

# THE ROLE OF VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION IN CREATING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

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## **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to facilitate the occurrence of cultural transfer by means of Visual Arts education in the context of individuals' traditions and customs, of their national and international dimensions, and of their recognition of different cultural artifacts. It also aims to allow intercultural dialog and to raise consciousness of cultural values and diversity.*

*Through the research and Visual Arts Education Association (GÖRSED) and the International Society for Education through Art (INSEA), educators in Turkey and across the world have been made aware of the visual arts. 15 schools, 7 of which were from five different foreign countries and 8 of which were from Turkey, participated in this research. The students who participated in the research were between the ages of 7 and 15. Depictions of customs and traditions were processed as part of this research. 66 of these depictions came from abroad and 189 from Turkey. 255 students created pictures with accompanying explanatory texts on a purely voluntary basis. These pictures were taken, classified by topic, and organized into charts. The results of the research were presented as a display at the Gazi University private schools foundation.*

*The research concludes that it is possible for students to familiarize themselves with and understand the traditions and customs of different cultures. I claim that in this context the pictures and their accompanying texts helped create an awareness of different cultures.*

**Key Words:** Visual Arts Education, international cultural transfer, traditions, customs

## 1.0 Introduction

After a number of debates and discussions concerning the concept of culture, academics formulated a variety of definitions and examined the concept from different angles. One particularly comprehensive definition was given by the English anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor: Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Özkarabacak, 2013). According to Güvenç (1974), it is possible to define the concept of culture from four different angles:

1. Culture is a society's or all societies' cumulative civilization
2. Culture is a determinate society itself
3. Culture is the product of a series of social processes
4. Culture is a model for people and society

Inglis and Hughson (2003) argue that culture includes the thoughts, values and beliefs found within a given group. These thoughts, values, and beliefs are expressed through symbols such as written languages and pictures. There is always a difference between any one group's culture and another's. Every culture determines how the people that it includes perceive their surroundings and their world, what meaning they give to it, and what kind of emotional and intellectual responses they give. Culture is transferred from generation to generation. Culture is a natural result of the joint actions of many people.

In this sense, culture is a point of common interest between all anthropologists and sociologists. Globalization is one way that the perception of cultural differences can be positively influenced. Oktay (2001) claims that globalization creates situations that require people from different cultural environments to interact, and for the content of education within various cultures to approach objectivity. It can thus prevent quite a few disputes and help individuals of different nationalities to begin to understand each other. Individuals from different cultures who recognize cultural differences show respect and tolerance and facilitate the establishment of effective communication in different cultural environments.

In addition to this, it has been observed that the world is returning to a multicultural social system. According to the American Psychological Association's (APA) 2002 definition, multiculturalism, in an absolute sense, recognizes the broad scope of dimensions of race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, class status, education, religious/spiritual orientation, and other cultural dimensions.

Additional expressions of multiculturalism also concern equality, coexistence, and establishing communication. Communication established between different cultures is an exchange process in which peoples' feelings, thoughts, knowledge etc. are transferred. This process is of the utmost importance for transferring our culture and saving our cultural heritage. Working to develop this goal, UNESCO approved the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” in Paris at the meeting of their 32nd General Conference between September 29th and October 17th, 2003. Turkey's first writing on the subject was developed by the addition of the Masterpieces, previously identified at the Third General Meeting of the 2008 Intergovernmental Committee in Istanbul, to the List of Representations of Intangible Cultural Heritage covered in the 16th Article. Since 2014, Turkey has had 12 heritage items registered on the list. These are: the Meddahlık (an Ottoman eulogy), the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony (including the whirling dervish dance), the Âşıklık tradition (a kind of traveling minstrel), Karagöz (shadow-puppet theatre), Nevruz (a new year celebration shared with Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan), traditional meetings known as Yaren, Barana, and Sıra Gecesi, Alevi-Bektaşî religious rituals, oil wrestling at Kırkpınar, the Keşkek (a meat and rice dish) ceremony, Mesir paste (a kind of spicy candy) festival, Turkish coffee and its associated traditions, and the art of paper marbling (Unesco, 2014).

