

# Behind Steel Doors: Images From the Walls of a County Jail

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## Abstract

*The compulsion and capacity for self-expression in penal institutions can be witnessed through the endless production of such creations as wall murals, graffiti, effigies, adornments, decorative envelopes, and tattoos. The intent of this paper is to examine the self-directed expressive endeavors of male residents at a county jail. The examples illustrate how the inmates, despite their impoverished and restrictive environment, were able to employ the image-making process as a means of enduring and adjusting to life circumstances within the jail environment. Several themes emerged; however, due to the limited scope of this paper, discussion is restricted to the themes of time, escape, anger, and redemption.*

## Introduction

Little has been written on the topic of art therapy in jails and prisons (Day & Onorato, 1989, 1997). Karban (1994) alleged, "Art therapy, especially in forensic psychiatry, is still a pioneering field" (p. 144). Liebmann (1994) concurred and stated, "The literature [in Britain] on art therapy with offenders is sparse, to say the least.... As far as I know, there is little American literature either" (p. 1). Gussak (1997b), however, has contributed a comprehensive book, *Drawing Time*, and stated, "Although some literature exists, up until now, no comprehensive account of art therapy in prisons in the United States has been published" (p. xix). Furthermore, there is little art therapy literature that examines self-directed expressive endeavors of inmates in jails and prisons.

Creative and artistic expression has been a fundamental component of the prison environment (Cronin, 1994; Day & Onorato, 1989; Gussak, 1997b; Hall, 1997; Laing, 1984; Milligan, 1997; Riches, 1994; Ursprung, 1997). Liebmann (1994) stated, "There has been a long tradition of arts activities in prisons, mainly through education classes, but also through individual activities by inmates in their cells" (p. 6). Despite an oppressive and stifling environment, inmates have a fundamental need to create (Hall, 1997). The compulsion and capacity for the image-making process can be witnessed through the endless production of wall murals,

graffiti, effigies, adornments, decorative envelopes, and tattoos—to mention a few of the expressive products.

The motivation for this article arose out of personal observations of expressive endeavors by residents at a county jail. In July 2000, I became employed by my local county jail to screen residents for mental health services; these services are not comprehensive and include only crisis counseling and pharmacologic agents for stabilization. I discovered that, despite jail policy that cell walls will be kept free of any writing, painting, or graffiti, residents were producing an endless number of murals and images on walls and doors. Inmates inherently employed the image-making process as they struggled to endure and adjust to their current life circumstances and the jail environment.

## Setting

The county jail resides in a large metropolitan city located in the Midwest section of the United States. It is a densely populated place, and three or more people are often confined in the space of a double cell. Each 8' x 10' cell contains two steel bunks, a metal table, and a stainless steel sink and toilet. The cramped and gloomy surroundings are colored with shades of gray. Small, translucent windows are covered with steel cages and provide only shadows of the outside world. The building frequently resounds with a metallic echo, clamoring voices, jangling of keys, and the repetitive slamming of thick metal doors.

Figure 1 alludes to the despair and hardship experienced by residents while residing in these impoverished conditions. Here, an inmate has used toothpaste to scrawl the words, "God bless the lost souls that enter this place." This benediction serves not only as a plea but as a warning to others who may follow in his steps.

## Materials

Art is difficult to create in the county jail where basic or traditional art materials are not available due to potential security risks. Contraband and personal property are carefully monitored and restricted. Cheney (1997) asserted, "Security concerns dictate that only the most benign expressive materials be used in an environment based on sensory and movement deprivation" (p. 98). Still, residents at the county jail are resourceful and have used such items as soap, toothpaste, toilet paper, magazines, and food pigment.

Where there is a creative passion, the resident will find a suitable material. Ursprung (1997) stated, "The incarcerated artist's need to synthesize 'new' artistic materials in

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Figure 1

response to a desolate, restrictive, and often debilitating environment speaks to the wonders of creative expression and the resiliency of the human spirit against major odds” (p. 13). The most readily available and primary medium in the county jail is pencil. Residents can purchase a pencil and various other items such as food, hygiene articles, writing paper, envelopes, and stamps through the commissary. Pencils measure 2 inches long to limit their use as potential weapons. Cheney (1997) warned, “Inmates, it is well known, can and will make weapons from anything and everything...[hence] the control of materials is serious business in this world” (p. 94).

