Mondrian in the middle east: Encouraging ceramic creativity in omani educational institutions

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Abstract

The focus on imitating traditional designs among students of ceramics in Omani educational institutions has led to minimising students’ creativity. The purpose of this study is to examine the capability of Omani ceramics students to use Mondrian’s style in their ceramic art with the purpose of evaluating their ability to free themselves from traditions when they create their ceramic art.

Keywords: ceramics, mondrian, traditional design, Oman.

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1. Introduction

In recent years in Oman there has been increasing interest in studying art and crafts from the perspective of local culture. However, this major change is having a serious effect on local schools of art and design because Omani students still connect the term ‘culture’ with the concept of ‘heritage’. This connection has had a negative impact on students in terms of limiting the designs, colours, motifs, decorations and patterns they use, as well as the purpose of their artwork.

Questions have been raised about the intensive use of traditional motifs and prototyped designs in the Public Authority of Crafts Industries (PACI) in Oman. According to a number of documented publications, PACI is encouraging designers and craftspeople to modernise their product designs and avoid imitating traditional forms and patterns (PACI, 2004, 2007).

Ceramics as one of a area of study in the Department of Art Education at Sultan Qaboos University has been affected by what we can describe as the domination of extreme traditional themes of art production. It is easy to recognise the absence of simple designs and creative forms in students’ studios. So far, however, there has been little discussion in Omani art and design schools about the negative effects of imposing traditional artistic themes on art-studio projects in schools and laying down more limitations within which university art students must practise art.

The researcher has selected the Piet Mondrian method to examine this subject because this artist is considered as the best example of a painter who created simple elegant designs and used only pure primary colours, black and white, and straight lines, and this makes his artistic philosophy more useful for this research. In other words, Mondrian’s special artistic vision can be used as a measurement of students’ real creativity when they work without limitations or controls in their studios. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to examine the ability of Omani ceramics students to use Mondrian’s pure colours and simple design in their ceramic art in order to evaluate their ability to avoid imitating traditional designs when they create ceramic objects.

1.1. The Uniqueness of Mondrian’s Art

What we know about Mondrian’s style in general is largely based upon empirical studies that investigated his artistic method (Blotkamp, 2001; Henkels, 1988; Mondrian, 1995; Worringer, 2007). Two important characteristics in particular allow us to use his art method to examine contemporary art matters (including art education): the influence of Mondrian’s patterns when they appeared on tangible objects rather than a two-dimensional canvas on the one hand, and simplicity on the other. Barriga’s (2011) detailed examination of Mondrian’s methodology and its use in designing three-dimensional physical objects demonstrated that the influence of Mondrian’s style can be observed in all developments in design and architecture. The author emphasised that the artist’s theory had more influence on utilitarian and decorative designed objects than on abstracted painting fields (Barriga, 2011). In a study that set out to determine Mondrian’s simplicity, O’Brien (2012) asserted that the most significant characteristics of Mondrian art were his ability to move from representational depictions of nature to nature’s core. O’Brien in his research counted more than four art movements that Mondrian had tested during his early art career before he reached the simplicity of what he called the New Plasticism (O’Brien, 2012). Simplicity in Mondrian art has been examined by Richard Taylor (2003), who directly stated that ‘whereas Pollock’s paintings are being used as novel test beds for examining people’s responses to visual complexity, scientists are becoming increasingly interested in Mondrian’s paintings because of their visual simplicity’ (Taylor, 2003). The literature related to both characteristics mentioned above is essential to meet the objectives of this research.
1.2. Research Methods: Survey and Studio Ceramics

