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Popularity of Art Motifs among Fourth-Grade Primary School Students in Slovenia and Croatia

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Abstract

The article presents the results of an empirical study, whose purpose was to identify preferences for art motifs among fourth-grade primary school students in Slovenia and Croatia. From the viewpoint of the total sample ($n=1,467$), the study results have shown statistically significant gender-related differences in four out of five cases. No differences were observed with regard to social stratum. With regard to individual countries, statistically significant differences were noted in three out of the five cases. It was expected that there would be no differences in preferences for art motifs between Slovenian and Croatian students.

Keywords: *visual arts education, preferences for art motifs, primary school, school systems of Slovenia and Croatia*

Introduction

In primary school education, the subject of visual arts enables students' permanent creative expression. It introduces them to perception and reception, i.e. evaluation of artwork. Teachers thus use artwork to give students an understanding or explanation of an art motif, problem or technique. Students' preferences for works of art can be observed from two different viewpoints. On the one hand, there is the student's natural and innate feeling for artistic order and, on the other, the learned feeling of what is beautiful and aesthetic. It may be noticed, says Mazepa-Do-magała, "that the young audience pays attention to both the objective, perceivable

by the senses, qualities as well as to the emotional aspect, which is noticeable but not leading” (Mazepa-Domagala, 2010 p. 184). This develops their visual abilities, the skill of organised observation and mental, emotional and other activities (Duh, Vrlič, 2003). The process of visual arts education thus develops students’ creative abilities for hands-on artistic work and the ability to observe and assess works of art. The perception and reception of works of art and their internalisation are called art appreciation. Today we know that art appreciation abilities are inherent to all students and that the students’ perceptive abilities are better developed than receptive ones. The level of art appreciation abilities is somewhat average (Duh, Korošec Bowen, 2014).

Artists choose different motifs in their work. When observing a work of art, every individual can identify with the art motif, but only if the motif is close enough and touches him or her. Höfler (1998) believes that a motif is a fundamental subject of the work of art. An important factor in understanding and responding to a work of art is the emotional response of students in the perception of artwork (Duh and Herzog, 2012). Grgurić and Jakubin (1996) classify motifs into three types: (1) visual motifs, (2) non-visual motifs, and (3) artistic and compositional elements as motifs. An appropriately chosen art motif represents motivation for the student resulting in the student’s creativity.

In modern visual arts education, the teacher has the possibility of freely choosing motifs, as these are not stipulated by the syllabus. At the elementary level of primary school, human figures, animals, still lives, landscapes, the interior, different genres such as occupations, scenes from everyday life, fantasy motifs and decorative and abstract works of art are appropriate motifs (Duh and Vrlič, 2003). Fantasy motifs are appropriate for lower-grade students due to their highly developed imagination. The teacher should strive to search for extraordinary and diverse motifs for every subject discussed in art lessons, so as to offer students the possibility to develop general and spatial artistic abilities.

Existing Studies

From the motivational point of view, choosing motifs in visual arts education is exceptionally important, as a motif represents the affective part of the artistic task. Emotional response of students, both in the perception of artwork and in their own creations, represents an important factor in understanding and responding to art. Individual studies (e.g., Aissen-Crewett, 1989) have shown gender-related differences in the artistic creation of children. These differences can be noted especially

in the choice of motifs, their structure and artistic expression and partially also in the choice of colours and shapes. These studies show that girls prefer subjects such as their home and the immediate neighbourhood. Boys, on the other hand, depict dynamic scenes in their works of art, strength and technical devices. On the other hand, Kampf-Jansen points out that the art “worlds of girls and boys are coming closer and in individual places even overlap” (Kampf-Jansen 1990, p. 96). She mentions the equally eager depiction of individual cartoon characters. Existing studies on the choice of motifs in Croatia (Kuščević et. al., 2009) have shown that younger primary school students are more attracted to figural than abstract motifs. Previous studies conducted in Slovenia (Duh and Herzog, 2010) indicate that there are statistically significant gender-related differences in the choice of the motif among ten-year old students. Boys were mostly attracted to animal and fantasy motifs and girls to genre motifs, portraits and landscapes. A similar study (Duh and Herzog 2012), on third-grade primary school students, has shown that as regards preferences for art motifs, the role of gender is more important than social stratum. Preferences for art motifs among fourth-grade primary school students were also monitored by a study (Duh, Herzog, Ros, 2013) that established that the majority are gender-related differences and rarely stratum-related differences. In order to obtain high-quality results in artistic creation, we have to choose subjects and motifs that can be internalised by students of both genders.

