

Stratifications – Past and Present in Teaching of Painting

Abstract of the DLA Thesis

András Ernszt
2009

I. The subject of the dissertation, the method of research

The ambition of my DLA thesis was to feature the improvement and historical traditions of teaching of painting and to review present methods. My topic choice was basically determined by the fact that besides my painting activity I also teach painting at high school and at university level as well.

Can art be taught? What kind of teaching methods can be used nowadays? Can academy prepare students for phenomena of our present world? What is considered to be modern art education? In my opinion all teaching artists are interested in these questions, though presumably it is an impossible mission in our world to prepare for all fine art trends because of artistic multiplicity. I am sure that after getting the firm craft, professional grounds for everyone valid, general educational schemes can not be used.

The conceptions of historical times basically determined fine art education and artistic teaching in general. Even in present art pedagogic practice certain momentums can be found which were arisen in different historical times – while actual ideas, aesthetic values conceived, appeared in works of acknowledged masters.

In the second half of the dissertation I reviewed fine art education worldwide nowadays – stringing the analysis around the most important aspects - of course without the wish of completeness. So I outlined where the painting traditions of the given area, country can be felt extremely strongly on the academies, how long education is in general, how and when students can specialize, what complementary subjects can be studied besides the compulsory ones. Where is the tradition of copying still alive, how do workshops and studios function, how do students and their masters keep connections, how does painting education adapt itself to the world of market and how are fine art students prepared to be able to live on from their art.

Writing my thesis I tried to process for me accessible domestic and foreign literature relating to my research topic. Outlining educational programs of foreign universities, academies I also used up their schedules and curricula. Ideas coming from personal interviews, opinions, consultations with practising art teachers also helped my research work. My own painting-teaching experiences performed as determining sources in my dissertation, too.

II. Results

2.1. Traditions of teaching of painting

In classical art academies through more centuries crystallized methods, procedures, „the pattern“ were followed which were taught in the workshops of great masters. The content, method, extent of pattern following changed by each master. The expectations towards the students were constant: manual skills, multiplicity of observation, good visual memory, disciplined, assiduous work, inclination to accept patterns. Imagery schemes, „the visual dictionary“ were acquired by the apprentice during his studies – with its help he could create art works which suited to the demands, aesthetic norms of the era. In art historical times which followed strict traditions artists in the meaning of our days did not exist, rather masters who translated the ideas of the procurer into

pictures (e.g. hewers). For them it was enough to learn the methods, procedures mechanically.

At first – so in Egypt as well - fine art education was carried on by the master. Apprentices, assistants learnt the tricks of the trade next to him. Greek conception did not consider teaching of painting important, it drew a distinction between handicraft and liberal arts which became determinative for a long time. Liberal arts were the privileges of free men and the ruling cast, while handicraft belonged to the life of workers and slaves. This dualism stamped the whole conception of the Middle Ages. Among the walls of cloisters the most talented monks could prove their talent first of all in scriptorium and could give their knowledge to their fellows.

Renaissance has induced an enormous change: fine art academies appeared – first only as informal groups of artists, then in an organized form as well. The atmosphere of academies acts on the joy of living of the times, liberty, variegation of humanist man, enthusiasm about antiquity. Parallel with this apprentices could acquire artistic knowledge and practice within the confines of guilds under the supervision of the master.

In the era of mannerism - in history the Counter-Reformation – academies lost their earlier airiness, while their number has multiplied. With establishing of 16th -17th century academies the activity of fine artists has intellectualized, so fine arts activities – among them painting – have ascended to be a part of liberal arts.¹ In 17th -18th centuries art academies mushroomed all over Europe – and all over the world which were created on the pattern of Paris Academy. In 19th century art was not only a mere craft or trade, but it has become a “science“, its education started on academies.

The great leap forward of the 19th century was the „configuration“ of „Meisterklasse“ system in Germany which put the paternalistic guidance of art teacher to the first place in art education – returning to the idealized conception of apprentice system of the Middle Ages on a nostalgic way. The personality of the student was in the center whose artistic work was guided by the master. Academies had to face several critics from the 18th century because of its rigid dogmatism and copying.

Hungarian art pedagogues appeared “on the scene“ in 19th century together with painting education. The whole 19th century was stamped by the fact that several Hungarian students studied in foreign academies, particularly in Munich and Paris. Without the wish of being completeness the art pedagogy of Bertalan Székely, István Csók, János Vaszary were determining in this era. Among contemporary and recent past art pedagogics the works of Ferenc Lantos, Dóra Maurer, Miklós Erdély and Sándor Molnár were reviewed.

From 20th century arts have to serve functionality as well – all fine arts exist inferior to architecture in the concept of Bauhaus. Their extremely special, personality-orientated, varied conception is indicated by Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Vaszilij Kandinskij, Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy among others.

Modernism-postmodernism results in an education conceptual cavalcade. There is not one, concretely to this era typical fine art education conception. Primarily the personality, approach of the master has determining importance, the educational system in which he lives himself. There is a constant debate about how and what to teach for art students. In the years after the victory of modernism modernist artists were convinced that the grand masters of the old times are old-fashioned, outmoded and can not give them anything – or at the most in which extent it can be fit into their program. According to Goldstein „*postmodernism in a certain apprehension is just a newer political trend, and as it loses the magic of novelty, it finds itself in the dustbin of history*“. (Goldstein, 1996. 299. o.)

