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Diagnosing Art Appreciation of Children between the Ages of Four and Nine Years

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Abstract

This research aims to determine the dynamic development of art appreciation in modern children between the ages of four and nine years. The definition of a child's art appreciation levels is based on the priority of the aesthetic function of art and children's ability to harmoniously develop their intelligence and feelings. The article considers different approaches to the diagnosis of artistic preferences within the framework of experimental aesthetics and the modern development of its methods. The authors have prepared a set of special tests to evaluate the development of a child's art appreciation. They have also described stimulus materials and presented the results of the research held at kindergartens and primary schools. The authors of the article have worked out ethical rules for the test designer diagnosing art appreciation and have concluded that children under five years of age have an aesthetic sensibility that allows them to choose artistic works of "complex" and inexplicit beauty at an emotional, non-rational level. By the age of eight and nine years, the level of a child's art appreciation declines due to the assimilation of cultural norms of mass art.

Keywords: *Art appreciation, diagnosing aesthetic development, younger children, educational system.*

1. Introduction

The problem considered in this article has two controversial aspects. Firstly, it is often supposed that individual manifestations of art appreciation are similar, contrary to the widespread belief that there is no accounting for tastes. Secondly, certain general criteria of art appreciation are recognized that are not connected to a particular period and at the same time take into account some historical events relevant to the recipient. In the pedagogical practice of communicating with children over the age of seven years, the authors have found out that the latter knew the following proverbs: "Tastes differ" and "Every man to his taste", as well as the common notion that any subjective evaluation is a matter of free choice and cannot be judged by any other person.

The protest against the imposition of certain tastes and introduction of taste standards or stereotypes, as well as the protection of the right of choice as a part of personal freedom, has existed at all times and at all levels of consciousness: from everyday to professional, from a child to an adult, from an individual choice of colors for the walls in one's kitchen to the professional evaluation of art and grouping of users in social networks. The discussion of different tastes and their owners' conviction in their rightness is also a common situation.

Children of younger age do not care about the dispute over different tastes. All teen groups are characterized by a constant struggle for the freedom of choice. Throughout the research, children often quoted the "Every man to his taste" proverb. Older children (and adults) were usually asked to think over the fact that one's taste, like physiological sensations caused by eating or a color as an object's property, does not need to be ranked and does not have an objective rating scale. The "not to argue" advice is eternal because people always argue about their tastes, and, openly or secretly, consider themselves bearers of a better taste. To make these children change their mind, one should simply show them the test results. In this case, they will see that the choice of the best and the worst options in stimulus materials coincides for most children who took part in the polling.

The authors of the article try defining the norm of art appreciation through various experiments and finding a proof of its existence in the history of art, beliefs about classical masterpieces in their development, notions of mass and non-traditional culture, as well as modern studies [1].

The experimental study of art appreciation levels has been conducted for more than a hundred years. Scholars often analyze a child's preferences in one art form. For instance, there is a research of musical preferences of children and their parents. Recognizing the significance of preferences in the teaching and upbringing process, researchers note that young children are able not only to express their musical preferences but also to carry them through their whole lives [1, 2, 3]. Dwelling on the importance of an aesthetic taste and art preferences, as well as their development in children, researchers point out that aesthetic activities are an investment in a better understanding of oneself and the world around. Declarative knowledge is replaced with discussions, questions, aesthetic projects, experiments and creativity [4].

Nowadays, the diagnosis of art appreciation is not so popular or widespread. There is a hypothesis explaining the low interest in measuring the development of an artistic taste. The authors suppose the reason is its practical uselessness in the culture of commercial values. Mass culture does not need to develop a good artistic taste and therefore lose its immediate consumers. Nevertheless, the scientific development of criteria of art perception and evaluation is still used in art history and pedagogy as a counterbalance and a starting point for the culture of the future. Thus, the diagnosis system that has been developed and tested by

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the researchers from the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education for twenty years is associated with the aesthetic development of today's growing children [5–8].

