

Teaching Greek Mythology Through Art — A Differentiated Teaching Proposal for Third Grade Students

Vasiliki Tsoulou

(1st Primary School of Samos, Greece)

Abstract: The present article describes a proposal for the teaching of Greek mythology, which is part of the national curriculum of History in Primary Education in Greece. The teaching intervention occurred during the school year 2020–2021 in a 3rd grade classroom using art and new technologies. Several kinds of art such as paintings, sculptures, ancient pottery paintings, frescos and mosaic were employed in order to initiate a conversation with third grade students about artworks' mythological theme as well as the revelation of the myth.

Presentation software was also used with the aim of showing these art works in detail and systematic order so as to enable students to make connections amongst them and answer questions which would lead them to discover the myth. All lesson plans of History class during the school year 2020–2021 were designed following the methodology as described below.

Key words: history, Greek mythology, art works, technology

1. Teaching History in Greek Primary Education

History constitutes a major part of the national curriculum at all stages of education in Greece, since it is thought to be very important in forming humans' perceptions and conserving peoples' cultural identity (Ministry of Education of Greece, 2002). According to the Hellenic curriculum, the configuration of historical consciousness and the cultivation of historical thought are considered to be the main purposes of teaching history in contemporary and multicultural societies. Critical thinking is defined as the structural integration as well as the combination of mental and psychological skills which can be cultivated through History lessons.

Despite its significance in the national curriculums History is considered to be an irrelevant subject to modern reality and boring for the students both in Greece and internationally (Joseph S., 2011). Moreover, students consider History to be one of the most difficult subjects to be learnt (Mauroskoufis D., 2002). Students often adopt a negative attitude towards the History lesson either because they face conceptual difficulties, because of their assessment tests or because they do not find any meaning in History that is related to their lives. This attitude results in their lack of interest and active participation. All of these in correlation with teaching approaches which are considered boring by the students, make them passive listeners (Narang A., 2015). In fact, in Greece, where learning outcomes are based on memorization and the teaching approach is more teacher-centered, a re-evaluation of teaching methods is deemed necessary.

Vasiliki Tsoulou, MSc., 1st Primary School of Samos; research areas: innovative teaching methods, art, history in education. E-mail: vtsoulou@gmail.com.

According to Repousi (2004), procedural knowledge, which is an organized body of targeted action, holds a prominent place in the teaching of History (Moniot H., 2002). According to this view, the development of students' historical thinking is associated with the activation of their interest and active participation in the teaching practice. (Oikonomidou S., 2002) This means that, if we focus on the development of skills by trying to stimulate the imagination of students by activating their interest, a more enjoyable environment for our students will probably be created.

2. Art as a Tool for Teaching History

A fundamental aim of the Greek curriculum is the development of critical thinking. According to this, images in general and artworks more specifically are considered to be an integral part of teaching, since they may arouse the student's interest.

The Greek curriculum highlights artworks as an important means of teaching and learning and describes the theory in order to achieve a modern teaching with effective learning. However, there are no specific teaching instructions on how these artworks can be approached and analyzed (Vrettos I. E., 1988). Furthermore, even if school textbooks are full of artworks and images, which could contribute to effective learning, the way they are presented leads the teacher to use them only as evidence since they more often exist at the end of the unit. Since there are no imperative instructions or suggestions for the use of these artworks either in the textbook or in the teacher's book and provided that they are presented at the end of the lesson in the form of evidence, the teacher is not motivated to use a constructive teaching approach. Instead, the teacher is pushed towards a traditional teaching of the history lesson, either through narration, or by studying the texts of the textbook and asking comprehension questions after that. The Greek history textbook of the third grade, while containing quite attractive and clear images of artworks, methodologically seems to present them simply as evidence of the pre-existing text (Vrettos I. E., 1995). Consequently, the majority of teachers use these images in a way that neither triggers the interest of their students nor activates them. As a result, students either find the lesson boring or find it difficult to understand.

