

FREEHAND SKETCHING AS PART OF THE CURRICULUM IN LATVIA. 1920–1940

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on freehand sketching as a method and part of the curriculum in a historical context. Using material published in the Latvian press in the 1920s–1930s, authors attempt to find out what role sketching played in general and professional education, and what ideas pedagogical and art theoreticians came up with almost a hundred years ago. The study of the publications makes it possible to deduce what forms of sketching have been historically focused on, how sketching as a method has been valued and supported in the methodological programmes of primary and secondary schools, and how it has been integrated into the content of the courses organised by various professional organisations. The study raises four research questions to help clarify these aspects. In addition, the inter-war press highlights areas where sketching skills were needed and broadens the understanding of the applicability of sketching.

18 articles from Latvian periodicals were selected for the study. From the analysis of the texts, it can be concluded that publications mentioning sketching can be divided into several groups. The first group includes descriptions of school teaching or study programmes at various levels, the second group includes articles related to vocational or lifelong learning courses organised by professional organisations and schools, and the third group includes articles devoted to the formulation of the basic principles of sketching as a pedagogical method or as a skill necessary for a profession.

Keywords: *education in Latvia, freehand sketching, professional education, sketching history, sketching methodology*

Introduction

The article is based on the research “Sketching as a Methodological Technique in Art and Design Studies” conducted at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art (FEPA) of the University of Latvia. The research is carried out by four lecturers and researchers from the Department of Art and Technology and aims to investigate and update the importance of sketching as a methodological technique in the study process to develop

atheoretically grounded approach to sketching for future designers, design and technology teachers, and primary education teachers. The practical aim of the research is to develop new tasks for sketching skills development.

As there are no teaching tools and methodological materials on sketching in design and teacher education in Latvia, as well as a lack of adapted materials for learning to sketch, the results of the research will provide new and summarised information on the significance of sketching and will contribute to the understanding of sketching as an important technique in creative processes that has not lost its relevance in the digital age. This article is devoted to the study of the historical context of sketching in the Latvian educational space between 1920 and 1940, the period of the first independence of Latvia. An insight into the different directions of Latvian education in the 1920s–1930s, through an analysis of material published in periodicals and annual reports of organisations of the time, provides quite extensive information on the role of sketching in education – both formal and professional. Highlighting the key aspects underpinning the importance of sketching in education almost a hundred years ago is the aim of this article. It should be noted that the period chosen has one feature in common with the present day: it has witnessed several educational reforms adapting and developing curricula in line with the pedagogical insights of the time, changes in educational paradigms, and a reassessment of values. A look at history might confirm the hypothesis that reforms do not always have to be radically new, but that it is worth highlighting tried and tested methods that have proved their worth.

In terms of research in the 21st century that has focused on the theoretical and practical aspects of sketching, there has been a renewed focus on hand-sketching and ways to engage and involve students in sketching (Thurlow et al., 2019), as well as a search for ways to classify sketches (Pei et al., 2011) to bring structural clarity to the widely branching variety of sketches.

Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the criteria for selecting the study period was the fact that the Latvian education system was undergoing major changes at that time – after the establishment of an independent state, there was a need to revise both the content and the methodology of education.

In the repository of digitalized periodicals and books of the National Library of Latvia (periodika.lv), texts describing sketching in the content of different levels and forms of education or discussing, what sketching is, were selected according to the keywords “sketch” and “sketching” and a certain period (1920–1940). A total of 18 texts were selected and are presented

here in chronological order to give the reader a better understanding of the development of sketching during the period under study. The selected texts contain a variety of information about sketching, which may be only mentioned or described in more detail. From the longer texts, quotations have been published in this article that best describe the topic under study – the basic principles, tasks, and teaching methodology of sketching.

The study posed four research questions (RQ):

RQ1 – In what context is sketching mentioned in publications of the 1920s and 1930s in the Latvian press?

RQ2 – What types and techniques of sketching are described and highlighted?

RQ3 – Is there a significantly different approach to sketching from today?

RQ4 – Do the publications on sketching point to methods that could be used and adapted in future design and technologies teachers' and designers' education today?

