

**MEDIAVAL ART WEBSITES AS A SOURCE  
OF HISTORICAL IMAGES: COGNITIVE PROBLEMS**

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*In this article an attempt is made to analyse the quality and effectiveness of information offered by the most popular websites in Poland. The selection was made on the strength of proposals by the browser "GOOGLE". Dates that would allow pupils to broaden their ideas about medieval art were searched. The biggest barriers recognized by pupils surfing the most popular web sites are mentioned. Sources of texts that pupils use to copy are noted.*

*Key words: medieval art; websites; historical images*

Contemporary socio-economic reality is based on information technologies and requires the development of skills needed to move both efficiently and effectively in this reality. This is beyond argument. All the more education ought to make use of these sources of information and communication because it is a system of education – programs and the work of teachers that prepare children and the youth for adult, professional life. Topic experts call for designing a model in which media transmission and teacher activity would find place in.<sup>1</sup>

A man using multimedia information is characterized by T. Barski as a "*communicating, creating and transforming knowledge inquirer*".<sup>2</sup> First, therefore, teachers have to learn how to search for sources of knowledge and how to transform it: analyze and synthesize it. Current social expectations towards educational activities concentrate on developing creativity, on perceptual skills and the search for logical solutions by students instead of just processing data. Therefore, it ought to be necessary to teach children the ability to use the techniques aimed at solving problems, and then require the practical use of WWW database. A frequent charge, unfortunately supported by overused practice, is a remark that students mindlessly copy online texts. This risk is minimized through teachers' creativity by using creative ways of working up thesis topics. The task consisting of repeating rigid questions and then expecting practical ways to cope with it is, by all means, a naive expectation.<sup>3</sup>

A textbook is, undoubtedly, at the forefront of the most available sources of information to students. Among its determining factors are: easy access, ready, organized and verified in all aspects (factual, methodological, orthographic and grammar) material, additional accessories in the form of questions, maps, illustrations and all kinds of diagrams. However, even the best designed, hypothetically perfect textbook would have drawbacks. It refers, first of all, to the stability of historical narratives, a common feature of all printed texts. Knowledge, a story span by the narrator is always a closed, finished one. Any supplements, enrichment of historical content are connected with a tremendous amount of effect (working with text), means (requirements of the economics publishing process) and time – required both by the author and by the publishers for the final work to publish. The linearity of the text always imposes on us the same, explicitly defined beginning and in the same way constructed ending. It is always

<sup>1</sup> BARSKI, T.: *Technologie informacyjno-komunikacyjne w edukacji*. Opole 2006, s. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> WOJDON, J.: *Programy komputerowe w nauczaniu historii*. Wiadomości Historyczne, 2004, No. 2, p. 108f.

a strange creation for a reader, the author's with all its consequences in the form of a top-down hierarchy of the importance of facts and historical phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Such a structure does not prompt to creativity – neither to action, nor to thoughts.

The available narration in printed form is rigid as well. All that determines its lower attractiveness and limited range of impact when compared with network resources.

Knowledge gained through free, creative navigation between WWW resources is often compared to the structure of a root where logical connections between individual modules-problems of knowledge form “*hypertexts*”, called by some authors “*multimedia post-historical counter-narrative*” which is a peculiar “*history game*”.<sup>5</sup> Its form depends only on the author of the hypertext, the searcher of answers.

It is not our intention to persuade to use multimedia resources for educational purposes. We believe that such considerations were taken into account two or three decades ago. Multimedia and the Internet offering access to unlimited sources of information is a part of the human world and if we have any doubts in this respect, these arise due to our imperfections: skills and methods of using the database. We do not examine the problems of using the Internet safely as well.<sup>6</sup> We wish, however, to draw attention to completely different perceptual possibilities which open up during the participation in a computer game or during “surfing” the web.

