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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 20th century, researchers have been writing about the importance of expressing by art during the early childhood for cognitive and mental development. This article examines daily art activity after school entry and its effects on the transition from kindergarten into school. It is based on a research project conducted by an international and interdisciplinary research team. The researchers come from the fields of art education as well as from pedagogy and didactics of primary level from two different countries, Israel and Germany. The use of sketchbooks as a private visual diary gives the children an additional voice and provides them with opportunities to play, imagine and decide how to integrate formal knowledge into the familiar visual language of art. Based on our findings, we discuss

whether the sketchbooks activity can transform the class into a social learning community and if they cushion the transition into school.

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Keywords: Sketchbooks, Early-childhood, Transition into school, Transformation of the classroom, Alternative learning mode

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, researchers have been writing about the importance of expressing by art during early childhood for cognitive and mental development (Arnheim, 1969; Efland, 1990; Kerschensteiner, 1905; Kindler, 2004; Lowenfeld, 1947; Matthews, 2004). Childhood, as an important stage in life, is characterized by various transition processes. Parallel to physical and emotional changing processes, children are facing educational transitions from family to kindergarten and from kindergarten to the first formal school, the primary school. Transitions can be defined as “distinctive transformation processes [...] stimulated by coping with discontinuities on several levels, which are socially and culturally embedded” (Griebel & Sassu, 2013, p. 327). Transitions are challenges that can be dealt with successfully or form personal crises for the individual child (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Griebel & Niesel; 2003). This article examines an art activity during early childhood in terms of its effect on the transition from kindergarten into school. It is based on research conducted by Orly Zer-Aizner, a classroom teacher, who responded to this challenge using expressing via art as a routine activity in first and second grade classes¹. Following the presentation of this case study, we discuss some of the main characteristics of the transition from kindergarten into school and the difficulties which children will be confronted with. Thereafter we discuss whether the routine art activity can help ease some of these difficulties which occur in transition processes from kindergarten or pre-school into school.

A study of daily art activity

The case study focusses on the everyday art activity with first and second graders in a primary school in Israel. The school is located in the north of the country, serving a small new settlement of young middle and high-income families. Orly Zer-Aizner, one of three first grade teachers of

¹ The data was collected and analyzed together with Dr. Nurit Cohen Evron, a senior lecturer in art education and a researcher of the field, and Dr. Anja Seifert, who is a German scientist of education sciences and comes from the field of childhood and transition studies.

this school and one of the researchers, offered her students the opportunity to work in special sketchbooks while listening to quiet background music each day. She first chose this activity with the aim of keeping the children calm when they entered her classroom. She repeated this activity routinely for twenty minutes three times a day: when the students entered her classroom in the morning at the beginning of the school day, and twice after the long breaks. Although the art activity lasted just twenty minutes, the students were not frustrated by the limited time because they knew that they could return to their work again soon.

She found this method of classroom management a useful and enjoyable way of easing the transition of the physical, emotional and noisy activities which occurred outside the classroom into a different environment and setting (Griebel & Sassu, 2013). It helped her students to process their experiences and prepare themselves gradually for the class activities which demand inner quietness and concentration. She valued the fact that the calm atmosphere was not imposed by authority, but rather resulted from her students' own relaxation.

At the beginning of the first grade, most of the children looked forward to participating in an art activity which was familiar from their kindergarten. Those few who hesitated to draw freely in the drawing sketchbooks, joined in after seeing their classmates' enjoyment of this activity and getting used to the classroom routine. When their reading ability improved, students, who didn't feel like painting or drawing, could read a book during this relaxing period. Toward the end of the first grade and during the second grade, Zer-Aizner encouraged the students to combine both activities: reading and drawing.

Zer-Aizner described in her research diary how she dealt with those few children who were resentful toward this art activity: "I tried to understand their reasons for avoiding drawing and suggested ways to start, such as scribbling, drawing a shape, or add stickers - from which they can continue their drawing. When a kid had no idea what to draw, I suggested, him or her to consult his or her friends. It helped immediately. Their ideas were always better than mine". It seems that offering the routine art activity in a sketchbook helped those who had difficulties to start a drawing on a plain

white sheet (Kramer, 1971); This private, little space, invited experimentation without judgment, with the possibility of turning the page and starting a new drawing. She never had a student who didn't want to paint at all, but there were children who preferred to draw with friends or to write in their sketchbook.

