

# THE EMOTIONAL CHARACTER OF SOFT SCULPTURE AND CLOTHING AND ITS APPLICATION IN CHILDREN ART EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

The sculpting procedure and sculpting materials are traditionally "hard" oriented, and so are works in clay which have always found their final form in baked terracotta. However, the tendency to "soften" this hard and "rough" surface was already present in Ancient Greece in the early classic sculptures in the form of draperies wrapped around the body of the sculpture. Until then in prehistoric sculpture and in the sculptures of the first civilizations the drapery appeared in stylized, symbolic geometrically treated forms which emphasized the calmness and dignity of the characters presented even more. In ancient Greek sculpture the moving, swaying and almost "transparent" drapery appears for the first time, and its articulation strengthens in parallel with the emotional expression in Greek sculpture.

The softened sculpture in the form it exists today in modern sculpture appears in the second half of the twentieth century and in two characteristic directions "soft sculpture" which treats the material as a constructive element of the form and 'clothing sculpture' which uses clothes as an independent element. These two approaches mix and complement each other in works of the majority of modern sculptors. This work examines the phenomenon of soft sculpture and its emotional character is linked with the concept "contact comfort" created in accordance with the researches of the famous psychologist H.F. Harlowe. Powerful, scientifically proven influence of soft clothing on one's psyche which has proven itself in one's life many times in practice (the attachment of a child to soft things which comfort it and make it feel safe) will become the foundation for the approach towards "the soft, textile sculpture" as a medium which, within itself, carries a powerful psychological element of intimacy and which is the carrier of deep psychological meanings. Soft materials emphasize warmth, variability and flexibility and possess a psychological and metaphorical meaning contrary to the one in traditional sculpture which is by definition solid and unchangeable. This article promotes the usage of "soft" sculpting materials and deepens the topic of softened sculpture in the educational process and children art education.

**Keywords:** *Soft Sculpture, Clothing, Art, Children, Education*

*“Love is a wondrous state, deep, tender, and rewarding. Because of its intimate and personal nature it is regarded by some as an improper topic for experimental research.”*

With this sentence the American psychologist Harry F. Harlow (1958) begins his scientific work “The Nature of Love”<sup>1</sup> in which he describes the research carried out on monkey cubs separated from their mother immediately after birth, to which he offered a substitute, wire, or a soft/textile “mother”. In these experiments the cubs demonstrated attachment towards the soft/textile mother, spending daily 17 hours on the soft mother and only one hour a day on the wire one, regardless on which mother the milk bottle was placed. The study showed that the psychological need for attachment towards the mother is much stronger than the need for physical fulfilment of the primary drive for food, and that in the development of attachment in cubs feeding is only on the second place, while on the first place is definitely holding and clinging to the mother. This phenomenon, according to Harlow is named **contact comfort**. His researches add to the, maybe, most important theory of emotional development of the personality, the theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1988).

In the following text this powerful, scientifically proven influence of soft material on one’s psyche which in man’s life has many times been shown through practice (the attachment of the child to soft things which give it the feeling of comfort and safeness) will prove to be the foundation for the approach to the «soft/textile sculpture» as a medium which carries, within itself, a powerful psychological element and which is the carrier of deep psychological meanings, and as such is, indeed, an excellent source of motivation in the process of artistic creation of children. Focusing on the process of creation with emphasis on the study of materials and forming procedures.



*Frieze from the Parthenon, Phidias*

The sculpting procedure and sculpting materials are traditionally very “hard” oriented, and even works made of clay have always found their final form in baked terracotta or glazed ceramics. However, the tendency to «soften» this hard, stiff surface was first found in ancient Greece in the Neoclassical sculpture in the form of drapery which is wrapped around the body of the sculpture. Until then, in prehistoric sculpture and in sculptures of the first civilizations (Egypt, Sumerians) the drapery appeared in stylized, symbolical and geometrically treated forms that emphasize the calmness and dignity of the presented characters even more. The moving, swaying and almost «transparent» drapery occurs for the first time in ancient Greek sculpture, and its emphasis becomes stronger parallel with the strengthening of the emotional expression in Greek sculpture. The display of the drapery in the Late Classical period of the Greek sculpture is also

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<sup>1</sup> Harlow H.F (1966)., The Nature of Love, *American Psychologist*, 13, 673-685

called « the style of wet drapery» which is characterized by clothing clinging tight to the body of the sculpture, rich with creases while on the protruding parts (the stomach, chest, knees) it strains and stresses the covered form. The function of the drapery, until then considered to be a decorative element, turned into the one of giving life to the sculpture, poeticizing and enriching it in the manner very similar to the painting process.

