

Psychotherapy Guidebook

**ART
THERAPY**

Elinor Ulman

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Art Therapy

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DEFINITION

Art Therapy includes a range of therapeutic uses of visual art materials. At one end of the spectrum art as a means of nonverbal communication is stressed. In conjunction with verbal associations and interpretations, art products serve to assist the understanding and resolution of emotional problems. At the other end of the spectrum, therapy is derived from the artistic process itself. Its usefulness depends on the age-old power of the arts to reconcile conflicting forces within the individual and between the individual and society.

Basic to the art therapist's work in all its variations is the use of expression in the visual arts as a bridge between the individual's inner and outer experience.

HISTORY

The term "Art Therapy" was originated in 1942 by Adrian Hill, a British artist and teacher who started his therapeutic work with his fellow patients in

a tuberculosis sanatorium. In the United States, Margaret Naumburg was the foremost pioneer in the field; she began to work in the early 1940s at the New York State Psychiatric Institute under the sponsorship of psychoanalyst Nolan D. C. Lewis, M.D. Other prominent American figures are Edith Kramer — outstanding both as a general theoretician and as the leading specialist in child Art Therapy — Lauretta Bender, and Paul Schilder. Schilder contributed to theory while Bender, in her work with autistic children, was among the first to put art to therapeutic use. In Europe, Lombroso, Simon, and Prinzhorn, with their early investigations into the art of mental hospital patients, were important precursors.

The development of Art Therapy in the United States coincided with, and to some extent was related to, the rising influence of psychoanalysis on psychiatric thinking. Today Art Therapy is associated with many kinds of psychotherapy and extends, as well, into nonpsychiatric areas.

TECHNIQUE

Where art is used mainly as a tool in psychotherapy, art materials are limited to those that produce effects quickly and without the need for a great deal of technical proficiency. Art methods aimed at spontaneity of expression are presented in the hope that unconscious material will escape censorship. Since the art works are valued mainly for their immediate communicative

value, the complete development of expressive art products is not emphasized.

Therapy is primarily interpretive, with the client's own verbal associations and formulations playing a large part. Provided that the therapist has sufficient training, the development of transference (shifting feelings about significant people to the therapist) may be encouraged and its handling then becomes an important element in treatment (Naumburg, 1966).

Where therapy depends primarily on values inherent in art itself, the therapist strives to help clients make art products whose expressive quality and depth are as fully realized as the individual's capacities permit. Art materials are selected on the basis of their suitability for this purpose in the hands of people of various ages or who are in particular stages of artistic development. The therapist uses his clinical background to respond to the latent as well as the manifest messages contained in the art and to help clients to be more tolerant of the less easily accepted aspects of themselves. The significance of habitual behavior and attitudes is likely to be discussed, but direct interpretations of unconscious material evident in the art work are seldom made or invited.

Art Therapy of this kind does not stand alone as an agent of profound psychological change. It complements psychotherapy by providing an area of

symbolic experience, where new attitudes may be tried out, gains deepened and made an integral part of the person (Kramer, 1971).

There are many variations on these two basic technical approaches. For example, clients are sometimes asked to collaborate — in conducting a pictorial dialogue, producing a mural, or working on a single small picture. In most of these instances, emphasis is placed on the way in which the immediate experience enhances self-awareness and demonstrates or influences the relationship between group members. Both artistic development and insight gained through the interpretation of symbolic content play a relatively minor part.

APPLICATIONS

Art therapists have found a place not only in all kinds of psychiatric institutions (ranging from mental hospitals to community mental health centers) but also in private practice. In addition, Art Therapy is used in many nonpsychiatric settings, such as geriatric centers, rehabilitation programs for the physically disabled, residential centers for children suffering from a wide range of disorders and deficiencies, special education schools and classes, prisons, and centers devoted to enriching the lives of people without any recognized psychiatric problems.

Applications to which Art Therapy has been adapted include

psychological assessment, the training of members of other psychotherapeutic disciplines, intensive individual psychotherapy, formal Group Art Therapy — where art productions serve as a springboard for group discussion — assessment of family dynamics, ongoing psychotherapy with family groups, and adjunctive therapy with patients seen in informal groups.

Because the art product inevitably bears the stamp of its creator, Art Therapy cannot help impinging on the territory of psychotherapy and psychological assessment. Painting and sculpture are, in addition, susceptible to such a broad range of applications that the boundaries between Art Therapy and other uses of art materials are inevitably blurred. Recreation and rehabilitation programs use art activity to serve purposes other than those of Art Therapy, as does Occupational Therapy. Art education in residential facilities for emotionally disturbed children seldom makes the most of the therapeutic possibilities of art.

At best, all institutional uses of art materials will be coordinated by a person who understands their similarities, differences, and possible points of conflict as well as the usually untapped opportunities for collaboration among them.