Results

The 1920s

In the 1920s and 1930s, Latvian educators and researchers, including Aleksandrs Dauge, Jūlijs Aleksandrs Students, Roberts Šterns, Andrejs Aronietis, Augusts Dīriķis, Marta Bīlmane, and Arvids Dzērvītis, focused on the theory of art pedagogy, teaching methodology and educational practice (Stramkale, 2022). In her 1922 article “Pedagogical drawing”, the teacher Marta Bīlmane describes a form of drawing that can be compared to sketching in terms of its purpose and technique.

“The pedagogical drawing is characterised by simple expression, a clear structure that includes only the most important, the most typical, ignoring the details. In other words, a pedagogical drawing is a diagram of a subject or idea, a light sketch which does not pretend to be finished or to be completely correct. The quick and easy highlighting and throwing of the matter to be illustrated on paper or the blackboard multiplies the pedagogical value. The less time, the greater the effect” (Bīlmane, 1922, pp. 61–62).

Bīlmane (1922) recommends that pedagogical drawing should be widely offered in pedagogical courses and seminars, even replacing formal drawing in pre-school teacher training. In her opinion, the teacher's ability to draw in this way in school frees him or her from the use of several other teaching tools and makes the work easier.

The extent to which art activities, including sketching, were incorporated into the curricula of general education schools is reflected in the reviews

of pedagogical exhibitions. In the report of the first Latvian Pedagogical Exhibition (1922), we can read that some schools exhibited several hundred works in the field of art, giving the impression that students were drawing in all disciplines.

“In this field, studio work in sculpting, drawing, and especially sketching is widely practised. Here you can get an overview of how a student’s technical skills and artistic taste develop, from the last grades of primary school to the upper grades of secondary school” (Melnalksnis, 1922, p. 954).

Although sketching was part of the study process in art schools and private studios, as well as at the Art Academy of Latvia, founded in 1919, there is evidence in the press of the early 1920s that sketching was also included in technical study programmes. For example, the Faculty of Mechanics at the University of Latvia offered a course of study called Technical Drawing and Sketching (Upesleja, 1922), while the Faculties of Engineering and Chemistry offered Technical Drawing, the course description of which stated that freehand sketching from given models (machine parts, pipe joints, bearings, valves, etc.) could be learnt (Upesleja, 1923).

In 1924, a new programme for Neighbourhood Studies in schools was developed and proposed (Birkerts et al., 1924). The programme included 15 topics for Grade 1 and 10 topics for Grade 2, with sketching for each topic. The authors also added an example of a Grade 1 student sketch to the program description (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. “Small animals and some sick people live on milk alone”. Example of a sketch by a Grade 1 student in Neighbourhood Studies (Birkerts et al., 1924, p. 132)

Drawing and sketching as a method in lessons in various subjects might seem appropriate and useful, but the 1924 Pedagogical Exhibition sparked a debate in the press about the relevance of students' drawings to the content and aims of the curriculum.

“Some reviewers are concerned that the Latvian people, being a nation of singers, want to become a nation of drawers. There are even voices from quite experienced educators, as if about an excessive cult of “pencil heroes” in our schools” (Bīlmane, 1924, p. 433).

Bīlmane (1924) notes the insufficient competence of teachers compared to the skills of Western educators and the meaninglessness of several teaching tasks, which is reflected in the works in the exhibition.

“For such phenomena and shortcomings, of course, is not the fault of drawing as such, but of the teacher, who has failed to direct the children's expression suitably. These phenomena do not evidence that drawing has too much of it, but that the teaching of this important subject, in all but a few schools, is without system, understanding and taste. [...] While in our country many teachers find it insurmountably difficult to sketch subjects correctly, in the most modern schools in Austria, Germany and America, for children aged 12 and older, it is a game” (Bīlmane, 1924, p. 434–435).

In the 1920s, sketching in Latvia could be learned not only in formal education but also in courses organised by professional organisations. For example, the Graphic Commission of the Latvian Book Industry Association organised sketching courses in book design and tried to promote them in the Latvian provinces.

“At the exhibition on April 2, students of the lettering and typesetting sketching courses come out in the open for the first time with folders of Riga sketchers and Riga typesetters. The folders are the fruits of many months of effort, and at the exhibition, everyone can see what a blessing the courses have been to our craft” (Auziņš, 1924, p. 2).

