

History of the Dax Centre

When Dax arrived in Victoria from England in 1951, he was already interested in the potential of practicing art making in a therapeutic context, to assist patients in expressing their emotions and ideas.

He also believed that the symbols present in these works could assist psychiatrists and medical teams in diagnosis and care. Art therapists or occupational therapists were hired to run the art sessions, as Dax believed that the practice of art making was therapeutic and acted as a form of recovery.

“The person in charge was an artist usually and they encouraged people to do the art. We used standard paper and standard colours, which was useful for research purposes...It was for people to get rid of their anxieties. Other people didn't examine them, unless the person who painted them wanted to talk about them. The patient didn't take them away, although sometimes they did and we didn't stop them. But on the whole they were treated like case sheets.” - Dr Dax, 13 May 2005

Dax felt there was potential to share these works further afield, in the hope that they could convey information about mental illness. However, as the concept of institutionalisation became more problematic after 1975, institutions began shutting down. Dax continued to collect the works produced within these circumstances and began searching for a permanent home for his Collection.

Subsequently, contemporary artists with an experience of mental illness or psychological trauma also donated works, exploring personal expressions about mental health and wellbeing. Today the Dax Collection is comprised of these two distinct components: historic works, produced in institutions and under clinical conditions, and the work of contemporary artists, who seek to promote the value of art making practices in assisting with the management of one's health.

Whereas Dax's interest in the therapeutic benefits of art making differ greatly from art therapy, as it is now understood, it remains evident that such early initiatives have contributed to the dedicated study and practice of art therapy in Victoria today.

Brief history of the Cunningham Dax Collection and The Dax Centre

2016