Methods

Purpose and hypotheses

An empirical study was conducted to establish preferences for art motifs among Slovenian and Croatian fourth-year primary school students (aged 10 – 11). Five sets of test paintings were used with each set covering the objectives from the field of drawing, painting and sculpting for fourth-year primary schools (Syllabus: Likovna vzgoja, 2011; Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu, 2006).

The study derived from hypotheses related to students’ gender, social stratum of schools and their country of origin.

Gender-related hypotheses.

It was assumed that there were statistically significant gender-related differences in motif preferences in the first set of paintings (H1.1), the second (H1.2), the third (H1.3), the fourth (H1.4) and in the fifth set of paintings (H1.5).

Hypotheses related to the social stratum of schools attended by the students who were included in the study.

It was assumed that there were no school stratum-related differences in motif preferences in the first set of paintings (H2.1). It was further assumed that there were no school stratum-related differences in the second set of paintings (H2.2), the third (H2.3), the fourth (H2.4) and in the fifth set of paintings (H2.5).

Hypotheses related to the students' country of origin (Slovenia, Croatia).

It was assumed that there were no differences with regard to the country of origin in the first set of paintings (H3.1), the second (H3.2), the third (H3.3), the fourth (H3.4) and in the fifth set of paintings (H3.5).

Method

The study was conducted using the descriptive and non-experimental causal method of pedagogical research. In order to establish differences as regards motif preferences between the students' nationality, gender and social stratum, the χ^2 test was used.

Study sample

The study sample comprised 1,467 fourth-grade primary school students from Slovenia and Croatia; of those 834 students from Slovenian primary schools, or 56.85 % of the total sample, and 633 students from Croatian fourth-grade primary schools, or 43.15 % of the total sample. It needs to be mentioned that Slovenian fourth-grade students are 10 years old and Croatian 11. However, in the fourth grade both groups have had 4 years of primary school education. With regard to gender, the sample consisted of 741 (50.5%) boys and 726 (49.5%) girls. With regard to social stratum, the sample consisted of 1,085 (73.9%) students from urban schools and 382 (26.1%) students from suburban primary schools.

Data collection procedures

We conducted a lesson in individual primary schools in one class of fourth-year students, in which the students were asked to individually fill in evaluation sheets. We used an LCD projector to project reproductions of works of art (photographs). We showed the students artwork from the fields of drawing, painting and sculpting with different motifs. The artwork reproductions were classified into five sets of five works of art, i.e., a total of 25 pictures. The individual sets covered the learning objec-

tives with regard to art problems as set out in the fourth grade syllabus. The artwork reproductions were grouped according to the art concepts that they contained: the first set points and lines, the second chromatic and achromatic contrast, the third the relationship between volume and space, the fourth complementary contrast (mostly red-green) and the fifth painting textures, emphasised spots and strokes.

