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HEALING THROUGH ART

Submitted by **ART ZOLO** on Tue, 2014-04-15 18:06



A pure artistic expression is a manifestation of an artist's inner world. Irrespective of the medium chosen for expression – music, dance, drama, or visual arts like painting, drawing, sculpting – the creative product is a reflection of the creator's personality. It reveals his/her moods, feelings, thoughts, emotions and life's circumstances. For instance, Amrita Shergill's bold and bright nude portraits reflect her own fiercely independent and colourful attitude towards life. Similarly, Tyeb Mehta's works convey his angst against terror and violence he witnessed in real life. It is this power of art to reach to the deeper recesses of one's inner self that otherwise remains inaccessible which lends it a therapeutic value.



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A Tyeb Mehta painting

Since time immemorial, art has been used as a means of communication. However, it was in early 20th century when people began looking at art as an illustration of mental fitness. Several educators, psychologists, artists and doctors experimented in this field and highlighted the inherent therapeutic properties of art. Soon, the use of art for healing purposes emerged as a distinct field of study --- ART THERAPY or ART PSYCHOTHERAPY. Psychoanalytic principles had a profound impact on the early development of art therapy. Edith Kramer, Margaret Naumburg, Elinor Ulman and Hanna Kwiatkowska were the pioneering individuals who popularized art therapy and contributed to the contemporary art therapy literature. While Margaret Naumburg is considered as the founder of American Art Therapy, Edith Kramer's contributions in this field earned her the prestigious 'Honorary Life Member' award from the American Art Therapy Association. She spent considerable time with children and adolescents who failed to communicate their trauma in words. Later, she wrote books like *Art Therapy in Children's Community* and *Art as Therapy with Children*. Both Naumburg and Kramer were highly influenced by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the eminent psychologists, who highly recommended the use of art in treating their patients. In 1970s and 80s, a large amount of work was published in this field. The period also saw the emergence of organizations like the American Art Therapy Association (1969) and the British Association of Art Therapists (1964). These organizations helped in establishing Art Therapy on a global platform. Today, many universities worldwide offer professional courses in art therapy. Art therapists are trained to study, analyse and interpret the whole process of art making and its outcome. They are required to possess knowledge of visual arts, counselling theories, psychology and human development fields.

Art Therapy blends the cognitive principles of art with the psychoanalytic theories to help people in distress. It has emerged as a mental health profession for improving the emotional, physical and mental well being of critically ill patients suffering from diseases like Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Dementia, Thalassaemia and AIDS. The method is practiced in hospitals, educational institutes, prisons, rehabilitation facilities, wellness centres, senior communities and other settings. Besides, a large number of non-governmental organizations have sprung up in different corners of the world that are employing this technique to help abused women, traumatized children, homeless, military servicemen and others.

Art is known to stimulate brain, lessen the aggressive behaviours, stir the memories, overcome grief and provide an enjoyable experience. It heightens a person's self-esteem, self awareness, and sense of personal fulfilment. Sonabai, an Indian folk artist, is a perfect example of how through art she overcame tumultuous times and rediscovered herself. Art gave a new dimension to her life (refer the previous entry, *From the Obscurity*). Mary Hecht, an acclaimed American sculptor, was a remarkable example of how creative abilities remain intact in spite of severe degeneration of brain in cases of dementia and Alzheimer. Art has the potential to access those parts of the brain which language cannot.

India is slowly catching up in this field. A number of organisations working in this area have sprung up across the country, for instance, Sankalpa. Started by an international art therapist, Krupa Jhaveri, it is aimed at transforming the lives of village youth and women in South India. Snehadhara Foundation, a Bangalore based registered non-profit organization, is another effort in this direction. Its mission is to connect with children and adults who are differently abled using Arts Based Therapy.

Excerpts from an interview with Ms. Gitanjali Sarangan, the founder of Snehadhara

**PHGADI-4**

Rural woman

**THE LORD OF...**

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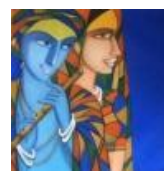
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Foundation.

Based on your experiences of working in the field of art therapy, how do you think arts based therapy has contributed to the learning and development of children with special needs?

“Special needs” is not just a politically correct phrase; it is the recognition that “normal” is relative and needs are special in seemingly “normal people” too. The main challenge faced by individuals with developmental disabilities like Down syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Cerebral Palsy, etc. is the lack of receptive environments that look at holistic learning. Children and adults with special needs seem to acquiesce to the arts more naturally than to the traditional therapies. They often miss out on social connects which are in itself a system of healing, accepting, learning and growing. A community here not only plays a role of social acceptance but also offers a responsible sense of security.

The arts, rightfully, are the community’s own resource that allow a viable model best suited for children with multiple or severe disabilities to emerge. Meeting the needs of disabled young people is a three-way responsibility between institutions available for all children, disability services and the community. The approach using arts as the canvas is to help strike a right balance between the three.

What lends Art a therapeutic value?

Experiencing different art forms create synaesthesia between the nuances of art education, arts in education and therapy. For an example, a drum circle that allows one to experience drumming not only helps one connect to the rhythm it produces or the rhythm within but also opens out possibilities of observing patterns, sequences and melody. Taking this example to a child in the Autistic Spectrum who is an auditory learner, playing the drums and learning a song/rhythm would mean a lot more than just learning the skill. At the onset, just the physical stimulation of fingers and palms and the texturing aids in impulse control and leads to relaxation.

The introduction of an artistic medium helps in achieving the objectives, be it the sensory integration or the therapeutic milestones, in a more creative, fun and non-invasive manner thereby enriching the learning experience. The arts thus lend a credible alternative to address development involving practical, creative and conceptual elements. Introducing non-verbal children to visual arts media not only opens a world of colour and wonder through sensory functions but also offers a medium for expression and communication through lines, strokes, shades and hues they create. The tool used could be brushes for some, cloth for some, hands and legs for a few. Each one takes a tool that one best responds to and what does get created is a lasting impact of this experience on the child and the educator.

Where do you see India heading towards in this domain?

The Indian subcontinent has always ascribed high spiritual value to art, besides celebrating its obvious aesthetic repercussions. The diversities in our cultural orientations have allowed a lot more room for things to remain organic. And our community as a whole holds a natural leaning towards art, but nevertheless, therapeutic art has so far not really taken off in India as much as in the countries outside. The invasion of technology at an affordable cost has brought in its advantages but has also got us to rely less on our intuitive capacities that are enablers for us to look at alternative approaches. There is art that is all pervasive but it has not yet got packaged as therapy.

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ArtZolo's special correspondent:

Reema Mittal



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