Paul Klee says: „the artwork does not simply want to refer to something, but it wants to be

1 Stankiewicz, Mary Ann (2007): Capitalizing Art Education: Mapping International Histories, In. Bresler, Liora(szerk.): *International Handbook of Research in Arts Educatio*. Springer, Dordrecht. 31–32. o.

something in itself.² The style itself, the novelty has become the most important which materializes in an extreme individualism.

The above mentioned processes effected fine arts education automatically, making functioning of academies out-of-date, which transmitted patterns and schemes. In the 20th century changes in art have speeded up so much that schools were unable to follow this – since when new norms have gained certain social support to be ready to teach them, they were already old-fashioned. Because of this the strange paradox artistic forms against cliches have enriched the „camp of cliches“ as well soon. One of the most remarkable change of fine art education was that before the work of student was valued on grounds how much he could follow the pattern, the taught ideal, from this time on personality, individuality, novelty, genuineness, originality became the standard, the benchmark. Because of the above mentioned change in paradigm the emphasis was reallocated. Till this time the thorough observation, visual memory, manual skill had outstanding role, from now on creativity and fantasy were developed. The “Master-Student“ context prevailed further on, though the person of the master did not only serve as a pattern, but he also tried to support the student to express himself in more and more genuine art works. The changes can also be seen in other areas as well. Before the name of the master authenticated the beginner artist, since this time if the effect of the master could be felt on the art work, the artist was labeled as an epigon. After a certain time concentrating on the personality of the student was not enough – today the artist teacher has to act as a catalyst as well.

According to Bodóczy the person of the master is not enough from an other point of view either: acting in social life, keeping connection with audience belongs to the creative work in a broader meaning as well. For the second half of the 20th century students have already studied by “themselves“ at and outside academies: very often they joined an artists' intellectual workshop.³

2.2. Fine art education on different universities of the world

The fine art, painting traditions are important in all countries since no one is able to break away entirely from the cultural heritage in which he was brought up and his world was formulated. Though there are certain regions where it can extremely be felt in painting education which precipitates in special courses besides teaching special painting methods, tools, etc. Its reason can always be found in historical traditions – e.g. in the fine art academies of Japan, China and Bulgaria.

Copying appears from time to time among teaching methods. It is true for academies of our days as well. It appears among methods on grounds that this helps students to learn the tricks of brush-work, colors, surface – which can be followed by autonomous creative work. The method is used among others by Middle- and Far-East academies, e.g. in Armenia and in Japan. In our country there are also painting teachers who „make students paint“, but it is absolutely dependent on the master.

In painting teaching the connectionship between master and student has a significant role This relationship, the constant, common work manifests primarily in personal consultations, but workshops, critical sessions are often employed as well, on which students and masters take part together and share their remarks. Extraneous professionals, guest artists, curators often participate in this work. It can not be neglected either what kind of technical background is ensured by the academy for the students, where they can work - on nearly all fine art academies studios and workshops function.

During modern fine art education emphasis must be laid on to prepare students to appear on

2 Bodóczy István: A vizuális nevelés megújítása, új paradigmája, <http://www.oki.hu/oldal.php?tipus=cikk&kod=2003-07-ta-Bodoczky-Vizualis> (2009. 02. 02.)

3 ibid.

art works market as well. On art markets, auctions, at galleries their art turns up as „goods“ which must be sold, from which they must be able to live on.

2.2. Summary

Art education was constantly influenced by the character of art productions around it. In contempt of the fact that art has remarkably changed, become much more incomprehensible and free comparing to past centuries, in my opinion there are certain elements, methods which can be valid in present fine art education as well. Today several tendencies work in fine art education: from the ones built up of strict norms and methods till the absolutely free, „by the student determined“ ways everything appears. It is very important, that these phenomena can be grouped according to areas, academies – as I did it in the second part of my dissertation – but even in this the whole process is dependent on the master – which can especially felt e.g. in German fine art education.

The copying of different art works was a strict postulate, requirement till the decadence of academic values – in certain schools e.g. in Ecole De France it was used as an exclusive teaching method. In my opinion it can not be dismissed in today's fine art education either – as it can be seen on more academies- primarily in the Far-East- where it is a task built in the curricula. To get appropriate painting technique knowledge it can be a good practice to study a carefully selected art work thoroughly. By accurate observation of painting stratifications newer knowledge can be acquired. It is extremely important that copying should be after genuine art works – since on reproductions the system of painted surfaces can not be extracted. This delineates students with the results and experiences of arts. In my opinion it is worth devoting a half a year for copying. So I mean on copying not the reception of certain conceptual patterns, but the improvement of painting technical knowledge, the cognition of results which were developed by other artists. “Grounding phase“ is an important element of teaching of painting, where it is necessary for students to get acquainted with craftsmanship relating to painting, and with the functioning of different materials.

