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ACADEMIC TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY. THE CASE OF ART HISTORY*

Introduction: Modern digital advances have streamlined scientific research and teaching. At the same time, they present a challenge for teachers and researchers, whose methods must be adapted to this new reality.

Research Aim: The article primarily examines the teaching practice since 2007 and the author's own pedagogical innovation: weekly visual terminology exercises, which students value for facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and for actively engaging them in the teaching process. The article aims to highlight the changes that have taken place in art history teaching from the beginning of the 21st century to the present day. It also illustrates how academic research has evolved. Furthermore, it demonstrates which of the old teaching techniques and principles remain relevant and continue to have a universal dimension.

Method: The article is based on an analysis of the author's own experiences and the documentation gathered. It compares several hundred terminology tasks, the answers to them, conclusions drawn from lively discussions during Introduction to Art History classes, as well as other types of classes: tutorials, seminars and optional modules, as well as feedback from students. The author's own experiences of writing academic papers are also presented.

Results: Modern advances in computing mean that we are constantly skimming through texts, reading excerpts, summaries, and highlights. Meanwhile, it is still worthwhile to read extensive academic works from cover to cover. Written and oral terminology exercises, as well as familiarising students with numerous diagrammatic representations, remain essential, functional elements of the art history teaching process.

Conclusions: Thoughtful dialogue with artificial intelligence can be helpful rather than harmful. However, research and teaching methods will continue to evolve. Strictly humanities-based disciplines, such as art history, must be open to new teaching aids and the use of modern equipment that facilitates teaching and research.

Keywords: art history, academic teaching, research, artificial intelligence, introduction to art history, teaching methodology

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INTRODUCTION

Piotr Michałowski (1800–1855), a Polish Romantic painter and, at the same time, a prime example of a *homo universalis* – a man of broad learning and talent, a nineteenth-century polymath – wrote in a letter to his brother, Władysław Michałowski, dated 13 January 1820 that he knew of no greater delight than poring over Tacitus or Homer: there, one can learn to think, and he who cannot think can do nothing (Ostrowski, 1985, p. 130). It may be surmised that for Michałowski, these authorities served, for example, as ‘masters of logical reasoning,’ much like Aristotle and Averroes did for the thirteenth-century Witelon (Burchardt, 1979, p. 57). Michałowski did not, therefore, have in mind the acquisition of factual knowledge or mere information.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIM

In this article, I shall share my own observations and conclusions drawn from my experience in academic teaching and research. The aim is to redefine methods for teaching specialist terminology and certain other aspects of art history that are important for first-year students as well as for assessing students’ work. At the beginning of the 21st century, the prevailing view among art history students was that one should memorise the entries of the standard art history dictionary. This meant, for example, learning by heart the entries from ‘abacus’ to ‘ziggurat.’ This refers to dictionary of fine arts terminology, edited by Kozakiewicz (1976) or its newly published, revised version, which is a result of work of a team of authors (Bielska-Łach et al., 2020). This view must be regarded as inadequate on the one hand and unappealing on the other. For instance, the sets of diagrams that illustrate the types of artefacts that are key to understanding art in the various vocabularies complement one another, are partly distinct, or even unique compared to other publications.

Numerous dictionaries and books that contain general art terminology have been published. Most often, this terminology is also presented in the form of diagrams or illustrations. Many dictionaries have been reprinted several times (see e.g., Cole & Baker, 2022; Gabryś-Cichacz et al., 2008; Jendryczko & Bania, 2013; Jendryczko & Bergman, 2013; Kaczorowski, 2011; Koch, 1996; Krajewski et al., 1999; Mączyński, 1997; Mikocka-Rachubowa, 1997; Rządek & Tomaszewski 1991; Szolginia, 1991, 1992; White & Robertson, 2004; Winzer, 2000; Zwolińska & Malicki, 1990). Numerous entries and diagrammatic illustrations useful to art historians are contained in certain comprehensive encyclopaedic works (see e.g., Dmochowska & Kamiński, 2012; Gove, 1993).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In terms of scientific research, the article is based on my own research and verification of responses from such artificial intelligence systems as Microsoft 365 Copilot, Google Gemini, and ChatGPT. The teaching component is based primarily on weekly practical art history introduction sessions, held for one or two groups from 2014 to 2026, as well as on other classes, mainly seminars. The research sample includes sets that total several hundred terminology tasks, assigned at a rate of one to several per week, as well as over 23 termly terminology tests. Student responses, my commentary on the tasks, and model answers to the tasks were subjected to a detailed analysis. I also included feedback from my students as well as anonymous evaluation surveys of my university classes within the scope of the research.

