

Still Pictures as a Form of Learning

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Abstract

This article describes a history lesson in which pupils working with still pictures studied the history of ancient Egypt. The aim of the article is to present the educational potential of a specific didactic method applying the psychosomatic unity of body and mind in order to inspire creativity in pupils. A necessary condition for creating still pictures is team cooperation.

Biography



MGR. VERONIKA RODOVÁ, PH.D. lives in the Czech Republic. Her work focuses on examining the possibilities of applying Theatre when teaching History. She has a degree in History and Archiving, and a degree with specialisation in Drama Education. She worked formerly as a teacher, and during the period between 2008-2012 she held a teaching position at the Studio of Drama and Education at the Theatre Faculty of Janáček's Academy of Music and Performing Arts (Brno, Czech Republic). Currently, she works for the Faculty of Education at Masaryk's University (Brno, Czech Republic). She is the editor in chief of the *Komenský* magazine and a member of the *Tvořivá Dramatika* (Creative Drama) magazine editorial team. She is also a co-author of the publication *Drama Education in the Curriculum of a Modern School* (2008), and an author of *Drama Education in Service of History Education* (2014).

The starting point of this study was an empirical analysis of situations recorded during history lessons (Rodríguezová 2012). Pupils worked on still pictures, which is a specific technique using psychosomatic capacities of the body. At the cognitive level this technique works with pupils' pre-concepts and with facts and concepts in the form of narrative and iconic texts. At the social level it is based on group work and communication. The result is psychosomatic expression of ideas in time and space that is extended to creative acts, thus opening space for cognitively demanding work (Švaříček 2011: 42–43).

I was first introduced to the possibility of applying still pictures at the London Redbridge Drama Centre¹. Following their model I have created and implemented several teaching programmes² during which pupils learn themes of history by methods of drama education, particularly still pictures. The teacher assigns a topic and brings pupils to our Centre, where we work together all morning. The teaching programme is designed as an integrated unit consisting of two blocks and linked by the theme, the principle of conversation and the choice of teaching techniques. This article describes two subsequent stages of the programme Ancient Despotism: Egypt.

The programme begins with a methodological sequence of psychosomatic activities, starting with a freeze³, in which pupils use their bodies to depict assigned themes, and leading to the creation of thematic still pictures. It is followed by a structured discussion on the meaning of the iconic text, resulting in the description of the reliefs on the palette of King Narmer. It is concluded with a creative-cognitive task to depict as precisely as possible a selected part of the palette by means of a still picture.

The second block opens with a discussion on concepts and explanation and deciphering of a hieroglyphic text. Pupils use this information to make their own iconic text. In the form of an acoustic still picture they create a relief celebrating the Pharaoh whose name has been deciphered. A necessary condition is the inclusion of facts they have learned. When presenting their suggestions the groups discuss meanings contained in their pictures. The programme is concluded by reflection.

Pupils get acquainted with concepts and facts of Egyptian history. They work with visual text, learn to understand symbols and metaphors and use their bodies and voices in simple role play. They collaborate in groups and develop their creative and communicative capacities.

In the Czech Republic it is rather unusual to connect history lessons with drama education. Drama education is not an obligatory part of the curriculum at basic schools. Like some other subjects such as a second foreign language it has the status of a complementary subject that can, but does not have to, be added to the educational programme if a qualified teacher is employed by the school. So drama education does not share an equal position with other art subjects such as music and arts. A survey of the extent of the integration of drama education into school curricula was carried out by Doležal (2015: 1–12) who says that schools more often use partial methods of drama education than teach it as a separate subject. As to the segment of secondary and higher education in the Czech Republic, drama education is a part of the curriculum of secondary and vocational schools of education. Drama education is a constant part

1 Its founder was Hugh Lovegrove (1925–2002), counsellor for drama education, director of the British branch of IATA/AITA (International Amateur Theatre Association) and Honorary Chairman of EDERED (European Drama Encounters).

2 A total of 454 programmes were carried out between 1999 and 2007, in the course of which Egypt was performed fifty-four times (Rodríguezová 2012: 35).