There are many scientists such as Gardener (1990), Eisner (2002), Perkins (1994), Watzlawick (1981), Broudy (1987), Anderson (1993), Olson (2000), Efland (2002), Freire (1978) who have created a current in the field of education in order to highlight the role of art in it, believing that its use can not only contribute to the learning process but also help develop skills such as creativity, critical thinking and emotional expression.

According to Dewey (1934), critical observation of the art can be a source of knowledge to the same extent as that of science. He makes the point in his "Art as experience" (1980) that the emotional experience that one acquires through art, leads to the development of the imagination which is a fundamental element of the learning process.

Thus, the application of a differentiated teaching approach as is described below was used for the activation of students' interest, reflection and critical thinking.

3. Teaching Through art in Greece

Education through art and the use of it in education is becoming more and more systematic in recent years in Greece (Vrettos I. E., 1999). The method of "education through art" began to be applied systematically in 2009, mainly in adult institutions, with the aim of highlighting creativity and critical thinking through the systematic observation of works of all kinds of art. Learners are empowered through this process not only because they will be able to understand a subject in depth, but also because they will have a more open look at the world (Kokkos &

Mega, 2007).

This method has been applied to a limited extent in primary education but mainly through Perkins' method that aims to obtain creative and critical thinking (Kousoulas F. & Mega G., 2005; Mega G., 2009). As argued by Perkins (1994), students can learn to think critically through art. Critical thinking develops with the "deepest reading" of a work of art.

Our teaching proposal has been inspired by modern teaching techniques such as the "Artful and Visible thinking" which was carried out in the framework of the "Project Zero" research program of The Harvard University in collaboration with Traverse City and aimed at cultivating and developing skills such as observing and reading artworks.

More specifically, the teachers of this program tried to combine works of art with the subjects and objects they taught, in order to use them for the students' learning achievement and critical thinking. (Ritchhart, R. & Perkins, D.N., 2008). The observation of artworks stimulates and encourages the contemplative mood because it requires a thoughtful approach in order to discover what they offer to show and tell us. Moreover, the artworks are emotionally associated with social, personal and other aspects of life. Therefore, the observation of artworks can better build some important moods of reflection than many other processes.

4. The Application of the Teaching Procedure

4.1 Description

The intervention was a series of lessons concerning the teaching of Greek Mythology to thirteen Greek students of the third grade of primary education during the school year 2020–2021. The teaching procedure followed during these classes is presented in this paper.

The design of our teaching plans was based on a selection of several relevant artworks regarding the myth that had to be taught and their introduction into a presentation program in such a way that successive scenes of the story were emerged. Targeted questions were created in order to enable students to decode the meaning and content of art works and compose the myth in the end. Each lesson lasted for forty-five minutes.

4.2 Artworks as a Tool for Developing Critical Thinking

Taking into account the conceptual difficulties that 8-year-old students face regarding the understanding of historical concepts combined with the fact that Greek History textbooks are full of methodological errors, we designed a series of lesson plans aiming to stimulate students' interest in History as well as to lead them to discover the myths through relevant artworks.

The purpose was for the students primarily to acquire a positive attitude towards History in general as well as towards art itself, since expression through arts was an integral part of ancient Greeks' lives. The history of ancient Greece is intertwined with Greek mythology, which is why a large number of art works such as ancient pottery, frescos and sculptures depict various scenes from it.

Our aim was the integration of art in the learning process through several systematic ways of looking at art such as Feldman's or Broudy's and Silverman's suggestions. Feldman's process concerns description, formal analysis, interpretation and evaluation while Broudy and Silverman suggest that the viewer should look first for sensory properties, then formal properties, then expressive properties, and technical properties and evaluation in the end (Perkins D., 1994). At times we based our observations on Perkins's suggestion which is to give looking time,

to make looking broad and adventurous as well as clear and deep and to review the work fluently to re- experience its qualities (Perkins D., 1994). The chosen way of looking at art depended on the kind of artwork we examined and the content of the myth we had to teach each time.

