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Architecture in painting – in search of third dimension

Two white rectangles

A huge white rectangle put on the easel and a huge white rectangle on the drawing board – two planes creating a coordinate axis. What's important for an art historian is the points where y-axis and x-axis cross, creating a drawing, illustration of synergy of both media of artistic expression. Vitruvius – lover of eurhythm, symmetry, illusionistic painting and a module based on human body as a pattern of good proportions – is the person who symbolically combines these two areas of expression.

Vitruvius demands that artists only precisely imitate reality and especially the illusions of spatial depth and third dimension. There is one more aspect of the Vitruvian lecture – a colorful tale of antiquity that actually could be the basis of the scenario of a virtual game called “the world of an architect” whose main characters would be a hero-superman and an environmentalist, an incorruptible architect, a philosopher and a poet, an expert in painting and a constructor of “ballistas, scorpions and other war machines” [7, pp. 16–17].

Huge white rectangle put on the easel

In my teaching classes I have students of the Academy of Art and Design, Faculty of Ceramics and Glass who chose the specialization in restoration and reconstruction of ceramics and glass. These are difficult studies which require adequate knowledge of all strictly artistic subjects obligatory for all students of the Academy such as drawing, painting and sculpture as well as perfect ceramic craftsmanship. This area of knowledge requires not only knowledge of application of the techniques and technology of ceramics and glass but also specialist knowledge in the scope of chemistry, physics, and technical drawing required in the designing process. The selected specialization – restoration and reconstruction of ceramics and glass – requires knowledge of history of architecture, with special attention to the history of details and architectural decorations, ability to recognize, date, analyze, document, restore and stylize them. It requires from the students almost “Vitruvian” inquisitiveness and work discipline, which is often difficult to find among

the temperamental students of the Academy of Art and Design.

The course of studies teaches humbleness towards material and technology. The simple basic ceramic forms made on the wheel or built from rolls of clay gradually introduce the students to the world of spatial geometry – the third dimension. During classes on style recognition the students begin their journey to the past and they learn about the canon of divisions of entablature, composition of friezes, discipline of architectural compositions employed in the Middle Ages and modern times as well as to solve puzzles of eclectic decorations.

During the classes in conservation documentation, which the students take at the same time, they deal with the basic technical problems connected with the drawn copies of details as well as terminological, stylistic and typological problems. The students stand in front of artifacts without any basic description tools which would enable them to understand their contexts and relations with the history of architecture. The sensitive students who developed a sense of form and acquired manual skills as well as knowledge of compositions of architec-

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tural details begin with micro-scale structures, studying historicizing and eclectic furnaces where they see architectural details in most fantastic relations. However, due to the fact that the students lack any specific knowledge

of art history – that subject is not included in the curricula of public secondary schools – the knowledge they learn in classes is often not connected with specific cultural context.

Describing architecture

Since the 1950s cultural studies have been an interdisciplinary field of research dealing with relations between artifacts, objects or phenomena within the scope of material culture in its broad sense and its recipients. For an art historian operating in that domain what is especially interesting is the area of visual culture studies. It is a task of a researcher dealing with the history of architecture to look at an object in the whole context of aesthetic phenomena accompanying that object and place it in the post-modern discourse which is sometimes far from a positivistic description [1, pp. 133–135]¹.

The specific features of my classes with the students require also research of the ability of an object of architecture to communicate with contemporary recipients who mentally operate in two spheres – material world and virtual world. In that relation an object of architecture becomes one more visual message searching for a way to the consumer of the mass media culture. The reception of such a message depends not only on the cultural foundation of the recipients but also on the degree of their cur-

rent activity in culture. The students of the Academy of Art and Design constitute a specific target group, meeting at the same time the specific criteria of the author (sender) of the visual message as well as exceptionally critical and detached recipients. The educational content dedicated to that group should then demonstrate features that would distinguish it from the information noise and the visual pulp of the mass media. In such a context the way in which the visual information is read and absorbed or rejected will depend on decisively subjective factors. In extreme cases it will be an outright rejection of the didactic proposal, manifested often by such claims as: *We won't ever need it* or *We've already seen it*.