3 A motion exercise stopping the body in order to activate its psychosomatic unity. It works as a means of communication of inner notions which gradually come together in the theme of the programme.

of amateur art education. At basic schools of art⁴, literature/drama is equal to arts and dance. As for higher education, drama education can be studied at the Department of Drama in Education of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (besides, a doctoral study programme of Theory and Practice of Drama Education was started there in 2015) and at the Studio of Drama Education of the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno. Drama Education can also be studied by teacher students as a study programme at several faculties of education. Teachers can become members of the Association for Creative Drama which organizes educational courses, seminars and drama festivals and publishes a specialist journal on creative drama. Another institution, the Association of Drama Centres was established in 2012 in order to develop and support the position of drama education in the Czech educational system; one of the members of this Association is the Centre where the programme of Ancient Despotism: Egypt was performed.

Theoretical basis

As an organic part of our spiritual world, visual interpretation of reality has accompanied mankind since prehistoric times. The desire to capture thoughts, actions and visions in stone, clay, wood, papyrus, parchment or paper is not only a manifestation of the need to copy the world as it can be seen. Such a desire is also embedded in the inner structure of the mind of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. David Lewis-Williams considers (rock) drawings to be encoded images of the visions of (prehistoric) people, analysis of which may lead to a reconstruction of the neuropsychological model of the image of the world in the mind of (paleolithic) man (2007: 209–212). The symbolic level of the iconic text is fundamental: “The symbolic language is a particular one; it is the only universal language mankind has ever developed... Understanding the symbolic language should be taught in the way other foreign languages are” (Fromm 1999: 8). Images can speak a mute language that is “understandable to anybody’s eyes and fantasy” (Eco 1985: 42). The universal communicativeness of the language of images is the source of their impact on our minds. Competence in an iconographic perception of reality (Kratochvíl 2004: 72) is a part of visual literacy and includes the capacities to both understand visual messages (read them) and use these capacities to communicate (create such messages). Observation can be considered as active art. Such a skill is even more important for us humans, who are able to “read voiceless communications as easily as those printed or uttered” (Hall in Sztompka 2007: 21) and whose “capacity to distinguish microscopic nuances in the postures of eyes, head and body is extraordinary” (Goffman 1979: 18). To teach pupils to understand meanings hidden in visual messages and, at the same time, teach them to create such messages is an objective equal to the skill of reading or listening to a written text.

Cognitive potential of still pictures

The main substance of this article is a description of two still pictures that pupils created when working with an iconic text. Its form was that of a photographic print of the palette⁵ attributed to King Narmer, which depicts allegorically the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, dated approximately 3,200 B.C. Deposited in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, it is a key relic of the archaic period. “Originally Narmer had worn the White Crown of

4 Basic schools of arts represent a system of public education in arts that is unique in the world. As a part of the network of public schools warranted by the state, they provide the basics in music, visual arts, dance and literature/drama. They are not a constituent of obligatory education; pupils may opt for these schools according to their hobbies and attend them in their leisure time.

5 A limestone plate with a shallow depression in the middle, used to dissolve cosmetics

Upper Egypt. Then he coupled it with the Red Crown of Lower Egypt so that the united crown represented his claim to rule both countries” (Harenberg 1992: 26). The task of the pupils was to describe the scenes on the palette in words and then choose some part of the image and transform it into a still picture.



Picture 1. King Narmer Palette, obverse [Source: Pijoan/1 1977: 50]

Wearing the White Crown of Upper Egypt the King bludgeons an enemy at his feet. Opposite, the Falcon counts the defeated (there are six thousand of them) and behind the King stands a squire (fetcher of sandals) [...]. Numerous reminiscences on the pre-dynastic era, the script and an important shift in artistic expression are typical features of the Narmer (or Menes) palette. The way of depiction of the human body, to which the Egyptians were faithful throughout their history, is perfectly elaborated; heads and legs are depicted in side view while bodies are viewed *en face* in order to stress the width of the back. The name of the Pharaoh is written in a cartouche; the heads at the sides represent the goddess Hathor with cow ears and horns. Facing the Pharaoh the Falcon counts six pegs, meaning six thousand enemies killed. Behind the Pharaoh walks his fetcher of sandals (Pijoan/1 1977: 50–52).

