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Functions of visual art as an element of culture and society in a psychological perspective

Funkcje sztuki wizualnej jako elementu kultury i społeczeństwa w perspektywie psychologicznej

Abstract: Art has accompanied people since the dawn of time. From the cave paintings - through the ages - to contemporary works, it is an inseparable element of culture. The issue of art and its creation has already appeared in the texts of ancient philosophers. Significant changes can be observed in the trends of visual arts at different periods. Art is referred to as a mirror of social processes. At the same time, the authors emphasize that it could influence the occurrence of these processes and their course. The role of art in the development of culture is multifaceted. The literature on the subject shows attempts to understand this relationship. This article presents the importance of art from the context of cultural development from a psychological perspective.

Based on the literature on the subject, it was proposed to categorize the function of art in relation to human mental and social functioning, its activities, referring to such aspects as communication between the creator and recipients, presentation of emotional states, the possibility of social and religious identification through art and application in therapeutic interactions. These aspects have been characterized in this article.

Keywords: social changes, culture, society, psychology of art

Abstrakt: Sztuka towarzyszy ludziom od zarania dziejów. Począwszy od malowideł naskalnych - przez następne stulecia - aż po dzieła współczesne, dziedzina ta jest nieodłącznym elementem kultury. Zagadnienie sztuki i jej tworzenia w kontekście społecznej i kulturowej działalności człowieka pojawiało się już w tekstach starożytnych filozofów. Znaczące zmiany można zaobserwować w obszarze sztuk wizualnych w różnych okresach historycznych. Sztuka jest określana jako zwierciadło procesów społecznych. W literaturze podkreśla się, że może ona wpływać na ich występowanie i przebieg.

Rola sztuki w rozwoju kultury jest wielopłaszczyznowa. Literatura przedmiotu opisuje próby zrozumienia tego związku. W artykule przedstawiono znaczenie sztuki w kontekście rozwoju kultury i społeczeństwa z perspektywy psychologicznej. Zaproponowano również kategoryzację funkcji sztuki w kontekście funkcjonowania psychicznego i społecznego człowieka, odnosząc się do takich aspektów, jak m.in. komunikacja między twórcą a odbiorcami, prezentacja stanów emocjonalnych, możliwość społecznej oraz religijnej identyfikacji z grupami społecznymi oraz zastosowanie sztuki jako formy działań terapeutycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: zmiany społeczne, kultura, społeczeństwo, psychologia sztuki

1. Definition of culture

The etiology of the concept of 'culture' is rooted in Latin, where the phrases *colo* and *colere*, meaning the cultivation of land and spirit, were used (Eliot, 2010; Kiereś, 2013).

Culture is indicated as a way of human existence and realization of this existence, an area in which man is looking for the purpose and meaning of his own life (Brown, 2004).

Human activities in relation to cultural functioning can be described in the context of several aspects:

- 1) The functional nature of this activity understood as an attempt to rationalize the world (explaining observed phenomena, elements of the world) and its humanization (changes, some modification of phenomena found as a result of the nature of human functioning) (see: Duncum, 2001; Kiereś, 2013);
- 2) Understanding human cultural activity as the sum of its products, which are the result of actions taken (see: Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Duncum, 2001; Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht & Lindsley, 2006);
- 3) Defining culture as a property describing the characteristics of an individual (see: Jahoda, 2012);
- 4) Distinguishing the concept of culture into a personal and social level (defining the features of larger social groups) (see: Baldwin et al., 2006).

As the above-mentioned forms of human cultural functioning prove, the concept of culture in literature is understood in different ways. Regardless of the definition used, the authors agree that art is inseparably connected with culture - both in individual and social terms. This issue is presented in Chapter 2.

2. Art as an element of culture

Art is considered by many disciplines and fields of science (e.g., Alexander, 2003; Kiereś, 2013; Carless & Douglas, 2016). The literature on the subject clearly indicates difficulties in defining the concept of art. One of the universally accepted and most universal understandings is to define it as a subjective beauty transformed into an object, a product (see: Hall, 2018; Ketola, Bulut & Yumrukaya, 2009).

Art is indicated as one of the significant elements of human culture (Ketola et al., 2009; Frołowicz, 2012). The first considerations on the importance of art in the social context are contained in the treatises of ancient philosophers. As Chalmers (2019) describes "around 373 BC, Plato concerned himself with the place of art in the ideal state. In addition, Aristotle and Plotinus offer metaphysical theories which place art in general context of their world views. In the East discussion about the nature of art in society can be traced to Confucious "(p. 95). The precursor of reflections on the relationship between art and culture was Taine (1871), who pointed out that "a work of art is determined by an aggregate which is the general state of mind and surrounding circumstances of the culture" (as cited in Chalmers, 2019, p. 95). Some authors point out that art is a form of life - "the original and authentic existence of man in the world. Thanks to creativity, it protects freedom - a deposit of

humanity, and thus shows that culture is only a collection of conventions "(Kiereś, 2013; p. 29).