Table 1. List of shown artwork reproductions according to sets

Sets	No.	Work of art
the first set	1	Leonardo da Vinci: Antique Warrior
	2	Albert Kinert: Self-Portrait
	3	Vincent van Gogh: The Yellow House
	4	Giorgio Morandi: Still Life
	5	Ante Kuduk: Kadar 5
the second set	1	Josip Račić: Lady in White
	2	Miljenko Stančić: Interior
	3	Pablo Picasso: Harlequin with a Guitar
	4	Paul Cézanne: Still Life with Pitcher
	5	Ante Kuduk: Graf-COLOR-8
the third set	1	Greece: Marching Soldiers
	2	Miron: Discobolus
	3	A. D. Fernkorn: Saint George and the Dragon
	4	Branislav Dešković: Dog in the Square
	5	Henry Moore: Reclining Figure: Holes
the fourth set	1	Albrecht Dürer: Barbara Dürer
	2	Albrecht Dürer: Paumgartner Altarpiece
	3	Giuseppe Arcimboldo: The Librarian
	4	Claude Monet: The Poppy Field
	5	Victor Vasarely: Vega 200
the fifth set	1	Chuck Close: Self-Portrait
	2	Pierre-Auguste Renoir: Irène Cahen
	3	Pierre-Auguste Renoir: Moss Roses
	4	Vincent van Gogh: The Starry Night
	5	Ordan Petlevski: Black Furrows

The instrument used to gather data was the evaluation sheet that was filled in by each of the students individually. The students were first shown a sequence of five works of art. Each was projected for 10 seconds and the next projection

featured all five works of art together. The students compared them and graded them 1 to 5. They gave five points to the work of art that attracted them the most and one point to the work that attracted them the least. They could use each grade only once. When all the students in the class concluded their evaluation, they evaluated the next four sets of artwork in the same way. We used an instrument with tested measurement characteristics (validity, reliability, objectivity), which was developed at the Faculty of Education of the University of Maribor (Likovni test PR, 2010). The instrument comprises Microsoft PowerPoint presentation of 25 photos divided into five sets and grading sheets.

Data processing procedures

The study employed methods of basic descriptive statistics (f, f %) and inference statistics (the χ^2 test). Data were processed with the use of SPSS 21 software.

Results and Interpretation

A study was conducted to establish motif preferences of Slovenian and Croatian fourth-year primary school students. We were predominantly interested in whether there were differences with regard to nationality, gender and social stratum.

Table 2. Works of art that the majority of students favoured in individual sets

Set	Work of art	Total	
		f	f %
1	Vincent van Gogh: <i>The Yellow House</i>	708	48.3
2	Paul Cézanne: <i>Still Life with Pitcher</i>	702	47.9
3	Anton Dominik Fernkorn: <i>Saint George and the Dragon</i>	807	55.0
4	Victor Vasarely: <i>Vega 200</i>	717	48.9
5	Vincent van Gogh: <i>The Starry Night</i>	663	45.2

The results show (Table 2) that in the first set almost a half (48.3%) of all the students favoured Vincent van Gogh's *The Yellow House*. In the second set, again almost a half of the students (47.9%) favoured Cézanne's *Still Life with Pitcher*. In the third set, more than a half of the students (55.0%) favoured Fernkorn's *Saint George and the Dragon*. In the fourth set, slightly less than a half of the students

(48.9%) favoured Viktor Vasarely's *Vega 200*. In the fifth set, almost a half of the students (45.2%) were drawn to Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night*.

The study further focused on whether there were preferences for art motifs conditioned by gender. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Preferences for art motifs of works of art with regard to gender and the results of the χ^2 test

Sets	the first set	the second set	the third set	the fourth set	the fifth set
Result χ^2	$\chi^2=83.022$	$\chi^2=55.188$	$\chi^2=43.068$	$\chi^2=3.816$	$\chi^2=13.041$
	P=0.000	P=0.000	P=0.000	P=0.431	P=0.011

