

Visual Narratives in Contemporary Painting as an Educational Resource in Shaping the Artistic Worldview

Mariia Kovalova^{1,*}, Maryna Tokar², Oleksandr Chursin¹, Nataliia Tretiakova¹ & Yevheniia Nestierova¹

¹Department of Painting, Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, Kharkiv, Ukraine

²Department of Audiovisual Arts, Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, Kharkiv, Ukraine

*Correspondence: Department of Painting, Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, 8 Mystetstv Street, Kharkiv, 61002, Ukraine. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9254-2565>. E-mail: kovaleva2075@gmail.com

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Abstract

In a contemporary practice, painting functions both as an aesthetic object and a powerful narrative medium conveying profound social, philosophical, and symbolic meanings. This study examines how visual narratives in contemporary paintings shape artistic worldviews and their significance for art education. Employing qualitative semiotic and iconological analysis methods, the research explores how symbolic elements, composition, and color contribute to meaning construction. Findings reveal that contemporary artists employ dynamic, contextually flexible symbols that operate on multiple interpretive levels. While painting remains underutilized as an educational tool – often overshadowed by non-painting techniques and technical instruction. This analysis draws attention to the need for greater inclusiveness in art education that incorporates visual pedagogy to aid in developing analytical and reflective thinking. This research, while contributing to the body of knowledge, apologetically recognizes limitations in sample size and the subjective nature of interpretation and calls for expanding the range of analyzed artworks and methodologies for future studies. Through this analysis, the essence of contemporary painting is formulated, and its significance in provoking pedagogical discourse toward the visual culture is brought to light.

Keywords: visual narratives, contemporary painting, semiotic analysis, iconology, art education

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Contemporary art acts as an important medium for social reflection and cultural critique, as modern paintings extend beyond aesthetic objects to engage with political, cultural, and identity-related issues. Through symbolic visual language, contemporary painting develops complex meanings that remain open to multiple interpretations within a broader system of signs (Dobrovolska et al., 2024). From an iconological perspective, art is understood not as mere representation but as a creative response to historical, philosophical, and anthropological developments in society (Vuk & Bosnar, 2021). As a result, modern paintings stimulate aesthetic appreciation while also encouraging deeper discussions about culture and social realities.

At the same time, the development of contemporary visual narratives is influenced by factors such as digitalization, changes in art pedagogy, and global creative exchange. Digital technologies have expanded the communicative potential of art, enabling more direct interaction between artists and audiences (Clark, 2020). In academic contexts, paintings are increasingly analyzed through approaches such as semiotics, iconology, and discourse analysis to uncover underlying meanings and representations (Neill & Basnet, 2022). However, despite this potential, the use of painting as a medium for critical reflection in art education remains limited, as many institutions still emphasize traditional technical training rather than interpretive and analytical approaches to visual narratives (Gayed & Angus, 2018). Therefore, this study highlights the importance of positioning contemporary painting within broader social and academic discussions.

Modern painting has developed into not just a form of art but a visual story with complex meanings and symbols to be interpreted. Contemporary artists construct Aesthetically pleasing compositions with visual elements and use imagery to express sociopolitical and philosophical ideologies (Ihnatiev, 2019). The study addresses a key question: how artists

construct visual narratives and how symbolism in paintings shapes audience perception and attitudes toward art. Although art has strong potential to raise social awareness and stimulate critique, the mechanisms through which this occurs in modern art still require deeper examination. Furthermore, while painting is frequently used in visual arts education mainly to practice composition and technique, its role as a medium for social critique and reflective learning remains underutilized. Therefore, this research seeks to demonstrate how painting can be taught not only as an aesthetic object but also as a pedagogical tool that encourages critical thinking and helps students understand the social and cultural dimensions of art (Dobrovolska et al., 2024; Clark, 2020).