DATA ANALYSIS

I teach a two-hour weekly field trip-based course on the introduction to art history for first-year undergraduate students, held in Gothic churches and in urban spaces in front of various buildings in the Old Town of Toruń, at the headquarters and branches of the Regional Museum, including the Museum of Far Eastern Art in the 'Kamienica Pod Gwiazdą' building, the University Museum, as well as the Diocesan Museum. In each case, this applies to both permanent and temporary exhibitions. Furthermore, sessions take place in contemporary art galleries, including the "Znaki Czasu" [*Sign of the Times*] Centre for Contemporary Art, the "Wozownia" [*Carriage House*] Art Gallery, and the Gallery of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers.

Students greatly value classes that take place in direct contact with works of art and prefer to discuss artistic issues directly in front of the artworks themselves, comparing their own formal and iconographic descriptions with the works of art and architecture. However, a significant proportion of the topics, as well as the extensive terminological issues, cannot be discussed on site, as many types of buildings and artefacts are not available in Toruń. Hence, when I began teaching practical sessions for the Introduction to Art History course in October 2014, I deemed it necessary to supplement the students' knowledge by introducing weekly 'visual terminology tasks' (abbreviated in Polish as WZT – read in plural as "wuzetki" – name of a popular Polish cream and chocolate biscuit).

The task involved several A4 or A5 printouts of diagrams. Each participant received one sheet. The diagrams were taken from various terminology dictionaries. The students' task was to identify the diagrams themselves, write down their answers, and hand the sheets back. The participants were then given their work back with correct answers. However, to solve the tasks, they had to constantly refer to the many terminology dictionaries listed in the syllabus, the



number of which has also been steadily increasing since 2014. Students with a keen eye for artistic forms are usually able to identify which dictionary a given diagram comes from and, though less frequently, can determine the origin of a given definition.

RESULTS

When introducing students to the intricacies of this teaching innovation for the first time, I quoted the line “Daran erkenn ich meine Pappenheimer” (Schiller, 1957, p. 695), taken from Friedrich Schiller’s *The Death of Wallenstein* (Act III, Scene 15), which is translated into English as “In this I recognise my Pappenheimers” (Schiller, 2017, p. 215). In the context of the course, this well-known saying means that, right from the start, I hope that I know you, my students, and that I can rely on you to master the course material. The quoted motto resulted in everyone recognising the 17th-century helmet known as a *pappenheimer* – one of the diagrams in the first terminology exercise. However, it later happened that they described the pappenheimer-type helmet generally as a *szyszak* – a typical helmet worn by the Polish winged hussars (cf. Gradowski & Żygulski, 2010). They did, however, correctly identify its parts: the nose guard, the bell with crests, the cheek pieces, and the flanged neck guard.

The recent pandemic has necessitated certain changes in this aspect of teaching. At that time, students received, via email or Microsoft Teams, colourful collages featuring my photographs with numbered architectural details, ornaments, and structural elements marked for identification, and were asked to submit their answers via email or Microsoft Teams. The tasks were discussed in class in a friendly manner, considering all the answers suggested by the students. All issues were clarified. Explanations were sometimes provided for minor but decisive differences that allowed a particular element to be classified under one type rather than another, for example, regarding Corinthian and Composite capitals or the bucranium and aegicranion motifs.

The examples demonstrated that the art history terminology system is largely natural and organic in nature. The photographic material used for the terminology exercises was gathered during university study tours, personal trips, and seven research fellowships abroad. In addition to meticulous library research, students sometimes solved tasks by using online image search engines. In such cases, it was easy for them to identify the specific object depicted in the illustration, but it was more difficult to determine the general type to which it belonged. In the introduction to art history course, the primary aim is to identify the broader category that an individual work represents. The best answers are produced by making use of both the benefits of the Internet and traditional printed books. The conclusions

drawn from the evaluation of the tasks made it possible to set a higher standard for the students, as in the case of the terminology for the ribs of a late-Gothic star-vault (see Figure 1 below).