To date, various methods have been developed to measure Piet Mondrian’s painting philosophy of pure colours. Surveys such as that conducted by Hilton Kramer (1995), Welsh and Joosten (1998), Kenneth Baker (2002) and James Elkins (2010) have shown that before beginning any investigation of Mondrian’s painting or methods (in qualitative research using identified samples) it is important to check participants’ ability to identify Mondrian’s style correctly (Kramer, 1995; Welsh & Joosten, 1998; Baker, 2002) and (Elkins, 2013). Therefore, in order to understand art education students’ ability to explore Mondrian’s true artistic style (white backgrounds, black lines and pure colours), a quick survey was performed with the selected sample of this research. Using students belonging to Middle Eastern culture as sample (the research used a convenience sample of 10 fourth-year art education students), the researcher employed the survey to examine students’ ability to distinguish the true Mondrian examples among other, fake, examples. This survey showed that 80% of the participants in the selected sample could distinguish the artist’s paintings and exclude the fake examples. The applied survey (as a warm-up) was a practical way of preparing the selected participants for the major stage of the research, which was to use Mondrian style in their ceramics studio applications. Selected students’ experiments in their studios were carried out over the length of the course (a four-month semester). This period of time was long enough for them to complete the project, including all ceramics processes (handbuilding, drying, glazing and firing). Participants in this project had more freedom to choose the handbuilding techniques and application methods for their pottery, and all of them had learned all making techniques during their previous academic programmes in the school. For this study, both methodologies (survey and ceramic studio practice) contributed to examining the ability of Omani ceramics students to use Mondrian’s style in their ceramics studio. This allowed the researcher to evaluate students’ ability to disconnect themselves from prototyped traditional forms when they created their art objects.

1.3. Results: Qualities of Mondrian’s Style and the Participants’ Studio Outcomes

So far, this paper has focused on examining the ability of Omani ceramic students to use pure colours and simple design in order to evaluate their ability to resist the influence of traditions and heritage. The following section will address the final results of research project.

At the outset, the most striking result to emerge from the researcher’s observations is that the majority of participants preferred to use the mould-casting technique in the forming stage. In fact, no one used coil or throwing wheel techniques in this project. Through their studio outcomes (mostly functional utilitarian pots), the participating students presented some evidence that they have the ability to free themselves from traditions and local heritage, and they significantly proved that they became more flexible in using pure colours and simple design in their ceramic products.

During the course period, the participants may be divided into two main groups. The minority of the participating students showed less acceptance of using pure colours, and their work showed more confrontation with simplicity in that the surfaces of their ceramic objects were covered with too many details. In contrast, the majority of participants presented more creative solutions in using pure colours and organising the surfaces of their objects in order to seek simplicity of design and avoid complex compositions. It was clear that the majority of participants expressed the belief that all narrative content was secondary in their minds, and they gave priority to lines and colours, which they considered as a subject matter in their ceramic artwork.

As well as lines and colours, it was also important to observe how the selected participants saw position and dimension. In fact, out of the study population, 90% of the participants (9 students out of 10) showed less understanding of the conceptual framework of New Plasticism; however, their artwork showed that they had taken advantage of its principles without realising it. Over the duration of the course, students showed remarkable developments regarding the rules of assembling their
patterns on the surfaces of the ceramic pieces and they believed that these rules had to be followed to the letter to achieve desired compositions. According to them, within the period of study (four months), they conducted intensive technical readings and this helped them to progress from the stage of making random Mondrian patterns to the stage of setting rules and making intentional compositions. Many art historians have argued that Mondrian’s artworks are strongly linked to a spiritual and philosophical concern. Mondrian reduced, in most cases, all that was recognised in ordinary pictorial figures, including textures and contour lines, etc. However, some of the participants persisted in adding textures and presenting complicated compositions to attract audiences. It seemed to them that Mondrian’s style of painting could not attract local audiences in Oman because of its simplicity.

Mondrian used freehand and masking-tape techniques when he painted the stripes in his paintings, and both of these techniques were used by the research participants within the course period. There was a significant difference between the two techniques: the students who used masking tape produced clean lines with sharp edges (stripes), whereas those who used freehand made the edges messy. It was also pointed out that another problem with the freehand technique is that it fails to take the thickness of glazes and decorating slips into account. Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of the freehand method is that all applications in this research were carried out on rounded or semi-rounded (three-dimensional) objects (ceramic pots). Consequently, it was expected that it would be more difficult for them to achieve sharp edges and clean borders compared with applications carried out on canvas or any other two-dimensional surface. Moreover, some participants expressed the belief that making.