Because of the defined problems, this research attempts to determine and analyze the place and meaning of visual stories in modern paintings as a tool for forming an artistic opinion. While artwork can formulate deeply personal meanings, more research is needed to explain visually constructed narratives' relationships with audiences and their understanding of culture and aesthetics. Therefore, this research will examine the effects of paintings on the aesthetic perception of viewers in the spheres of visual art and art pedagogy. Furthermore, this research intends to devise methods for using paintings as a critical thinking tool instead of merely viewing them as a technical instructional aid for art students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Analysis of Visual Narrative Concepts, Semiotic Approaches in Art Analysis, and Iconological Examination in Visual Arts

Visual narratives in art function as a communicative system in which images, symbols, and pictorial elements interact to construct meaning. In painting, narratives may range from explicit representation to metaphorical and symbolic expression, making visual storytelling an important component of art education because it helps students understand complex ideas and develop interpretive thinking (Pak et al., 2020; Neill & Basnet, 2022). The use of imagery in art analysis also enables students to appreciate the aesthetics of contemporary art while critically interpreting its social meanings (Gayed & Angus, 2018). Semiotic approaches further support deeper interpretation by examining signs and meanings within visual communication, an approach increasingly applied in contemporary art studies, including digital and visual media (Sofilkanych, 2022; Thellefsen & Friedman, 2023; Serafini & Reid, 2024). As a developing field, the semiotics of culture demonstrates that artworks are often polysemic and can be interpreted through multiple social and cultural perspectives (Parmentier et al., 1986; Verstegen, 2022; Lacković, 2020; Timmermans & Tavory, 2020).

Within this framework, Panofskian analysis remains influential through its three stages: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation, which connect visual elements with broader cultural and historical contexts (Serafini & Reid, 2024; Ihnatiev, 2023). Iconology allows artworks to reflect social understanding while offering interpretive flexibility in contemporary contexts (Clark, 2020). Compared with classical iconography, modern art tends to allow more open and contextual interpretations, as artists often reconstruct or deconstruct traditional compositions to produce new socio-cultural meanings (Neill & Basnet, 2022; Gayed & Angus, 2018). Consequently, contemporary iconology maintains links with classical analytical traditions while adapting to ongoing social and cultural transformations.

2.2 Visual Pedagogy and the Role of Images in Education

Empirical studies show that visual pedagogies can enhance critical thinking across various disciplines. In art education, the use of images and visual media helps students understand aesthetic composition and artistic techniques while also encouraging deeper interpretation of symbolism and cultural meaning in artworks (Parung et al., 2024). Other studies indicate that visual learning can also strengthen empathy, observation skills, and cultural awareness, including in fields such as medicine and the social sciences (Alkhaifi et al., 2022; Chisolm et al., 2021). Similarly, in nursing and social work education, integrating art into teaching practices has been shown to support the development of professional values, ethics, and social-emotional learning (Lynch, 2022; Obara et al., 2022).

More broadly, visual pedagogy positions art not merely as a means of mastering artistic techniques but also as a medium for critically examining social and cultural issues. Approaches based on visual critical pedagogy have been widely applied to develop students' visual literacy and awareness of social contexts (Gil-Glazer, 2020; Winstanley et al., 2024). In addition, methods such as artography and collage have been used to explore liminality in art education (Garcia-Lazo, 2022). The integration of art within the STEAM framework has also demonstrated effectiveness in fostering reflective learning, allowing students to connect artistic practice with scientific concepts (Bassachs et al., 2020). In higher education contexts, visual arts pedagogy helps students link artistic concepts with practice, thereby strengthening their understanding of modern art from historical, sociological, and philosophical perspectives (Abas,

2019). Overall, these approaches support deeper appreciation of art while promoting critical and reflective thinking across disciplines.

2.3 The Gap between Art Studies and Its Application in Education

Although contemporary art is increasingly recognized as an important medium for fostering creativity, critical thinking, and cultural awareness in education, its implementation in art education still faces several challenges. Art studies have traditionally focused more on aesthetic and historical dimensions, while the use of contemporary figurative painting as a medium for critical inquiry and discourse in education has received limited attention (Hamlin & Fusaro, 2018; Maksymchuk et al., 2018). Moreover, tensions often arise between conventional teaching approaches that emphasize technical skill development and more recent pedagogical models that prioritize active participation and project-based learning (Semigina, 2022; Arbuckle, 2020). Additional challenges include integrating technology-oriented teaching with contextual approaches and the limited availability of resources to support project-based analysis in art learning environments (Hawari & Noor, 2020). Nevertheless, integrating the arts into education has the potential to create meaningful learning experiences by encouraging aesthetic engagement and promoting a more integrated, reflective, and humanistic approach to learning (Perales & Aróstegui, 2021).