Currently, students are also given photographic tasks. Sometimes, these are accompanied by thought-provoking questions or a task to compare two or more elements shown. For example, students were asked to identify sets of funerary attributes held by cherubs. The attributes, gestures, and facial expressions of the cherubs served to illustrate the concept of *vanitas* in art. Tasks based on black-and-white diagrams remain a compulsory element of the terminology tests, marking the end of the first and second semesters. These diagrams frequently featured in my supplementary classes for first-year students, which were conducted at an intensive pace of four teaching hours per week.

I also introduced non-graded oral tests in the form of visual terminology exercises, which were used to start the classes. The images printed on A4 sheets were already numbered. If a student did not know the answer, they passed the sheet to the next person with the same diagram number, which they were required to name and explain. However, students were initially stressed by this form of exercise, even though the tests were not assessed in any way. Consequently, the opening tests simply became 'additional educational materials' (abbreviated to DEMa – in Polish, 'demonstration versions'), which, as a rule, the students were allowed to keep. Students usually take notes on them and find them extremely useful.

The number of students in each group is small. This made it possible to tailor tasks to the academic interests of individual students. Small groups allow for a good understanding of each student's aptitudes and for the course of study to be tailored to the individual. Following a student's response, there would be a comment and an exploration of the meaning of the term in question, going beyond the information contained in terminology dictionaries.

Another principle was also applied: free choice, with students able to answer questions in any order they wished, and so they usually started with the most familiar elements and worked their way up to the most difficult ones. The overarching principles were variety, a dynamic approach to problem-solving, lively discussion, and the avoidance of monotony. Students always received feedback and solutions to the tasks, both through verbal explanations and via email.

Similarly, drawing on the teaching experience from the last pandemic and e-learning methodologies used in other types of classes, similar structures, various types of visual tasks and textual terminology have been introduced. The terms, this time not in the form of drawings but simply words taken from the assigned article or academic chapter, arranged in two columns, usually had specific, specialist meanings. In such cases, turning to the internet to try to find an answer did not guarantee the best results. Similarly, students were quick to explain the words found in the article or its English-language summary, primarily in the following

languages: English, German, Italian, Russian, Greek, and Latin. The discussion was dynamic. The aim was to consolidate and deepen the students' knowledge of specialist terminology in a foreign language. Similarly, this time the discussion was lively and allowed for a deeper understanding of the terms, going far beyond their dictionary definitions. During lively discussions on field trips or in the classroom, it is better not to use the internet. It is quicker and more effective to draw on one's own memory and assess issues related to works of art with one's own eyes. A similar method and approach have also proved useful in explaining palaeographic issues in Byzantine and later icons.

To encourage students to make use of a variety of sources, each student participating in the first session was given a sheet that featured a collage of dictionary and encyclopaedia entries relating to a single topic: entries on the **Biblia pauperum**. Through discussion, the students evaluated various aspects of a given definition, useful in different situations, and considered its general and specific meanings, as well as linguistic usage. The students learnt to use the resources in the correct order: starting with Polish language dictionaries and dictionaries of foreign terms, moving on to general encyclopaedias and various art terminology dictionaries, then specialist dictionaries, and finally general and specialist literature.

Similarly, in the seminar on Romanesque architecture for first-year students of a Bachelor's degree programme in Cultural Heritage Conservation, most of the sessions during the semester concluded with a similar discussion on the seven different dictionary definitions of the term 'westwerk' (elaborate western structure found in some Carolingian and Romanesque churches). For Interior Architecture students, knowledge of specialist visual terminology is also essential. Furthermore, these motifs enrich the designers' artistic portfolios.

During one of the first seminar sessions in 2007, students were given a lengthy informative text taken from the internet and a chapter from a thesis on the same subject. The students were able to conclude for themselves that the academic text was not only more valuable but also more interesting, containing points of reference that inspired them to critique it, accept it, or go beyond its scope. From then on, they eagerly read academic texts in subsequent classes, including selected excerpts from theses written for master's, doctoral, or postdoctoral degrees.

Students can make use of modern technology: high-zoom cameras, online maps, images from the internet, and the ability to write assignments on a computer, tablet, or even a mobile phone, which eliminates problems with text legibility and allows those with illegible handwriting to participate fully in course assessments. Magnifying glasses, for example with a higher, five-fold magnification, often found as reading aids, may prove useful for producing detailed descriptions of copperplate engravings with fine inscriptions. The students' work is creative and independent – they work in small groups under the watchful eye of the tutor, who provides guidance.