Cennino Cennini has advised for apprentices “*to spend six years with studying colors, getting practice in painting and in wall painting, working at how to cook glue, make mordant and draw golden layer.*”⁴ Similar to Renaissance – when one of the most important educational aspect was the understanding and observation of nature, in today fine arts education teaching of perspective, composition, proportion system, color system, understanding and mapping of form can not be neglected either. So these are essential in the grounding phase of today's education system.

The studying of human body appears first in the framework of the subject of anatomy in Bologna Academy which was established in 16th century. I do not consider this nearly 500 year old subject to be out-moded, since this has a certain artistic proportion system function, visual thinking can be acquired with studying human body. In the 1960's anatomy was left out from curricula of Western-European academies, but nowadays it is bringing to life again, its education is being started.

In 1648 - at the time of the establishment of the French Academy professors worked in a rotary order, in each month someone else was appointed for supervision to gate that a teacher should get too strong influence on art students. It can be good in a sense that this way students can get more and more knowledge from the “thesaurus“ of different masters, from which it can be appropriate besides one “leading, supervising“ master's consultations to attend more courses of other masters.

Analysis of painting had a significant role, with the help of which he rules of art could be laid. It is also important today since this way students can get a complex „cyclorama“ on contemporary art.

First in the 18th century the Royal Academy started to organize grandiose exhibitions for its

⁴ Efland, 1990. 23. o.

members - at this time its most important projection was getting the necessary financial sources for its functioning. Later exhibitions were organized for students as well, on one hand with educational purpose (to learn the rules of installing exhibitions), which was constantly present at further process of education – and is still valid even today. On the other hand a debut forum was created for students as well.

At the beginning of the 20th century in Bauhaus a great importance was attributed to artistic and craftsmanship as well: “The artist can create art with his own hands involuntarily as well, though it is crucial for all artists to be aware of the grounds of handicraft as well.”⁵ In their opinion an art student has to learn from two masters: one supervises and guides him from artistic, and the other one from technical side. In my opinion this should not be severed so strictly, but in today's art education there are still subjects which reflect this distinction.

At Düsseldorf Academy the curricula started with a two-year long grounding class in the 19th century, when students studied exclusively drawing. Drawing helps students even today to study forms, proportions, composition rather fast.

Johannes Itten considered it outstanding important to strengthen the individual creative talent, instinct of students and to teach them the objective, general form- and color orders. The primary objection of teaching is freedom: to get rid of hindrances. This kind of approach can be important for art-painting education in general as well nowadays, it can be extremely significant when students have already acquired basic professional knowledge. For Itten it was outstanding important to give students with different talent “tailor-made“ instructions and stimulation. Itten would give different tasks for different type students in a quite special system. I think these categories are too narrowed, nowadays the “camp“ of students can not be grouped in such a concrete way. Each student must be offered tailor-made ways and possibilities which are adjusted for their temperament, “type“, painting habit or their chosen orientations, directions must be strengthened and enriched – of course only after learning craftsmanship.

Kandinskij differentiated two ways in painting education: one considers painting art for art's sake, while the other one steps over the limits, borders of painting and gets to synthetic art work. Kandinskij – just like Klee – considers point, line, color and composition one of the basic pillar of education, which gives possibility to a relatively narrowed educational direction. It is not sure that this approach can mean a valid studying scheme for all students today.

I agree with Josef Albers who says that art education must be the part of a general education on all teaching levels.

László Moholy-Nagy in his art pedagogy gives tasks for his students which do not have a general solution in textbooks, which help to improve their creativity, can cease constant comparisons to results reached before. It also has a stimulating effect on the master as well, and breaks with automatic “innervations“. A constant creative work is necessary for the master as well, to improve himself and his art, so he can talk about the questions of art and painting by himself more genuinely. It is crucial for the master as well – not only for the student – to orientate himself about the world of contemporary art and take an active part in the circulation of art.

Ad Reinhardt rejects academic norms in the interest of the establishment of a new academy. In his opinion education must return to renaissance, Florence-model, which is not staggered by different art movements, and is the scene of the research and dialog about art. It is a day-dreaming about an idealized academy since the students' individual search for their own way and their work is often influenced, affected by actual artistic trends, fashions - if you want or not. An art academy can not function isolated from the artistic or other events of the world.

LITERATURE

⁵ Mezei, 1976. ed. 49-50. o.

- Bodóczy István: *A vizuális nevelés megújítása, új paradigmája*, <http://www.oki.hu/oldal.php?tipus=cikk&kod=2003-07-ta-Bodoczky-Vizualis> (2009. 02. 02.)
- Efland, Arthur D. (1990): *A History of Art Education, Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*. Teachers College, Columbia University, New York and London, 23. o.
- Mezei Ottó (1976, szerk.): *Bauhaus. Válogatás a mozgalom dokumentumaiból*. Corvina, Budapest. 49-50. o.
- Stankiewicz, Mary Ann (2007): Capitalizing Art Education: Mapping International Histories, In. Bresler, Liora(szerk.): *International Handbook of Research in Arts Educatio*. Springer, Dordrecht. 31–32. o.