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# NEWSLETTER

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# The Power of Art.

## **Editor's Note:**

Angèle Angoh is an artist, art therapist and an art critic. She studied fine arts in London and in Paris, and holds a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership. She is currently a part-time lecturer in Art and History of art at the Fashion and Design Institute, University of Technology. She conducts art and creative writing workshops. She exhibits her paintings in Mauritius and abroad. She is the chief examiner of the Cambridge Art examinations and is very involved in the leadership of Art education in Mauritius. When she is not teaching art, Angele is making art. History, Art, Design, the movement of energy and crossing of paths have always been part of her lifestyle and her career paths are a reflection of that lifestyle.



It was freezing cold outside at 3 degrees Celsius and here I was, on the second day of the New Year, feeling very warm inside the grand hall of the British museum. Hundreds of people from all over the world were looking, with amazed eyes, at the stunning Ming artefacts on display in the "Ming: fifty years that changed China" exhibition.

For more than three hours I was in awe and my mind was racing with excitement for two reasons. Firstly I felt proud of my Chinese ancestors and secondly my faith in the healing and therapeutic power of art was strengthened. In addition to their military skills, emperors, princes and leading officials were literate in painting, calligraphy, poetry and literature. So much time was dedicated to the appreciation of music and art. All Chinese emperors painted. The Xuande emperor (ruled 1426 to 35) is regarded as one of the most gifted imperial painters in Chinese history.

A valid point that is worth exploring in greater detail is whether by expressing themselves through art, the emperors and the high officials of the Ming Dynasty were processing emotions and feelings. Emotions that they may have been struggling with and which by creative expressions provided them with insights on warfare and strategies. Those incredibly literate and powerful people must have discovered the power of art since 1368.



From the cave men to the Greeks and Egyptians up to nowadays, the creative energy behind art has captured our imagination. There has not been a culture without art. Artistic expressions and the creative process of art have always been essential in the history of mankind.

Art therapy is a fairly new field of study which utilises the creative process of art to bring together physical, emotional and spiritual care. The pursuit of art can be accomplished through various mediums including: painting, drawing, sculpting, mosaics, clay making, music and a variety of art modalities. Being in an art therapy session is like embarking on a journey in the subconscious mind. Our brain is the most sophisticated computer in existence. It is efficient and is able to send our difficult thoughts into our

unconscious to help us handle our trauma. We then have no recollection of the trauma as it is repressed in the unconscious. What happens next is that details of every significant emotional event of our life are stored in the data base of our unconscious. But the unconscious mind is like a silent dragon watching over us, ready to jump at any time. To the lucky ones it moves in our dreams and reveals a different reality or perhaps "the" reality to us while to others it catches us unaware, in times least expected and race incessantly against our conscious mind.

During the creative process of art therapy, individuals are able to tap into these unconscious thoughts and memories and bring them to the surface. It's only when one faces one's own dragons and ride them, that healing occurs. Healing occurs when there is reconciliation. Reconciliation occurs when there is forgiveness. Art therapy places one in a space where one can forgive oneself and start anew.

I have carried out art therapy sessions in several non-profit organisations, in cancer centres, schools, and in corporate structures on leadership programmes. I have conducted a pilot art therapy project with children in Mauritian hospitals, sponsored by the ministry of Health in collaboration with the National Art gallery. I have witnessed the potency of art therapy in assessing and improving various mental and physical symptoms including, reducing pain, anxiety, and tension. Art therapy is a tool that can help, guide and promote psychological health and wellbeing. The length of therapy really depends upon the individual's needs and desires.

I worked with a beneficiary at a non-profit organisation in Rose Hill, who was in a constant state of anxiety. He worried incessantly about his health and any small health problem was aggravated in his mind. That resulted into new ailments. Art therapy helped to remove that health fear from his subconscious mind. The pictures that he painted most of the time were strong reflections of his state of mind. He discovered himself in many ways. After several sessions, having accessed his subconscious mind, the reasons of his fears resurfaced and he opted to deal with them. Afterwards his persistent fears disappeared.

For the past 16 years I have been conducting Art therapy sessions in men's and women's prisons as part of a sound rehabilitation programme. I have been privileged to bear witness to the healing power of making art. The humanizing aspect of art therapy helped the inmates in settling their minds and gave them a tremendous opportunity to cope with their life behind bars and provided them with skills to start anew when they leave prison.

In 2013, I conducted art therapy sessions in the new wing of the men's prison, prior to starting a

group painting of several murals designed to embellish the new wing environment. The result was astounding and a positive outcome manifested itself in myriad ways. Through substantial teamwork during the conceptualization and planning stage of the mural, the participants showed mutual respect for the contributions of each member. Additionally, the inmates displayed great pride in their work and reported feelings of self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment.

In order to examine the effects of art therapy, with the help of some prison officers and the commissioner of prisons, I conducted an experimental study with 10 female inmates. After 7 weeks of attending art therapy classes that met once a week, significant reductions in depressive symptoms and a decrease in recidivism were noted. Participants also showed a better understanding and acceptance of the leadership of the prison administration. I have been compiling data and noted down a list of percentages of inmates who felt a positive impact in their lives due to art therapy

Art therapy have actually helped the inmates find different alternatives to situations, and allowed them to explore the paths they have once walked upon and ponder on what they have seen and done in their lives. The uncovering of repressed and unconscious images during Art therapy sessions helped them find meaning in their own new images, in their own lives and find relief from overwhelming emotions, crises or trauma and cutting through emotional defences that have built-up over the years. Art Therapy has allowed them to externalize their problems and take a fresh view of themselves from a distance. They were able to experiment with change on their artworks before taking the risk of change in reality.

To paint one's own scream, one's own images, to process emotions, brings understanding that further brings personal growth and a coming to terms with oneself and the world around us.

Some of us see no point in spending time transforming the lives of prison inmates through art therapy. The notion of convicted criminals having to pay for their crimes is a legitimate one. Giving a second chance to any human being in any life situation is also a legitimate concern. When I first entered the prison gate sixteen years ago, when the huge door slammed at my back, I took a leap of faith and I knew I had made the right decision.

Transforming emotion into imagery is such a powerful act of healing. Basically what I have been doing for almost two decades is to incorporate my love for art into counselling others, helping myself and others explore and express ourselves authentically through art. In fact all that I have pursued in my life have had tremendously a lot to do with my passion for art.

All those gratifying years and the wonderful results and I am still intrigued after all these years by the potent therapeutic outcome of art expression. After all "Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life." Pablo Picasso.

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