As a rule, since 2007, in seminars and optional classes for more senior students, students have been given reading material for discussion a week in advance, particularly as these materials were usually difficult to access or were only available on-site in a single copy or in the lecturer's possession. The introduction of this rule proved to be very practical and effective. Whereas students used to receive books or photocopies of articles, nowadays, in most cases, they receive publications in the form of links to numerous online academic databases, including those of individual publishers and online journal platforms, such as the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), the Academic Journal Platform of the Nicolaus Copernicus University (UMK), Ejournals, and the Heidelberg University collections.

When preparing for classes that are strictly discussion-based, students take notes in various ways: traditionally, on printed handouts; they make extensive notes on several separate sheets of paper; or sometimes they have the text highlighted and annotated on a computer or mobile device, such as a tablet. Practice shows that when preparing for classes and writing academic papers, traditional notes, written in one's own words, or hybrid notes – a combination of handwritten and digital – work best. Students should take notes to summarise the issue in the text using their own words. It is also useful to draft short sections of text on paper, so that they can later be incorporated into their own work in a word processor on a computer. Nowadays, it is essential to write the final versions of papers on a computer and to take most notes in this way. The situation is slightly different when it comes to writing out source quotations – here, any deviation from the text, any aberration, is unacceptable, and this often happens when taking notes by hand.

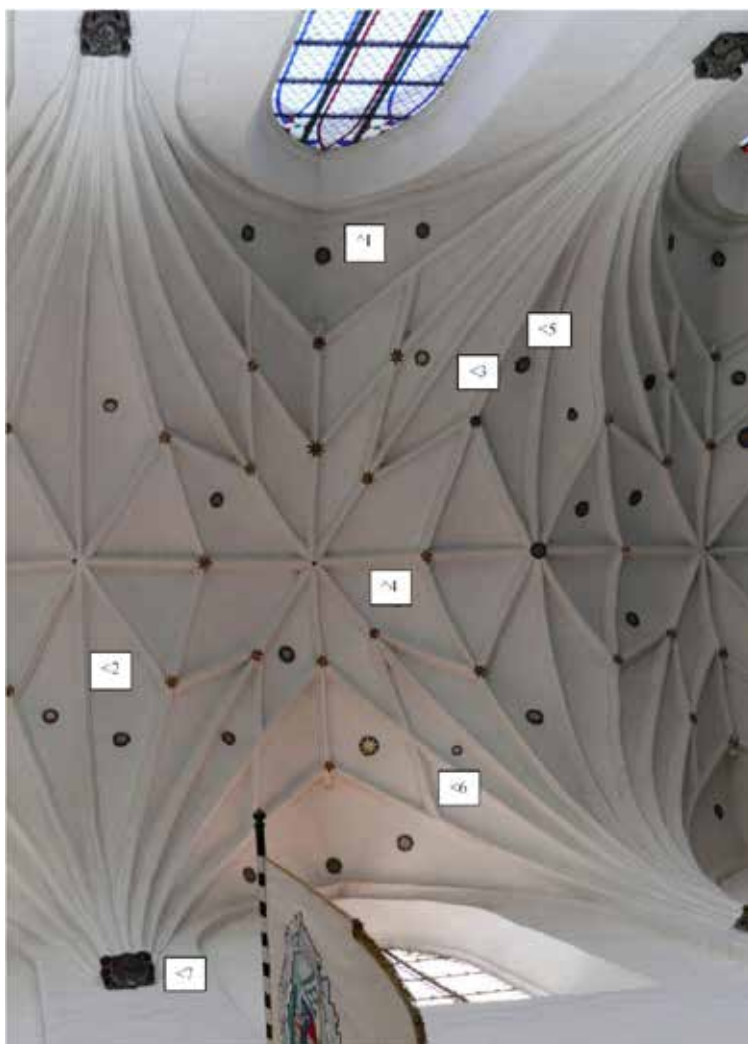
I will now turn to discussing academic research. During the pandemic, it was possible to borrow over 146 books at a time from several libraries, including those available only in the reading room or published a very long time ago, such as **Medieval Art** (Gębarowicz, 1934). The books were studied intensively and returned. In my case, this resulted in a sharp increase in the number of academic publications and one book-length monograph published in 2022 or based on art history research conducted during the pandemic.