Such attitudes – seen only too often – on the part of the recipients practically discredit the traditional method of a positivistic lecture on the history of architecture. In the light of the multitude of biographical, historical and topographical information in the area of art history which is readily available to the Internet users, it does not seem necessary to further create or copy the encyclopedic texts. In contemporary didactics it is more important to ask questions which would enable studies of contextual art history and opening historical and artistic canon for works which are present in the visual sphere is only tenuously or which are absent in that sphere altogether.

¹ Positivism is a term describing a research method which relies exclusively on facts, excluding their interpretation. In art history it is a method of detailed description of a formal work of art, taking into account the history of its creation, symbols, motifs and biography of the artist.



Fig. 1. Hubert Robert, *View of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre*, 1796



Fig. 2. Paul Delvaux,
Temple, 1949

Reading architecture

The theory of *reader-response* assumes that the significance of text “occurs” as a result of reading and it does not exist as an earlier imposed element of text [2]. Art historians have adapted that theory to research visual art where each cultural phenomenon which is subject of interpretation is the “text”. Wolfgang Kemp, who created the methodology of the aesthetic of reception, was critical of the traditional techniques of transfer presenting works of art as lonely beings with no contextual connections and described them as *ubiquitous, homeless, relocated* [4, pp. 180-196]. Introducing the term of “implied reader”, Kemp also assumes the existence of a specific viewer with specific visual experiences and he considers reading architecture to be another visual experience. It corresponds to the opinion of Roland Barthes who, while discussing the practical applications of the *reader-response* theory,

states that *the pleasure of the text lies not in pinning down meaning, but in enjoying the free play of words – the gliding of signs – as the reader catches provocative glimpses of meanings that surface only to submerge again*². While preparing the presentation material for classes in style recognition I used the *reader-response* theory. An image of architecture in painting was the “text” and the student of the Academy of Art and Design was the “implied reader”. While selecting iconography I also tried to go beyond the “historical and artistic canon”³.

² Quote after D’Alleva A., *Metody i teoria historii sztuki*, Kraków 2008, p. 135.

³ This is what I call the artworks which are universally recognizable, copied in various forms and at present in the social visual sphere as well as in the media.

Lecture structure

Condition 1

Determining the degree of satisfaction

I will go back to Roland Barthes’ statement: *the pleasure of the text lies not in pinning down meaning, but in enjoying the free play of words – the gliding of signs – as the reader catches provocative glimpses of meanings that surface only to submerge again*. I make an interpretation of text in such a way as to introduce categories referring to the process of viewing understood as one more visual experience: *the pleasure of the view is not the pleasure of the text lies not in pinning down meaning, but in enjoying*

the free play of visual associations – the gliding of details – as the viewer catches provocative glimpses of details of the described images that surface only to submerge again. In practice this means that the selected image should have the qualities stimulating the viewer to perceive it actively, to analyze its cultural context, to discover its message; it should demonstrate the features evidently distinguishing it from the series of postcard-like “objects of architecture” – slides used for decades in lectures on the history of architecture. Only in this way can the first condition be met – “the pleasure of the view”.

A good example of meeting that condition is the reaction of the viewers when they are in contact with the painting by Hubert Robert *View of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre* (Fig. 1).

The basis of the discourse is the situation of “a painting within a painting” with some narrative motifs – a study of copies made by people in an interior. During the projection three levels of perception connected with the *reader-response* process were observed. The first one – comparing the composition of the painting to framing a movie shot, long perspective and closing up in a long shot. The viewers felt “ushered into” an architectural interior of the painting, the perspective of the gallery. The term *virtual gallery* was used. It was the key moment before going into the second level of perception, consisting in discovering the disposition of the interior and the architectural decorations of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre. In the conversations about the painting, they recalled their trip to the Louvre and the crowds of visitors everywhere *blocking the view*. The objective of their trip was *the paintings not the architecture*. The painting by Robert became a pretext to discover the components of the architectural interior, to search for details and elements of architectural decoration. The next step was the attempts at reading the “paintings within a painting” and recognizing the ancient buildings presented in them. The classes were open, the attempts at identifying the motifs were corrected by the teacher, and the correctly identified and named details were incorporated into the dictionary. The third level of perception was connected with the attempts at making a drawing copy of the identified details and finding templates [5, 6, 7, 8]. The drawing exercises were connected with the subject of style recognition and with specific requirements of the conservation documentation – making a drawing copy on the basis of iconographic presentation.