The data contained on CDs attached to textbooks as supporting materials would have a similar structure. Their usage is, undoubtedly, easier, one cannot “get lost” among, for example, poorly designed websites. It does not require such amount of effort – it is, therefore, more economical and of course safer for young users. On the other hand: CD materials are of closed form, one cannot use them in such a creative way as it happens in the case of searching based on hypertext.<sup>7</sup>

Let us begin then with a logical, cognitive difference between the traditional knowledge acquisition from printed sources and the knowledge gained on the basis of information found in the Internet. In both cases, locating sources of knowledge and critical selection of interesting content is required.

The opportunities of gaining knowledge through the Internet encourage, therefore, not only to assess students' final answers but also to trace the path through which the answers were formulated. A practical hint or a requirement is, therefore, to make a stipulation about the minimum usage of websites.

Getting information from the Internet is commonly understood as easy, it does not require any effort, work or time. It is, probably, the fastest way of acquiring data. It is important to realize, however, and make students aware of the fact that database is not the same as knowledge-messages organized in some logical structure. The Internet is a database but it does not offer the final knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, one ought to pay special attention to enhancing students' ability to selecting and acquiring data.

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<sup>4</sup> WITEK, P.: *Multimedia jako jeden z wariantów kulturowej gry w historię. Metodologiczne problemy „przedstawiania” przeszłości w epoce ekranów*. In: Dytman-Stasieńko, A. – Stasieńko, J. (edd.): *Język a multimedia*. Wrocław 2005, s. 373f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 382, 384, 385.

<sup>6</sup> WALAT, W.: *Podręcznik multimedialny. Teoria – metodologia – przykłady*. Reszów 2004, s. 66, 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Wikipedia. Wolna encyklopedia. Hypertekst* [online]. © 2012. Available on: <http://pl.wikipedia.org/Wiki/Hipertekst> [cit. 2011-11-28].

<sup>8</sup> LEDZIŃSKA, M.: *Nadprodukcja informacji jako wyzwanie edukacyjne-perspektywa psychologiczna*. In: Radochoński, M. – Przywara, B. (edd.): *Jednostka – grupa – cybersieć. Psychologiczno-kulturowe i edukacyjne spektry społeczeństwa informacyjnego*. Rzeszów 2004, s. 23f.

I have decided to trace the information concerning the medieval art in order to explore both the possibilities and the cognitive barriers which can be encountered by students obliged to complete their written assignments on this topic. I have also searched for arguments which would explain the widespread enthusiasm about searching for information on the web. I have chosen this subject matter because students would become familiar with the medieval art, in particular with the Romanesque and Gothic architecture considered accessible already in the elementary school. In my opinion, however, students may encounter many cognitive barriers resulting from a high degree of abstract concepts typical of the subject. What I mean is a logical process connected with attention and intuition referring to images consisting of elements or observed objects.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, I have considered this topic as an issue and started to observe how it can be solved basing on the Internet websites.

When typing the term “medieval art” on Polish websites, one can be referred to the most popular sites: [sredniowiecze.klp.pl](http://sredniowiecze.klp.pl); [www.bryk.pl](http://www.bryk.pl); [sciaga.pl](http://sciaga.pl); [blaga.pl](http://blaga.pl); [pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/](http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/); [www.interklasa.pl](http://www.interklasa.pl); [www.interia.pl](http://www.interia.pl); [www.wypracowania24.net](http://www.wypracowania24.net); [historia-online.pijarzy.pl](http://historia-online.pijarzy.pl); [pl.shoong.com](http://pl.shoong.com); [www.historiasztuki.com.pl](http://www.historiasztuki.com.pl). Individual users’ addresses are also available. In addition, Google search (browser) offers keywords: medieval painting, the Romanesque style, Gothic art, medieval architecture, medieval music, the Middle Ages, medieval literature, medieval art of Poland, medieval art of Europe.<sup>10</sup> If we trace the above mentioned websites – the choice is enormous. And these are just the very first three websites offered by the browser.

