

From canvas to classroom: Exploring modern art movements through creative expression in early childhood education

Eleni G. Zaimi *

Kindergarten of Metamorfosi, Ioannina, 45500, Greece.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 15(03), 817-824

Publication history: Received on 28 April 2025; revised on 10 June 2025; accepted on 12 June 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2025.15.3.1756>

Abstract

This paper focuses on the study and educational application of three significant artistic movements – Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism with an emphasis on how they can be creatively integrated into the preschool curriculum. Through theoretical analysis and a comparative presentation of the characteristics, techniques, and major representatives of each movement, their artistic and pedagogical value is highlighted.

The central part of the paper presents an innovative teaching plan inspired by the work of Salvador Dalí, which utilizes experiential and interdisciplinary methods to introduce young children to surrealist art. The activities promote imagination, aesthetic development, critical thinking, and children's creative expression, connecting art with language, nature, technology and the natural sciences.

The study documents the importance of contemporary art in early childhood education and demonstrates that even the most abstract art movements can be understood and accessible to young children when presented in a pedagogically appropriate way.

Keywords: Impressionism; Cubism; Surrealism; Salvador Dalí; Early Childhood Education; Interdisciplinary Approach

1. Introduction

Art has always been a medium through which artists express emotions, contradictions and the changes occurring in the world around them. From the Renaissance to the modern era, artistic movements have mirrored the course of social, political and technological developments. In particular, during the 19th and 20th centuries, movements such as Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism not only shaped the form of art but also influenced the broader perception of reality.

Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism are not merely techniques of representation, but also ways of thinking—revolutionary reactions against established notions of art and society. Each movement expressed the contradictions and quests of its time, offering new perspectives on how people can perceive the world around them.

This paper will analyze these three movements, starting with Impressionism, continuing with Cubism and ending our journey with Surrealism. We will examine their theories, innovations, and the influence they left on modern art. Additionally, we will refer to key representatives of each movement and their landmark works.

* Corresponding author: Eleni G. Zaimi.

2. Impressionism in Painting

2.1. Historical Context and Birth of the Movement

Impressionism emerged in France in the mid-19th century (1). Painters of that era felt that the traditional forms of painting, as dictated by the Academies, were too restrictive and did not allow them to express what they truly felt. Inspiration came from everyday life, light, nature, and even the Industrial Revolution. The name "Impressionism" originated from Claude Monet's 1872 painting (2) "Impression, Soleil Levant", which a critic dismissed as "just an impression" (3).

2.2. Characteristics and Techniques

Impressionist painters focused more on light and color than on detail or precision. They painted quickly, using visible brushstrokes (4), and emphasized the changes in light throughout the day. They often worked outdoors to capture the natural atmosphere of the moment. Rather than depicting historical or mythological themes, they chose everyday scenes people in the streets, parks, rivers, workers, and leisure activities (5).

2.3. Key Artists and Major Works

Claude Monet, perhaps the most recognizable Impressionist (2), revolutionized art with his depictions of nature, skies and landscapes in constant transformation. His painting "Impression, Soleil Levant" gave the movement its name, capturing the "impression" of a fleeting moment. His "Water Lilies" series showcases his mastery in portraying changing light and natural reflections.

Other major Impressionists include Edgar Degas, known for his focus on ballet dancers and everyday scenes, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, famous for his use of bright, vivid colors and charming depictions of social life (6).

3. Cubism in Painting

3.1. Historical Context and Development

Cubism emerged shortly after Impressionism, in the early 20th century (7). Artists of the time, influenced by new sciences and technological advancements, sought to view objects from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque are considered the primary founders of the movement. Beginning around 1907, Cubism developed in two phases: Analytical and Synthetic Cubism (8).

In Analytical Cubism, artists broke down objects into smaller parts and represented them from various angles in order to convey a more complete image by showing multiple viewpoints simultaneously. In Synthetic Cubism, artists began to reassemble forms with greater freedom, incorporating new materials such as newspaper and fabric in a technique known as collage.

3.2. Characteristics and Techniques

Cubism fragmented reality into geometric shapes: cubes, spheres, cones (7). Forms were deconstructed and reconstructed on the canvas. There was no depth or perspective in the traditional sense. A limited color palette, mostly earth tones, was used, and the artwork often appeared almost abstract. The viewer sees an object from many perspectives at once.

3.3. Key Artists and Major Works

Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque are considered the founding figures of Cubism, while Juan Gris and Fernand Léger made significant contributions to its evolution.

Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" (1907) (9) presented a radical deconstruction of the human form. In this work, the female figures are rendered with an aggressive breakdown of traditional representation, using geometric forms and overlapping viewpoints. Braque, in works such as "Violin" and "Candlestick" (1910), advanced the techniques of Analytical Cubism, reducing objects to smooth, abstract shapes.