Despite growing scholarly attention to visual culture, studies that specifically examine the pedagogical role of contemporary painting remain relatively limited (Levitt et al., 2023). Research often concentrates on artistic and historiographical aspects rather than exploring how paintings function as tools for reflection and critical discussion in art education. At the same time, art historiography continues to show a strong Eurocentric orientation, even though students are increasingly engaging with non-Western artistic traditions (Bilytska et al., 2022; El-Amin & Cohen, 2018). Therefore, further research is needed to address this imbalance, particularly by integrating semiotic and iconological approaches that help learners understand the social and political meanings embedded in contemporary art (Neill & Basnet, 2022). In this regard, the present study attempts to bridge the gap between art theory and teaching practice by emphasizing that art education should not only be treated as a subject of study but also as a means of developing students' critical thinking.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine meaning construction in artworks and their pedagogical reception. Yamagata-Lynch et al. (2016) state that this method supports the detailed analysis of symbols, imagery, and stories that emerge from a particular work of art. The interpretative approach facilitates analysis of intersubjective meaning-making among art stakeholders (artists, educators, critics), while phenomenology explores viewers' experiential engagement (Kerby et al., 2021).

3.2 Research Subject

Participants were purposively sampled across four key art-world constituencies. Contemporary painters were selected because their works present strong visual narratives addressing socio-critical, philosophical, historical, and ecological issues. Art critics ($n = 5$) were included to provide professional analyses of symbolic content and cultural impact, while art instructors were chosen based on their experience using painting as a pedagogical tool in art education. In addition, nine students ($n = 9$) who had formal training in visual arts participated in focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore how they understand, interpret, and respond to symbols in paintings within both theoretical and practical contexts (Parung et al., 2024; Bhangu et al., 2023). The final sample comprised four contemporary painters (Artists A-D), five art critics, four art instructors, and nine students.

For this research, the number of participants was determined using the principle of data saturation, meaning that data collection continued until no substantially new themes or interpretations emerged from the interviews and discussions. This sampling strategy allowed the study to obtain diverse perspectives from creators, critics, educators, and learners, thereby supporting a comprehensive analysis of contemporary painting as both an artistic and pedagogical practice.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

To achieve a holistic approach to the research object, several techniques were employed for data collection. First, visual analysis of the artworks was conducted by examining harmony, color, and symbolism in the paintings to identify aesthetic styles and the underlying meanings conveyed by the artists. Second, content analysis of art history texts was carried out by reviewing books, journals, and academic articles discussing the development of aesthetics, critical interpretations of art, and the socio-cultural relevance of artworks (Lee, 2015). This investigates how the paintings are

situated within academic discourse and art criticism (Parmentier et al., 1986). Third, artists, art critics, and art teachers were interviewed to investigate their views regarding the artwork's creation, interpretation, and educational value. Fourth, the focus group discussions (FGDs) with students in art education classes were conducted to understand how students conceptualize symbols in paintings and identify or use them in artwork. The interaction among the participants is anticipated to yield a greater and more thoughtful interpretative understanding of dynamics. Research instruments included: art documents (paintings), academic texts (books and journals), interview outlines, and discussion guides for the FGDs.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Multiple analytic techniques were applied to the data to develop a comprehensive analysis. Semiotic analysis was used to identify signs, symbols, and metaphors within the artworks, enabling interpretation of how visual elements function as a system of meaning in art (Mingers & Willcocks, 2017; Versteegen, 2022). Discourse analysis was then conducted to examine how artworks are presented in texts, particularly in art history and educational contexts, including the sociological and epistemological constructions surrounding visual arts and their interpretation. In addition, an iconological perspective was applied to explore how imagery in paintings influences viewers' perceptions and aesthetic experiences within art pedagogy, thereby clarifying the relationship between iconography and audience interpretation. Overall, these approaches were employed to examine how paintings convey multiple meanings related to culture, history, and art education (Zhang, 2022).

3.5 Data Validity and Reliability Techniques

Trustworthiness was established through four verification strategies. First, data triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of visual analysis with findings from art historical literature reviews, interviews, and focus group discussions to strengthen the analysis (Yamagata-Lynch et al., 2016). Second, a member check was done by confirming the analytic results with the accuracy of the participant inputs to reduce biases. Third, an audit trail was made by capturing the entire study process, which aids verification and increases openness. Fourth, researcher reflexivity through maintained journals documenting positionality and decision trails. This study has explanations of visual narratives in contemporary painting and their impact on art education employing relevant and reliable research, which is the more comprehensive approach.