Forming new concepts of modern diagnostics, the authors further develop the principles and methods of early experimental studies of children's aesthetic sensibility and artistic taste. The abovementioned studies contain several hypotheses and practical notions whose viewpoints and results were confirmed decades later. D. Selli said that "every child is assumedly an artist because they have vague aesthetic sensibility". C. Burt conducted special research of the development of an artistic taste asking experts to lay out reproductions of classical paintings and postcards bought in the so-called "slum" shops (examples of mass culture) in accordance with their artistic merits. Giving the same task to children, Burt discovered that a child's art appreciation was close to an expert's one, and the level of its coincidence declined with age [9]. In the middle of the 20th century, psychological experimental aesthetics became more complicated [10, 11]. Torshilova [12] introduced the development of its system and directions at the end of the 20th century. David J. Hargreaves and his colleagues thoroughly reviewed scientific theories of experimental aesthetics on the study of musical taste. Their model explaining the tastes and preferences of children and adolescents takes into account their age, sex, education and duration of music classes. Thus, the authors considered the socio-cultural context while testing different attitudes towards art [13].

The psychological aspects of experimental aesthetics that form the research model described in this article were oriented towards individual features of artistic perception and an aesthetic taste.

Later studies of this problem traced the development of children's perception and taste preferences from sensory experience to evaluating aesthetic functions of the environment and art. Thus, researchers restored the classical model of evaluating an aesthetic taste and perception. It is worth mentioning that they included elements of a sensory response into a child's art perception. A sensory response ensures harmonious perception unless it is lost with age [14].

Within the framework of a similar aesthetic concept, scholars working at the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education conducted modern studies to trace the logical perception of a literary text accompanied by illustrations. It is established that children between the ages of three and four years perceive only the actions of book characters, while children between the ages of four and five years can analyze the relationships of these characters. The scholars compiled special tests to identify the skills of semantic analysis when reading an illustrated book, developed evaluation criteria and a visual-text series. Thus, the perception of artistic illustrations turns cognitive activities into aesthetic ones [15].

2. Materials and Methods

The general rules of diagnosing young children include the non-disclosure of information about the child to non-involved people (the protection of personal data), the creation of a favorable atmosphere during the interview with due regard to the psychological characteristics of the young recipient. As practice shows, the test designer working with young children can approve of their success although they should be detached from the recipient's responses while conducting tests. Since this diagnosis aims to identify a child's art appreciation, test designers find themselves in a tough situation. They should motivate children to express their own opinion but also praise them for good results showing there is a certain rating scale. The long-term diagnosis of developing art taste and art perception of young children proves that children between the ages of four and nine years cannot see this contradiction, and the test designer's approval further stirs up their interest in the survey.

The essence and principles of diagnosing art appreciation are based on the research method developed by Child who revealed the aesthetic sensibility of children between the ages of three and seven years [16].

The diagnosis of the children's aesthetic development aims to reveal their ability to see, feel and evaluate the artwork they see, hear or read at some particular moment. Moreover, a child does not know who the author is or what this piece of art is called. This information is concealed to get an immediate reaction from the child (to activate the child's aesthetic sensibility) without adjusting it with education, the knowledge of artists and their cultural heritage.

The stimulus material for diagnosing an artistic taste as an aesthetic one includes several pairs of images, with one picture differing from the other in artistic and aesthetic virtues according to the expert's evaluation. The child should choose the preferable "picture" (music or a poem) from the given pair by answering the question: "Which one do you like best?" All examples of the stimulus material are presented without specifying their title and author. Samples within the pair are distinguished by some feature stimulating the certain attitude (taste) that should be tested. Other grounds for making a choice should be minimized. Images are compared in accordance with their subject and overall motif, i.e. a portrait of a woman should be compared with a similar female portrait, a landscape painting can be correlated with another landscape painting, a still-life painting is matched with a still-life painting (preferably, with a similar color scheme). However, images in the pair should have different aesthetic merits because they should evaluate the child's aesthetic sensibility and no other possible grounds for the child's choice, including their preference for landscapes over battle scenes, a bigger love for cats or dogs, etc.