Sometimes, at the end of this drawing activity, students asked to show their work to the teacher or share it with the class. Zer-Aizner planned a time slot for sharing the drawings at almost every end of the school-day. She used the students' presentation for highlighting the strength of the drawing and invited the kids to appreciate the outcome and to suggest ideas for additional paintings.

In a discussion of this art activity among Zer-Aizner's second graders, many mentioned that these were the most pleasant moments during the school day, describing them in terms of "joy", "relaxation" and "fun." For example: "When I come back from the break feeling irritable after a fight in a football game and I start painting, it calms me down...You start to reconstruct what happened or something and start to relax." Although this activity took up a whole hour each school-day, the primary school teacher did not consider it to be a waste of time because it showed positive effects, it allowed her to start the lessons calmly.

Since the teacher gave no specific instructions for this activity, we were interested in studying how the students used their private sketchbook individually, and whether there are any other benefits resulting from this ungoverned activity beyond relaxation.

The research is based on data collected in two different classes taught by the same teacher.² We used classroom observations, video and audio recordings of the students at work with their sketchbooks, during the

² The research began as part of Orly Zer-Aizner's studies at the Master Program in Art Education at the School of Art, Beit Berl College. In the first case, the data was collected during the years 2009- 2011 when the students were in the first and second grade. Among the 32 students, 6 were identified as students with special needs, and 6 as gifted. In the second case the data was collected during the year 2012- 2013 in a class of 24 students in first grade. The students in this case performed on a normal scale. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy. All students and their parents volunteered for the participation.

presentation of their artwork to the classmates or the teacher, and during private and group conversations about this activity. We also photographed the children's sketchbooks (with their permission), and used Zer-Aizner's research diary. In order to study how the students and teacher used the art activity, we analyzed the visual materials using visual methodology (Rose, 2007); and we used text analysis (Schwandt, 1997) to study the conversations and the teacher's diary.

Transition into school - Becoming a school child

In western society when children turn six or seven, they enter the formal school system. This arbitrary act of the state has dramatic effects on their childhood (Shain, Ronen and Israshvili, 1998). Becoming a primary school pupil is not a single event, it is rather a process which begins one or two years before the first school day and can last until the end of the second school-year.

Although learning and playing belong together in childhood, they operate differently within the institutional concepts of kindergarten and primary school, due to the fact that their history and self understanding as pedagogical institutions are different. When Friedrich Froebel (Fröbel, 1782-1852) invented the kindergarten, he based the curriculum on playing, which he regarded as an active representation of inner life and self-expression, revealing the nature of a child's soul. The "gifts" and "occupations" he created for kindergarten children were designed to enable them to learn through free use of materials and shapes such as wooden cubes on grid tables. These materials and games were regarded as ways to explore nature, science and aesthetics (Brosterman, 1997; Efland, 1990).

Since the first kindergarten was established in the 19th century, many things have changed, but the concept of the educator-like a gardener -being the one to provide the proper conditions for children's growth is still fundamental (Brosterman, 1997). The kindergarten offers opportunities for verbal, visual and physical expression where young children encounter different materials and activities to arise their curiosity and enable them to create their own world. These include providing paints or clay, a puppets corner, wooden cubes and a junk yard, among others (Hass, 1998).

Even in a less “romantic” view of the kindergarten, the differences between kindergarten and school are noticeable. While both institutions aim at socializing the young generation, they refer to different theoretical and historical backgrounds, they use different time-structures, teaching methods and have different views on children’s learning processes.

Adjustment to the social and academic environment of school

From the moment children become students in school, they are disciplined in a bodily manner: school limits their movement for hours by seating them at a suitable table, detached from other children, and facing the teacher who maintains control over everyone at once (Foucault, 1979; Sheinberg, 2003). Being aware of the teacher’s potential scrutiny, the children learn to govern themselves and behave as expected from normal students. Foucault (1983) described the means which ensure the desired behavior:

[I]t is developed by means of a whole ensemble of regulated communications (lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks of the "value" of each person and the levels of knowledge) and by means of a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy). (Foucault, 1983: 218-219)

During the lessons the children have to keep quiet, speaking only with the teacher’s permission, and on issues determined by the subject-matter at hand. The different pedagogical methods used to teach various disciplines seldom include playing with toys, materials and friends; they are usually limited to writing and reading, activities which the children are still learning to master and for which they depend on the teacher’s guidance for success. The blocks of time within the school schedule which permit children to decide for themselves what to do, what to talk about and with whom, are limited to short breaks outside the classroom.

