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# Bulgarian Roses and the Art of Art Education

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Mirena Vaseva is an Art Education Ph.D. student from Plovdiv University, Bulgaria, who joined the Faculty of Education in Charles University during her Erasmus study in the summer semester of 2015/2016. As an Art Education student it was an obvious choice for her to join the award winning Europe Meets School programme, a voluntary teaching programme of the Erasmus Club at the Faculty of Arts. This May, her project amazed both the host teacher in the Basic Art School Olešská in Prague 10 as well as the pupils in her guest class. The interpreter of the project complimented her profound enthusiasm and dedication to the project and its success.

Mirena made clay medallions for each of the children prior to coming to her host school and even cut dozens of rose petals out of red paper for her class so that the pupils would have an easier job of making paper roses out of them. Her commendable dedication was evidenced by the tears in her host teacher's eyes when Mirena's class was over and when she left the school.



1. *Mirena, You held an exemplary EMS art project recently, which centered around Bulgarian roses. What is the significance of a rose for Bulgarian people and how did you introduce the flower and its importance in Bulgaria and its people to your host class?*

Thank you for the lovely introduction! The reason why I chose flowers as the topic of my project was to show the children something unique to my country. The Bulgarian rose is a special symbol which embodies freshness of nature, aesthetics in Bulgarian culture and the pursuit of beauty and happiness. The Rose, grown to produce rose oil and other derived products, is used in the perfume industry. Bulgarian rose oil has superb quality that can compete with any other producers in the world and it is the preferred raw material of many reputable producers of perfumery products.

For the rose part of my project, children in my host class created „folders“ out of thick paper, which they later can use for collection of various things. On the top, the folders were decorated with glued-on paper roses and a painted view of the Bulgarian mountains in the background, inspired by the pictures shown in my opening presentation. I also brought rose oil with me and let the children smell the aroma, as rose oil is not as popular in the Czech Republic as it is in Bulgaria. While the children worked on their art works, we compared similarities in words between Bulgarian and Czech using the names of colours, flowers etc. as examples. It was also a good occasion to talk about a recent important date in Bulgaria, May 24th. On this date we celebrate the National Day of Education and Culture as well as Slav Letters and brothers Saint Cyril and Methodius who created the first Slavonic alphabet.

2. *Thank you for mentioning the Bulgarian alphabet. This is actually something our two nations share – the origins of the Slavonic alphabets can be found as far back as the 9th century, in Great Moravia, an Early Medieval state that existed for about one century in what is known as the Czech Republic and Slovakia today, and to some extent parts of Hungary and Austria. It was later abandoned in Czech countries due to the strong Latin church influence, but – after adaption – the Slavonic alphabet has survived in Bulgaria (among other countries) until today. As part of your project, you spoke to the children in your host class about the different alphabets and similarities and differences between our two languages as previously mentioned. Considering the children in your class were quite young, had they any knowledge about the different alphabets prior to your arrival at the school? How good were they at learning the basic Bulgarian words?*

I was pleasantly surprised how quickly the children embraced the different alphabet. Using the panel I had prepared at home prior to coming, I showed them the Bulgarian alphabet and consequently they all were able to write their names in Bulgarian! We repeated certain words and phrases together couple of times, such as *What is your name?*, *thank you*, *hello*, *sun*, *mother* etc., and I helped the children to make a connection between the three languages – English, Czech and Bulgarian. Together we found that there were interesting similarities between the languages – which I believe will be useful to the children.

3. *The second part of your project was the decoration of clay medallions you had made for the children. The decorations were inspired by the traditional Bulgarian embroidery and its current master, Stoyana Krustanova. Could you tell us more about this part of the project?*

When I was preparing this part of the project, I was thinking about what would be interesting and useful to children in an art course. Then I thought about my exciting introduction to an incredible artist, a true master, Stoyana Krustanova, a guardian and distributor of Bulgarian weaving techniques and embroidery. I wanted the children to „meet“ with her as I had done – and share the message which has strongly impacted me and I hope has the same effect on them. The message is that Art has no boundaries and when you love doing something – whether you are 4 years old or 94 – you do it because you love it! Despite her considerable age, Stoyana Krustanova opened an exhibition a few months ago, and now is preparing her next one, which is truly astonishing to me!

I also taught the children about Bulgarian traditional decoration techniques and showed them various pictures depicting the detailed art to them and explained how each figure and decorative element had its own symbolism. Based on all this, the children's task was to choose which ornaments to use and combine in the making of their medallions. I think they did very, very well!

4. *While the children were creating their rose cards and decorating their medallions, you sang Bulgarian songs to them. I can almost see them joining in with you singing ... Am I right to assume that both they and you enjoyed the project greatly? Were you also able to learn something by visiting a Czech Basic Art School? Is there actually any afternoon or free-time art course like this offered for children in Bulgaria?*

I think we all enjoyed the combination of the two arts. My idea was to show the children the attitude and the relationship between the various art disciplines and the diverse feeling to them. I think we got quite a complexity: when the children painted flowers, they smelt the (rose) aroma and listened to the song I performed... The application of different senses makes an artist more immersed in the world of art.

As to the visit of the school itself, I must say thanks to Helena Hradilová, who in addition to translating for me, acted as my teaching assistant, and also the host teacher – Mrs. Hana Horká was very kind and cooperative. She has a lot of experience in teaching art; during my visit to the school, she showed me works of the children from the course and we talked about various topics. I think this all will be useful to me. In Bulgaria we have a similar form of hobby art courses, but it is always helpful to share experiences with other enlightened people in the field! I am even starting to think about possible forms of a future cooperation!

5. *You proved to be a truly great and dedicated teacher in your project. Is teaching children your chosen career and if yes, what attracts you to it? Would you be interested in teaching children only or are adults also a potential target group for you? What are the main differences teaching art to children and to „grown-ups“?*

In Bulgaria I have had the opportunity to work with both children and adults, as well as students in the University of Plovdiv, where I am enrolled in a Ph.D. programme. By the latter, I am grateful for the confidence my department had



given me. For me being a teacher is a mission; I like feeling the desire to give everything in me to my audience. As a teacher, be it of art or any other subject, you can help to educate and create a personality – or damage it. Therefore it is very important that the teachers constantly develop themselves – mentally, spiritually and professionally. I like working with people – especially when I see the joy and positive reaction in the eyes of the person I was able to help to (while sharing the idea, knowledge, and showing them a way to solve their problems...). Through art people can communicate at many different levels – which is rewarding in itself.

*6. My last question. You are an artist yourself. What do you like to paint, draw, model or perhaps design the best?*

As an artist I like to deal with many things in the field of visual arts. It can be designs (often connected with children) or free art works (mixed media), in which I diffract reality through my eyes, feeling and experience... I like to create things that inspire me.

Thank you for the interview.

I would like to Thank you for this interview, too, and to Charles University, Department of Art Education in the Faculty of Education, for the opportunity to learn new things and to get in touch with the Czech culture. I met so many different and interesting people during my stay here – for which I am truly grateful.

**Aoife Brady** is an Irish International Law student on Erasmus in Charles University. She enjoys observing and reporting on the cultural immersion of Erasmus students and the integration of foreign students studying abroad. She also has a keen interest in travel and is looking to improve her journalistic skills.