4. Results

4.1 Visual Narrative Categories in Contemporary Paintings

Semiotic analysis revealed four predominant visual narrative categories in contemporary paintings. These categories embody the most common themes that are addressed by the authors alongside the meanings and symbols that their works comprise. Below, the delineated types of narratives are explained, and each type is illustrated with corresponding artwork descriptions and analysis, alongside the artists' interpretations of the intentions and meanings surrounding their paintings. Social-critical narratives: addressing socioeconomic inequities and political violence. For example, in his pop artwork titled "Fight in the Middle of the City," Artist A paints a crowd of people with contorted faces. They are depicted using dark colors such as black and grey. The masks in this piece represent the disguise of true identity in modern society. As artist A explained that this artwork aims to challenge the acceptance of violence and dehumanization in the city.

The philosophical narratives challenge the viewer to address questions surrounding life and existence. One example is Artist B's "Circle of Eternity", which captures the life cycle with semi-concentric circles of blue and gold. The composition's simultaneous balance and contrast produce harmonic tension, mirroring philosophical paradoxes. He says that work is part of the reflection of his thoughts on the philosophy of time and sustainability. Historical narratives provide a fresh interpretation of a particular event or historical character. This can be seen in 'The Forgotten Hero' by Artist C, where a freedom fighter is depicted in front of a flag that is torn apart. The faded red and white colors represent the dying will of nationalism, while the lonely position of the figure suggests isolation. Artist C argues that this piece seeks to instill in those who examine it the will to remember the sacrifices of the people he calls heroes.

Eco-friendly narratives are gaining extra attention when it comes to global environmental concerns. "The Earth That Groans" illustrates a cracked earth with the roots of a tree sprawling. The prevalent green and brown colors depict how humans rely on nature and how the environment is in ruins. Usually, artist D comments that this piece was made to reply to the climate crisis and is a piece for appreciating nature. A semiotic interpretation suggests that the symbols of contemporary paintings serve to convey complicated messages. Sorrowful or tense emotions are frequently expressed in dark colors, while bright colors denote hopefulness. Asymmetrical designs are energetic, while symmetrical

construct calmness. Circles, masks, and even cracked earth are symbols chosen purposely to tell the story visually.

From interviews with artists, the aim of art goes beyond personal representation; it also seeks to enact conversation and contemplation. While artist A places social criticism in the foreground of art, the philosopher is very much concerned with how art aims to give answers to philosophical questions. This shows that contemporary paintings are constructive instruments for communication about sociological, philosophical, historical, and ecological issues.

4.2 Content Analysis: Painting Representation in Art History Discourse

4.2.1 Categories of Painting Representation in Academic Discourse

The research suggests that the major themes and scholarly interpretations of the paintings could chronologically arrange the paintings of art in history. The prominent categories articulated in art history literature and other art branches include aesthetic-formalistic, social-critical and iconographic, historical-narrative, and deconstructive methods. Every category has its approach to analyzing the paintings' significance, be it in terms of their visual composition, the historical context, social critique, or the deconstruction of meaning.

Aesthetic-formalistic analysis: Examines compositional elements (color, texture, form) to assess technical mastery and beauty. Mainly, this method is described as concentrating on the pleasing aspects of art and the skill of handling it. The historical-narrative method depicts historical or social events or stories in art, with Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* as a frequently cited example. This type of narrativity assumes a story or plot exists within art. **Social critical analysis:** interprets artworks as response to oppression (colonialism, feminism, environmentalism).

On the other hand, the iconographic approach emphasizes the symbols, signs, and meanings concealed in the works of art, as demonstrated by Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait*. The deconstructive methodology of art studies disputes traditional meanings of artworks, arguing that art has multifarious and circumstantial meanings, as in Marcel Duchamp's *The Fountain*. Table 1 summarizes the various categories of artistic representation discussed in the literature.

Table 1. Analytical Frameworks in Art Historical Scholarship

Category	Description	Example of Painting
Aesthetic-Formalistic	Focuses on the analysis of form, composition, color, and technical aspects.	<i>The Starry Night</i> (Van Gogh)
Historical-Narrative	Using paintings as representations of historical or social events.	<i>Liberty Leading the People</i> (Delacroix)
Social-Critical	Seeing art as an expression of social criticism of inequality and political issues.	<i>Guernica</i> (Picasso)
Iconographic	Analyzing symbols, signs, and meanings behind visual elements in a work.	<i>The Arnolfini Portrait</i> (Jan van Eyck)
Deconstructive	Analyzing art with a postmodern approach that challenges traditional meanings.	<i>Fountain</i> (Marcel Duchamp)