There is no any other criterion to form image pairs and define the "right" answer except for the expert's judgment. While selecting the stimulus material in the conditions of constant re-examination, experts agree on which picture of the pair possesses better artistic and aesthetic characteristics. They decide which picture in the pair is better, i.e. which is more complex in its beauty, further from reality, fully reflects the depth of the author's artistic vision, etc. An expert can be a professional who participates in the research, an art critic who somehow reviewed this picture or its author and even common beliefs that fixed these artworks in the human collective memory. The winner becomes a child who does not know anything about the given materials but intuitively understands a picture, poem or music piece, as an expert does, and expresses it in simple words.

Therefore, if the test designer (test conductor) solves the problem of determining the individual level of the child's aesthetic development, the development of the child's art perception and the artistic taste measured by the number of coincidences of the child's answers with the "right" answers of this test. If the test conductor needs indicators of the average aesthetic development of the given group, indicators of all its participants are summed up and divided by the number of children that participated in the test. However, the teacher will need such severe evaluation in case of high scientific objectives or the purposes of accurate reporting. Interviews with parents or children call for a less strict and more benevolent system of evaluation.

While analyzing the results of previous studies on the development of art appreciation of preschool and primary school children and conducting the cross-cultural comparison of aesthetic preferences of American, Japanese and Russian children [7, 17], the authors have managed to specify the stimulus materials for testing children between the ages of four and nine years in 2017. The authors have revealed peculiarities of a child's art perception that is mostly based on the concept of art as an understandable, believable, bright and emotionally positive reflection of life. These criteria for defining merits of an artwork are not suitable for the perception of its aesthetic specifics. The stimulus material for diagnosing was selected in such a way as to point the child towards other criteria, i.e. reading the language of art as figurative, emo-

tional, expressive and developing one's phantasy and imagination, allowing originality and unlikeness to reality, including the perception of complex rather than simple beauty. Therefore, samples of high art in each pair of images were opposed to standard photographs and examples of mass culture.

The latest system for diagnosing the development of the artistic and aesthetic perception and appreciation of children between the ages of four and nine years includes two groups with five pairs of images. This system was developed at laboratories of theoretical and psychological foundations of art education of the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education. The authors of these diagnosis methods are E.V. Boyakova, R.V. Kopylov, I.A. Polosukhina and E.M. Torshilova.

The "Children's Taste" test includes five pairs of images selected according to the principle described above.

The first pair ("Children's Taste" test):

1. Rogier van der Weyden "Portrait of a Lady";

1a. G. Hayter "Portrait of E.K. Vorontsova".

"Portrait of a Lady" (1460) was painted by the Flemish artist of the 15th century. A child who perceives art as everyday reality sees the heroine as very "old", dull, wearing an unusual headdress. On the contrary, E.K. Vorontsova (G. Hayter's portrait painted during the lady's stay in London in 1832) is regarded as a beautiful woman wearing luxurious and bright clothes decorated with feathers and lace. The preference for E.K. Vorontsova's portrait is explained not by an aesthetic taste for complex beauty but by the identification of obvious beauty that is imposed on the viewer by the artist.

The second pair ("Children's Taste" test):

2. P. Picasso's still-life painting "Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit";

2a. The photo of porcelain.

Here the contrast is obvious since the dark image is set against the light one depicting beautiful dishes that are decorated with elegant and quite realistic embellishments. P. Picasso's pitcher and bowl seemed to be deformed and are presented from a rather "strange" perspective. However, it is an expressive painting conveying a specific mood.

The third pair ("Children's Taste" test):

3. The photograph of a pretty kitten;

3a. Takeuchi Seiho "Tabby Cat" (1924).

There is obvious "provocation" of children who need to make the most difficult choice between the gracefully laconic image of the Japanese artist (1924) and the photo of a kitten that touches the viewer.

The fourth pair ("Children's Taste" test):

4. M. Vrubel "Rose in a Glass";

4a. The photo of an ordinary rose.

The artistic provocation of this test pair is that the exquisitely subtle and sad flower image is given in contrast to the standardly beautiful and completely "empty" rose in the ordinary photo.

The fifth pair ("Children's Taste" test):

5. The drawing of a boy on an old postcard;

5a. V. Tropinin "Portrait of the Artist's Son".