Table 3 shows that in the first set of pictures there were different preferences for motifs between boys and girls. In the first set, the result of the χ^2 test shows that there are statistically significant gender-related differences (P=0.000) as regards preferences for art motifs. This confirmed hypothesis H1.1. In the second set preferences for art works are more dispersed between the genders, which was also proved with the help of the χ^2 test. In the second set of paintings, a statistically significant gender-related difference (P=0.000) was established in preferences for art motifs. This confirmed hypothesis H1.2. The third set of reproductions shown to the students were sculptures, i.e., one relief and four full plastics. The diverse preferences for motifs allowed us again to note statistically significant gender-related differences (P = 0.000) also in the third set of works of art with the help of the χ^2 test, thus confirming hypothesis H 1.3. In the fourth set, the boys (52.0%) and the girls (45.7%) again preferred the same work of art among the presented reproductions, i.e. Viktor Vasarely's *Vega 200* (picture No. 5). The second most popular work of art from this set in both genders was Claude Monet's painting (picture No. 4). These two paintings were preferred by 90.5% of the girls and 74.4% of the boys. The preferences for the remaining three paintings were slightly more dispersed. Nevertheless, the χ^2 test did not note any statistically significant gender-related differences (P = 0.431) in this set as regards the preference for art motifs. Hypothesis H1.4 was thus rejected. The preferences for motifs in the fifth set were also diverse and we again noted statistically significant gender-related differences (P = 0.011) in this set of works of art with the help of the χ^2 test, thus confirming hypothesis H 1.5.

The study further focused on the role of social stratum in preferences for art motifs. The preferences for art motifs among the students of urban and suburban schools were compared. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Preferences for art motifs of works of art with regard to social stratum and the results of the χ^2 test

Sets	the first set	the second set	the third set	the fourth set	the fifth set
Result χ^2	$\chi^2=0.613$	$\chi^2=3.559$	$\chi^2=4.618$	$\chi^2=3.816$	$\chi^2=7.209$
	P=0.962	P=0.469	P=0.329	P=0.431	P=0.125

Table 4 shows that in all the five sets, the students of urban and suburban schools preferred the same works of art. In all the five sets, the results of the χ^2 test do not show any statistically significant differences with regard to social stratum. This confirmed hypotheses H2.1, H2.2, H2.3, H2.4 and H2.5.

We were further interested in whether there were any differences in preferences for art motifs with regard to the students' country of origin. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Preferences for art motifs of works of art with regard to the country and the results of the χ^2 test

Sets	No.	Slovenia		Croatia		Result χ^2
		f	f %	f	f %	
1	1	219	26.3	156	24.6	$\chi^2=17.768$ P=0.001
	2	13	1.6	15	2.4	
	3	370	44.4	338	53.4	
	4	185	22.2	100	15.8	
	5	47	5.6	24	3.8	
2	1	118	14.1	181	28.6	$\chi^2=79.893$ P=0.000
	2	38	4.6	30	4.7	
	3	106	12.7	128	20.2	
	4	460	55.2	242	38.2	
	5	112	13.4	52	8.2	
3	1	60	7.2	53	8.4	$\chi^2=8.041$ P=0.090
	2	80	9.6	68	10.7	
	3	450	54.0	357	56.4	
	4	187	22.4	131	20.7	
	5	57	6.8	24	3.8	

Sets	No.	Slovenia		Croatia		Result χ^2
		f	f %	f	f %	
4	1	19	2.3	23	3.6	$\chi^2 = 42.011$
	2	65	7.8	47	7.4	
	3	42	5.0	64	10.1	P = 0.000
	4	245	29.4	245	38.7	
	5	463	55.5	254	40.1	
5	1	97	11.6	76	12.0	$\chi^2 = 3.296$
	2	278	33.3	202	31.9	
	3	58	7.0	38	6.0	P = 0.509
	4	365	43.8	298	47.1	
	5	36	4.3	19	3.0	

Table 5 shows that in the first set of shown drawings, the students from Slovenia and the students from Croatia preferred the same work of art. The motif of Vincent van Gogh's *The Yellow House* attracted the highest number of Croatian (53.4%) and Slovenian (44.4%) students. The second most preferred motif was that of Leonardo da Vinci's drawing, with the Slovenian students showing a slightly higher preference (26.3%) than the Croatian students (24.6%). The third, fourth and fifth position as regards the popularity of the motif were taken by the same drawings in both countries, however the percentages differed. Regardless of the same order of popularity among the students from both countries, the χ^2 test proved statistically significant differences (P=0.001) between the students with regard to their country of origin due to the different percentages as regards the popularity of individual motifs. This result disproved hypothesis H3.1.