The creation of a still picture consists in physical interpretation and requires reflection on the meaning of the message. It is based on the depiction of details, which involves work with expression, gesture and props (either real, imaginary or alternative). Pupils start to interpret signs and symbols naturally, thus developing abstract thinking. At the same time, imagination and higher cognitive levels of reflection are involved. The depiction of details becomes the carrier of fundamental information specifying the scene in terms of time, hierarchy, relations among elements and circumstances of the action. Naming and analysis of these elements lead to cultivated thinking and imagination on the part of the audience, including the teacher. The limited means of communication

require pupils to look for substantial features and important characteristics that can provide mental comprehensibility of the result (Rodová 2014: 160). A still picture is an opportunity for all pupils; participation and cooperation of all members of the group is an important condition for its creation.

Example 1:



Picture 2. King Narmer Palette (obverse) [Source: author's archive]

Description: *A falcon is seen on top of a movable platform. Underneath this is a piece of turf with lotus flowers. The victor is standing and a defeated man is kneeling below him; on the left there is a servant in sandals. The bottom of the palette is occupied by a lying figure in the foreground.*

The group chose to work on the obverse side. The task seems simple: to simulate as accurately as possible the scene (or a part of it) carved into the stone palette. It opens space for working with expression and gesture; besides human figures pupils may depict landscape, animals and things in varied perspectives. Having used the moving platform for the depiction they were able to maintain the vertical character of the scene. We see the victor, the Pharaoh, standing and holding a substitute prop (a plastic bottle of water) that represents the bludgeon with which he is beating the defeated enemy, as experts explain. The uncomfortable position of the kneeling boy in the role of the defeated man indicates efforts to keep to the artistic expression of the model as precisely as possible and capture the Egyptian code of depicting the human body. To depict the animal, the boy who represents the falcon (an incarnation of the god Hor) makes a gesture with his hand to symbolize the beak. The boy beneath, representing the motive of lotus flowers, is content with mere representation of the round form on which the falcon is standing. Six lotus flowers shown in detail, symbolizing the number of enemies defeated, are missing. The figure of the fetcher of sandals is captured in a realistic style that includes the real shoes he holds in front of him. His size, different from that of the Pharaoh, refers to his lower social importance and is indicated by his kneeling, which makes him appear smaller than the girl in the role of the Pharaoh. A girl lying on the ground represents two figures at the lower end of the palette to whom no particular attention is paid in

specialist literature. Yet pupils are usually interested in them and say these figures are probably escaping members of the defeated party (as the resemblance to the defeated enemy suggests), perhaps swimming in the Nile, which is evidenced by the identical angle of their heads. Their look back and the incline of their bodies evokes movement away in haste. Disregarded by the pupils are two cow heads, symbols of the goddess Hathora and the cartridge with the name of the Pharaoh. The simplicity and accuracy of the depiction clearly suggest, with minor shifts in meaning, which part of the palette is being treated.

Creative potential of still pictures

The second example presents the result of the group working on another task. In the first example the pupils “imitated” the painting style of an Egyptian artist who lived five thousand years ago. In this way they adopted various means of expression used by Egyptian painters such as the depiction of figures, work with spatial arrangement, symbols and epitomes. Also, the pupils had to decide which part of the scene they would depict, so as to correspond with the cognitive level of application. Then they entered the cognitive level of synthesis. They were supposed to depict their own scene and propose a design of a relief⁶ to decorate the tomb of a Pharaoh whose name they had deciphered in the meantime (Akhenaten, Nefertiti or Tutankhamun). Egyptian artists were even able to make their sculptures sound⁷. Therefore, every still picture would have its acoustic component: the name of the ruler for whom the relief was meant would be heard. The pupils had to decide how to add sound to the scene, whether the name of the Pharaoh would be pronounced by one or all and in which situation. Here they entered the role. At the same time they were to observe the Egyptian code of depicting figures as they had been introduced to it with the Narmer palette.

Example 2:



Picture 3. Relief celebrating the Pharaoh [Source: author's archive]

6 “Reliefs are sculptures on a flat ground meant for frontal viewing and evoking the illusion of three-dimensionality” (Kvasil 1984: 299). “The relief is a common form of decorating burial chambers. It narrates the life of the dead and shows interesting details. At the same time the Egyptian way of depicting figures is evident here” (Pijoan 2000: 57).

7 Here the teacher uses the information that one of the so-called Colossi of Memnon, sculptures from the Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III on the left bank of the Nile, emitted sounds at dawn, caused by evaporation of water (Guidotti & Cortese 2006: 101).