After students had tried to decode the content of the artwork, we urged them to associate the meanings so that the myth would emerge in the end. It is worth noting that the historical sources contained in the textbook were used while we were processing the relevant artwork and not at the end of the whole process.

The revision of each section was carried out through a game of puzzled works of art from the whole section where the students had to guess the myth of each one. Each correct guess earned a point. The student who scored most points won.

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 The teaching approach

Our teaching approach was based on the constructivist theory as the students, motivated by the complexity of the artworks, tried to discover and compose the myths that were revealed to them. That means that we did not intend to use the selected artworks and presentations during the lessons as evidence of the myths mentioned in the third grade's textbooks. On the contrary, our teaching plans were designed so that the artworks would be the starting point of students' thinking, reflection and imagination.

4.3.2 The artworks

The artworks we used in each lesson were previously found and retrieved from the internet and then integrated into a presentation program along with editing questions. Presentation was made via video projector to display all the details of the artworks. Their time series' presentation went hand in hand with the chronological sequence of the scenes of the myth we tried each time to reveal.

5. The Teaching Example “The apple of Discord”

In order to give a detailed description of the teaching proposal, an indicative presentation is made of the sequence of works of art and the techniques through which we taught the first chapter of the Trojan War, “The apple of discord”.

5.1 Learning Process Objectives

We expected students to:

- activate their interest in studying the myth of the start of the Trojan War.
- discover and get to know the myth of the Apple of Dispute through works of art.
- observe works of art of different eras and styles, distinguish mythical figures and gods and decode art works' content.
- Develop their critical thinking and imagination by decoding works of art.
- connect the art works with the Greek myth about the beginning of the Trojan War.
- appreciate the value of art and its importance for the emergence of Greek myths
- discover how ancient Greek history is connected with mythology through ancient Greek art works.

5.2 Pre-existing Knowledge

The students have already been taught the creation of the world and the Olympic gods according to Greek mythology. Furthermore, the students have been trained to find the Olympian gods in works of art by observing

details in their appearance.

5.3 Preparation

The following is a detailed presentation of the artworks we selected from the internet to include in a presentation program along with their decoding questions in order to gradually reveal the myth.

5.4. Detailed Description of the Use of the Art Works

5.4.1 Introduction to the Trojan War (First Scene)

Wanting to activate the students' interest and concentration to the Trojan War, which they come in contact with for the first time, we introduced the fresco of the siege of Troy by Achilles (Franz von Matsch, *The Triumph of Achilles*). We asked general questions like "what do you think has happened here? Describe the city". This painting gave us the opportunity to discuss the event of the Trojan War as a historic fact which we would examine in the new section. In this chapter we studied the mythological cause of the Trojan War.

5.4.2 The Marriage of Peleus and the Thetis (2nd Scene)

The next painting was "The Nuptials of Thetis and Peleus" by Hendrik de Clerck, "The Nuptials of Thetis and Peleus". We asked the students to imagine themselves in the painting and then to describe to us the people who are at the table and to guess why they are all gathered there. Then, they had to look up, find "Eris" (the goddess of strife and discord), look her in the eye and focus on two things: First on what she is holding and then on her facial expression in order for students to understand her mood and predict the reason for such an appearance.

After having expressed their views, we discussed the meaning of the word "Eris" which means a violent and constant disagreement between two or more people that pushes them into hatred in modern Greek language. We searched the meaning on an online electronic vocabulary and then they compared the meaning of the word with the woman in the painting. The students' views gave us the opportunity to mention the myth where the goddess Eris appeared at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis to sow discord by offering a golden apple to the "fairest" goddess as revenge for not having been invited to the wedding.

Then the students observed "The wedding of Peleus and Thetis" by Paul Rubens depicting the scene where the apple has reached the wedding table, so that they could find and recognize the gods and goddesses sitting around it. Taking into account the gods' expressions and movements they subsequently tried to guess who and for what reason might argue. At this point, we explained the reason for the quarrel between the three goddesses.