Logically speaking, one ought to search for illustrated images – since it is impossible to come up with ideas about art without previously watching its model works – I have chosen a website with illustrations: images of medieval art.<sup>11</sup> When the user selects the first icon, the browser directs him or her to [witryny.blaga.pl](http://witryny.blaga.pl). The website presents a number of beautiful illustrations but not all of them relate to the Middle Ages which can mislead students and, undoubtedly, lead to cognitive confusion.<sup>12</sup>

When selecting the first of the offered illustrations, the website displays pictures of the interior of a Gothic cathedral and we may presume that this is a cathedral – due to its architectural structure, yet the picture is not signed and no information from the text refers to it.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, it only contains general, incoherently formulated information, for example: “*Medieval sculpture was connected with architecture because the former served as an ornament. It mainly presented – similarly to paintings – religious content or ideas. St. Mary’s Altar by Veit Stoss, a very popular gothic sculpture of one of the greatest artists of the Middle Ages, serves as an example. The sculpture is located in Cracow.*”<sup>14</sup>

Users of this website must demonstrate their self-discipline and determination when searching for specialist information because apart from the terms connected with art visible on accompanying additional information space, the website offers for example “Rock and metal bands”, and the recommending text is about OASIS band. There is a temptation, therefore, to “surf” more attractive “waves”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> GÓRNIOWICZ, J.: *Sztuka i wyobraźnia*. Warszawa 1989, p. 5, 7; KUKSEWICZ, Z.: *Wyobraźnia jako władza duszy. (Na przykładzie poglądów Michała z Wrocławia i Jana Z Głogowa)*. In: Michałowska, T. (ed.): *Wyobraźnia średniowieczna*. Warszawa 1996, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Available on: <http://www.google.com/search?q=sztuka+%9Bredniowiecze&rls=com.microsoft> [cit. 2011-09-26].

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Available on: [http://www.google.pl/search?q=sztuka+%C5%9Bredniowieczna&hl=1&nord=1T4SUNA\\_enPL317PL211&site=webhpp&prąd=imvn&tbn=isch&tbo=u&Skurce=univ&SA=X&ei=hoXPTqqL15HCswa-gooWsDA&sqi=2&ved=0CHIQAQ&Biw=501](http://www.google.pl/search?q=sztuka+%C5%9Bredniowieczna&hl=1&nord=1T4SUNA_enPL317PL211&site=webhpp&prąd=imvn&tbn=isch&tbo=u&Skurce=univ&SA=X&ei=hoXPTqqL15HCswa-gooWsDA&sqi=2&ved=0CHIQAQ&Biw=501) [cit. 2011-11-25].

<sup>13</sup> Available on: [http://blaga.pl/Sztuka\\_sredniowieczna.html](http://blaga.pl/Sztuka_sredniowieczna.html) [cit. 2011-07-05].

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

When selecting the headword “medieval art” on klp.pl website, one can see the content put in order: the Romanesque art, Gothic art – architecture and sculpture, Gothic art – painting. One can also find short information here with the possibility of extending it through the option “more”. The lack of hypertext is a cognitive barrier to this collection. Although such terms like “stained glass”, “mural” are marked with bold type, for a beginning history explorer, with absolute certainty an elementary school student or even a secondary school student, it would be more appropriate to use a reference which would explain the above mentioned terms.<sup>16</sup> Clear arrangement of medieval art styles: architecture and the multitude of signed illustrations presenting examples of medieval structures is an unquestionable advantage. However, for an unknowledgeable user – it is not enough – the descriptions are missing which would exactly demonstrate individual architectural solutions. Painting is illustrated with Giotto’s beautiful works. However, it is far too one-sided presentation for a student showing the decline of medieval style. The English captions under the illustrations may also pose some difficulty.<sup>17</sup>