The test conductor claims that it is a challenge to ask a child to distinguish an angel-like boy in a beautiful costume who is devoid of any expressiveness and individuality and the brightly expressive face and pose of the boy Arseny depicted in V. Tropinin's portrait.

The other test is conventionally called "Pumpkin" and means that children do not have to guess what is depicted in the picture they are shown. The provided images represent the same subject but it is depicted in a different manner, has a different emotional and aesthetic meaning. The following five pairs of images were included in the so-called "Pumpkin" test.

The first pair ("Pumpkin" test):

1. G. Garzoni "Pumpkin";

1a. The photo of a pumpkin.

The second pair ("Pumpkin" test):

2. A. Dürer "Young Hare";

2a. The photo of a hare.

The third pair ("Pumpkin" test):

3. The photo of the forest;

3a. A. Derain "Trees on the Banks of the Seine".

The fourth pair ("Pumpkin" test):

4. The photo of the waterfall;

4a. A. Gorky "Waterfall".

The fifth pair ("Pumpkin" test):

5. V. van Gogh "Saint-Rémy-de-Provence";

5a. The photo of an estate.

This test can be conducted for different purposes, including scientific, pedagogical and psychological ones. Using other methods, test conductors can measure the effectiveness of their work on the aesthetic development of children, and record the dynamics of individual or group development. They are also capable of telling parents about their child's success, aesthetic and general development, as well as recommending how to help their child, which parents greet with fervor.

3. Results

In 2017, the authors interviewed 79 children between the ages of four and nine years within the framework of individual choice testing and their motivation.

The analysis of taste preferences of children between the ages of four and nine years has revealed the results of perception and evaluation of art confirmed by the measurements used in the study. Most children perceive an artwork as direct information about the world around them regardless of its specific artistic representation. The perception of ordinary life conditions preferences for evaluating the illustrations provided in the test materials.

The mundane orientation of an artistic taste was revealed in a response to the beautiful portrait of E.K. Vorontsova (by G. Hayter), the magnificence of the dinnerware set and roses captured in the photo, the cuteness of the kitten and the freshness of the pumpkin that looks almost eatable in the picture.

The conducted research has surprisingly shown that there are children with aesthetic sensibility. Moreover, the number of these children is greater at a younger age. More than 40% of children spoke in favor of A. Derain's landscape because they found it to be "fabulous" and mysterious. 47% of the votes were given to A. Dürer's "Young Hare" for its almost imperceptible expressiveness. The children said, "Look! It drew up its paws". The dull photo of an estate is completely defeated by V. van Gogh's small landscape that, according to the children, won for the beauty of its "patterned" trees and "because it looked like an animation".

The age-related decline in the level of the child's art appreciation first discovered by Burt [9] more than a hundred years ago was confirmed by the research indicators. 34% of four-year-old children, 28% of five-year-old children, 23% of six-year-old children, 13% of seven-year-old children and none (0%) of nine-year-old schoolchildren preferred Rogier van der Weyden's "Portrait of a Lady" to G. Hayter's painting. During similar studies of previous years, the authors presented A. Dürer's "Self-Portrait" (among three other male portraits). It was marked as favourite by 33% of five-year-old children. 23% of six-year-old, 27% of seven-year-old children and only 10% of nine-year-old pupils liked this A. Dürer's painting.

4. Discussion

The results of some studies on the artistic taste of younger and older adolescents indicate complex dynamics of its development since they consider the nature and direction of education, the adolescent's personal and professional specialization that are not recorded by common tests [18].