For many children the process of adaptation to the school’s social and academic environment is fraught with difficulties, frustrations, fears and

crises. They express these difficulties by resisting going to school, by finding it hard to communicate with their peers or teachers or to behave according to the rules of the new system. Edelson (1992) has found symptoms of depression in 28% of first graders for periods ranging from two weeks to four months after the transition into school (in Shain, Ronen and Israshvili, 1998).

Sketching as an ungoverned activity in a private space

Sketching was part of the classroom activities in the work with the school beginners in this study. It required the children to situate their bodies quietly in a disciplined manner at their tables, each working with his or her assigned notebooks. The sketchbook itself was an object identified with school. However, as Zer-Eizner didn't give any further instructions to the students, working in the sketchbook was a legitimately playful and ungoverned art activity. Its use in classroom was similar to its use by artists—as a private visual diary which records observations of the external world and inventions, with the freedom to play, explore and experiment (Brereton, 2009).

The freedom of the ungoverned space provided by the sketchbook was described by a second grade boy: "I love to paint all kinds of things that are connected to war and I love simply to scribble. I do not paint beautiful paintings all the time... because in the sketchbook you can draw anything. So I paint freely...it is private. No one is watching me." The children painted and wrote about whatever interested them at the time, using any technique or medium they preferred. In these assigned sketchbooks there were no mistakes to be corrected, no right or wrong answers about any specific subject matter. Some were working carefully on one colorful painting for a whole week; others started a different sketch each time. Some students used it to tell sequential stories, and some worked randomly with no particular order.

Unlike in many formal art lessons, they could paint individually or initiate collaboration with others. One of the students described the reasons for inviting friends to draw together: "I like to paint with others. The painting has

more details because each one is adding something... When I paint by myself, sometimes I have no idea how to improve it."

Being aware of the privacy this space permitted and the fact that the teacher and classmates could only enter when invited, the students could be daring and challenging norms. For example, one of the best-behaved students in the class who was never violent, used his sketchbook to write curses he had never dared to speak out loud. Others used the space to act childishly, scribbling rather than drawing as would be expected from children of their age. As a private diary, the sketchbooks provided a legitimate space for recording the children's world beyond the school agenda: through this activity, matters which were emotionally and intellectually important to them gained entry into the classroom. These included a variety of themes, such as relations with their friends and families, imaginary worlds and stories, characters from their computer games and other media, repeated drawings of football games, beautifully-dressed girls, sharks, invented machineguns, science experiments, and so on.

As an undirected art activity, the sketchbooks entered into the void created by the reduction to almost null the opportunities for children to express themselves verbally or non-verbally on issues which were not part of the school's agenda. The arts, which are used at many kindergartens for this purpose, have a limited and marginal place in school and the children hardly get the opportunity for "free" undirected creative activity to express their own ideas and interests (Matthews, 2004; Wilson, 2004).

Following the ideas of progressive childhood research and theories, we can perceive and analyze this art activity as an opportunity to behave as children in school (not only as pupils) linking together their different childhoods (family life, peer culture activities etc.). During the transition period into school, at a point when children have not yet mastered the written language, the lack of a familiar visual language silences their young voices. In this aspect, the sketchbooks can be regarded as a 'child-centered' pedagogy.³ In response to standardized teaching, usually matching the

³ The idea of teaching in a child-oriented way, characterizes the classic 'reformist époque', on the turn of the 20th century. Friedrich Fröbel, who began to work with the influence of playing on learning processes as well as Heinrich Pestalozzi, whom is ascribed the principle of learning 'with head, heart and hand' (Heiland, 1996), can both be seen as visionaries for later reform ideas.

scheme of reciting, retelling and testing (Skiera, 2003), this 'child-centered' approach comprises the idea of radical school criticism as an institution of constraint and drill aiming to raise children as subjects rather than as individuals with independent thoughts.

