The adoption of the children’s art expression increased a bit. Students namely perceived more interesting details present at children’s art products, they also noticed a larger diversity of different art shapes, but they weren’t so convinced by forming the composition of the product.

### A consideration about the results

An art piece by Italian semiological model as well as the majority of cultural phenomena represents a sign or a system of signs and as such something that enables communication (Bračun Sova 2009: 99). Masterpieces therefore aren’t something useless and ineffective.

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\(^{13}\) In the final stage students didn't evaluate the same child's art products as in the initial stage, but the art products of the same age of children.
They represent an important part of social life intended for the viewers (mainly non-artists) for balancing their spiritual inclinations and harmonization of their own needs with the society and nature (Butina 2000: 2). Each masterpiece therefore represents an object of connection and communication between the viewer and the artist that is enabled through the senses and the neurotic system as a whole.

The signs were continuously changing throughout the history of art in accordance with the momentary needs of human art communication. Anyway at least on the level of artistic shapes they were long-lasting based exclusively on realistic images (realistic form). This bound wasn’t possible to break until the general human development allowed and enabled the deliverance (Butina 2000: 14) more or less at the end of the 19th century and with the entrance into the era called modernism (in approx. 1880). The term modernism represents the collection of rather different artistic styles (expressionism, constructivism, fauvism, futurism, surrealism, cubism, abstract art etc.), some more and some less bounded on the realistic images, characteristic for pre-modernist era (Bocola 1999). Painters started to develop subjective artistic languages to declare authentically their own visions. Due to that some of them (Malevich, Mondrian, Pollock, Klein) totally broke away from the tradition of realistic images.

What usually causes a negative judgment about modern art pieces?

First let me try to explain what influences our opinion about visual images in general. Butina writes that beauty, harmony, rhythm, proportions, color of shapes and space are not qualities of a thing, but qualities of a human perception and experience (Butina 2000: 8). While experiencing we try to form meaningful information obtained by sensual data. The majority of grown-ups trust their visual perception by far most. We are sure that our eyes give us most relevant data for which we can get rational explanations based on previous experiences. The problem of art perception and thinking is the problem of changing the world into art signs and symbols. An artist presents their understanding of the world in combinations of different art signs and symbols (Butina 2000: 14) which are often not easily recognizable or readable. Art is, as Butina points out more than visual or tactile and it transmits the artist’s entire cognition. The artist’s visual and touchable cognitions enriched with the cognitions of other senses transform through the visual and touchable channel into the outer world in the form of an art piece that is an art message which is enriched with spiritual cognitions and represents a new spiritual reality. Artistically speaking it is not and can never be a mere copy and an imitation of the visual. It namely represents the creation of a new world that is not a natural world but a special human world made “by a human for a human” (Butina 2000: 14). The problem of an artist is how they could transmit their own thinking, feelings, cognition on the outside and transform the visual into the artistic.

It is there that hides one of most frequent clues of non-understanding of the modern art images. As far as the images are realistic the viewer gets the impression that they understand them and know what message they try to convey (usually that is not true at all, namely also the art from previous periods does not present the mere imitation of the reality, but it is full of mystic, allegoric, etc. content which demand the knowledge of certain points of departures to be able to truly understand the message). Modern images demand even more from us for simple understanding. We are often deprived of non complex rational (self)explanation for it is not easy to decode what we see, the meaning of the seen images is simply not possible to explain. Such art pieces remain strange to the viewers therefore they don’t trust it or even experience some fear or confusion which leads to denying the opportunity to get to know
them. All of the stated presents the reasons why modern art pieces discourage an unskilful viewers and their uncertainty often hides behind the underestimating response and the negative valuation.