It indicates that human creations of art are the results of imitating purposefulness observed in nature (Noe, 2015; Paldam, 2017). As Kiereś (2013) claims, they are "a picture of our knowledge about nature and space, as well as about ourselves. They are also an expression of our will, which tells us to perfect the existing world and move towards the optimum perfection that we are entitled to under our rational and free nature "(p. 10).

There is a belief in the literature that art constantly affects people and shapes society (see: Vannini & Williams, 2016; Chalmers, 2019). Authors indicate that art has an impact on such aspects of human functioning as for example beliefs, ideology, thinking, perception of the world and other people, and values. Ketola et al. (2009) indicate that culture and art are constantly evolving. The authors believe that both these phenomena are a reflection of social changes but also can shape society at the same time. Kiereś (2013) postulates awareness towards such conclusions, pointing out that "research practice in cultural sciences proves that these sciences not only describe cultural facts but, first and foremost, find out the causes of such facts and evaluate these facts. Their assessment is inevitable, because - as we already know - not every cultural fact is also a culture-forming fact, that is, a fact that really enriches human nature "(24-25). Chalmers (2019) states that a functioning culture predisposes the reception of cultural work. The author refers to the assumptions proposed by König (1967), who notes that "since objective creations of the mind can never be opposed to what happens in society, but only seen in a functional relation with it in particular cultural spheres of influence" (p. 160; as cited in Chalmers, 2019). Also noteworthy is the statement by Silbermann (1968): "no modern thinking social scientist can overlook the fact that the arts, like economics, law, religion, the state, etc., are ultimately expressions of culture and society, as is already clear from the fact that they can be viewed from such different angles as symbolic representation, communication processes or, in the last analysis, social processes. All thinking and research on the sociology of art inevitably leads to the spheres of influence of art and must embrace them all "(p. 573).

Although not entirely clear nature of the relationship between art and culture, reflected in the literature is the position that they are inseparable elements, not existing without the other (e.g., Ketola et al., 2009; Chalmers, 2019). Art is inseparable from the processes taking place in society and accompanies the development of culture through the creation of art or its reception (Stephenson & Tate, 2015).

2.1. Art through the ages

Visual art has been created over many centuries. Rock paintings are one of the first pieces of evidence of human artistic activity. This particular art form usually depicts human

and animal characters (Dissanayake, 2008; Risatti, 2009). As possible goals, researchers indicate, for example presenting the community in which the creators operate, documenting important events (e.g., hunting) and leaving a trace of their existence (Whitley, 2016).



Figure 1. An example of prehistoric rock paintings at Manda Guéli Cave in the Ennedi Mountains, northeastern Chad¹

In ancient Greece and Rome, it was assumed that art mimics nature (Clark, 2018). As Aristotle pointed out, he only wants to fill the gaps left by nature (Frołowicz, 2012). This philosopher thought that creating art is a mental disposition. This view was associated with the assumption of the rationality of art as an activity performed for a specific purpose, based on specific rules for its production (Kiereś, 2013).

The art of the Middle Ages was often religious, for example, icons of saints, religious scenes (Marrow, 1979). Medieval artists also depicted battle scenes and portraits of rulers. There was a belief in the futility of human life and the pursuit of salvation after death (Klibansky, Panofsky & Saxl, 2019). The art of the Middle Ages often refers to the vision of a mortified man, stuck in a hostile reality and finding the only consolation in religion (Janson, Janson & Marmor, 1997).

The later period - the Renaissance - brought significant changes in the field of art (Kiereś, 2013). It alluded to the ideology of humanism and anthropocentrism (Ames-Lewis & Rogers, 2019). The emancipation of the artist was visible. He was considered a character with

¹ Image source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saharan_rock_art#/media/File:Prehistoric_Rock_Paintings_at_Manda_Gu%C3%A9li_Cave_in_the_Ennedi_Mountains_-_northeastern_Chad_2015.jpg

special features and cognitive abilities to create (Cole, 2018). At the same time, it aroused admiration and raised his social status. Unlike the art of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance alluded to pleasure things. There was a cult of man and admiration for his corporeality (e.g., Ribeiro, 2011; Ames-Lewis & Rogers, 2019).

Anthropocentrism and the cult of man developed in art up to modernity. In recent decades there has been a breakthrough in the way art is presented (Tribe, Jana & Grosenick, 2006; Shanken, 2009). According to Zhang (2019), multimedia forms, new types of exhibitions or online transmission are just some of them. The author indicates that the experience of modern art forms affects the functioning of man in almost every aspect, including forms of communication with other people, shaping relationships, way of life. Modern art shapes culture at a new level. This type of art - despite its global character - is also different for different cultures - "different nationalities have different historical experiences, lifestyles, and mindsets, which in turn form their own aesthetic habits and aesthetic values of different styles" (p. 131).

The nature of visual art has changed over the centuries, along with social and cultural changes (Brown, 2004; Paldam, 2017; Chalmers, 2019). The relationship between art and culture is also currently observed (e.g., Stephenson & Tate, 2015).