It is striking how the timing and events coincide – 2022 saw the introduction of artificial intelligence into wider, even widespread, use in the form of ChatGPT – one of the many implementations of artificial intelligence. All publications from this year were therefore based not on the achievements of artificial intelligence, nor on its exploration, but on diligent work on texts, written sources, and collected photographic materials – all sources of an art historian. Nor were the publications produced as a result of using internet search engines, but rather through the independent synthesis of content, iconographic sources and reflections. The works were therefore produced using traditional methods, following the formulation of a new research topic and a meticulous, comprehensive analysis of a vast number

of printed publications in several languages relevant to the problem at hand, as well as references to works of art. In the 17th century, Rembrandt instructed his inquisitive pupils, who were bombarding him with questions: “Take it as a rule to use properly what you already know; then you will come to learn soon enough the hidden things about which you ask” (Slive, 1995, p. 111). It must be admitted that artificial intelligence copes surprisingly well with translating texts from one language to another and is becoming increasingly useful in the work of researchers, students and in everyday life.

Figure 1

Elements of a Star Vault: An Introductory Naming Exercise for First-Year Art History Students



DISCUSSION

Considering the above considerations, one might argue for a certain re-evaluation of academic research and teaching. Specifically, I propose that we should re-appreciate syntheses – primarily academic ones, of course, including older ones – and place greater emphasis on drawing knowledge from non-digitised printed works, those to which AI has no access. By ‘academic synthesis’ one should understand both Levey’s (1968) comprehensive *A History of Western Art* and the same author’s much more extensive work on French painting and sculpture, covering the entire 18th century and accompanied by a full scholarly apparatus (Levey, 1993). The situation is similar with regard to thematic monographs and works on specific works of art or artists.

Nowadays, it is relatively easy to find a specialist article – including one in a foreign language – or just a relevant section – needed for the topic being researched, suggested by online resources or artificial intelligence, to have it (or just the relevant excerpt) translated using AI, and thus to incorporate it into one’s own work without requiring significant effort or even a full understanding of it. It is, however, more difficult to incorporate into one’s own research the author’s perspective contained in a printed summary, which, moreover, lacks indexes or a detailed table of contents. Of course, the use of the internet and artificial intelligence need not be viewed so pessimistically if the user approaches the suggested texts in a thorough and comprehensive manner. Bergson (1920) stated: “The effort is toilsome, but also it is precious, more precious even than the work which it produces, because, thanks to it, one has drawn out from the self more than it had already, we are raised above ourselves” (p. 29). This statement is complemented by the Latin maxim: “ars est celare artem”, meaning “it is (true) art to conceal art” (D’Angelo, 2018). When assessing the use of the internet and artificial intelligence, the evaluation criteria previously applied – for example, to a 13th-century treatise on optics – remain relevant: can the author be described merely as a copyist or someone paraphrasing the text without much understanding, or, ideally, as someone who has reworked a difficult, scientific, foreign-language text to produce a new contribution to science? (Wróblewski, 1994).

Academic works should be read in their entirety, from cover to cover, both out of a sense of duty well done and for one’s own satisfaction in reading them. At times, it is even worth reading critically through an entire voluminous, ancient encyclopaedia. A good example comes from an encyclopaedia written at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries and attributed to the Cistercian abbot, Pseudo-Garnier of Langres, now available in a Latin-Polish edition, in order to familiarise oneself with medieval allegorical interpretations of the entire Holy Scripture and apply them in one’s own academic work as well as in teaching (Bardski & Budzanowska-Weglenda, 2023).

When quoting an author's idea as developed in various parts of a publication, it is advisable to cite all specific pages where that particular thought appears, is clarified and expanded upon, and thus to present its overall perspective in the main text of your work, even if only in a few sentences. It is therefore essential to read the entire book or article. It should also be noted that even if a given book has indexes, it is still worth compiling your own indexes, as the problem we are addressing – our own research questionnaire regarding the ideas contained in the monograph – may not have a direct counterpart in the entries listed at the end of the book. What's more, indexes cannot always be fully relied upon. The function for searching for text based on fragments of entries in an electronic file can also be unreliable. This is because a given topic is expressed using various words and phrases. In such cases, artificial intelligence could be of assistance, or even a simple programme that automatically processes as many synonymous expressions as possible relevant to the text and topic in question (a kind of thesaurus).