And so, with the development of style, the drapery softened from the Archaic period (when it was still in the stiff and geometric form), to the "strict style" of the Classical period in the 5th century BC when it relaxed and softened and started to have a naturalistic, natural fall of creases, that is in cases when draperies on a human figure did exist. Male figures were never sculpted with a drapery at that time, and in female figures it was wrapped around the waist. In the 4th century BC the Classical period was at its peak and there was a transformation from the "strict" to the "soft" style, when we witness the total softening of the creases of the drapery. In the Hellenistic period, since 330 BC till the end of the Ancient period, the drapery, as a sculptural form is extremely dynamic. It totally freely sways around the body, becoming its integral part.

The softened sculpture in the form present in modern sculpture today first appears in the second half of the twentieth century in two characteristic movements «*soft sculpture*» which treats the material as a constructive element of form and «*clothing sculpture*» which uses clothes as an independent element. Those two approaches mix and complement each other in the works of the majority of modern authors.

*«In this sense sculpture entered a deep state of its inversive logics and became pure negativity: a combination of exclusiveness.» (Krauss, 1979)<sup>2</sup>*

The artist who first used «*soft*» materials in modern sculpture completely transforming the traditional tense form of the sculpture is *Cleas Oldenburg*, the sculptor of pop art who softened forms of pop art to the degree when they could be completely blown out, using soft materials such as plastic and cloth as a «upholstery», as a form for an inflatable object.

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<sup>2</sup>Krauss, R.E. (1979).Sculpture in the Expanded Field , The MIT Press, London, England



C. Oldenburg, *Soft Toilet*, (1966)



M. Pistoletto, *Venus of the Rags*, 1967

The first trace of «clothing» as a movement in modern sculpture is present in the works of *Michelangelo Pistoletto* with his famous work «Venus of the Rags». He confronts problems of the modern world (*second hand* clothing garbage) with the icons of classical culture in accordance with the artistic determination of *Arte Povera* as an artistic group which promoted, among other things, textile and clothes as legitimate sculpting materials. One of the most influential figures of modern art *Joseph Beuys* included felt into his artistic opus after a traumatic war experience (in which his plane was crashed above the Soviet Union and he was saved by the Tatars who wrapped him into a felt cloth and spread fat on him to return and retain his body temperature), emphasizing its characteristic of warmth, safeness and the one of providing shelter, in the very same way later many authors of «clothing» used to in their psychologically and socially engaged works.



J. Beuys *I love America and America loves me*, 1974. and *Felt Suit*, 1970.

That the option of choosing soft materials in the process of sculpting was a significant breakthrough that could find its place in the contemporary visual arts education was proven by theories of the philosopher and psychologist John Dewey in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He made an outstanding contribution to American visual art pedagogy with his work "Art as Experience" published in 1934, where he describes the work of art as an experience in which the meanings and values are stressed or displayed, rather than expressed or imposed. " For Dewey art works like experience. Processes of questioning, seeking and finding meaning are transformative (metamorphic), extended links of what is good, what is bad. Expanded perception creates space for understanding and action. "(Goldblatt, 2006.).

In the United States of America **Victor D'Amico** is the representative of the pioneer ventures in visual art pedagogy. As the Head of the Pedagogical Department of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) he promoted an active, visually artistic creation of children as the best way towards achieving a qualitative conception of art. In 1937 he founded the Gallery of the Young at the Museum of Modern Art. Works of young students of art were exhibited there and courses for children and the youth were held. He believed that the child should be given the opportunity to create in the same way as the artist, and through the manifestation *Children's Art Carnival*<sup>3</sup> he created a programme which soon spread over the USA, and which advocated creative learning in which the museum becomes the laboratory for art education and a place where, through direct aesthetic experience, the best motivation is acquired and a precondition for personal expression is achieved.

