

Historical Painting and History Education: Teaching the Greek Revolution of 1821 through the paintings of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos

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Abstract

The present study explores the pedagogical integration of historical painting into the teaching of the Greek Revolution of 1821 within secondary education. Drawing upon contemporary frameworks in History didactics, visual literacy, and experiential learning, the research examines how artistic representations function as historical sources that foster students' historical thinking and critical interpretation skills. Particular emphasis is placed on a comparative analysis of works by Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos, two artists who depicted the Greek War of Independence through distinct aesthetic and ideological lenses. The paper details an interdisciplinary teaching framework implemented in the third grade of secondary school, aimed at bridging historical knowledge with artistic expression. Through the analysis of selected works, students are encouraged to investigate historical events, decode symbolic elements, and critically evaluate the interplay between art, ideology, and collective memory. The proposed educational framework utilizes inquiry-based and collaborative learning principles to promote active student engagement in the interpretation of primary sources. Findings suggest that integrating historical painting into the curriculum significantly enhances visual literacy, historical empathy, and overall student motivation. Furthermore, the comparative approach enables students to recognize the subjective and interpretive nature of historical narratives. The study concludes that employing painting as a pedagogical tool contributes substantially to the modernization of History education by fostering critical thinking, multimodal learning, and a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and national identity.

Keywords: History Education, Historical Painting, Greek Revolution of 1821, Visual Literacy, Historical Thinking, Art-Based Learning.

1. Introduction

In contemporary education, the teaching of History has undergone a paradigm shift, moving away from the rote memorization of events and dates toward the cultivation of historical thinking. The central objective is now to facilitate active student participation, enabling learners to develop critical analytical skills and engage with the past through the synthesis of multiperspectivity, the rigorous analysis of sources, and the interpretation of diverse historical representations (Wineburg, 2001; Seixas & Morton, 2013).

Within this revised framework, the integration of art -and painting in particular- emerges as a pedagogical instrument of significant educational value. Visual artworks are no longer perceived merely as decorative accompaniments or supplementary aids; rather, they are regarded as authentic historical documents. These sources allow students to decode the dominant ideologies, value systems, social structures, and cultural perceptions of a given era, as well as its collective memory and constructed representations of the past. As Burke (2001) argues, images constitute compelling forms of testimony, as they do not merely record events but reveal how a society chooses to conceptualize and visualize its historical trajectory.

The Greek Revolution of 1821 is uniquely suited to such an interdisciplinary approach, having been the subject of extensive visual representation since the nineteenth century. The works of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos serve as quintessential examples that contributed decisively to the crystallization of national identity and the collective memory of



the War of Independence. This study presents a teaching scenario designed for the third grade of secondary education, which utilizes a comparative analysis of these two artists to highlight multifaceted aspects of the Revolution. Grounded in the principles of inquiry-based and collaborative learning, the proposed framework emphasizes the role of painting in fostering historical thinking, visual literacy, and active student engagement.

Under this scenario, students explore the social and ideological foundations of the Revolution, beginning with the activities of the Filiki Etaireia and the semiotics of its symbols. The analysis progresses to a comparison between the academic, heroic perspective of Vryzakis -typified in *The Exodus of Messolonghi*- and the raw, primary testimonies of the combatants regarding the deprivation and famine endured during the siege. This juxtaposition of visual representation and primary written sources enables students to discern the distinction between idealized imagery and historical reality. Concurrently, the study of early political institutions and documents, such as the Constitution of Epidaurus, underscores the influence of Enlightenment ideals and the intrinsic link between national liberation and education. Ultimately, this teaching scenario demonstrates that painting functions not merely as an illustrative medium, but as a sophisticated tool for interpreting and constructing historical meaning in contemporary education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Contemporary history didactics

In recent decades, the discipline of History has undergone a fundamental transformation, reshaping both its pedagogical objectives and instructional methodologies through the implementation of active learning models. These contemporary trends prioritize the cultivation of historical thinking, encouraging students to critically engage with and deconstruct primary sources and historical evidence (Zajda & Whitehouse, 2009).

According to Wineburg (2001), developing historical thinking represents a formidable cognitive challenge; it requires students to transcend "presentist" assumptions and engage with the past without projecting contemporary values, perceptions, and experiences onto it. Within this same theoretical framework, Seixas & Morton (2013) contend that modern History education should focus on cultivating specific competencies, such as interpretive source analysis, historical empathy, and a sophisticated understanding of historical representations.

The study of History presupposes the ability to synthesize heterogeneous forms of evidence and establish meaningful connections between them. Consequently, the past is no longer perceived as a fixed or static entity; rather, History is viewed as a dynamic, multidimensional field that reflects the complexities of an evolving society. Within this context, History didactics must highlight this inherent multidimensionality by utilizing specialized tools -such as historical painting- to analyze divergent social and ideological perceptions of reality (Cooper, 2013).