CONCLUSIONS

To summarise the issues relating to teaching, in the assessment of students' work, greater weight could be given to attendance and thorough preparation for classes. It is reflected in active participation in problem-based discussions. Written assignments would come next; they remain an indispensable element of higher education, as does participation in dissertation seminars. Assessment in the Introduction to Art History course is multifaceted. One of its components involves the ability to handle terminology-related tasks, both orally and in writing. The other – to describe works of art in situ, including without the use of specialist literature or in the absence of such literature.

To summarise both topics. The way in which art history students and those in other disciplines acquire specialist terminology, and the way in which teaching and research are conducted and evaluated, will continue to evolve. In English, regarding academic research, it is said that "if you do not change your mind about some matters during the course of a generation you probably do not have a mind to change" (Slive, 1995, p. VIII). Critical discussions with artificial intelligence will become increasingly important in teaching and in the conduct of academic research. Artificial intelligence is here to stay in these areas of our lives; there is no need to eliminate it from human existence, as suggested in short story *The Hammer* by Lem (1959). Lem was somewhat less sceptical about artificial intelligence in 2000, no longer suggesting such radical measures (Lem, 2000).

LIMITATIONS

The sample could be expanded to include evaluations of subsequent cohorts of students, as well as courses taught in a different format by other academic staff. Artificial intelligence is subject to rapid and dynamic changes, also in terms of the content of the answers provided to the same question. Different generative AI programmes provide different answers to the same question.

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NAUCZANIE AKADEMICKIE I BADANIA NAUKOWE W XXI WIEKU. PRZYPADEK HISTORII SZTUKI

Wprowadzenie: Współczesne osiągnięcia cyfrowe stanowią usprawnienie badań naukowych i dydaktyki. Okazują się zarazem wyzwaniem dla dydaktyki i badacza, którego metody muszą ulec adaptacji w nowej rzeczywistości.

Cel badań: Artykuł bada przede wszystkim prowadzenie od 2007 roku zajęć oraz własnej innowacji dydaktycznej: cotygodniowych wizualnych zadań terminologicznych, które studenci cenią za ułatwianie przyswajania wiedzy oraz aktywizowanie ich roli w procesie dydaktycznym. Artykuł ma za zadanie pokazać zmiany, jakie następowały w dydaktyce historii sztuki od początku XXI wieku do dzisiaj. Pokazuje zarazem, jak ewoluowały badania naukowe. Demonstruje ponadto, co z dawnych technik oraz stwierdzeń dydaktycznych pozostaje aktualne i ma nadal wymiar uniwersalny.

Metoda badań: Artykuł bazuje na analizie własnych doświadczeń i zgromadzonej dokumentacji. Porównywane są zadania terminologiczne (w liczbie kilkuset), odpowiedzi na nie, wnioski z żywej dyskusji podczas zajęć ze *Wstępu do historii sztuki*, a także innych typów zajęć: konwersatoryjnych, seminariów i fakultatywnych oraz informacje zwrotne od studentów. Zaprezentowane zostały również własne doświadczenia z pisania prac naukowych.

Wyniki: Współczesne osiągnięcia komputerowe prowadzą do ciągłego przeglądania, czytania ekscerptów, skrótów, wyimków. Tymczasem także obszerne prace naukowe wciąż warto czytać w całości. Pisemne i ustne zadania terminologiczne, a także zapoznavanie studentów z licznymi schematami rysunkowymi wciąż pozostają istotnym, funkcjonalnym elementem procesu dydaktycznego historii sztuki.

Wnioski: Uważne rozmowy ze sztuczną inteligencją mogą pomóc, a nie zaszkodzić. Metodyka badań i nauczania będzie jednak ulegać kolejnym adaptacjom. Kierunki *stricte* humanistyczne, takie jak historia sztuki muszą być otwarte na nowe pomoce dydaktyczne oraz stosowanie nowoczesnych sprzętów ułatwiających dydaktykę i badania.

Słowa kluczowe: historia sztuki, dydaktyka akademicka, badania naukowe, sztuczna inteligencja, wstęp do historii sztuki, metodologia nauczania