From the perspective of the events that we have lived through, our thoughts display difference to the world and to people from culture to culture. Rapid globalization must be recognized as one of the elements

that presents individuals in the world to both their own culture and to different cultures. The variety of different cultural works should be made known to humanity, and as a result of this all cultural constructs should be approached with tolerance.

Learning about different countries and cultures broadens the perspective of the future generations now developing and of children all over the world who are working towards the same goal. The meaningfulness of this perspective should not be overlooked (Şentuna, 2011). Here we arrive at the significance of introducing the customs and traditions of different societies by means of visual arts education. It is quite important that we are able to perceive that the values we have made for ourselves could be different and that there are people who are different than us. This, in fact, can be achieved through education, of which visual arts education is an important component.

## **2.0 Aim of the Study**

This study aims to raise awareness about cultural diversity and provide intercultural dialog through the recognition of cultural artifacts in the context of traditions, customs and their national and international dimensions through Visual Arts education. It also aims to demonstrate that Visual Arts Education is an efficient form of education for transferring our cultural values and understanding different cultures. It will show that it is highly important to use this form of education in a productive manner.

## **3.0 Materials and Method**

The research materials consist of pictures made by students who were between the ages of 7 and 15 and who participated in Visual Arts lessons during the 2013 - 2014 school years. There were texts explaining the traditions and customs accompanying the pictures. Supporting the student's pictures with the texts allowed different perceptions of our customs and traditions to be presented.

The Visual Arts Education Association (GÖRSED) and the International Society for Education through Art (INSEA) were contacted to determine which schools would be included in the research, to make visual arts educators aware of the research, and to collect information. 15 schools, 7 of which were from four different foreign countries and 8 of which were from three different cities in Turkey, participated in this research. 66 of the students participating from abroad were from Germany, Australia, Estonia and Hungary. 189 students participating from Turkey were from the cities of Ankara, Şanlıurfa and İzmit. In total, 255 students made pictures depicting customs and traditions and wrote accompanying explanatory texts about the topic.

A contract was prepared in order to ensure a certain standard during the application process. In this contract, the stages of the topic, paper size, and the techniques to be used were explained item by item. A two week training process was planned in order to help students understand the topic and all students involved in this research were informed about the topic.

All students, whether they were in Turkey or abroad, were asked to talk to their families about their customs and traditions and take notes about the topic. In this way communication between the students and their families was facilitated and awareness about the topic was created. Since the students were brought up in different regions, a variety of customs and traditions was acquired. The students were then asked to share the information they gathered from their families about their customs and traditions with the other students in their class. Thus, students had the opportunity to learn about the customs and traditions of different regions.

The last stage of the study involved students making pictures about the custom or the tradition which they found the most interesting and supporting their pictures with a text. The pictures were made on 35cm

by 50cmsized papers with any technique desired by the students apart from charcoal pencil and collage methods.

Some of the pictures and texts were chosen for display on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2013 in an elementary school. This is because April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1920 is the date when the first Turkish Grand Assembly was opened, laying the foundation for the democratic parliamentary regime of the country. The founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, declared the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April as National Sovereignty and Children's Day and presented this day to all children around the world. The 23<sup>rd</sup> of April is celebrated every year with various activities in different institutions in our country and in our representative institutions in foreign countries, as well. For this reason, the international customs and traditions exhibition was opened on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 in Gazi Vakfı Private Schools as a part of the “National Sovereignty and Children's Day” activities.