Fig. 1. (a)N.Almamary; (b) Z.Alsubhi; (c) N.Tubuk; (d) Sh.Alhatmy. Samples of participants’ ceramic vases showed Mondrian style, 2014.

Accurate and clean lines (stripes), sharp edges, smooth areas and perfect corners became the only criteria to evaluate the students’ technical skills. As a matter of fact, Mondrian’s New Plasticism sometimes showed an extremely textured field of brushstrokes: his stripes sometimes short, sometimes long, and his angles and corners not completely perfect, as can be observed by the naked eye in museums (Elkins, 2010)

1.4. Discussion

The present study was designed to assess the Omani ceramic students’ ability to create ceramic art that is not completely controlled by traditional perspectives. It is interesting to note that the majority of this study’s participants selected the slip-casting (mould) technique, and this was considered a positive selection of making method with regard to the research purpose because, according to the participants’ claims, the mould technique itself is more representative of modernity than traditional
Omani techniques such as throwing wheels, slab and coil hand building methods. A possible explanation for this might be that participants unconsciously were searching for clean, white surfaces to paint on them using Mondrian pure colours, and only slip-casting can provide copies of an identified single design if any unexpected mistakes occurred during the painting stages.

As demonstrated by the results, the majority of participants showed more flexibility in using pure colours and simple lines and avoiding complexity. It seems possible that these results are due to the participants’ intensive reading about Mondrian style. The participants’ claims that pure colours, for example, became the subject matter in their ceramic works may be a positive indication because this proved that the students have the ability to move toward modernising their ceramic designs and freeing themselves from tradition. However, with a small sample size (10 students), caution must be applied, as sometimes the quantity findings cannot be helpful to make a final judgment.

The experiments made by participants in the studio showed that it is not always important to perfectly understand the New Plasticism movement and its complicated theoretical aspects in order to use them in their projects. This finding may help us to understand that the participants have given themselves the opportunity to express their artistic visions freely, and Mondrian style was only a key they used to begin developing simple designs on ceramic surfaces.

A minority of students who participated in the research claimed that Omani people are attracted mostly to complicated designs and are less attracted to simplicity, and for this reason they continued to fill their ceramic objects with intensive patterns that covered all the surfaces of the pieces. Sometimes, students have difficulties managing empty spaces in their artwork, and may have confronted this weakness by filling all the spaces of the ceramic objects. Therefore, generally it seems that it is more difficult for an artist (including this minority of the participants) to develop simple designs when it is very difficult for them to know when they have to stop adding more details (patterns) to their artwork.

A strong relationship between Mondrian’s accuracy in producing perfect lines and clear colours and his use of supporting tools (masking tape) has been reported in the literature. Regarding using supporting tools, there are similarities between the applications and techniques used by the students who participated in this study and those described by James Elkins (2010) in his article ‘How to Look at Mondrian’, which investigated the differences between Mondrian’s paintings when he used supporting tools and when he used only freehand. Some of the issues emerging from this finding relate specifically to the field of painting rather than ceramics, where it is very significant to understand that using ceramic glazing slips with a high thickness became an obstacle to creating sharper stripes and clear soft colours. Furthermore, students who used high-temperature firing faced another obstacle in achieving Mondrian’s qualities.

2. Conclusion

Ceramics as a field of study has its own difficulties that prevented some students achieving high-quality results similar to those that can be achieved in the field of painting. Because of all these specific obstacles, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before art colleges and craft associations (e.g., PACI) in Oman can build a special framework to address the challenge of introducing contemporary design in their institutions, which have continued to prototype traditional designs and forms for decades.

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