The sketchbooks initiated alternative knowledge and learning processes

The repeated routine art activity with the sketchbooks encouraged the children to imagine, discover and create their own worlds, expressing them in their own ways. Their own world also included paintings which were influenced by others. They created pictures using ideas from friends sitting next to them which they developed by adding their own personal elements (figure 2). The students described this process when they presented their sketchbooks. For example a second grader pointed to his drawing and said: "Jonathan taught me to paint airplanes, and Uri and Avner taught me to draw the castles". While the act of copying from each other (rather than from the blackboard) might suggest a lack of self-confidence, it may also indicate part of a learning process based on observation of their surroundings and an interaction with other children, coming to conclusions and implementing new ideas. This learning process is often part of building social identity and forging friendships (Wiamar, 2005), it also can be named co-constructive learning based on peer-collaboration.

Like other art activities, the sketchbooks created opportunities for visual thinking and problem-solving processes (Arnheim, 1969; Matthews, 2004); it demonstrated cognitive processes other than those normally offered by the classroom teacher and it was evaluated by the school. For example, one child explained the problem he set himself in his drawing and the process of solving it: "For no particular reason I had an idea of a man who sees but cannot be seen. I had a problem: if I didn't paint anything, no-one would know that there is somebody that can see and cannot be seen. So I painted him with dots" (figure 1). A different example was provided by a student who used his sketchbook as a platform for presenting his high-level thinking and his knowledge about planets and space. He showed his teacher his drawing and asked her to find Pluto (the name of a dog in a famous children's story).

After failing to find the dog she was looking for, the pupil proudly explained that he drew Pluto very small, and pointed to a star in the sky. By reversing the common hierarchy and posing a question to the teacher, the student could demonstrate his knowledge and humor which were not part of the school curriculum. Another similar example was shown by two first graders who sat next to one another, each drawing a detailed scientific experiment they planned together.

For some of the children in this case study, the sketchbooks were the only means of expressing their knowledge. One was a first grader who was unable to sit quietly for more than five minutes during other assignments and whose achievements were limited as a result. However, he could work for hours with his sketchbook, creating beautiful, realistic and detailed paintings of fishes (figure 5), and three dimensional landscapes. Being able to demonstrate his knowledge skillfully through paintings, which were valued by his teacher and classmates, gave him step by step more self-confidence and more feelings of worth.

Many sketchbooks referred to the newly taught school knowledge such as writing and bible stories. Their expression of these subjects demonstrated the students' interpretations and understanding through their painted representations and, in many cases, also offered an alternative learning process. This self-initiated learning was based on the process of transferring new (unfamiliar) knowledge into a familiar scenario using the sketchbook in a playful manner; in this way, the children created ways of making the unfamiliar manageable. Thus the sketchbooks served as a bridge between the children's world and the school's agenda.

This bridging function was evident in many of the sketchbooks; for example, the numbers which were learned and posted on the classroom wall were used in a first grader's sketchbook to indicate different football players. Other students incorporated new words they had learned into their paintings (figure 3), or rewrote songs or stories which had been taught in class. A few students created comic-books which integrated text and visual images. In this self-initiated activity, learning became a meaningful and creative assignment through the incorporation of the child's voice.

While the formal learning was remote from the children's life, the knowledge contained in their sketchbooks played a social and emotional role. This was also acknowledged by the parents. A mother of a first grader wrote: "...There is no doubt that for her the opportunity to paint freely provided her with self-confidence and a lot of joy" (e-mail correspondence, March 2013). When the students showed their sketchbooks to the teacher or their classmates they became the source of knowledge; being aware of the empowering aspect of this, Zer-Aizner provided opportunities for those students who wanted to present their work.

Integrating the student's world and knowledge gained outside of school into the school's learning agenda was the teacher's way of transforming the classroom. It was her way of compensating for the marginal place of the children's world within the school system. The sketchbooks created an alternative venue of pursuing official knowledge handed down by the teacher—a situation which belittles the children. In contrast, the sketchbook provided the children's scholastic knowledge the opportunity to construct their own knowledge based on dialogue between the familiar and the new, in a process which empowered them.