Website [www.bryk.pl](http://www.bryk.pl) is a popular. Our subject matter can be elaborated on the topic: *Medieval art – its characteristics and works*. There are additional sections: *reading, works, dictionaries, add a work, exams, how to write, forum* – and here the administrator predicted its usefulness for elementary and secondary school students.<sup>18</sup> Information on art is given in an accessible form, though the lack of illustrations complementing the text is a drawback. If we read on the subject of defensive functions of structures, then we are given information in brackets concerning how they exhibited these functions (“*they were additionally surrounded by walls and moats*”). Similarly, in the case of painting the content was defined as “*allegorical and symbolic*”, we read about “*rigid facial expressions of saints*”,<sup>19</sup> most commonly used colors by artists. On the basis of such constructed text the reader is able to create the images that would introduce him to the characteristics of medieval art. But an elementary school student or even a secondary school student may have problems with reading comprehension. Next to an explained term “rose window” (“*a round window with stained glass*”) we find expressions belonging to a typical professional jargon: “*under constructed walls*” that are not built. For more demanding [www.bryk.pl](http://www.bryk.pl) website recommends works: *The theme of ‘dance macabre’ in medieval literature and art; Comparative analysis of Hans Holbain’s woodcuts and the Conversation between Master Polikarp and The Death; Allegorical nature of medieval art and literature; Medieval art; The Middle Ages as a period of superstition, ignorance and benightedness*. When quoting various examples of medieval texts and works of art take a position on this statement.<sup>20</sup>

Another website [interia.pl](http://interia.pl) offers other kind of information. The subject *Medieval art* was elaborated on the basis of websites:

<http://edusek.interklasa.plartykuly/artykulida/4353/idc/17/>;  
<http://www.xiv-lo.krakow.pl/~abanka/malarstwo/religijne.html>;  
<http://republika.pl/dysku/sredniowiecze/sztukasr.htm>;  
<http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akt>.<sup>21</sup>

Information contained here supported by medieval miniatures are illustrative but they seem to be appropriate for high school students. As an example, let us quote a fragment of the text: “*The Romanesque painting is characterized by the lack of perspective-unreality and by the*

<sup>16</sup> Available on: <http://sredniowiecze.klp.pl/ser-207.html> [cit. 2011-07-05].

<sup>17</sup> Available on: <http://sredniowiecze.klp.pl/a-6305.html> [cit. 2011-11-26].

<sup>18</sup> Available on: [http://www.bryk.pl/teksty/liceum/j%C4%99zyk\\_polski/%Bredniowiecze/5053-](http://www.bryk.pl/teksty/liceum/j%C4%99zyk_polski/%Bredniowiecze/5053-) [cit. 2011-07-05].

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Available on: <http://sztuka.sredniowiecza.w.interia.pl/pliki/malar/mal.html> [cit. 2011-10-10].

attempts to present the world in a subjective way, a total absence of plans and dull scheme, e.g. the miniature of the Code of Pultusk.” The same text contains logical and spelling errors. For instance: “*Thatched structures, that is teams of craftsmen of different specialties working on the design and construction of structures, had easy structure and wider range of activities.*”<sup>22</sup>

No analysis of online resources would be complete without considering texts available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. The subject of medieval art is presented in great detail, supported by illustrations and divided into a number of sections: the Romanesque architecture, Gothic architecture (in English, France, Spain, Germany, Poland, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Italy and Central Europe).<sup>23</sup>

Websites *The Romanesque Architecture* and *Gothic Architecture* contain extensive information supported by numerous illustrations depicting the Romanesque and Gothic structures. The captions under the illustrations indicate their location. However, the content is directed towards experienced users. High text difficulty marked by professional terms that are not translated, (for example: “*ostrołukowe łęki międzynawowe*”, “*machicolations*”, “*tracery*”, “*wimperg*”, “*ogival cradle vault with lunettes*”, and many others prove this fact.<sup>24</sup> That indicates that the text is addressed to a group of professionals, most probably to art historians and architects. Even a historian would encounter here cognitive barriers.

Zadane.pl; zaliczaj.pl; ściaga.pl; Ściaga-eduseek belonging to interklasa.pl belong to another group of information. These are the most popular websites among young users including complete assignments, the so called “readymade assignments”. A brief characterization of the Romanesque and Gothic style was placed on the last website by one of the users. This is a typical example of an “original”, rough and oversimplified note which shows the immaturity of the author’s knowledge. Let us quote several features that are to constitute the examples of the Romanesque style. The author claims that these were among others “*massiveness and simplicity of structures, thick walls, simple low reliefs*”<sup>25</sup> – therefore the note suggests rather a primitive style. When describing the Gothic architecture, in turn, the author mentions “*thin, [sic!] walls and trusses*”. Additionally, the reader learns about “*the spirituality of the Gothic architecture*” and that one can “*notice chiaroscuro*”<sup>26</sup> in the interior. If such information is to give us an idea about the Gothic architecture – we can only have a hazy idea of Gothic cathedrals similar to that of houses of cards!