In the 1970s an expert in the field of visual art pedagogy, professor of education at Stanford University, Elliot W. Eisner<sup>4</sup>, advocated a balanced approach that emphasizes the importance of learning from one's own experiences and based on spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical needs of the person who creates it. He defined ten tasks that are taught by art and almost all in favour of the use of soft materials as sculptural expression in education. They refer to the celebration of multiple perspectives, search for different solutions, the ability to interpret and experience the world in many ways, the ability and willingness to take unexpected opportunities, and thinking through the material. Eisner states that art helps children express what is inexpressible and it is deeply connected with the emotional part of a person.

In the book "Languages of Art" by Nelson Goodman<sup>5</sup>, we find two terms that distinguish the fundamental properties of visual works of art (or not) very well. These two terms are **representation** - as a term that implies description (of objects, patterns, events) and **expression** - as a term that encompasses the feelings - those that are brought by the author of the work, as opposed to those experienced by the viewer of the work and which do not necessarily have to be the same. In this case representation primarily refers to the attempt to present a visual presentation of reality and facts, while the expression is associated with *sensibility* and *emotions*. Both elements are inseparable properties of a work of art. Expression is closely related to the selection of art materials, and in this case refers to soft materials usable in sculpture.

Into the motif of the work of art children include their personal style which at a very early stage shows a tendency towards the rational/mathematical/realistic (perspective, figuration) or the sensory/emotional/expressive (colour, abstraction). This indeed means representation, that is, expression. Of course, these two extremes are mixed in different ratios, thus creating new expressions time and time again. In some children the concept is in the foreground, and, the whole story intertwined around the work of art may have more weight than the work itself. All of these approaches (rational /

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<sup>3</sup> Anning A. & Ring K. (2004). *Making sense of children's drawing*, UK, London, Open University Press

<sup>4</sup> Elliot W. E. (2004)., *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, Yale University Press, Yale College, USA

<sup>5</sup> Goodman, N. (2002). *Jezici umjetnosti*, , KruZak, Zagreb, Croatia

sensory / conceptual) are distributed equally and are artistically legitimate. Shaping soft sculpture is an ideal tool for investigating the impact of soft materials, understanding of the medium, its behaviour and its influence on contact. Through soft materials children are able to explore the tactility, to transpose their experience into methods of forming, and by gaining new experiences with the material they remember the gained experience and continue to develop new models discovering the possibilities of shaping and the treatment of surface. By enabling children to work with soft materials we are opening a whole new perspective in the three-dimensional shaping and in a way they like most, through a tactile experience of squeezing, stroking, transforming in space and for them this is a valuable approach and a detachment from the standard two-dimensional artistic expression. This gives them the opportunity to adopt most unexpected materials as sculptural and to choose among materials which best suit their characters in the same way Beuys did by transposing his most intensive life experience into sculpture.

Children first touch soft materials and examine them with their senses and then from a big selection choose one texture which goes with the concept they want to express best. In this way they sensitize the ad hoc choice course of action and decisions made in such a way during creating artistic works was described by the famous Jean-Paul Sartre as a process identical to the one man passes during his lifetime. When an artist creates his work he begins with one idea or intention, which in a series of intuitive influences changes and progresses in completely unpredictable directions, and he ultimately materializes himself in a unique and unrepeatable work of art. The work of art in this case represents the existence of an individual which is formed by a series of unpredictable decisions conditioned by intuition, instincts and quite a distinctive personality of the individual who exists.

*«... When we talk about a Picasso painting, we never say that it is unreasonable, and we understand very well that he, as he was, was developing himself at the same time while he was painting, and the totality of his work is embodied in his life..»<sup>6</sup>*

It seems that when using soft materials in education one of the most significant contributions is this encounter with the new, unknown and unexpected as well as making the decision how and with what kind of motivation to use it. The selection and procedures will undoubtedly speak about its author and provide a background for further consideration.

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<sup>6</sup>J.P.Sartre, (1964) Egzistencijalizam je humanizam, Veselin Masleša, Sarajevo

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