Building social relationships through the sketchbooks

Art activity is usually considered to be an individual act and the sketchbook a private space. Nevertheless, like artists who share their edited sketches (Brereton, 2009), the sketchbooks were used as a venue for sharing knowledge and building social relationships. One way in which this was achieved is described above when students initiated partnerships by inviting one another to work together. Another example was provided by a second grader who recalled: "In first grade I met many friends that wanted to paint with me: it was an opportunity to get to know children through the painting". The importance of the social relationships facilitated by the sketchbook activity is evident in the case of a student who tended towards angry outbursts and had difficulty with managing conflicts with his friends. Because of his painting abilities, he became popular and many children wanted to sit next to him and paint with him together.

Zer-Eizner used the sharing of knowledge exhibited in the sketchbooks as an opportunity not only to empower individual students, but also to create a social community. Presentations of the artwork among classmates led to discussions about social values such as sharing, paying respect, listening, providing positive feedback, tolerance, etc. For example, when two first graders displayed work showing a detailed scientific experiment they had planned in their sketchbooks (figure 4), their classmates were appreciative in their feedback and told them they worked like "real scientists".

Pedagogy of caring and co-constructing in transition

According to Griebel & Niesel (2002), transition into school can be seen as processes which lead to changes in the settings, relations, identities and roles of the participants. In our study the teacher's pedagogical position of supporting and co-constructing the transition processes was reflected in situating the sketching activity within the core classroom agenda and inviting the children to demonstrate their brought knowledge and skills, and to give children a voice. A mother of a first grader described it thus: "It is heart-warming to see that everyone in class has such a private space and how you clarify to the children what is important in life and important to them as people" (e-mail correspondence with Zer-Aizner, March 2013).

An important outcome of intervening in the school discursive practice which marginalizes the children's world and formulates their voices into a very limited and partial venue was the special quality of the student-teacher relationship which was based on trust and confidence. When the students were working in their sketchbooks independently and quietly, the teacher had time to exchange a few words with each of them, to give them personal attention and to relate to problems that occurred. At these times she could be an observer, watching her students and identifying their moods; she could listen to the quieter children who were hesitant about expressing themselves verbally. In contrast to the usual conditions prevailing in school, it created the possibility for caring relations (Noddings, 2005).

The contents of the sketchbooks and the way the students used them provided opportunities to get to know the pupils as individuals beyond their academic performance. An example of this more holistic view was given by a

second grader with motor-graphic difficulties, which challenged his writing ability but not his visual expression, with which he felt more secure. He would not present his sketchbook to the class but he was happy to share it with his teacher as a way of communicating with her. From his imaginative paintings, full of delicate creatures painted next to fearful dragons and brutal battles, she learned about his rich inner world, his special humor and his sensitivity for details. Winning his teacher's appreciation, made him feel as worthy as the other students who achieved better academic results in their scholastic work.

The teacher learned about her students' developmental processes and their specific world by relating to the sketchbooks as a kind of private diary and means of narration. Using what she learned from the sketchbooks she could relate to the students more meaningfully during the limited time they had for personal communication during a school day.

Echoing the mother's e-mail to the teacher, Nel Noddings (2005) believes that the establishment and maintenance of caring relations provide a sound framework within which one can conduct moral education. The sketchbooks provided the opportunity to develop familiarity and trust that in a class of 32 students is usually impossible to achieve; thus the teacher could work from a caring perspective, maintaining a constant connection with the students, watching them develop and listening to them. In contrast to the school system of assessment, this provided a holistic picture based on intimacy (Noddings, 2005).

Hamre and Pianta (2006) argue that trustful relationships with teachers, such as those engendered by the described activity, are fundamental to both the academic and social-emotional development of the students. They provide a unique entry point for educators to improve the social and learning environment in schools. Positive relationships with teachers provide a secure base for young children; they are more able to play and work independently when they know they can count on their teacher to recognize and respond to their problems.