The results of the analysis of the second set show that both the Slovenian (55.2%) and Croatian students (38.2%) preferred the same work of art, i.e., Cézanne's *Still Life with Pitcher*. Josip Račić' *Lady in White* was the second most preferred motif by the students of both countries, however the percentages differed. The percentage is twice as high among the students of Croatian schools (28.6%) as among the Slovenian students (14.1%). As this is a famous Croatian author, it is possible that the Croatian students had already seen this work of art and recognised it. The motifs of other shown works also caused different reactions from the students of both countries and the χ^2 test revealed statistically significant differences (P=0.000) in preferences for art motifs with regard to the country of origin. This result disproved hypothesis H3.2.

The results of the third set of shown reproductions of sculptures show that both the Slovenian and Croatian students preferred the same work of art, i.e. Fernko-rn's *Saint George and the Dragon*, in similar percentages – the Croatian students slightly more (56.4%) than the Slovenian students (54.0%). The students from both countries expressed similar preferences also for other motifs. The χ^2 test did not show any statistically significant differences ($P = 0.090$) between the preferences for motifs of this set from the viewpoint of the country of origin. This confirmed hypothesis H3.3.

In the fourth set of paintings, the Slovenian and Croatian students preferred the motifs of the same two works of art. They were the most drawn to Vasarely's *Vega 200*. This percentage was higher among the Slovenian (55.5%) than among the Croatian students (40.1%). On the other hand, the second most preferred motif from this set, i.e., Claude Monet's *The Poppy Field near Argenteuil*, was more popular among the Croatian (38.7%) than the Slovenian students (29.4%). The preferences for other motifs of this set differed. These differences were also noted with the χ^2 test, which showed statistically significant differences ($P=0.000$). This result disproved hypothesis H3.4.

In the fifth and last set of paintings, the students from both countries found the motif of Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* to be the most captivating. This motif was slightly more popular among the Croatian (47.1%) than among the Slovenian students (43.8%). The results of the χ^2 test indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between the two countries ($P=0.509$). This result confirmed hypothesis H3.5.

Conclusion

The study established preferences for art motifs among fourth-grade primary school students. We were interested in whether there were any differences in choosing the preferred motif between genders, with regard to the environment and the country of attending primary school. It was established that the students mostly prefer realistically depicted motifs, which had already been shown by previous studies (Kuščević et. al., 2009; Duh et al., 2010; Duh & Herzog, 2012). It was established that the boys preferred dynamic and fantastic motifs and the girls predominantly motifs reflecting motherhood and tenderness. Similarly to previous studies (Aissen-Crewett, 1989, 1992; Duh & Herzog, 2012; Duh et al., 2013), it was established that the boys preferred energetic motifs, while the girls

were more inclined towards calmer motifs. There were no differences noted in the preferences for art motifs from the viewpoint of social stratum.

The study results pose completely new questions on preferences for artwork and on the cultural tradition. The study did confirm the set hypotheses regarding students' stratum, however, it did not confirm all the hypotheses regarding the differences between the students of the two countries. A novelty is the realisation that regardless of their social stratum, students within the same cultural area and within the same country and of equal age do not show any differences with regard to preferences for artwork. Such differences were, however, noted between the students of the two countries, i.e., the students coming from different cultural environments. Regardless of the similar art education tradition, similar planning, implementation and evaluation of art educational processes and assessment of children's works of art and the relatively small cultural differences between Slovenian and Croatian students, the study noted differences with regard to the preferences for artwork between the students from the two countries. However, the similarity in the ranking is sufficiently high for these results to indicate a tendency towards generalisation of findings, at least for these two countries. This is undoubtedly a result that poses numerous new questions, to which art education professionals will have to find the answers sooner or later.

In their artistic and pedagogical work, teachers need to choose art reproductions with appropriately chosen art motifs, which are interesting, known to students and preferred by the majority. Teachers should also choose works of art that are created in an unusual and attractive manner that corresponds to the art concepts that the teacher has taught their students. The study results can contribute to a higher quality of visual arts lessons.

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