2.2. Art and the image as historical sources

The integration of visual art into History didactics is predicated on the principle that visual representations constitute primary historical sources rather than mere supplementary instructional aids. Specifically, Burke (2001) contends that images do not simply depict individuals and events, but rather reflect the value systems, cultural paradigms, and ideological agendas of their era. In a similar vein, Berger (1972) emphasizes that every visual representation embodies a subjective perspective, inherently shaped by specific historical and social determinants.



During the nineteenth century, historical painting played a pivotal role in the consolidation of nation-states and the construction of collective identities. In the Greek context, the works of artists such as Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos were instrumental in shaping national memory regarding the War of Independence.

The incorporation of artistic creations into historical inquiry provides students with a rich field of visual evidence, facilitating a more profound understanding of everyday life, social hierarchies, and the ways in which historical actors perceived themselves within their own contemporary milieu. From this perspective, artistic production is approached as a deliberate human construct through which artists formulate alternative realities and articulate their own responses to lived experiences and the conditions of daily life (Levstik & Barton, 2001).

2.3. Visual literacy, aesthetic experience, and experiential learning

The integration of iconography into educational practice is inextricably linked to the cultivation of visual literacy, defined as the capacity to perceive, interpret, and critically engage with visual messages. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), images are not merely auxiliary tools but autonomous systems of meaning production governed by a specific "semiotic grammar"; decoding this grammar requires specialized analytical competencies.

Concurrently, the theory of multiliteracies, as formulated by the New London Group (1996), underscores the necessity for contemporary education to utilize diverse modes of knowledge representation. Within the framework of the proposed teaching scenario, this approach enables students to synthesize historical information through the integrated use of written sources and visual evidence, fostering a multimodal understanding of the past.

In his seminal work *Art as Experience*, John Dewey argues that artistic creation constitutes a profound form of experience that mobilizes intellectual activity, emotional resonance, and creative engagement (Dewey, 1934). Consequently, the integration of artworks into pedagogy facilitates the creation of a dynamic, multisensory learning environment that enhances student motivation and encourages active participation. Within this framework, the use of paintings such as Vryzakis' *The Exodus of Messolonghi* or Zografos' battle depictions transforms History teaching from a standardized recitation of events into an experiential investigation of the past.

2.4. The paintings of Vryzakis and Zografos as historical representations

The artistic production of the nineteenth century played a decisive role in forging national identity and constructing the collective memory of the fledgling Greek state. The works of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos represent two distinct schools of visual representation regarding the Greek Revolution, each offering divergent interpretations of the struggle.

Influenced by the Munich School and German Romanticism, Vryzakis produced compositions characterized by a pronounced idealistic and heroic aesthetic. His oeuvre focuses on the dramatization of historical events, the apotheosis of revolutionary figures, and the promotion of a narrative centered on national cohesion. In contrast, Zografos offers a more experiential and descriptive chronicle of military engagements. His style, deeply rooted in the post-Byzantine and folk traditions, prioritizes a meticulous, narrative-driven presentation of battles, often functioning as a visual testimony.

This divergence in the aesthetic and ideological foundations of the two artists provides fertile ground for educational practice. Through a comparative analysis of their works, students are afforded the opportunity to engage with competing representations of the same



historical period. This process allows them to recognize that historical images are not neutral depictions of reality but are laden with specific interpretations, biases, and ideological intentions (Kasimati, 2000; Asdrachas, 2006; Karampelias, 2024).

3. Teaching framework

3.1. Lesson planning

The proposed lesson plan, entitled “Teaching the Greek Revolution of 1821 through the Paintings of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos”, is designed for the History curriculum of the third grade of secondary education. The proposal focuses on the unit pertaining to the Greek Revolution, seeking to bridge historical narrative with artistic creation through an interdisciplinary approach. The total duration of the course spans three instructional hours, a timeframe deemed essential for meaningful engagement with the artworks and the effective implementation of collaborative learning activities.

3.2. Educational objectives

The primary objective of these three hourly courses is to facilitate a multidimensional analysis of the Greek War of Independence through the study of emblematic works of historical painting. The intention is to transcend the mere description of military engagements in favor of a deeper historical consciousness, through which students cultivate historical thinking and visual literacy. By examining these paintings, students are encouraged to perceive the image as a dynamic historical representation that necessitates critical interpretation and deconstruction.