“The cooperation between a piece of art and a viewer is not to be taken for granted. To experience a piece of art and to make it meaningful we have to come along a certain way – through observation, thinking, searching, comparing, asking...“ (Strnad 2006: 37). Taking this into the consideration I tried to educate my students during the research with some particular knowledge and experience which would lead them at least to a better familiarity with specific pieces of modern art as well as to a more emphatic attitude towards them. I am certain that this is the first step to a different valuation which is more argumentative if not more positive. The emphatic attitude towards the modernistic pieces of art which correlate with children’s artistic expression in some of the points (usually works with primitive essentials such as for instance art-brut (Dubuffet) or some other (De Kooning, Appel, Basquiat) is especially important for the future general teachers. Art pieces of the named artists were badly accepted by the students in the initial state of the research and were worryingly “beaten” by non artistic, daub images. This fact points out that students see only the decorative result which originates from the hypothesis that art should be in the first place something beautiful, decorative and pleasant, and much less something that irritates our emotions and challenges our rational response. The consequence of such understanding of art is ignoring the essentially more important mission that children’s art expression has (at school) and that these future teachers should encourage; that is the development of creative thinking. Rhodes (1997) finds out that understanding the circumstances why modern artists (together with the previously mentioned Klee, Miro, Picasso, Münter, etc.) actually started to use the so called primitive art form, inspired among other things on children’s form, contributes a lot to dealing away with the underestimating attitude to the modernistic art pieces (“every pre-school child is capable of that”). Children’s art products were glorified because if its art persuasiveness, spontaneity of art response, the simplicity of art performance and the freshness of the form (Rhodes 1997). As long as a child is not burdened with the form they create in a relaxed manner, they don’t doubt about their art forms because the actual form of a specific object does not oblige them, therefore they can form it with an innocent simplicity and certainty. And it is this very determination that a lot of modernistic artists want to experience again regardless of a completely different starting point on which they build their art expression and regardless of completely different goals which they try to reach. In the background of their work is as we had previously pointed out their communication with the surrounding. The children on the other hand primarily do not have any intention to communicate throughout their art product with the world but they communicate with themselves through the visualization of their deliberation, their understanding of particular problem. In fact they “visually explain to make certain problems clearer”. Kandinsky (in: Rhodes 1997:56) writes about the characteristics of a child’s art expression as about “unconscious concentration on the inner-self, on the inner life forms”. “An enormous unconscious power is present in a child’s drawing and it raises it on the level of adults and sometimes even higher...” It often happens that an “academically educated artist with an excellent technical knowledge loses the ability to listen to this precious inner sound. They create perfect forms which are dead, empty.” (Rhodes 1997: 59).

Two usually closely related reasons could be exposed concerning the students’ negative judgments about modern art pieces. They arise from the same starting points and represent an
exaggerated glorification of décor (this arises from the belief that art should be something beautiful regarding its form as well as its content). The results of the research showed that what concerns the form itself students appreciate the exact art technique which reflects the realistic image of the motive (in the recognized, non mutilated and non deformed art images). With the regards of the art content they appreciate the non-problematic illustration, non-provocative, non-shocking, non-aggressive content. But this kind of view on art itself is problematic, because with regards of all previously mentioned findings, an art piece should in its from represent an accurate, realistic reflection of real object in their surroundings, with no aspiration that an author has tried to give us something more than that. This leads us in the consideration about the problem of focus on the décor of an art piece and of the indispensable presence of the content essence.

The problem of focus on the form décor

As it was previously stated, in the background of each qualitative art piece there is a content essence that is something which an artist tried to communicate to their surrounding with their work. And it is this content that a modernist artist adapts the visual for form all the time. The form which means that the artistic images complement the content for this is the only way they could convey their idea as a whole. The form because a reflection of thinking about the problem, its analysis, and the final synthetic decision, so it often loses its “décor”; it is not nice, likeable, gentle, sweet any more. The images become deformed, and/or formally minimized, stylized (they keep only the most important formal data, so that we can still recognize them, but sometimes this reduction is so thorough that even that is not possible any more (for example: Mondrian)).

All this has one goal only – to visually complete, confirm and emphasize the content. It is this that influences the particular art esthetics of modernist styles which are mostly explicitly subjective. Not understanding the fact that the content of an art piece is at least as important as its form (and certainly not less) leads into the poverty of a work of art and it minimizes it on a technical artificialness, empty virtuosity, seen especially on daub images.

To understand that the form is adapted to the content is crucial for future general teachers for they will also carry out tasks from the field of artistic expression. They have to realize that a child makes an art product that is not necessarily decorative (suitable to be put on an exhibition) to be successful – but it by no doubt has to contain the child’s thinking that it can be treated as excellent. Interestingly, such a piece of work usually contains authentic artistic esthetic which we look for in a child’s artistic expression. Unfortunately this too often remains neglected by teachers.