5.4.3 The Judgement of Paris

The next scene of the myth attempted to be unfolded through a series of artworks was the Judgement of Paris. (Paintings by Francois Xavier Fabre, Guillaume Guillon-Lethiere, Sandro Boticelli and an ancient Greek pottery). Our students had to define these art works' common subject by recognizing the goddesses and wondering about the shepherd's presence. Questions such as: who can be the one who gives the apple, to which goddess he gives it, what gift each goddess could have promised him in return and who seems to mediate between the shepherd and the goddesses motivated students to make assumptions about the connection between the two scenes of the story.

The assumptions that were made triggered the students to study the ancient Greek text by Loukianos, describing the dialogue amongst the goddesses and the shepherd, which exists in the textbook, with increased interest. After reading it they dramatized the dialogue.

5.4.4 Paris and Helen

In order to help students connect the Aphrodite's gold apple to Helen as a gift to Paris, they were given four artworks to study. "Venus Induces Helen to fall in love with Paris" by Angelica Kauffmann, "The Reconciliation of

Helen and Paris after his defeat by Menelaus” and two ancient Greek pottery representing Paris with Helen. Questions such as: where has Paris gone, who is with him, why is that person pulling him, what could be Aphrodite's gift, where does the woman live and how does she look like, helped students realize that Helen was rich and important. By carefully observing her clothing, the students managed to recognize her social status.

5.5.5 The Abduction of Beautiful Helen

Helen's abduction by Paris was the next scene of the myth to be represented. We did so by showing “The Rape of Helen” by Francesco Primaticcio, an Ancient Greek Attica Krater having the ship of the abduction on it and an ancient sculpture with the same content. We asked students to find Helen and Paris in all these art works and focus on how the abduction takes place and then wonder about the reasons for the abduction. After an interactive discussion among the students, it was revealed that beautiful Helen had been married to the king of Sparta, Menelaus.

5.5.6 The Presentation of Beautiful Helen to King Priamos and Queen Ekavi of Troy

We completed the story of the myth by introducing the scene of the couple's arrival in Troy through two paintings. One by Gerard Hoet, “Paris presenting Helen at the court of Priam” and another one by Claude Vignon, “Paris Introducing Helen to his Parents, King Priam and Queen Ekavi”. Both paintings show Helen's meeting with Paris's parents in Troy. At this point the students had to find Helen and Paris, wonder about the place they had arrived at as well as the possible relationship between Paris and the royal couple. We revealed that Paris was the prince of Troy who had kidnapped Helen and so the Trojan war began.

6. Valuation

Primary school students are taught History for the first time in their school life and so there is no pre-existing attitude towards it to be changed. We can, however, cite our personal experience of whether they acquired a positive attitude towards History through their response and active participation during the courses. As our teaching proposal was implemented from the beginning as a way to increase students' interest and not to produce results of systematic research, we can only express our personal perception of an identical process that was entirely applied throughout one school year.

The students were particularly interested in the learning process from the beginning, seeking to make assumptions about the content of the works of art and trying to relate them to the knowledge they already had without fear of making a mistake. Another thing that was observed was that the students gradually managed to decode the content and find the mythical heroes in the works of art more easily.

It is important to mention that two out of the thirteen students were foreigners (Syria and Albania) and were very attentive, learned with interest and showed great interest during History lessons, despite language issues.

It is also worth mentioning that in the repetition games, while there was no previous study by the students at home, the majority of the students recognized and remembered most of the myth scenes.

We consider that the attempt to completely escape from the narrow limits and limitations of the textbook by including art as a tool for the development of students' thinking and imagination, worked both in terms of the learning process and the learning outcome. What is needed in the future is that systematic research concerning the effective use of art in lesson plans for teaching not only history but also other sciences be carried out. More specifically, we believe that it is in the interest of science to investigate whether students can, through art, activate their thinking, interest and imagination in order to form a positive attitude towards these subjects.

The results of such a research can be useful for the re- evaluation of curricula, teaching methods and the use of textbooks related to social science courses so that students acquire a more positive attitude towards them.

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