Source: author's development

4.2.2 Bias in the Historiography of Art History

Art historical narratives continue to show a strong Eurocentric orientation, positioning European art as the dominant reference in global art discourse. To examine this pattern, a content analysis was conducted on selected art history textbooks by categorizing each referenced artwork according to its geographical origin and calculating its proportion relative to the total artworks identified. As presented in Table 2, European art accounts for 70% of the artworks discussed, while Latin American art represents 10%, Asian art 8%, African art 7%, and Middle Eastern art 5%. This distribution indicates that non-European artistic traditions remain underrepresented in academic sources, potentially limiting students' exposure to diverse cultural perspectives. These findings highlight the continued dominance of European-centered narratives and emphasize the need to broaden art history education through more balanced global representation. For Table 2, each artwork in the analyzed textbook sample was coded once by geographical origin, and percentages were calculated as the number of artworks in each category divided by the total number of artworks identified in the sample multiplied by 100.

Table 2. Distribution of Art Representation in Academic Literature

Art Categories	Percentage of Representation in Art History Books
European Art	70%
Latin American Art	10%
Asian Art	8%
African Art	7%
Middle Eastern Art	5%

Source: author's development

4.2.3 The Role of Art Institutions in Building Art History Discourse

Art institutions play a crucial role in shaping art history discourse, as galleries, museums, and academic institutions influence how art is interpreted and valued over time. Through curatorial practices, museums determine which artworks are displayed and, consequently, which works become part of the established “art canon.” An examination of several prominent museums—such as the Louvre, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and Tate Modern—reveals a dominant emphasis on European art within their collections. As shown in Table 3, European artworks account for the largest proportion in each institution, reaching 80% in the Louvre, 75% in MoMA, and 78% in Tate Modern. In contrast, the representation of other regions remains considerably smaller, including Asian art (10%, 8%, and 9%), African art (5%, 7%, and 6%), Latin American art (3%, 5%, and 4%), and Middle Eastern art (2%, 5%, and 3%). This pattern indicates that institutional curation continues to reinforce a Eurocentric orientation in global art history narratives, highlighting the need for more inclusive representation of diverse artistic traditions in major museums. For Table 3, the same regional coding procedure was applied to the museum collection sample, and the percentages represent each category’s share within the reported institutional distribution.

Table 3. Distribution of Art Collections in Famous Museums

Museum	European Art (%)	Asian Art (%)	African Art (%)	Latin American Art (%)	Middle Eastern Art (%)
Louvre (France)	80%	10%	5%	3%	2%
MoMA (US)	75%	8%	7%	5%	5%
Tate Modern (UK)	78%	9%	6%	4%	3%

Source: author's development

4.3 Perspectives of Artists, Critics, and Art Teachers

4.3.1 Artists' Perspectives: Creative Process and Symbolic Meaning

Table 4. Visual Elements and Meaning in Contemporary Painting

Visual Elements	Symbolic Meaning (According to the Artist)	Examples of Work
Monochrome Colors	Isolation, introspection, or deep emotion.	Painting A
Rough Textures	Social turmoil, political unrest, or trauma.	Painting B
Broken Lines	Uncertainty, loss of direction, or life transition.	Painting C
Blurred Shadows	Ambiguity, blurred identity, or dream world.	Painting D

Source: author's development

Interviews with selected artists reveal that the creative process in contemporary painting is not only driven by aesthetic considerations but also by deeper influences such as philosophical reflection, social observation, and personal life experiences. The artists consistently use symbols and metaphors to communicate complex conceptual ideas through visual forms. Most participants explained that everyday life and the surrounding community serve as primary sources of inspiration, while the emotions they wish to convey determine their selection of visual elements, including color, line, and texture. As summarized in Table 4, specific visual features in contemporary paintings are closely associated with symbolic meanings: monochrome colors often represent isolation, introspection, or deep emotion; rough textures symbolize social turmoil, political unrest, or trauma; broken lines indicate uncertainty, loss of direction, or life

transitions; and blurred shadows reflect ambiguity, fluid identity, or dreamlike states. This relationship between visual elements and symbolic meaning illustrates how artists intentionally construct visual language to express layered interpretations within their works.