Description: *The Pharaoh (here Tutankhamun) is sitting on his throne, wearing a crown and holding the sacred sceptres. At his sides stand two girls, maybe wives, maybe dancers, whose portrayal keeps to the traditional Egyptian depiction of the human figure. In the foreground, a guard (a boy in blue) is restraining a thief who has just stolen a purse from a passer-by.*

The overall arrangement is divided into two halves. One, more distant and situated at the top of the image, observes the official artistic style of the ancient Egyptians; the Pharaoh is depicted in a traditional manner that shows his majesty and signs of power, i.e. the crown, the sacred scourge and the sceptre (Barbotin & Biard 1993: 197), expressed by means of alternative props: pieces of resonant wood and three caps in a pile (the depiction of the Pharaoh's crown as described below). The delicate symmetry of the composition is enhanced by two female figures at the sides. The other part of the scene renounces the traditional code, rather presenting a genre picture of everyday life⁸. In order to explain the uniqueness of this still picture we must return to the beginning. The boys who appeared in caps in the morning have removed them unwillingly and only after a vehement order by their teacher. Now the one who represents the Pharaoh (and was the most unwilling to accept the fact that he must remove his baseball cap) has used his cap to play the part of the Pharaoh's crown. During the first block of the task pupils learned that the shape of the Pharaoh's crown was a symbol of the unification of the country, presented as an intersection of the White and Red Crowns. Its shape is also a symbolic depiction of the body of Hor, the falcon god, who embraces the ruler's head from the back, protecting it with his spread-out wings (Verner, Bareš & Vachala 1997: 371). The head of an attacking cobra over the ruler's forehead represents strength and power.

The crowns constitute the main components of the Egyptian royal insignia. The White Crown (Hedjet) was originally weaved from stems of alloy; later it was made of fabric. The Red Crown (Deshret) was originally made of leather. The stylized shape of falcon wings and the cobra belongs to another type of crown, the so-called Khepresh, which was blue and made of ostrich skin. (Verner, Bareš & Vachala 1997: 260).

The group incorporated this information into the picture. If we look closely we can see that the boy who represents the Pharaoh has used the caps to depict symbolically the importance of the Pharaoh's crown: he has put on all three caps with their peaks sticking out at the sides and front. He has imitated the shape of the crown, with the lateral peaks representing the falcon that protects the king's head with its wings, and the front peak referring to the attacking cobra, a symbol of the ruler's power. Although it seemed at first that the caps would be a source of conflict and the boys' reluctance to participate, in the end, thanks to their inventive use as a symbol for the crown, they served as a connection between historical information and the world of the boys' values. A baseball cap is such an important element of their identity that they are ready to run the risk of reproof for wearing it in socially inappropriate situations.

⁸ During the discussion a pupil came up with the idea of a use for the duplicity of expression: under this Pharaoh people lived in safety, without having to worry about their possessions. The awareness of safety allows for the violation of the stiff depiction of human figures.

Conclusion

Emotional excitement strengthens long-time memory (Hughes 2007:48–51), which is also confirmed by a pupil who describes her experience⁹ like this: *I think sometimes it's good to be sitting at the desk and learn something but I think it's better to learn something and then repeat it when you play a game. That's what I enjoy a lot. I can learn more.* Another pupil says: *I liked our class cooperating. No arguing or like that.* Cooperation is a significant feature; it is a condition for being able to create the still picture. This is confirmed by another girl: *...that we were able to work together so. well when we played the freeze and the performance here.*

A still picture means a specified spatial expression of an idea (Morgan & Saxton 2001: 116). From time to time pupil creators of still pictures provide a completely new incentive which in some way exceeds the established limits of viewer perception. Knowledge is important but so is intuition and the general ability to understand an iconic text. In order to create a still picture pupils must embrace the cognitive level of creative synthesis, i.e. create something new, understandable to others but based on previous knowledge. They also have to be able to substantiate and defend their suggestions. The involvement of psychosomatic modelling of the final shape of a still picture makes it possible to apply original ideas, and to creative authenticity as well as historical fact. In this particular case this was achieved by means of the depiction of the crown of the Pharaoh using caps, modern crowns of today's children, as an original and accurate representation of the historical crown of an ancient sovereign.

⁹ The analysis of pupils' utterances as related to current research of communication in schools was carried out in my dissertation thesis (Rodríguezová 2012) and published in a book (Rodová 2014).

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