In 1925, a draft drawing program was offered to Latvian primary schools. In the general instructions for all primary school classes, sketching was also mentioned in the programme (Zīmēšanas programmas projekts [Drawing programme project], 1925). The drawing programme was the subject of controversy, and there were opponents, but no one had any fundamental objections to sketching as part of the programme; rather, the necessity of sketching was emphasised (Šenbrūns, 1925).

“To master drawing techniques, it is advisable to practise sketching (rough sketches) very often. Also, take every opportunity to draw outdoors and out of the window.

Limit frequent and unnecessary use of erasers” (Zīmēšanas programmas projekts [Drawing programme project], 1925, p. 260).

“In general, in Grade 6, objects and groups from everyday life should be drawn, with a strong focus on the construction and representation of light, shadow, reflection and cast shadow. Sketching (rough sketches) of objects would also be of great value for the mastery of drawing techniques in Grade 6” (Šenbrūns, 1925, p. 369).

Although publications in the 1920s highlighted the value of sketching as a method in various fields and levels of education, there was no deeper discussion among educators about the theoretical aspects of sketching. It was not until 1927 that an article on quick-hand drawing by the German educator Oskar Seinig was published, which can be compared with the pedagogical drawing described by Bilmane (1922). Seinig explains the difference between such drawing and artistic drawing and the possibility of creating it from simple basic shapes that have been learnt in advance, the combination and transformation of which should be taught in sketching lessons.

“Quick-hand drawing, i. e., drawing that we quickly sketch on a blackboard, has always been a means of expression, a means that we use to promote understanding. So, it is not a means of pleasure, and it does not want to be, it does not want to arouse any feelings. And therefore, it has nothing to do with art if we understand art in the narrow sense.

Quick-hand drawing only creates intellectual values. Here lies the difference between these two types of drawing.

And that is why those who still quite often, without understanding things properly, demand of the quick-hand drawing, what they demand of the artistic drawing, are wrong” (Zeinigs, 1927, p. 478).

“[...] as far as the language of the hand, i. e., the expression of our thoughts using figures, is concerned, so arise quite a number who do not yet know the inherent difference between art-making and quick-hand drawing and think that it is quite superfluous to learn to draw certain typical figures [...] and that it is equally superfluous to learn to transform such figures and to relate them to one another. This is a mistake [...] and here lies the fault why we have not yet systematically arrived at the necessary teaching of sketching in the teaching of drawing” (Zeinigs, 1927, p. 479).

The aforementioned Latvian Book Industry Association took care of the development of the professional skills of its craftsmen for almost the entire interwar period and emphasised the importance of sketching in the process of creating printing works. Encouraging book publishers to acquire sketching skills, the Association’s 1928 publication explained that an understanding of art (book design in the modern sense) was not innate but could be trained and developed.

“[...] from the commissioned work, a rough draft or sketch must be prepared, as is now done abroad, and was also practised here before the war. Unfortunately, this method of working has remained here only in the most decent printing houses.

When sketching a draft of printing work, the main point to note is grouping the lines of type. [...] A good grouping of the lines of type shows an artist with an expressed perception and a correct understanding of the division of space” (Kā rodas uzmetums? [How does a draft come about?], 1928, p. 1).

“Sketching and drafting is something that every book publisher should be familiar with, as the modern printing press is unthinkable without it. It is the only way to eliminate costly typesetting and to enable the customer to obtain neat, printed work cheaply and easily. Nor is it justified to say that not everyone is capable of such work. The understanding of art is not so much innate, but external circumstances beautify and educate the artistic impulses of the individual” (Kā rodas uzmetums? [How does a draft come about?], 1928, p. 2).

The 1930s

Professional development courses involving sketching have been organised not only by the Book Industry Association but also by other professional organisations. For example, in 1932 the Technical Department of the Latvian Agricultural Central Society organised courses for the Mazpulki¹ organisation in home crafts, and the woodworking classes included sketching an idea for an object to be realised later.

“Wooden crafts:

1. Tree species and their uses in crafts.
2. Preparation of wood material: felling, drying, storage. [...]
7. The idea and its sketching. Proportions.
8. Making various objects from a sketch (drawing) and without a drawing” (Vairāk vērības mājas amatniecībai [More focus on home crafts], 1932, p. 2).

