

Art in a Therapeutic Context Today

How the role of art as a therapeutic tool has evolved in the last half century

The Dax Collection of “Psychiatric Art” falls into the realm of Art Brut, or Raw Art. Very simply this means the art work is produced by non-professional or even amateur artists, but by people who simply wish to express themselves artistically in one form or another. Thus, in a sense, Raw Art is a universal form of art. However, it has become a phenomenon that has attracted much general attention, particularly in Western Europe, where there are major collections. Perhaps the three most significant of these are the Art Brut Museum in Lausanne (Switzerland), the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg (Germany) and the Guttman-McLay Collection at the Bethlem Royal Hospital in London.

A major reason I believed the Dax Collection should be preserved for posterity, is that it contained creative art works by psychiatric patients who, for the most part, were inmates of the large psychiatric hospitals, or “mental asylums”, during the mid-twentieth century; roughly the 1930s to the early 1960s.

This was a period when such patients usually had long, institutional stays in hospital, often with severe restrictions on their freedoms. It was also prior to the development of the vast array of safe and scientifically evaluated psychotropic medications and of modern psychological therapies, most notably the Cognitive Behavioural Therapies.

Thus, the kind of work seen in the Dax Collection at the time it initially came to The University of Melbourne, would never be repeated again.

Today, the attitudes towards people suffering from “mental illness”, or “psychological disorders”, has changed radically, as has the world in which they live and the treatment options that are available to them; at least, in developed societies.

No longer are patients kept for months, or even years, in large, tightly controlled institutions, usually out of sight from the general population. There is a greater understanding in the population about mental illness and much of treatment today is on an outpatient and community basis; with short periods in hospital when necessary.

In addition, our modern society is more open and individualistic. A far greater proportion of the population, than in the first half of the twentieth century and earlier, is aware of art and enjoys experiencing it, through a wide range of media; but, including visits to art galleries and exhibitions. Even the widespread appearance of graffiti in the general urban environment (a form of Raw Art) is accepted as a normal phenomenon and, it could be argued, is part of the democratisation of art. Art is much less elitist than it was 60 years ago.

Thus, the way artistic expression by those suffering from schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, trauma, brain damage, and so on, is expressed in a totally different and open milieu, than has ever occurred before.

Artistic expression can still be used in therapy but is much more formally supported by mental health staff and tends to focus upon the individual as an individual. Not only that, the respect for the validity of artistic expression by anyone with any form of illness (e.g. cancer, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), in any form of media (photography, video presentations, etc) is now well acknowledged and attracts general public interest. This is reflected in the kinds of exhibitions that The Dax Centre currently presents to Melbourne and which are so well attended. With the continuing evolution of the use of all forms of media for personal artistic expression and society's hunger for such creativity, it could be said that Raw Art has become commonplace, and thus, the work from those suffering from psychological illnesses, is almost part of the mainstream interest in the human desire to be self-expressive. This is perhaps one of the most validating changes in societal attitudes to understanding the sufferings of normal people with very disturbing emotional, social and thought experiences.

Author: David J de L. Horne