#### 4.0 Research Findings

**Table 1: Picture Topics from Turkish Students, Total Numbers and Percentages**

Picture Topic	Number	Percentage
Wedding and wedding related traditions (henna night, requesting a family's permission to marry, marriage proposals, raising the flag, the bride's trip to the hamam, etc.)	68	35.98
Traditional local dances (semazen, semah, horon, halay, âşık ile maşuk, köçek, cirit oyunu, çuval yarışı, yağlı güreş, etc.)	32	16.93
Traditional food and drink (Türk kahvesi, Osmanlı macunu, Türk lokumu, etc.)	15	7.93
Hacivat-Karagöz shadow puppet productions	12	6.34
Birth and birthdays	9	4.75
Holidays (Hıdrellez, Kurban kesme, şeker toplama, batıl inançlar, dilek ağacı, mani söyleme, etc.)	8	4.23

Traditional Arts (carpet weaving, ceramics and pottery, iron smithing, nazar beads, etc.)	8	4,23
Weddings, henna night	5	2.65
Âşıklık traveling minstrels	4	2.12
Circumcisions	4	2.12
Hacivat-Karagöz	3	1.59
Hand kissing	3	1.59
Funerals	3	1.59
Sıra gecesi (a night of discussion and music)	3	1.59
Nasrettin hoca	2	1.06
Elegies	2	1.06
Sending off of soldiers	2	1.06
Folk dances	2	1.06
Oil wrestling	1	0.53
Tooth pulling	1	0.53
Pool of Sacred Fish	1	0.53
Making çiğköfte (a spicy bulgur and meat-based dish)	1	0.53
<b>TOPLAM</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>100.00</b>

As Table 1 shows the most common topic for students in Turkey was weddings and wedding-related traditions (henna night, requesting a family's permission to marry, marriage proposals, raising the flag, the bride's trip to the hamam) with 68 pictures made. This is followed by 32 pictures of traditional local dances, 15 pictures of traditional food and drink, 12 pictures of Hacivat-Karagöz, 9 pictures of births and birthdays, 8 pictures each of holidays and traditional arts, 5 pictures of weddings, and 4 pictures of âşıklık traveling minstrels. Circumcision, henna night, Hacivat-Karagöz, hand kissing, funerals, sıra gecesi, Nasrettin hoca, elegies, sending off soldiers, folk dances, oil wrestling, tooth pulling, the Pool of Sacred Fish, and making çiğköfte each had between 1 and 3 pictures.

**Table 2: Picture Topics from Foreign Students, Total Numbers and Percentages**

Picture Topic	Number	Percentage
Folklore	10	15.15
Carnivals	7	10.61
New Year / Christmas	7	10.61
Australia's Natural Wonders	7	10.61
Animals ( e.g. deer, birds)	6	9.08
Eid al-Fitr	5	7.57
Aboriginal traditions	4	6.05
Rural lifestyles	3	4.54
Hunting	2	3.03
Natural beauties	2	3.03
Estonians	2	3.03
Valentine's Day	2	3.03
Folk Dances	2	3.03
Embroidery	2	3.03
Diwali	1	1.52
Birthdays	1	1.52
Easter	1	1.52
Holidays	1	1.52
Natural disasters	1	1.52
<b>TOPLAM</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table 2 shows that folklore was the most common topic among foreign students with 10 pictures made. This is followed by 7 pictures each of carnivals, New Year / Christmas and Australia's natural wonders, 6 each of, animals, Eid al-Fitr, and 4 pictures of Aboriginal traditions. Valentine's Day, hunting, natural wonders, Estonians, rural lifestyles, folk dancing, embroidery, Diwali, Easter, holidays, and natural disasters each had between 1 and 3 pictures.

## 5.0 Results

### According to the Research Findings:

- The interviews conducted with families in order to acquire information regarding the students' topics had a positive effect on child-family communication.
- Students focused on the meaning of different actions and behaviour related to the customs and traditions. This has a cultural significance and indicates that they are aware of the narratives associated with these customs and traditions.
- Students found the opportunity to familiarize themselves with both their own culture and different cultures

- Setting up displays of these pictures in different locations around the world perhaps created some awareness of multiculturalism among students
- The results of the research presented in an exhibition at the Gazi University Vakfı private schools was followed with interest by both teachers and students. In this context, the pictures and accompanying texts can be said to have helped create an awareness of different cultures.
- The schools at which Visual Arts course hours were increased were able to be more productive.

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