4.3.2 Art Critic Perspective: Interpretation and Public Reception

Interviews with art critics and editors of art journals indicate that contemporary paintings are interpreted through systematic analysis that emphasizes evaluation, contextualization, and theoretical articulation. The findings reveal that interpretations of paintings often differ depending on cultural background, ideological perspective, and artistic style. One critic explained that socially critical paintings tend to receive greater attention in contemporary art discourse because audiences attempt to understand current issues such as social inequality and environmental crises. In this context, politically or socially engaged artworks are often perceived as more relevant to contemporary viewers than purely decorative works; for instance, the continued relevance of *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso demonstrates how artworks addressing universal trauma remain influential in public discourse. Furthermore, the analysis identifies a noticeable gap between public appreciation and scholarly interpretation of art, as summarized in Table 5: the general public tends to focus on aesthetic appeal and personal taste, while academics and art critics emphasize symbolic meaning, social context, and theoretical analysis, resulting in deeper examination of symbolism and a more critical approach to artistic acceptance (Table 5).

Table 5. Differences in Interpretation of Art by the Public and Academics

Aspects	General Public	Academic/Art Critic
Main focus	Aesthetics and visual appeal	Symbolic meaning, social context, and art theory
Interpretation	Subjective, based on personal taste	Based on art theory and analytical approach
Response to symbolism	Less attention to symbols in artwork	Analyzes symbolic meaning in depth
Acceptance	Open to popular art	Tend to be more critical and conceptual

Source: author's development

Painting plays an important role in art education because it supports the development of technical skills while enabling students to apply conceptual and critical thinking in understanding visual works. Interviews with several art educators indicate that contemporary teaching practices are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, integrating technical training with sociocultural analysis of artworks. However, educators also report several challenges in teaching contemporary art, particularly when students encounter highly subjective or interpretive paintings. Many teachers noted that students often struggle to understand symbolic meanings without sufficient guidance. As presented in Table 6, these challenges are addressed through specific pedagogical strategies: difficulties in understanding symbolism are approached through iconological and semiotic analysis methods; the limited presence of non-Western references is addressed by incorporating art literature from diverse cultural contexts; diverse subjective interpretations are managed through class discussions based on critical reflection; and the imbalance between theory and practice is reduced by combining theoretical learning with visual experimentation. This approach demonstrates how art education can be designed to foster both analytical understanding and creative exploration.

Table 6. Challenges and Strategies in Arts Education

Challenges	Teaching Strategy
Difficulty understanding symbolism in art	Using iconology and semiotic analysis methods.
Lack of non-Western art references	Integrating art literature into various cultures.
Diverse subjective interpretations	Class discussions are based on critical reflection.
Imbalance of theory and practice	Combining theoretical learning with visual experiments.

Source: author's development

4.4 Student Responses to Contemporary Painting

Focus group discussions with fine arts students reveal considerable variation in how contemporary paintings are understood and appreciated, largely influenced by academic specialization, artistic interests, and prior visual experience. Students with stronger backgrounds in art theory tend to interpret paintings using analytical frameworks such as semiotic, iconographic, and discourse analysis, enabling them to identify symbolic meanings and broader social

or philosophical contexts embedded in the artworks. In contrast, students with a more practice-oriented orientation usually begin by examining visual harmony, including color composition, texture, and technical execution, before considering deeper interpretations. As summarized in Table 7, these differences are reflected in several analytical aspects: theory-oriented students emphasize symbolic meaning, social context, and art philosophy, applying approaches such as semiology and iconology and evaluating works through connections with art history and theory, whereas practice-oriented students focus more on technique, medium, and visual quality, often emphasizing experimentation with materials and the development of distinctive artistic expression.

Table 7. Differences in Students' Approaches to Interpreting Paintings

Analysis Aspects	Art Theory-Based Students	Student-Based Art Practice
Focus	Symbolic meaning, social context, and philosophy of art.	Technique, medium, and quality of visual execution.
Analysis approach	Semiology, iconology, and discourse criticism.	Experimentation with materials and the search for unique expressions.
How to assess a painting	Connecting with art theory and history.	Evaluating technical and artistic quality.

Source: author's development

Also, students' responses to contemporary paintings are not isolated from the issues dealt with in the paintings. Artworks with social and critical themes evoke more profound thoughts about inequalities and injustices, whereas philosophical and historical themes provoke more conceptual interpretations. Some students pointed out that the ecological theme is instrumental in creating awareness concerning the global environmental crisis (Table 8).