In the early 1930s, Leons Taivāns published a new programme for Latvian schools, Life Studies. He believed that sketching, which was part of the Grade 2 curriculum, should be used to develop a systematic approach to drawing and needlework.

¹ Mazpulki – Latvian youth organization, modeled on the US rural youth organization (4-H)

“5. Shape and colour: Schematic sketching of simple objects in the context of looking at them. Drawing elementary plans in the context of recording places visited. [...]

Practical work should be used to lay the foundations for the systematic practice of drawing and needlework” (Taivāns, 1932, p. 261, 1935, p. 73).

The fact that Latvian school teachers were up-to-date with the latest pedagogical trends in the world is evidenced by a 1935 publication – the Resolution of the Congress of Teachers of Drawing and Applied Arts in Brussels. The resolution proposed the use of active methods, including sketching, to teach drawing in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools.

“2. How to apply modern pedagogical ideas to teaching drawing? – It is desirable to develop drawing dexterity both in the students’ free expression and in the direction set by the teacher, from pre-primary school to the end of secondary school. In elementary teaching, active methods should be used which facilitate the development of the powers of observation, visual memory, and imaginative fantasy, especially the so-called centralising method. – Sketching quickly, freely, and spontaneously is important” (Kriģere, 1935, p. 528).

As the above publications show, sketching was important as a useful skill in the arts, design and crafts, and technical professions. Another area in which the importance of sketching is mentioned can be found in the magazine “Kadets”, which is aimed at the students of the Latvian Military School. One of the tasks of the magazine was to educate soldiers (Dambitis, 2021), and in his 1935 article “Perspective sketches” Vincents Karmazo explains the importance of sketching in the military field and suggests that perspective sketching is not difficult if one learns a few simple basic rules.

“Just as topographical sketches complement a map, perspective sketches complement, so to speak, visual memory. [...] A sketch drawn for military purposes is good not when it is artistically executed, but when it shows all the details that can easily be forgotten. The need for such a sketch in warfare may be very great and desirable. But [...] many people are not very good at perspective drawings. The reason for this phenomenon is not inability, as many imagine, but simply not knowing how. Overall, it must be said that the art of perspective sketching is not difficult, provided that a few simple rules are observed” (Karmazo, 1935, p. 29).

In the late 1930s, the Ministry of Education issued a new curriculum for vocational schools, which included sketching as part of technical drawing in Year 2.

“Proper surveying, sketching and drawing in projections and sections of various objects [...], with all necessary measurements recorded. Sketching and drawing objects in axonometry.

Note. Sketches and drawings should be prepared as far as possible in pencil on plain box paper, the main aim being to develop the students’ ability to understand working drawings correctly and quickly” (Izglītības ministrijas Mācību līdzekļu nodaļa [Teaching Aids Department, Ministry of Education], 1938, p. 38).

Finally, to conclude the chronological overview of publications, the adult education courses in women’s fashion design organised by the People’s University were promoted as an excellent basis for learning the craft, but it is known that the small number of interested students made it difficult to fill and launch them.

“Craft courses – to broaden education in: [...], drawing and sketching ladies’ clothing, drawing and sketching ladies’ hats” (Krišjāņa Barona tautas augstskola [Krišjānis Barons People’s University], 1939, p. 15).

Discussion

RQ1 – In what context is sketching mentioned in publications of the 1920s and 1930s in the Latvian press?

From the analysis of the texts, it can be concluded that publications mentioning sketching during the period under study can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of descriptions of school teaching or study programmes at various levels (Upesleja, 1922, 1923; Birkerts et al., 1924; Zimēšanas programmas projekts [Drawing programme project], 1925; Šenbrūns, 1925; Taivāns, 1932, 1935; Izglītības ministrijas Mācību līdzekļu nodaļa [Teaching Aids Department, Ministry of Education], 1938), which defined the role of sketching in the curriculum more or less explicitly. This group can also include articles on the results of schoolwork, which were displayed at Latvian Pedagogical Exhibitions (Melnalksnis, 1922; Bīlmanē, 1924). Sometimes the inclusion of sketching in the programme is indicated only by the title of the course (Upesleja, 1922), but mostly some additional information is provided, such as the purpose and tasks of sketching, and materials or objects/themes to be sketched. It can be concluded that, despite the variety of programmes, the objectives of the sketching were quite similar – to develop students’ ability to record the parameters of an observed object quickly and accurately and to practise drawing techniques. This meant that the focus was on sketching from life and developing the perceptual acuity of the sketcher. This approach was characteristic not only of visual arts classes, which would seem natural, or of vocational and technical specialisation programmes, where sketches were necessary

