

ART THERAPY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Visual expression has been used for communication and healing throughout history, with art therapy emerging as a distinct profession in the 1940s. At that time, psychiatrists were becoming increasingly interested in the artwork created by their patients with mental illness and educators were discovering that children's art reflected their developmental, emotional, and cognitive growth. Hospitals and rehabilitation centers began to include art therapy programs, recognizing that the creative process of art making enhanced recovery from illnesses and contributed significantly to an individual's health and well-being.

The evolution of art therapy as a more formalized field continued in the 1960s, with the publication of the first journal in the field and the founding of a national professional association, the American Art Therapy Association. The first graduate degrees in art therapy were awarded in the 1970s and today there are many undergraduate art therapy courses and over 30 master's programs in the United States. There are also growing numbers of art therapists around the world, including England, Korea, Australia, Canada, Brazil, Taiwan, and South Africa.

Art therapists are master's-level professionals who hold degrees in art therapy or related fields. They are skilled in using various art methods (such as drawing, painting, sculpture, and other media) for assessing and treating a wide range of mental and emotional conditions, family issues, trauma and loss, and challenges related to medical illnesses. Art therapists work with people of all ages and in many different settings, including hospitals and clinics, mental health agencies and treatment centers, shelters, community agencies, schools, correctional facilities, elder care, art studios, and private practice.

As we have moved into the 21st century, art therapists have been at the forefront of our most challenging times. In 2001, art therapists assisted disaster relief efforts in New York and throughout the nation, helping children and adults process the traumatic events. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, art therapists provided emotional support to young evacuees, helping them create and process their experiences through art. Art therapists around the country are also working with returning service members and veterans to help them heal and process their military experiences.

Art therapy as a profession continues to grow and evolve, and art therapists face a variety of challenges and concerns, including public and professional recognition, licensure standards, and obtaining comparable compensation to professionals with similar education. Such compensation sources include reimbursement for services through commercial or government-sponsored insurance plans as well as contract and private pay opportunities. In addition, there is also a general paradigm shift taking place in the profession, with technology and social media changing the boundaries of traditional therapeutic relationships and expanding communication options. The health care environment and culture are also evolving, with alternative and complementary health practices becoming more widely accepted. This increased interest has

been met with education, mental health, social service, and military health professionals searching for innovative and effective ways of addressing people's needs.

So what are some of the key issues and actions that will advance the profession of art therapy in the 21st century?

An Expanded Research Base: Over the last few years, the emphasis on (and funding for) mental health and medical services has increasingly focused on “evidence-based” practices. Rarely are any of the allied health services, such as art therapy, provided in isolation. So as a collective field we need to determine how best to manage and report on effectiveness. Joint research studies are an option in determining how to measure the various components of a comprehensive patient care system and their impact on individuals. Other behavioral health groups struggle with this issue as well. Questions we need to ask and discuss include (1) Does the intense federal focus on “evidence-based” practices results in a premature dismissal or disregard for therapeutic practices that are beneficial to many populations? (2) How do we work together with funders and policymakers to establish research methodologies that look at outcomes, protect the public, and measure results that take into account the complexity of the various interventions that impact individual recovery and collective well being, such as familial, communal, societal, and cultural issues and concerns.

An Increasingly Diverse Clientele: Art therapist, author and educator Harriet Wadeson has written about the major changes in the practice, noting that art therapists are increasingly found in diverse settings, including homeless shelters, AIDS programs, and domestic violence programs: “The soil for art therapy is likely to be most fertile in the fields of social, rather than in the more traditional psychiatric needs.”¹ Many art therapists see the application of art therapy to individuals from diverse backgrounds, in increasingly diverse environments, as an exciting opportunity for the field to move forward.

Art Therapy in Schools: Florida art therapist Janet Bush has actively promoted the value of art therapy in America's schools and said she looks forward to art therapy being available in every school district: “In the 21st century, art therapy will be equipped to offer children opportunities to work through obstacles impeding their educational success. It will facilitate appropriate social behavior and promote healthy affective development through which these children can become more receptive to academic involvement, and it will maximize their social and academic potential.”² As school districts tighten their budgets, art therapists need to work collaboratively with other support and related services school personnel to ensure that funds are available for these essential services.

Social Activism and Community Involvement: Art therapists help people become healthier and more resilient as they live, heal, and thrive in stressful or traumatic environments. In her book *Art Therapy and Social Action*, Frances Kaplan contends that art therapists are inherently social activists and visionaries, in that they use their creativity and skill to be address what's needed in the world: “[P]erhaps art can't save the world, but combined with therapy it can have a

significant part to play in rescuing some of its citizens.”³ Given the training and activism inherent in art therapy, we need to explore further the global challenges we can unite around and address most effectively – again, collaboratively and in partnership.

Technology: When talking about the 21st century one has to discuss technology and social media. Not only does it increase our communication options and our accessibility to the public, but it removes barriers between art therapists and artists around the world. We need to use our creative strengths to expand the application of technology in the work we do and find ways to train the field to keep pace with all the technology changes.

Growing the Profession: Diversity matters. There has been much discussion about the fact that art therapists are predominantly females and white. It is critical that we talk about this frankly and examine what that means for our profession. The conversation is an essential piece of working more proactively as a field to broaden the gender, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of those entering the profession of art therapy. This is important as we expand in the varieties of communities we serve and because we practice in a multicultural society. Remaining vigilant in educating the public and other professionals about the profession of art therapy is paramount as our profession progresses. It is imperative to continue to focus on how we educate and mentor our students and new professionals. It is critical that there is nurturance not only for a new generation of art therapists, but also for the leaders and innovative thinkers the field attracts.

The Green Papers are intended to generate dialogue and we hope long time art therapy practitioners, emerging leaders, and students will share their thoughts. We also hope that our collaborators and partners – particularly those working in the arts, education, health, and mental health – will join the conversation and share their views on how art therapy can add and bring voice to the issues and people with whom they work.

Submitted by the  AMERICAN
arttherapy
ASSOCIATION

¹ Wadeson, Harriet. (1994). How will the profession of art therapy change in the next 25 years? *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 11(1), 26–28.

² Bush, Janet. (1994). My visualization for 21st century art therapy. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 11 (1), 31-32.

³ Kaplan, Frances (Ed.) (2007). *Art Therapy and Social Action* (p. 15). London and Philadelphia, PA: Kingsley Publishers.