Juan Gris, influenced by both Cubism and Symbolism, developed a more structured form of Synthetic Cubism. His approach was more conservative in representing objects, using softer colors and clear geometric forms. His

incorporation of materials like newspaper into his artworks marked a move toward a more abstract and conceptual version of Cubism.

4. Surrealism in Painting

4.1. Historical Context and Foundation of the Movement

Surrealism emerged after World War I (10), when André Breton wrote the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. Surrealist artists aimed to go beyond logic and dive into the depths of the unconscious, influenced by the theories of Freud. They did not paint what they saw, but rather what they felt, dreamed or imagined (11).

4.2. Ideas and Themes

Their works are filled with symbolism, contradictions and elements drawn from dreams (12). Realistic detail is often combined with fantastic, irrational or even disturbing scenes. Techniques included automatic drawing (13, 14), decalcomania, illusions and chance-based designs.

4.3. Key Artists and Major Works

Salvador Dalí, the most famous surrealist painter (15), is known for his dreamlike landscapes and distorted forms, such as in *The Persistence of Memory* in 1931, which shows melting clocks in a surreal landscape. Dalí's work incorporated dream logic and paranoia, creating a kind of "reality" that merges external perception with internal psychology.

In his painting "Ship with Butterflies", butterflies replace sails, giving motion to the vessel. This image is a reaction against convention, a revolutionary depiction of dreams, consistent with the ideology of surrealism. It serves as a political and social statement on the power of difference: "unity is strength"—even delicate butterflies can produce power when united for a common goal. Imagination, madness, the unconscious, and the omnipotence of dreams form the basis of the surrealist perspective (3).

René Magritte, with works such as "The Treachery of Images" (16) explored the relationship between reality and representation, showing that an image can mislead both the eye and the mind. His art emphasized the contradiction between image and reality, inviting viewers to question the truth behind what they see.

5. Comparative analysis

The three artistic movements differ greatly but also share common ground. Impressionism emphasized light and the fleeting moment. Cubism deconstructed reality, attempting to present it from multiple angles. Surrealism opened the door to the unconscious and dreamworlds. Yet, artists across these movements sought to break away from the established art of their time, striving to express something more personal, modern, and inward-looking.

6. Interdisciplinary project plan

6.1. Title

"The Butterflies and Clocks of Salvador Dalí – Painting Our Dreams" Theme: Child, Creativity and Expression – Arts

6.2. Teaching Methods

Experiential method – project-based learning, group collaboration, brainstorming, interdisciplinary approach.

6.3. Purpose

The aim of the program is for preschool children to become familiar with Salvador Dalí's works and to be introduced to the artistic movement of Surrealism. After all, surrealism is reflected in the way young children express themselves, as surrealistic elements often appear in their drawings (17).

Objectives

- To enhance their aesthetic perception.
- To develop critical thinking through analysis and interpretation of important works of art.

- To embrace diversity in modes of expression and in all forms where it is encountered.
- To confidently combine diverse elements as their imagination dictates, without fear of negative criticism.
- To develop creativity and derive satisfaction from their own artistic creations.
- To improve their oral language skills by learning new concepts.
- To cultivate their fine motor skills.
- Duration: Two weeks (one to two activities per day, depending on the children's sustained interest).

6.4. Interdisciplinary Approaches – Connection with Subjects According to the Greek National Curriculum Framework

- **Language:** Development of oral speech, expressive language, vocabulary enrichment, argumentation.
- **Environmental Studies:** Natural environment – life cycle of butterflies; concepts of melting and freezing; human-made environment – introduction to painters and museums.
- **STEM – Technology:** Digital tours of museums, use and creation of a clock.
- **Creative Expression:** Artistic expression through personal artwork.

6.5. Educational Materials

Digital prints, worksheets from a Salvador Dalí coloring book (from the Madrid Museum), digital tour of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), where children are invited to identify Dalí's works among those of other artists, Eric Carle's book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, a wall clock. (All of the above are used in two activities based on Dalí's works: "Ship with Butterflies" and "The Persistence of Memory")

6.6. Teaching Process of the First Main Activity – Based on "Ship with Butterflies" Language

Presentation of the painting via digital print and information about the artist and the surrealist movement. Children describe the painting, express feelings, and ask questions.

A yellow butterfly flies into the classroom through an open window, exciting the children. They spontaneously begin drawing butterflies. In the discussion corner, they share their work, which is praised.

Teacher:

"Would you like to see how a famous painter, Salvador Dalí, painted butterflies?"

Children:

"Why is he called that?"

Teacher:

"Because he was from Spain."

Then the teacher writes his name on construction paper and pins it on the board.

Teacher:

"Now look at Ship with Butterflies by Salvador Dalí. What do you notice?"