Table 8. Student Responses to Contemporary Painting Themes

Painting Theme	Emotional Response	Cognitive Response
Social-Critical	Empathy, emotional involvement, anger.	Reflection on societal issues and injustice.
Philosophical	Curiosity, contemplation.	Exploring deeper meanings and interpretations of symbols.
Historical	Awe, nostalgia.	Understanding historical narratives in art.
Ecological	Environmental awareness, concern.	Analysis of visual impact in environmental activism.

Source: author's development

The discussion highlights that the diverse ways students engage with and respond to paintings can inform more hands-on and inquiry-based teaching strategies as they allow students can apply concepts learned theoretically. In the context of art education, students' ability to critique contemporary art and understand its meaning and aesthetics is strengthened. This empowers them to think critically about art as a means of communication and social image construction through semiotic interpretation, personal reflection, and visual experimentation. As both a mode of expression and a tool for visual analysis and creative exploration, painting serves as a vital medium for learning, integrating elements of technology, analysis, and synthesis. Through an interdisciplinary approach, students can appropriate artworks from diverse styles, periods, and cultures. In conclusion, painting-based pedagogy nurtures artistic sensitivity and critical thinking, while deepening students' understanding of art as both a tool and a medium for social and culture inquiry.

5. Discussion

This study reinforces previous research by showing that contemporary art functions as a medium of social expression and criticism, a pattern that also emerged from the findings of this study. The results indicate that many modern artworks communicate social, philosophical, and ecological issues through symbolic visual elements. For instance, the analysis of Artist A's painting *Fight in the Middle of the City* demonstrates how compositional elements and symbolic divisions are used to represent social conflict, supporting the view that art can serve as a platform for political reflection and social justice discourse (Aprotosoiaie-Iftimi, 2019; Jové & Farrero, 2017). At the same time, this study reveals differences from earlier interpretations of symbolism in art. The findings suggest that symbolism in contemporary art is more dynamic than in classical traditions. While classical symbolism typically follows established iconographic conventions, contemporary symbols are more fluid and influenced by cultural background, social context, and audience

interpretation. For example, the circle can in contemporary artworks represent the cycle of life, social transformation, or multiple layers of meaning.

These results suggest that modern art not only uses classical iconography but also constructs a distinct visual lexicon that is more temporally adaptive and open to subjective interpretation. This study indicates that students' perceptions of art historiography remain largely Eurocentric. Numerous studies (El-Amin & Cohen, 2018; Levitt et al., 2023), have critiqued art historiography for mainly centering Western art and ignoring the rest of the world's region's arts, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America for academic discourse and museum collections. The results of focus group discussions (FGDs), however, show a gradual movement among art students towards a fuller understanding and greater appreciation of art from different cultures. While this signals a paradigm shift in art education, the curricula still inadequately represent representation of the pluralism of global art history. This study contributes to the ongoing discussions on contemporary art. It highlights how emerging artists and art scholars construct narratives in art history and seek to fostering a more inclusive and equitable understanding. In addition to European examples, artists from other regions also illustrate how symbolic narratives reflect social and cultural realities. For example, El Anatsui explores history and postcolonial identity through recycled materials, while Ai Weiwei addresses political expression and cultural memory. Similarly, Tania Bruguera highlights social activism in contemporary art. Including such perspectives strengthens the global relevance of art education.

The geometric characteristics of many contemporary artworks support the idea that visual signs and symbols operate within a system of visual communication. Symbolism in modern art is often context-dependent, where identity is expressed through culturally embedded motifs, such as the river motif in certain artworks and symbolic elements in Taoist Chinese landscape painting (Sofilkanych, 2022; Junaidi & Hamuddin, 2019; Duan, 2018). This perspective raises the possibility that other movements, including pop art, may also reflect cultural influences on visual identity. Meaning in contemporary art therefore tends to be fluid and socially constructed, even as some theoretical approaches attempt to move beyond semiotic analysis (Verstegen, 2022; Kravchuk et al., 2023). Scholars also emphasize that artworks should be interpreted within their philosophical, historical, and cultural contexts, highlighting the relationship between visual imagery and the intellectual climate of a particular period (Hamlin & Fusaro, 2018; Miodoński, 2023). While religious iconography remains relevant, contemporary iconography increasingly allows more personal and contextual interpretations (Bühren & Jasiński, 2024). This shift can be seen in the transformation of classical composition, moving away from strict perspective and rigid color structures toward fragmentation and symbolic experimentation (Janhsen, 2021; Stiles, 2019), reflecting broader social changes in which artists use satire and imaginative forms to critique dominant ideologies (Keshmirshakan, 2024). Recent studies also indicate a transition from traditional religious imagery toward more personal and contextually meaningful spiritual symbols that encourage active interpretation (Yan & Zhang, 2024).