The learning outcomes are organized across three domains: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Regarding the domain of knowledge, students are expected to consolidate their understanding of key events and figures of the Revolution while simultaneously recognizing the instrumental role of art in the construction of national memory. In terms of skills, the lesson plan aims to train students in the rigorous analysis of visual sources, enabling them to identify symbolism, ideological nuances, and the stylistic divergence between academic realism and folk tradition. The comparative examination of Vryzakis and Zografos serves as a primary vehicle for cultivating critical inquiry, while the collaborative classroom structure promotes communication and the collective construction of knowledge. Finally, regarding attitudes and dispositions, this teaching framework aspires to sensitize students to historical and artistic heritage, fostering an appreciation for the evidence of the past. Through this process, students develop a critical stance toward historical representations, understanding that painting often serves as a medium for specific socio-political narratives.

3.3. Teaching methodology

The methodology adopted for these lessons is grounded in the principles of inquiry-based learning. Within this framework, the teacher functions as a facilitator of the learning process, guiding students toward the discovery of information through directed observation and structured dialogue. The utilization of specialized worksheets and the application of visual literacy principles enable students to “read” artworks as meaningful semiotic texts, connecting visual stimuli with primary written sources and information derived from the curriculum. Consequently, historical knowledge is transformed from a passive reception of facts into an experiential activity of inquiry, analysis, and reflection.



3.4. Teaching procedure

The implementation of the teaching framework unfolds through three distinct yet interconnected phases distributed across three instructional periods, following a progression from initial exposure to critical investigation and, ultimately, to final reflection.

During the first instructional period, which is dedicated to introduction and observation, the teacher establishes the historical and artistic context of the era. A concise presentation outlines the economic and social transformations that precipitated the Revolution, alongside the pivotal role of intellectuals and artists in forging the national ideal. Particular emphasis is placed on the biographies and divergent artistic styles of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos, elucidating how the academic training of the former and the experiential, folk character of the latter fundamentally shaped their respective visual outputs. Following this introductory phase, selected works -such as *The Battle of Lagada and Kompoti* or *The Exodus of Messolonghi*- are projected, and students are encouraged to engage in spontaneous description, focusing on composition, chromatic choices, and the identification of emblematic figures and iconography.

The second instructional period shifts the focus toward collaborative inquiry, during which students assume the active role of researchers. The class is organized into small working groups, each assigned a specific painting accompanied by analytical worksheets. Students are tasked with identifying the depicted historical event using descriptions from the school textbook, recognizing prominent revolutionary figures, and interpreting symbolic elements, such as the blessing of the flag or religious motifs that imply national cohesion. At this stage, the investigation deepens into the ideological underpinnings of the artworks, as students explore similarities and disparities in the approaches of the two painters. For instance, they compare the idealized, heroic figure of the Greek revolutionary in Vryzakis' works with the narrative, almost cartographic detail found in Zografos' battle scenes, thereby internalizing the concept that art is not a mere photographic record but a deliberate interpretation of reality.

The third instructional period serves as the culmination of the process through the presentation of conclusions and final reflection. Each group presents its findings to the plenary session, utilizing its analysis to support a broader historical and artistic synthesis. This is followed by a collective discussion coordinated by the teacher, focusing on the role of art as a mechanism for the construction of historical memory and national identity. Students are invited to reflect on how these images have influenced contemporary perceptions of the 1821 Revolution. The course concludes with an individual written assessment in which students address whether a painting can be considered an autonomous historical source. This activity is designed to consolidate the principles of visual literacy by requiring students to synthesize their acquired knowledge and argue for the evidentiary value of art within the field of historical research.

Table 1. Teaching Procedure

Phase	Duration	Teaching Activities	Student Activities	Educational Goals
Introduction and Observation of Paintings		The teacher introduces the historical context of the Greek Revolution of	Students observe the paintings, identify figures, colors, symbols, and emotions, and	Activation of prior historical knowledge, introduction to visual literacy.



	1 Teaching Hour	1821, the role of historical painting, and presents key information about Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos. Selected paintings are projected and discussed in class.	express initial interpretations of the visual material.
Collaborative Inquiry and Source Analysis	1 Teaching Hour	The teacher divides students into groups and distributes worksheets accompanied by selected paintings and excerpts from the school textbook. Guidance is provided for the comparative analysis of visual and written sources.	Students work collaboratively to identify historical events, analyze symbols and ideological elements, compare the artistic approaches of the two painters, and connect the artworks with historical sources. Cultivation of historical thinking, critical analysis of visual representations, collaborative learning, interpretation of historical sources.
Presentation and Reflective Discussion	1 Teaching Hour	The teacher coordinates classroom discussion and encourages reflection on the relationship between art, ideology, and collective memory.	Student groups present their conclusions to the class and participate in reflective discussions. Students complete a short-written reflection on whether a painting can function as a historical source. Development of critical thinking, historical empathy, oral communication, and reflective interpretation of visual material.