for further working drawings, but also of social studies subjects such as Neighbourhood Studies (Birkerts et al., 1924) and Life Studies (Taivāns, 1932, 1935). Sketching was integrated into the primary school curriculum as a versatile tool for training manual dexterity, recording observation and understanding regularities in the surroundings. The fact that this process involved not only a visual appreciation of the objects around us but also a deeper analysis of phenomena is evidenced by the published sample sketch by a Grade 1 student (see Figure 1), which shows a milk utility in small situational scenes. However, as can be seen, the extensive use of drawing and sketching to teach different subjects was not always useful or justified, and the shortcomings of this approach are pointed out by Bīlmane (1924). The main one was the lack of a system (a common curriculum), which was also closely linked to the incompetence of teachers.

The second group of publications covers articles related to vocational or lifelong learning courses organised by various professional organisations and schools (Auziņš, 1924; Vairāk vēribas mājas amatniecībai [More focus on home crafts], 1932; Krišjāņa Barona tautas augstskola [Krišjānis Barons People's University], 1939). Although there are many more advertisements and announcements of such courses in the press during the period under study, only a few representative examples are included in this article. From this information, it can be inferred that, whether it was, for example, graphic design, fashion design or wood crafts, sketching was included in the course curriculum as one of the essential components in the process of creating a design or craft product. In addition, sketching in these courses has a completely different task – to visualise the author's idea. This does not exclude the possibility that sketches were previously made from nature or samples, but the ultimate goal was to learn how to sketch the idea of a product so that the sketch is useful to the author and can also be shown to a client or commissioner. So here comes another sketching challenge – communication.

And in the last group, we can combine those articles that are devoted to the formulation of the basic principles of sketching as a pedagogical method or a skill necessary for a profession, or to a more detailed study of it (Bīlmane, 1922; Zeinigs, 1927; Kā rodas uzmetums? [How does a draft come about?], 1928; Kriģere, 1935; Karmazo, 1935). If we talk about the concept of pedagogical drawing proposed by Bīlmane (1922), we can see several analogies with the quick-hand drawing proposed by Seinig (1927): it is a quick drawing (sketching) that has no artistic orientation and does not require art education but is an aid for explaining (by the teacher) and understanding (by the student) the material to be learnt. Bīlmane's article was published in 1922, one year after the publication of Seinig's (1921) book "Die redende Hand" ["The Talking Hand"], in which he explains

the importance of handwork (including drawing) in expressing thought. Seinig is also known to have visited Latvia in 1924, giving lectures and courses on pedagogical drawing and the production of simple teaching tools (Vugule, 2011). Before Seinig visited Latvia, the press briefly outlined his pedagogical methods (“Runājošās rokas” praviētis [The prophet of the “Talking Hand”], 1924). From this, it can be concluded that Latvian teachers were familiar with this method and used it extensively, as the results of pedagogical exhibitions showed (Bilmane, 1924). The only question was about the quality and systematic use of this method and the professionalism of the teachers.

As regards the use of sketching in professional activities, such as book publishing or the military, the authors of the publications consider that this skill can be acquired by anyone and does not require any prerequisites (Kā rodas uzmetums? [How does a draft come about?], 1928; Karmazo, 1935). In addition, the authors also offer basic principles that should be followed when sketching.

RQ2 – What types and techniques of sketching are described and highlighted?

In the publications studied, three types of sketches can be found implicitly described: (1) observational sketches (record observation of the natural or subject environment), (2) conceptual sketches (depict and explain a concept, aid understanding of the subject) and (3) ideation sketches (visualise the author’s idea in the process of creating an art or design work). In primary education, a strong focus on the second group of sketches is placed, encouraging teachers to learn quick-hand drawing techniques to support pupils’ learning with visual aids.