The findings highlight the importance of incorporating broader cultural perspectives in interpreting contemporary art. Although art history has long been dominated by Euro-American frameworks, integrating visual traditions from Asian, African, and Latin American contexts can enrich symbolic analysis and support more inclusive art education. This perspective aligns with decolonized pedagogy, which encourages educators to reassess dominant narratives and introduce diverse cultural visual languages into the curriculum.

Contemporary art enables viewers to interpret artworks through the lenses of their lived experiences and social realities, thereby redefining meaning as something actively constructed and performed (Golańska, 2020; Stielau, 2022). In educational contexts, painting functions as an important medium for visual analysis, social critique, and higher-order thinking, encouraging students to engage with art beyond its aesthetic value. This case study shows that students' analytical and interpretive abilities improved through the examination of symbolic content in paintings. Critical media literacy can also emerge through social semiotic and multimodal discourse analysis, where artistic practices support reflective meaning-making, particularly in times of crisis (Duan, 2018; Orasi, 2022). Furthermore, integrating art with philosophy, history, and cultural studies broadens students' perspectives beyond purely visual considerations (Ding, 2024; Durrani, 2021). However, this study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly that the selected artworks may not fully represent the diversity of contemporary art trends (Levitt et al., 2023). In addition, interpretations of art remain open and may vary depending on both the researcher and the audience (Porr, 2019). This supports the view that contemporary art is more flexible than classical art, as its symbolism tends to be fluid and shaped by social context and personal experience. Another challenge lies in the complexity of semiotic and iconological approaches, since many contemporary artworks employ visual languages that are relatively open in meaning (Thellefsen & Friedman, 2023; Kichuk & Shevchuk, 2020). Thus, such studies should examine a more extensive set of artworks and more diverse sets of analytical frameworks with an ethnographic or transcultural comparative approach (Juneja, 2018).

The findings indicate that the diverse ways students engage with and interpret paintings can support more inquiry-based and experiential teaching strategies in art education. Based on these results, art instructors are encouraged to integrate semiotic interpretation, guided discussions, and reflective analysis into classroom activities so that students can explore symbolic meanings and social contexts in artworks more critically. In addition, project-based learning and visual experimentation can be incorporated to help students connect theoretical concepts with artistic practice. Curriculum designers may also consider including artworks from diverse cultural backgrounds and historical contexts to broaden students' perspectives on global art discourse and reduce Eurocentric bias in art history education. Through these approaches, painting can function not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as a tool for visual analysis, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary learning, ultimately fostering students' artistic sensitivity and deeper understanding of art as a medium for cultural and social inquiry. For example, students may complete a short comparative worksheet on one European and one non-Western painting, focusing on composition, symbolism, context, and audience response. A brief reflective rubric may assess symbol identification, contextual interpretation, and the ability to relate visual analysis to broader social themes.

6. Conclusions

This study confirms that contemporary painting functions not only as a visual art form with aesthetic value but also as a medium for complex narrative expression and social interpretation. The findings show that modern paintings encourage diverse interpretations shaped by viewers' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and analytical perspectives. In the context of art education, these results highlight the importance of integrating interpretive approaches alongside technical training to strengthen students' visual literacy, critical thinking, and understanding of cultural meaning. Therefore, art instructors are encouraged to adopt inquiry-based discussions and symbolic analysis in classroom practice, while curriculum designers should incorporate more interdisciplinary perspectives and diverse global art references to create a more inclusive learning environment.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The selection of artworks analyzed in this study represents only a limited portion of contemporary global art practices, and the inherently subjective nature of art interpretation may influence the analytical outcomes. Future research should therefore explore broader datasets of artworks and employ cross-cultural or audience-based approaches to better understand how contemporary paintings function as media of communication, reflection, and social commentary across different cultural contexts.

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Authors contributions

M. Kovalova, M. Tokar, O. Chursin, N. Tretiakova, and Y. Nestierova contributed equally to the conceptualization, design, and writing of this study. All authors participated in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings. All authors reviewed the manuscript critically for important intellectual content and approved the final version for submission.

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