Hamre and Pianta's (2006) arguments may explain the results achieved by Zer Aizner's second graders in math and language art assessed by the school. The test at the end of the second grade aimed to map the children's

academic abilities in order to consider whether to regroup them within the three classes. Although her class undertook formal study for an hour a day less than the other two classes taught by other teachers during the first two years, her students scored higher in math (the average grade was 91 compared with 82 and 84 in the other classes) and scored the same in language art (the average was 81 compared with 76 and 84). While further research is needed to determine whether this is the result of the sketchbook activity, there is no doubt that the time dedicated to art activities did not interfere with academic achievements.

Sketching in the transition from kindergarten to school

The transition from kindergarten to school means processes of change in the everyday life of children and their families. In our analysis of how the students and the teacher used the sketching activity and its impact, we learned that it is much more than just a method of classroom management helping to calm down the students. Our findings, as well as the resonance of parents and their interest in the sketchbooks, show the various ways in which the sketchbook activity deals with the challenge of transition from kindergarten to school:

- * The simple routine art activity situated the children's world and voice at the center rather than at the margins.
- * It linked the familiar environmental experiences of kindergarten and family childhood with the recent ones and offered the children possibilities to cope with stressful and new situations.
- * Continuing the undirected painting and drawing, which were elements of their daily kindergarten education, legitimated informal imaginative learning processes based on student's initiative.
- * The ungoverned activity allows the entrance of emotional and intellectual issues of interest to the students and allows them to initiate their own learning procedures. It respected the students as sources of knowledge and empowered them.
- * Within the traditional school setting, the daily visual diary established caring relationships which provide the foundation needed by all children for successful adaptation to the social and academic environment.

In sum, encouraging children's need to explore and imagine, and providing them opportunities to decide how to integrate writing, arithmetic and other formal knowledge into the familiar visual language of art, can help to soften the transition and can transform the class into a social learning community. Being able to rely on their teachers' empathy and understanding can alleviate some of the difficulties children encounter in their adjustment to school (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Summary

The traditional school discourse creates a separation between formal learning settings and the children's previous ways of learning as well as the children's world outside school (including family childhood and peer culture-life). This separation often leads to unmotivated students being disciplined to obey behavioral rules of learning by teachers, rewarding them when answering the "right" expected answers. Scholars such as Freire (1971), Goodman (1971) Giroux (1981), Postman (1998) and Greene (1995) argue that this kind of schooling teaches the students to internalize desirable social norms, at the cost of asking questions and damaging self-learning motivated by curiosity and interest. This traditional way of learning and teaching is one of the reasons students resist schooling at all levels.

Maxine Greene (1995) claimed that often the implication of the dominance of standards, assessment, outcomes, and achievement in the school discourse, is that teachers and students often feel it is to their benefit to comply. It posed a challenge to us as educators: "How can teachers intervene and say how *they* [original emphasis] believe things ought to be? What can they do to affect restructuring? What can they do to transform their classrooms?" (Greene, 1995, p. 9) The simple routine sketchbook activity is a possible way of answering these enduring questions. It, indeed, offers a method for the school teacher to relate to childhood and to schooling as more than teaching according to curricular contents and planned teaching methods.

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Appendix: Students' art works

The Use of
Sketchbooks in
the Transition
From
Kindergarten to
School

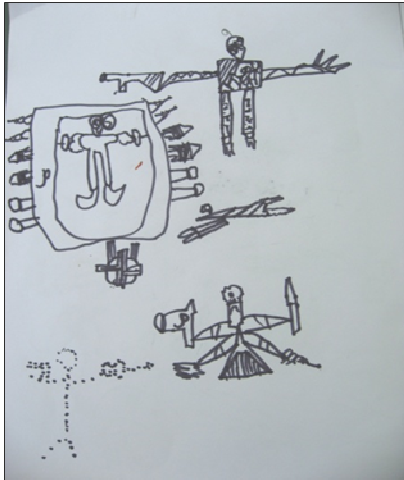


Figure 1 From the sketchbook of a first grade boy: A man that sees but cannot be seen.



Figure 2 Painting of a second grade girl influenced by another girl's sketchbook.

The Use of
Sketchbooks in
the Transition
From
Kindergarten to
School



Figure 3 Creating a map of a city by a first grader which incorporates writing and painting.



Figure 4 A Scientific experiment designed by a first grader.



Figure 5 A first grader's realistic and detailed painting of fish.