Estimating the obtained results, the authors can assume that children growing in the school education system of the traditional

Cartesian model form the following three types of aesthetic development:
– Children who by the age of four years can perceive art only as cognitive realistic information;
– Children who have not yet grown to the dilemma of choice;
– Gifted children who are capable of perceiving feelings and reasons in harmony that should not be destroyed [8]. It is unclear whether their aesthetic sensibility is innate.
The first group does not choose pictures with vague imagery. If children have no freedom of an emotional response, they do not allow themselves this freedom (even three-year-old children!). They have learned that they have to be "smart". They understood what they were asked to do and answered questions correctly. There are children who simply do not understand what it means to "choose". Other gifted children can feel subtle changes in an artwork. For example, they captured the emotionality of P. Picasso's bowl image described by children as "the one wolves drink from". While looking at the blue-green lumps with tails up above the saucer (without ears and noses, though) in P. Gauguin's still-life painting, children often told they reminded them of "dogs eating". Nobody in the kindergarten group (including the teacher) saw this similarity, except for three-year-old Sasha. 43% of four-year-old children liked the waterfall painted by Arshile Gorky. This painting is exhibited in the Tate Modern (London), and the artist is classified as an abstract expressionist. Aesthetically gifted children can feel the merit of this artwork. They also took a great interest in the timeless, classical beauty of Rogier van der Weyden's "Portrait of a Lady" and A. Dürer's "Self-Portrait" that depict "old" people wearing unusual clothes far from modern children and the modern understanding of beauty.
According to the research of the early 1990s, more than 40% of the four-year-old children, 30% of the five-year-old children, less than 30% of the six-year-old children and almost none of the seven-year-old children chose unusual pictures. It was one of the first studies on children's art appreciation. Back then, children were asked to evaluate a pair of male and female portraits. The authors of the article noticed that most three-year-old children had already known that a neat girl with rich hair, wearing dress shoes and socks depicted in A. Renoir's painting was better than poorly dressed and barefooted Cinderella in F. Udhe's painting. A kind black and white doggie was considered much prettier than a toothy lion or a bulldog presented in the form of a netsuke figure. However, some children were of different opinion. Their choice of H. Holbein's "Jane Seymour" surprised researchers.
The traditional system of general education is oriented towards selective intellectual development and makes children follow certain rules of perception, evaluation and creativity. It does not motivate children to reveal their potential, go beyond the rules of artistic crafts and discover new ways of perception. It is quite obvious that this trend becomes even more prominent with age. Three-year-old children can have a strong and unanimous opinion. Then they form a majority. They have already learned to see in the "right" way and lost the intuitive harmony of perception. This research has demonstrated that children have already adopted cultural norms of mass art. They are convinced that white porcelain decorated with golden flowers is better than P. Picasso's dark bowl painted in a strange manner.

5. Conclusion

The studies on the development of children's art appreciation conducted in 1992, 2000 and 2017 have confirmed the decline of artistic taste with age, i.e. by the age of eight or nine years. The authors of the article have suggested a hypothesis explaining this negative dynamics that is supported not only by the results of their research but also by some cross-cultural studies on the development of the art perception and artistic taste in different cultures and national communities. It is assumed that before children reach the age of five years, they have aesthetic sensibility that is later "fixed" by the system of rationalizing the knowledge about the world and a strong pedagogical focus on the development of one's intelligence depriving children of various perception, imagination, phantasy and the harmony of one's intelligence and emotionality [6].
By the age of four years, most children have already adopted cultural norms associated with psychophysiological grounds of preferences but not limited to them. The unconditional values of "good" beauty are complemented by the knowledge that E.K. Vorontsova wearing red velvet in her ceremonial portrait looks much better than the ascetic noble Queen Jane. In the same manner, a dark and shabby goat is neglected in favor of bright toys. This trend is likely to persist. Creators and supporters of modern beauty standards may not worry. These values will preserve as their adherents form at the age of four years. These facts make it possible to draw the following two conclusions: the pedagogy of aesthetic development should not waste time and efforts to reintroduce norms that have already been adopted or rejoice that most children over the age of four years adhere to these standards. It is crucial to create special pedagogical conditions in educational programs to draw attention to the more complex beauty and expressiveness achieved in the cultural development of humankind, art and personality.
The aesthetic taste of modern seven-year-old children growing in the conditions of mass aesthetic education is undeveloped. Their confidence in what is beautiful and what is not is also quite shocking. However, there are still children who have retained the innocent freedom and emotionality of choice. Some of them even "managed" to harmonize these features with the development of their intelligence. Unfortunately, these children are seriously outnumbered.

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