

Kuric, Jozef

The psychology of the perception of paintings in ontogenesis

In: Kuric, Jozef. *Psychologie vnímání malířských výtvarných děl v ontogenezi*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Univerzita J.E. Purkyně, 1986, pp. 259-260

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/122249>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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10. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PERCEPTION OF PAINTINGS IN ONTOGENESIS

The study summarises the present knowledge of esthetic perception of paintings with regard to ontogenesis and reports on the research into the ontogenetical specialities of the esthetic perception of paintings.

The first three chapters make use of the methodological approach of the theoretical and critical analysis to determine the specific features of esthetic perception as opposed to ordinary perception, report on the main research into these questions and try to define the main ontogenetical gradients of esthetic perception.

The confrontation of the sources in the theoretical part of the work shows that comparatively little investigation has been done on the problems of esthetic perception with regard to ontogenesis. In keeping with current ideas in psychology, the author conceives esthetic perception as a complex many-sided process involving both the perception proper and the comparison of what is depicted with one's own experience and ideal, a process culminating in making intellectual and emotional judgments. It is possible to say that the esthetic perception takes place when the perceiving person adopts an attitude of acceptance or refusal, when he tries to specify to what degree the work of art is beautiful, noble and perfect, when he realises not only the content but also the feelings the work of art has aroused in him.

The author states that it is too soon to formulate any comprehensive and complex theory of the development of esthetic perception.

In the methodological chapter the author surveys the methods of research in esthetic perception. He pays attention especially to the methods of the single stimulus, which he used in his research, treats it as an experiment of impression and then he pays particular attention to the method of the semantic differential, also employed in the work.

Throughout his work the author stresses the importance of examining and considering the problems of esthetic perception in general context of the cultural revolution and against a background of cultural, social and political development, all these being indisputable determinants of esthetic perception. Thus the study becomes a contribution to the substantiation of the psychological foundation of esthetic education and the formation of the socialist personality by means of the visual arts.

The actual research tries to answer such questions as to what changes in esthetic perception occur in the minds of children and young people between the age of ten and twenty-two, and what role is played by their sex, the period (the research is therefore repeated in three stages at ten-year intervals on comparable samples of persons), and also some variables of the esthetic stimulation. The esthetic stimuli are 42 reproductions of paintings by prominent Czech and world artists. The pictures are arranged according to the genre and the degree of esthetic stylisation, the formal and intellectual qualities being rated by art experts. The task of the tested persons are to choose the best and the worst picture of the exhibited reproductions, and to give reasons for their choices. Besides this, 12 pictures, chosen in this wide research

according to their attractiveness so that approved, refused, ambivalent and neutral pictures were present in the stimulation sample, were shown to a limited set of secondary school students to be rated on semantic differential.

The results of both these experiments are worked out both qualitatively and quantitatively. The author looks for the dynamics of preference and refusal of the particular pictures to be able to determine, on the basis of this analysis, which genre and what degree of stylisation, if any, what type of subject matter and form, are the most effective stimuli at particular age levels. By means of subject matter analysis of the motives for choosing the pictures, the author established and drew conclusions concerning the qualitative changes in the standard of the esthetic perception according to age. He succeeded in establishing that one of the critical boundaries for the origin of esthetic experience in the narrow sense of the word is the period around 13 years of age, the period most ontogenetical studies consider a major turning-point in the development of nearly all systems of the personality. In the study the author characterises two other critical periods of changes in esthetic perception, which take place on the threshold and at the end of adolescence. These changes prove that the development of esthetic perception is not lineally advancing process, but is a qualitative many-sided phenomenon not occurring automatically, but depending to a high degree on adequate stimuli from esthetic education. The author states the hypothesis, supported by the results of other studies of his, that even as adults there are individuals at all levels of esthetic perception. The reason for this is that what from the point of view of development seems to be evolutionary differential, becomes interindividually (intergroup) differential. The standard of esthetic perception is indisputably influenced by esthetic experience, esthetic interests and individual creative activity.

The esthetic experiences and reactions determined from the results of the semantic differential of 12 pictures show that esthetic stimuli that are less stylised and highly preferred evoke far more esthetic experiences than neutral or highly stylised ones. The research further indicates that the semantic differential is a very sensitive method suitable for providing insight into the manner and mechanisms of esthetic perception.

The study contributes to the psychological theory of the arts by giving proof based on concrete research material of which works of art are really relevant positive esthetic stimuli, which are neutral or ambivalent, and which evoke negative esthetic reactions.

To sum up it can be said that in the development periods observed the most important esthetic stimuli are above all realistic and non-stylised works of art with subject matter closely related to the interests and needs of young people, especially dynamic figural compositions, portraits and landscapes. Further, the results show that cultural and social evolutionary changes have helped contribute to a slight increase in the positive acceptance of esthetically more challenging pictures refused in the first stages.

In practical terms, there is valuable information concerning what the developing personality perceives in pictures, what works of art are positively accepted and what are refused at particular ages, what works of art evoke many esthetic experiences and what one are esthetically "mute". Thus the knowledge acquired can be applied both to the cultural policy and to art education.