Condition 2

Competences of the “implied reader”

The second stage of learning the canon of ancient architecture with the use of the *reader-response* method was the analysis of the painting by Paul Delvaux, *Temple* (Fig. 2).

That painting was selected because of the fascination with the world of surrealists which is popular among my students – so the competences of the readers – universally limited to one author – Salvador Dali. In this case the “pleasure of the view” was connected with the element of surprise and the anxiety to learn about the works of a different artist. Additionally, the third condition was met, namely opening of the historical and artistic canon by introduction to the illustration material an artwork by Paul Delvaux – a painter who is poorly represented in the popular presentation of art.

During the conversation about the painting it was important to read its symbols and identify the surrealist dictionary as well as to notice the code applied by Delvaux to make contact with the viewers. The key moment was achieved in this way to get to the second level of perception, consisting in discovering the principles of construction of an ancient temple, disposition of its interior and the components of architectural decorations.

The third level of perception was connected with the attempts at making a drawing copy of identified details and finding templates, finding analogies and deviations from the canon. The drawing exercises connected with classes were by their topics connected with the subject of “style recognition” and the requirements of the conservation documentation – making a drawing copy on the basis of iconographic presentation as well as comparative analysis of architectural details and elements.

Conclusions

The classes were conducted in a small group of six students, so it was possible to concentrate, exchange information freely and talk with the lecturer as well as do some exercises. Apart from the multimedia presentation of a series of paintings, additional aids included the templates used by Alberti, Vignoli, Dolmetsch and Koch’s tablets, fine art dictionaries and lexicons of iconography.

The basis of the didactic success is in this case individual participation of the students, use of their sensitivity and emotions. The *reader-response* theory, being an extremely subjective learning tool used in the analysis of an artwork – artifact – object – requires such a commitment. In the case of presented classes the theory becomes practice which I called a *visual-response*.

References

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Architektura w malarstwie – w poszukiwaniu trzeciego wymiaru

Tematem referatu jest metoda nauczania historii architektury, jaką autorka prowadzi ze studentami Akademii Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu, którzy wybrali specjalność rekonstrukcja i restauracja ceramiki i szkła. Studenci – artyści – są specyficzną grupą docelową, która z trudem przyjmuje tradycyjną formę wykładu, często wprost manifestując swój brak zainteresowania zagadnieniami pozaartystycznymi. Założeniem merytorycznym programu było wykorzystanie na zajęciach ze stylizacji i dokumentacji konserwatorskiej zainteresowania studentów historią malarstwa do prezentacji wątków ściśle związanych z wiedzą o architekturze i dekoracji architektonicznej. Ideą programu było praktyczne wykorzystanie w procesie dydaktycznym teorii *reader-response* Rolanda Barthesa i metodologii estetyki recepcji Wolfganga Kempa. Bazą

ilustracyjną wykładu, prowadzonego z zachowaniem rytmu chronologicznego, stał się zbiór obrazów pochodzących spoza kanonu historyczno-artystycznego, w których przedstawiono wizerunki obiektów architektury w różnych kontekstach. W wykładach-prezentacjach znalazły się dzieła, w których detale i elementy architektoniczne oraz ich relacje przedstawione zostały w sposób niemal wzornikowy. Znalazły się w nich obrazy z obiektami architektury w tle – architektury realnej i utopijnej – które, towarzysząc narracji sceny, stawały się dla studentów „tajemniczymi obiektami w tle”, obiektami pobudzającymi ciekawość i chęć ich poznania. W referacie przedstawiono teoretyczne podstawy metody oraz przykłady realizacji dwóch spotkań – wykładów, połączonych z praktycznymi ćwiczeniami.

Key words: architecture in painting

Słowa kluczowe: architektura w malarstwie