Websites devoted to specialists, professionals or fanatically involved users are another category. Let us mention here historycy.org website; which can direct users to another website [www.templariusze.org/katedry1.php](http://www.templariusze.org/katedry1.php) where one can find some valuable information contained in the text: “*Katedra. Sztuka blasków i pielgrzymowania światła.*”<sup>27</sup> The text is supported by beautiful illustrations which perfectly activate our imagination. It is doubtful, however, that a young user would reach the website. Instead, an inquisitive and creative teacher would direct a user to the website. Therefore, a student would get a hint concerning a reliable source of information but would be deprived of independent research. As a consequence, such way of gaining information would be effective but would not allow students to develop their skills of selecting sources, creative selection of information and finally – would deprive a student of a possibility of creating individualized narrations.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Available on: [http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Architektura\\_gotycka\\_w\\_Polsce](http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Architektura_gotycka_w_Polsce); [cit. 2011-10-18].

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Available on: <http://eduseek.interklasa.pl/sciaga/praca.php?idp=140> [cit. 2011-11-28].

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Available on: <http://www.templariusze.org/katedry1.php> [cit. 2011-10-24].

It appears, therefore, that working under the guidance of a teacher is by far the basic form and method of developing the ability to work with the Internet as a database appropriate both for elementary and secondary schools. A user is limited by far too many cognitive barriers in the Internet sources. There is a multitude of information. Most of them contains repetitive material. In order to reach more interesting and original content one needs determination, excellent knowledge of the subject of the research and criticism. An elementary or secondary school pupil certainly does not possess these skills. One cannot expect of a pupil to create a creative assignment using the material from websites. It seems that in the early stages of education, students' usage of the Internet should be subject to greater control and conduct of a teacher who ought to be knowledgeable about websites content and possible redirections. And then use them appropriately – at least at the initial stage of using information from the Internet – in history teaching/learning. It is necessary to become skilled at using the Internet. It is important to adopt and select methods that would help meeting the educational standards in the case of using websites. Otherwise, a student will find the Internet a waste of time or a duplication of simple solutions.

Finally, it is worth recalling an old and well-known principle that the effectiveness of the use of different sources of knowledge is directly proportional to students' knowledge and skills. The Internet resources do not bring a revolution in this respect. And vice versa, they require even greater ability to analyze the material, and an intelligent mind. Attention to that mind depends on professional working and teacher's and student's cooperation.

In the final consideration I wish to quote a note placed on thematic space "unusually on art" on blaga.pl. Those, however, who seek some alternative ways of becoming knowledgeable in this area will be very disappointed. Let us quote the note in order to confirm our hypothesis that the Internet resources, to a small extent, contribute to stimulating young students' imagination: "*Art is really beautiful and there is no doubt that it is popular with many people [...]. Unfortunately, it is difficult nowadays to think of something that has not been on a large scale yet. This is why art is considered very hard these days [...].*"<sup>28</sup>

Allow me, Reader, not to comment on this truly avant-garde commentary.

## Resumé

### **Středověké umění na webových stránkách jako pramen historických představ**

Z dosavadních výzkumů vyplývá, že na úrovni základní školy žák není schopen kreativně využít webové stránky bez pomoci vyučujícího. Aby dospěl k hodnotným a zajímavým informacím, musí být vytrvalým a kritickým badatelem. Tyto schopnosti dítě většinou nemá. Důležitou úlohou učitele je proto naučit žáka odpovídajícím metodám hledání na internetu. Je to možné jen tehdy, bude-li se on sám v internetu dokonale orientovat.

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<sup>28</sup> Available on: <http://blaga.pl/nietykowa-sztuka.htm> [cit. 2011-20-25].