The indispensable necessity to embrace the problem of the content

Regardless of students imagining that they understand the pieces of art, with the so called recognizable images, we have to remain critical about this belief because of the previously mentioned characteristics. As it was said before, the majority of the art pieces of older origin (pieces of art which were made in older periods: gothic, renaissance, mannerism, baroque,….) hides in their images a lot of metaphoric contents which do not “furnish” the viewer with the actually seeable data (images), but with a whole list of other information which we could see only if we know the art historical explanation or even the artist’s own explanation of the piece
of art. The belief of understanding should therefore be understood more as the recognition of visual images and less as their thorough analysis and looking for the metaphoric messages. The content that a modernistic artist tries to communicate originate from an inner urge, a problem, fear, distress which disturbs, troubles, irritates the artist. They think about them, analyze them and model them through the process of creating until the final artistic result which usually represents the artists’ spiritual catharsis. Subjects that disturb individual artists are relatively variable. Among the more frequent in the period of modernism are especially different forms of existentialism which cannot be markedly decorative and soothing as such, for they should provoke, shock the viewer and evoke a rational and an emotional challenge. Drawing a parallel with the children’s artistic expression, we have to find out that also a child’s art product, no matter how simple it is, should contain a certain idea, a problem which a child tries to solve with the help of an artistic interpretation. It is interesting that this is usually understood as so much desirable artistic creativity, which students unfortunately often can’t even see, because the exactness, the precision, the details of the artistic technique are more important for them. So we lose the precious freshness of the child’s artistic ideas which fade if they are not seen. A child should be allowed the ability to see things in a new way, differently as we adults can see and that they find out also such connections which we adults think are non-connectable, and are often illogical to us, but a child sees them as clear and unambiguous. All the interpretations that a child artistically (or in some other way) expresses have some meaningful connection with the reality which the child understands moreover because of this they may be congenially fresh. The aim of this research also being the valuation of children’s art pieces, I have to clarify some crucial reasons why the problem of inappropriate valuation even occurs. The reasons often lie in the distorted idea about a child’s artistic abilities, their inclination and their needs which comes from insufficient knowledge about specific child artistic development stages. Subconsciously the students’ uncertainty of their own artistic abilities also influences on the incorrect valuation; a lot of them are namely certain that teaching art contents is not something they are good at because they cannot draw well. That means that they are held back from the artistic expression. Nevertheless the research shows that most of them are sure that they know which child’s art product is good and which isn’t (certain insecurity with the valuation was acknowledged only by the minority of students). According to the results this kind of precaution is valid. That was also shown by the results of the valuation in the initial state. Students paid attention to how the surface of the drawing was fulfilled, to the accuracy of the art technique and to what extent teacher’s instructions were followed. However, the valuation of children’s art product is not so simple that it could easily be installed into some kind of formulations (the surface of the drawing is properly fulfilled, the technique is adequately carried out, the use of the stated ideas is regarded, therefore art product is excellent). In every valuation of children’s art pieces it is necessary to pay attention to the child’s idea which could for example radiate their understanding of the content. This could not be entirely predicted because its image is influenced by knowledge from other fields as well as by specific formation of art piece as a whole according with the child’s natural abilities. Being able to see this, a certain artistic sensibility is required and on the basis of modernistic pieces of art students were at least slightly familiarized with it during the present research.
The conclusion

Each art image has to involve a certain idea, a thoughtful content, the author’s attitude to something, briefly, something that the author (although a child) tried to present, and not let the image to stay on a level of an empty decoration. It is necessary that every teacher takes that into consideration in order to be able to stimulate and develop that. The modernist and post modernist art pieces enable students to see the meaning of connecting the form with the contents at the art expression. As the results showed that envision helps them with a sensible undertaking the technically less perfect (less decorative) products with bright ideas successfully. They stopped being thrilled by decorative but restricted, un-thoughtful instants. It’s important that the future teachers notice and value the art products with the idea, with the content and the children’s own expression. At the evaluation it is urgent to consider that and not just a form that namely plays a more important part than empty “cosmetics”. Beside that at the children’s art products also diversity of art elements, signs and their modifications involved into totality are needed to be seen, as well as to include the pupil’s ability for building a dynamic composition and show their flexible ability to change circumstances, their inventive fluency, autonomous realization and progress.

The envision into the period of the 20th century art, especially modernism, showed some important positive effects, such as:

- students recognized some main characteristics about different art aesthetics; aesthetics that were before perceived as disliked and absurd;
- they got close to the cognition that the form and content of the image in modernism complete each other;
- they have changed their valuation and partly their relation to the exposed masterpieces and to children’s art products;
- their new knowledge has been used in practice, at planning and teaching the art contents, they have changed their relation to the forming art motives and have become more open to technical experiments.

All of the enumerated influenced on the sensitivity of their perception of visual art in school and will (I honestly hope so) develop also in future, especially in practice. The visual art namely represent an opportunity for children not only to recognize different artistic contents (elements, techniques, materials) but also to use them in their own way, which show their own thinking, emotional attitude and total perception of the objects (they get to know the same object at different school subjects: at mathematics, science, music, …).

The importance of connecting the form and the content was shown through perhaps somehow provocative approach, but especially in modernism it is so clear. According to the results it seems that it was accomplished at least at some segments and I sincerely hope that the irritation will last as long as possible and force the students to experiment with modernistic characteristics even further or at least to use them by planning and teaching arts.

Literature and resources:

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14 Checking the initial state a lot of students were excited about the “original” artistic ideas and art-suggestions shown in various magazines intended for the ”creative use of spare time” which have nothing to do with the children's artistic expression.


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