Possible answers:

"Butterflies!"

"A ship!"

"A ship pulled by butterflies."

"Instead of sails, there are butterflies."

Teacher:

“What does a ship need sails for?”

Children:

“To move.”

Teacher:

“How is this ship moving?”

Children:

“The butterflies are pulling it.”

“But butterflies don’t have strength; they’re too small.”

Teacher:

“So can this happen in real life?”

Children:

“No.”

We then explain that Dalí painted using his imagination, beyond reality – like painting his dreams. This style is called Surrealism. Dalí was the most important surrealist painter. The word Surrealism is written under Dalí’s name on the board.

Children are encouraged to describe a surreal image. We then analyze the surreal elements in the painting: the butterflies, their sizes and positions, the sky, sea, colors, and ship. Based on their interests, children suggest complementary activities:

- Paint a large butterfly ship like Dalí’s.
- Explore more of Dalí’s paintings.
- Learn about butterflies.
- Decorate the classroom with butterflies.
- Activities Organized by Learning Area:

6.7. Art: Group Work (in pairs)

The children *reproduce* the painting as best as they can. They collaborate harmoniously and share responsibilities. One will paint the sea, another the sky, etc. However, each child wants to paint at least one butterfly. The materials provided are a 50x70 cm Canson cardboard, tempera paints, and brushes.

6.7.1. Art Appreciation

They observe and discuss two other works by Dalí that feature butterflies

- *Windmills with Butterflies*
- *Butterflies (on the stem of the rose)*

Then, they each draw individually, placing the butterflies wherever they can imagine. They used white A4 papers and markers.

6.7.2. Natural Environment

We read the book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, which helps us explore the stages of a butterfly’s metamorphosis.

6.7.3. Body Schema - Fine Motor Skills

The children individually cut out the outline of a butterfly template. They color it with crayons and decorate the classroom with the butterflies (18).

6.7.4. Evaluation

As part of the formative, intermediate assessment, the children

- *Drawing:* Color butterflies on a printed worksheet from the Coloring Book – Salvador Dalí, provided by the Madrid Museum (from the author's personal archive, kept since the age of 6). They use colors that Dalí used, from memory, after first carefully observing the paintings.
- *Visual Discrimination:* Words such as Dalí, surrealism, painting, museum, and brush are written on cards and matched to the correct icon. Then, the children are asked to recognize the words on their own, without the accompanying image.
- *Writing:* They then copy whichever of these words they choose, as best as they can, without any pressure.

6.8. Teaching Process of the Second Main Activity Based on “The Persistence of Memory”

Science: Melting and freezing of solid materials.

After completing the Ship with Butterflies activity, we turn to Dalí’s most symbolically significant work, The Persistence of Memory, which captivated the children during a virtual museum tour. This coincided with math activities where we learned the number 12.

Using a wall clock and a Styrofoam “class clock,” children compare real clocks to those in the painting, noting differences in shape, flexibility, and color. They also observe ants and the desert in the artwork.

We explain that Dalí depicted time melting away, as if being devoured by ants.

Teacher:

“How did the clocks melt?”

“Let’s think of things that melt...”

Children:

“Ice cream”

“Ice cube”

“Candle”

“Chocolate”

Teacher:

“Why do they melt?”

Children:

“Because they get warm.”

Teacher:

“So did the clocks melt from the desert heat?”

Children discuss what clocks are made of (plastic, metal), and whether these can melt.

Teacher:

“Melting is called melting, when a solid becomes liquid. When a liquid becomes solid again, it’s called freezing.”

Children suggest more melting/freezing examples and propose a fun idea:

“Let’s make a melting Dalí-style clock from ice cream so we can eat it!”

This became a science activity: children brought yogurt, honey, and chocolate, and made a healthy ice cream. They decorated it with melted chocolate to form numbers. The result was impressive and delicious!

6.8.1. Evaluation

Children color a worksheet from the same Dalí coloring book, featuring *The Persistence of Memory* using crayons or markers.

6.8.2. Final Evaluation

Digital tour of MoMA (New York), where children identify Dalí’s paintings and their surrealistic elements.

We lay craft paper on the classroom floor. Children lie on the carpet, do relaxation exercises, close their eyes, and dream. Then they draw their dreams – clearly influenced by Dalí’s work!

7. Conclusion

Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism are not merely artistic movements. They are ways of understanding the world. Each reflects the concerns, questions, and dreams of its era. Studying them helps us grasp not just art (1,12) but also history and culture through a more creative, human lens.

These movements introduced new techniques and ideas, shaping 20th-century art and leaving an indelible mark. Their break with tradition, challenge to established norms, and exploration of deeper psychological processes have left a legacy that modern art continues to build upon.

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