2.2. Functions of art in a psychological perspective

Authors studying issues related to art indicate that it is a conscious and purposeful product (Vannini & Williams, 2016; Paldam, 2017). Researchers agree that visual art can have various functions (see: Iseminger, 2004; Golka, 2008; Chalmers, 2019). From a psychological perspective, six main categories of functions that art performs in the context of the development and functioning of society and culture can be distinguished:

- 1) Communication function, which consists in creating a bond between the artist and the recipient by understanding the artist's experiences, perceiving his perspective of the world, evoking specific emotional states (Harper, Wiens & Matarazzo, 1978; Kester, 2004; Frołowicz, 2012). Chalmers (2019) indicates that without communication function, art would not have such a significant impact on the culture and development of society. The author states that "if art has no communicative role, then it cannot maintain or change cultures or even be said to be enhancing" (p. 9);
- 2) Cognitive function - the creator provides the recipient with specific information about the world and shapes attitudes and beliefs about specific phenomena (see: Staudinger, 1999; Brinck, 2007; Frołowicz, 2012). Art can be an effective transfer of knowledge by learning and acquiring scientific values (Read, 1976; Chalmers, 2019);
- 3) Aesthetic and expressive function, understood as a reference to the canons of beauty, evoking aesthetic experiences and motivating the recipient to take creative actions

and convey his own perspective, values, experiences, and emotions through art (Silvia, 2005; Brinck, 2007; Roald, 2007);

- 4) Religious function - consisting in referring to religious values, mysticism, beliefs. In some societies, the religious function of art is particularly important and is regulated by specific norms (Argyle, 2002; Klibansky et al., 2019);
- 5) Identification function - consists in the expose of certain functioning patterns in a given social group, shows the individual's belonging to it, strengthens social identity, allows identification with other members of the community (see: Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995; Frołowicz, 2012);
- 6) Therapeutic function - art can be successfully used in the therapeutic process for people with physical and mental dysfunctions (see: John, 1986; Coleman & Farris-Dufrene, 2014; Hinz, 2019). There is a wide range of forms of therapy using art, depending on the patients' needs (Dunphy et al., 2019). The forms of such therapeutic help are presented in Chapter 3.

3. The use of art in a psychology context

The basics of understanding art in the context of its therapeutic function can already be found in Aristotelian philosophy (Leighton, 2019). This philosopher referred to the concept of *catharsis*, consisting in discharge and purification - especially in the emotional context (Rozmysłowicz, 2005, Cheng, 2018). The essence of *catharsis* is to discharge the experienced tension and negative emotions. Aristotle pointed out that the creation of art can lead to this state. Creative process itself is often more important than the final work (Siemież, 2005).

In the psychological and psychotherapeutic literature, the importance of art as a therapeutic method for mental disorders, emotional deficits, behavioral disorders, etc. is pointed out (Szulc, 2006; Coleman & Farris-Dufrene, 2014; Edwards, 2014; Dunphy et al., 2019; Hinz, 2019). One of the precursors of therapeutic methods who drew attention to the possibility of using art are C. Jung, who encouraged patients to express emotions through artistic activities, or D. Winnicott - who postulated the need to recognize the area of cultural experience as a significant element of human experience (see: Van den Berk, 2012; Edwards, 2014; Bowie, 2018; Schaverien, 2018). At the interface of two fields - art and psychology, a new field were created - the so-called art therapy (Rozmysłowicz, 2005). This term appeared in the 1940s. Art therapy developed after the Second World War when soldiers in hospitals and sanatoriums were encouraged to do artistic activities. The goal of this type of therapy is to achieve specific therapeutic assumptions through the use of artistic forms of expression, while the artistic process itself has therapeutic value (Olszewska, 2002). Art therapy is based on the intentional use of artistic methods to externalize emotional states,

thoughts that a person is not able to convey verbally or identify (Wierzchucka, 2004; Szulc, 2006).

There are several types of art therapy, using various forms of activities, for example, therapy using visual arts - sculpture, painting, photography, etc., music therapy (using sounds, voice, music), dance and movement therapy), drama therapy (theatrical activities, role-playing, scenes, etc.) or bibliotherapy (using literature or creating own texts) (Malchiodi, 2007; Frołowicz, 2012).

Currently, therapy using various art forms is used to treat a wide spectrum of mental, behavioral, emotional disorders as well as physical and intellectual disabilities (e.g. Ruddy & Milnes, 2005; Spiegel, Malchiodi, Backos & Colie, 2006).

The results of research on the effectiveness of therapeutic activities using various forms of art indicate effectiveness in the context of changes in physical, mental and social functioning (e.g., Reynolds, Nabors & Quinlan, 2000; Schouten, de Niet, Knipscheer, Kleber, & Hutschemaekers, 2015). Frołowicz (2012) indicates that the participation of people with disabilities in art therapy improves physical activity, leads to the acquisition of new skills, learning everyday activities and improving social contacts. The result of the therapy is also increasing self-confidence and self-acceptance (Dain, Bradley, Hurzeler & Aldridge, 2015; Cross, Brown, 2019).

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