The techniques used in sketching are very little described in the research material and often only inferred from the context. It can be noted that sketching is most often associated with drawing with graphite pencil, and the variety of sketching techniques is generally not given much attention in the publications.

RQ3 – Is there a significantly different approach to sketching from today?

A study of historical publications shows that the teaching methods for freehand sketching have not changed significantly, and emphasises the following key principles: regular practice, sketching speed, no use of erasers, and sequencing of sketching tasks (study of nature and samples followed by independent sketching of ideas). Although the terminology has changed and many papers are now devoted to an extended study of sketching, the same basic principles of sketching can be seen in publications from the beginning of the last century and remain relevant today.

RQ4 – Do the publications on sketching point to methods that could be used and adapted in future design and technologies teachers' and designers' education today?

Relating the historical overview to the contemporary context, the question of whether sketching as a hand activity will have a place in the world of the future and thus in education, is a matter of debate. Konrad Paul Liesmann points out that “in the modern, digitised world, the hands are no longer in demand. On the one hand, this would break the course that has always accompanied manual work. On the other hand, almost everything related to manual activities – individuality, creativity, originality – becomes the most endangered” (Lismans, 2022, pp. 94–95). In many areas, the digital world offers technological solutions that make sketching completely unnecessary – for example, future soldiers no longer need to learn the laws of perspective to sketch their surroundings. However, in creative fields where originality and visualisation of an idea are important, sketching has retained its role, because “it is the unity of idea and immediacy, of head and hand, that makes artistic activity possible. The hand not only obeys the head; its possibilities have a significant influence on the product” (Lismans, 2022, p. 90). And it is not only the aspect of originality that is important. Sketching by hand plays an important role in design programmes in higher education; sketching is a means of language, reflection, communication, and information storage (Thurlow et al., 2019). Sketching has the potential to remain relevant as a means of communication in moments when smart technologies are not available or do not offer the necessary means of expression.

As neither the functions of sketching nor the teaching methods have changed significantly since the period under study, the inclusion of sketching in modern curricula (at different levels of education) can benefit from the insights gained from historical research, for example on the basic principles of sketching in graphic design (see *Kā rodas uzmetums? [How does a draft come about?]*, 1928).

Limitations of the study

The 18 publications reviewed in this article provide relatively broad, but not comprehensive, information on the role of sketching in Latvian education in the 1920s and 1930s. In the course of further research, it would be necessary to pay attention to other sources that can provide additional data on the issue under study – archival documents, art and design history studies, monographs, etc.

Conclusions

Overall, we can conclude that the Latvian press of the 1920s and 1930s reflected the main types of sketching: both sketching based on observation and sketching based on creative thinking and imagination to visualise ideas. These types of sketching can be developed and taught in both design and teacher education today, as the objectives of sketching have not lost their relevance. In design education, sketching is still an effective way to train precision and selectivity of observation, i. e., a way of looking that selects only the features or parameters of an object that are necessary for the work. Sketching is also the quickest way to capture a new design idea. In teacher education, sketching is about communication and creativity: it is a way to explain what students are learning by visualising verbal explanations and develop students' creativity by thoughtfully choosing which topics to accompany with sketching tasks. Even in the 21st century, a teacher who can illustrate his story in the classroom by drawing on an interactive whiteboard can capture more students' attention than one who uses only verbal communication.

The only differences can be found in the sketching technique when compared with the materials studied. Today we can sketch on interactive whiteboards, digital tablets, and smartphones. However, these tools have their limitations. Although digital sketching offers many possibilities and is constantly evolving, it is not yet able to offer the variety and nuance of expressive media that are possible when sketching traditionally. Perhaps this will change in the future. Digital tablet manufacturers are trying to get as close as possible to the feeling of drawing or sketching on paper, but this suggests that digital sketching will be only an imitation of traditional sketching without bringing anything fundamentally new to it. In this context, unless the convenience of smart technology is a determining factor, traditional sketching will continue to be relevant and attractive. The differences between traditional and digital sketching could be a topic for future research.

There is another aspect we can take from historical research: promoting sketching and justifying its necessity, as well as reviewing exhibitions that show the results of sketching. The FEPA research is also a step in this direction.

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