3.5. Assessment of the learning process

Assessment within this lesson plan adheres to the principles of formative and authentic assessment, prioritizing the students' longitudinal engagement over the mere final output. Throughout the implementation of the activities, the instructor systematically observes and



records the degree of student participation within their respective groups, their collaborative efficacy, and their individual contributions to the inquiry and analysis of sources.

Furthermore, the evaluation process encompasses the quality of the presentations delivered during the plenary session. Specific attention is directed toward the accurate application of historical terminology, the ability to synthesize visual and textual evidence, and the sophistication of the critical approach adopted toward the iconography and symbolism within the artworks. Finally, the individual reflective written assignment serves as the primary instrument for assessing the attainment of objectives related to the development of historical thinking. This diagnostic tool enables the instructor to determine the extent to which students have internalized the subjective and interpretive nature of historical representations, moving beyond a literal understanding of the past toward a more nuanced, critical consciousness.

4. Discussion

The integration of historical painting into the instruction of the Greek Revolution significantly enhances the cultivation of historical thinking, the development of visual literacy, and the active engagement of students in the learning process. The works of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos do not merely constitute artistic creations; rather, they function as multilayered historical representations that provide students with the opportunity to investigate the past critically. Through the comparative analysis of these visual sources, students are encouraged to move beyond the passive acceptance of information and become active interpreters of the ideological and social messages conveyed through nineteenth-century art.

The incorporation of artistic creations into History education promotes the abandonment of conventional, memorization-based methods in favor of inquiry-based and experiential learning. Through this approach, students cease to function as passive recipients and instead become active participants in the analysis and interpretation of historical evidence. Visual testimony becomes a central axis of reflection and dialogue, enabling learners to construct knowledge through critical observation, comparative analysis, and the formulation of interpretive hypotheses. Within the framework of the proposed teaching framework for the third grade of secondary education, this process enables students to synthesize the information contained in the school textbook with the aesthetic and ideological language of the period, transforming historical knowledge into a dynamic process of discovery.

Furthermore, the integration of historical painting into educational practice promotes the cultivation of visual literacy, a competency considered essential in the contemporary pedagogical environment. Students are trained to decode the content of images, identify symbolic elements, and analyze the semiotics of artistic composition. This process allows them to recognize that every visual representation incorporates conscious ideological and cultural orientations, as is evident in Vryzakis' heroic idealization or Zografos' narrative folk style. Consequently, learners become capable of approaching historical evidence not as objective records, but as complex constructions of meaning that reflect both the historical context and the intentions of their creators.

5. Conclusions

The comparison between the works of Vryzakis and Zografos constitutes an excellent starting point for a deeper understanding of the complex interaction between artistic creation, ideology, and the formation of historical memory. Through comparative study, students



acquire the ability to recognize that the same historical event may be perceived and represented in radically different ways depending on the social, political, and cultural background of each creator. This aesthetic and conceptual divergence functions pedagogically as a tool for deconstructing one-dimensional historical narratives, helping students realize the multifaceted nature of historical representation. In this way, students understand that a painting constitutes a dynamic field where divergent interpretations and visions of national identity intersection.

Moreover, the incorporation of artistic creations into educational practice strengthens the students' connection with the subject matter. The emblematic figures and the dramatic depictions of conflict and sacrifice create an experiential framework that fosters historical empathy. This approach allows learners to move beyond cognitive acquisition and establish an emotional connection with the past, gaining a deeper understanding of the motives and lived experiences of historical actors. Simultaneously, this methodology contributes substantially to the formation of students' cultural and national consciousness. Contact with artworks that constitute an integral part of modern Greek cultural heritage familiarizes students with fundamental historical and artistic traditions. Through this process, students realize that collective memory is not exclusively produced through school textbooks but is organically constructed through art, literature, and the broader spectrum of a society's cultural representations.

The proposed educational approach highlights the value of interdisciplinary synergy between the disciplines of History and Art, while confirming the necessity of a multimodal approach to knowledge. The integration of historical paintings into educational practice constitutes an effective pedagogical tool, as it successfully combines cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic learning objectives. In conclusion, painting emerges as a substantial medium for renewing the methodological practices of History teaching. The use of the works of Theodoros Vryzakis and Dimitrios Zografos enables students to approach the Greek Revolution beyond the mere presentation of events, understanding it instead as a complex cultural and ideological construct. Through the inquiry-based deconstruction of visual sources, learners cultivate historical thinking, critical ability, and visual literacy, ultimately promoting their active and meaningful participation in the learning process.

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