

Making the Joy of Christmas Meaningful

Already having become a tradition, students' international artwork contest "A Christmas Card", organized by the Lithuanian Centre of Non-Formal Youth Education and supported by Irena Degutienė (member of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania) is a beautiful celebration which indirectly unites over a thousand children from all over the world and has been continuing for three consecutive years. This year, the organizers of the contest have received as many as 1066 interesting and original Christmas miniatures from various Lithuanian schools of general education, as well as specialized art schools. Students from Croatia, Spain, Ireland, Brazil, Belarus, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation have participated in the contest.

According to the regulations of the contest, students' artworks were evaluated in three separate age groups. The youngest artists were children from the age of seven to ten, the second age group included students aged between eleven and fourteen years old, and the third one encompassed children and youths aged between fifteen and eighteen years old. This year, same as in the previous competitions, a specially-appointed evaluation committee selected five winners for each age group. The winning artwork, as well as the works of the rest of the students, will be displayed in an exposition in the palace of Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. What is new this year is that another exhibition of the works created by the participants of "A Christmas Card" will be displayed inside the premises of the Lithuanian Centre of Non-Formal Youth Education where they will be seen by many children who take art and other various lessons there. With Winter festivities coming up, they will definitely be pleased to see the Christmas-y fantasies of their peers. Perhaps this might even inspire them to pick up a paint brush or a pen and create something of their own...

Now, let us take a peek at the backstage of the evaluation committee discussions. Students' works were carefully evaluated by well-known artists, experienced art teachers, and lecturers. The committee was headed by Gediminas Žuklys, Assistant Professor at the Department of Drawing at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. Other members included representatives from the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiulionis National School of Art - expert art teacher, member of the Lithuanian Artists' Association, painter Ingė Talmantienė, as well as painter and art teacher-methodologist Audronis Žemaitis; teacher-methodologist at Vilnius Karoliniškės Gymnasium, head of the Art Teachers' Association, Rimantas Kisielius; teacher-methodologist at Vilnius Simonas Daukantas Gymnasium, and member of the Art Teachers' Association, Auksė Žukaitė. The author of this text - an art critic, Art History teacher, Chairwoman of the Art Department of the Lithuanian Artists' Association, represented Vilnius Justinas Vienožinskis Art School in evaluating the works of the participants of the competition. However, no matter how serious and solid our committee was, it also needed someone to provide accurate information, carefully count the votes and moderate discussions. This job was done by the secretary of the committee, methodologist at the Lithuanian Centre of Non-Formal Youth Education in the Department of Arts and Cultural Education, Audronė Urbelionienė, who is the initiator of the contest and has valuable experience in children's non-formal arts education.

Indubitably, all the contestants, along with their parents, teachers and exhibition viewers are extremely curious about how the evaluation of the artworks takes place, how the committee selects the best, most original works from a myriad of painted miniatures... It is, indeed, a very difficult and responsible task: the art specialists carefully view every single work of each contestant and begin the selection process based on their experience, objective evaluation criteria and well-trained intuition. Their opinions don't always coincide, which sparks passionate discussions about the uniqueness of the works, the technique used, the way the artist interpreted the theme of Christmas. The pieces of art made by contestants from different age groups are up for consideration to be potential winners time and time again... When the members of the committee cannot decide on something, they often agree to have a democratic vote, as well as listen to every opinion and often contradictory arguments... As a result, an artwork that was so close to being crowned as one of the winners may give its place up to another one – and vice versa... Of course, judging this beautiful event from a wider perspective, evaluation is certainly not the most important thing here. All of the participants, without exception, are great, creative, charming young individuals who wow us with genuine visual expression in the face of modern technology, having preserved a real sensible, human connection with the world around them. Their artwork is a reflection of the true values of the youngest representatives of our society. They testify to the fact that people's fears for the younger generation – the general idea that our youths are a “computerized” generation full of various psychological issues, far removed from reality – are unfounded. It is obvious that children's and youngsters' visions of Christmas come to be not only with the help of technological knowledge, but also by observing the world – the nature, the people we see around us, family members, festive traditions and attributes. It is especially great to see that most of the students are able to avoid trite, stereotypical Christmas imagery, and if they do decide to draw, say, a snowman, a Christmas tree, or a bunch of presents, they do it in a distinctive, unique way.

When discussing specific artwork of the students, the members of the committee always talk about the general image of the participants' works, the prevailing tendencies among students of different age groups. This year, we noted that the students created many great works using graphical tools but we also were impressed by the subtle painted miniatures, watercolours and mixed-technique artwork. In fact, creating a picture full of Christmas spirit on merely a 10x15 centimetre piece of paper is a daunting task that requires not only big imagination and the ability to break away from stereotypes, but also compilation skills, diligence, attention and patience. We were also really pleased with the works that were sent to us by Lithuanian children from special education schools, which were created with fervent sincerity and expression. After all, that is actually the main goal of this competition - to create conditions for self-expression of all students without exception, to encourage creative experiments and searches, and finally, to express the joy of upcoming Christmas.

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