## Examples

Females are incarcerated at the facility; however, security issues limited observations to male cell blocks only. Male inmates at the county jail produced the following examples anonymously. Permission was obtained from the County Sheriff’s Office to photograph images. The dim and gray surroundings adversely affected the quality of several pictures presented in this paper. Expressive endeavors were self-directed in individual cells. Several themes or topics resounded throughout the jail. However, due to the limitations of this paper, only a brief discussion on four of the most prevalent topics will be provided. Themes included, but were not limited to, time, escape, anger, and redemption.

### Time

Cooper (1978) alleged that time is the “creator and devourer.” Its consuming and destructive force is never more evident than in the county jail. Here, residents have nothing but time on their hands. Individuals are awaiting bail, trial, sentencing, or serving time for fines and tickets. Upon conviction they are held here until transferred to their long-term prison. Some inmates are held for days, months, or years depending on the complexity of their case or the backlog of cases waiting to be heard by the court. Often residents can deteriorate as they adjust to the boring and tedious jail regime. Taylor (1997) asserted that inmates require constructive ways for using time, and “dead time”

is a daily concern of inmates. Unlike prison, the county jail provides no structured recreational milieu or diversionary activities to keep residents occupied. Residents are fortunate to have occasional access to television and an outdoor basketball court.

Inmates will often draw calendars on cell walls to track their time in the county jail. One such drawing shows a calendar with days marked off illustrating the passage of time and “time served.” The words “LOCK UP” are written at the bottom of the calendar and are separated by barbed wire. Inmates are often locked down in their cells for an extended period due to an event that has compromised security or safety. Below the barbed wire are the words “PAIN BOUND,” alluding to the inmate’s anguish regarding captivity and confinement. Juxtaposed to the calendar is a hot drink and the words “3 hots & a cot thats [sic] all you got.” The county jail is required to provide for only basic needs such as food and a place to sleep.

Another drawing depicts the face of a clock that has been smashed surrounded by the words “Killing Time.” The image may illustrate the resident’s desire to get through his confinement uneventfully as well as his wish to bring an end to his incarceration. Often residents feel that their life has been taken away or that they are “wasting time.” Above the clock is the prison adage, “You got to do your time. But dont [sic] let it do you!” Murphy (1994) contended, “Prisoners are given time, which must be served, not used” (p. 34). Juxtaposed to the clock is the warning, “Everyday is the beginning of the rest of your life! So be what you want. Do what you want. Just be smart about it. Be legal, or dont [sic] get caught [sic].” The creed suggests that each day brings the possibility of a new beginning and implies that law-breaking behavior is justifiable if the person is able to elude arrest.

### Escape

Hall (1997) argued that art enables inmates to escape the prison environment. Gussak (1997a) concurred and stated, “The act of creating has also been long associated with the act of ‘escape.’ It allows an inmate or patient to retreat into a fantasy world that he has created” (p. 60). Through the image, current realities can temporarily recede from conscious awareness. Inmates momentarily lose themselves whereupon they are transported to an alternative world. The image can become a portal whereby inmates take leave from the prison environment.

Figure 2 is a mural depicting a tropical island. The pencil drawing is approximately 4’ x 3’. Cooper (1978) alleged the island is “ambivalent as a place of isolation and loneliness but also a place of safety and refuge from the sea of chaos” (p. 88). The inmate’s image may simultaneously represent his solitude, as well as his longing for sanctuary from the jail environment. The paradise-like image portrays an ideal state of bliss and tranquility (Springham, 1999). The soaring birds contribute to a fantasy of escape and freedom (Allan, 1988; Bertoia, 1993; Burns, 1987; Woodall, Diamond, & Howe, 1997). The mural floats near the ceiling further suggesting fantasy and may serve to



Figure 2



Figure 3

keep the dream “out of reach.” Duality is echoed in the paired palm trees and the divided island, possibly alluding to division, sin, and corruptibility (Cooper, 1978).

Figure 3 is a pencil drawing approximately 24" x 18". The mural creates the illusion of a portal that leads to a world beyond the confines of the jail environment. The cement wall now resembles wallpaper that has been torn back to reveal a hidden landscape. Hammer (1980) stated that landscapes are often drawn by individuals who wish to escape difficult personal situations. Riches (1994) agreed and asserted that landscapes and fantasy imagery are commonly used to escape temporarily from prison life. Often fantasy imagery can substitute for the freedom sought after but unattainable by inmates. The vast openness of the panoramic view conveys freedom and liberation, yet isolation as well. The canyon serves as a narrow channel that transports the viewer from one place to another. The moon looms over the landscape alluding to the lunar cycle and passage of time (Cooper, 1978; Jung, 1964).



Figure 4



Figure 5

## Anger

Individuals held in the custody of a jail or prison will exhibit a predictable scope of emotional responses to their loss of freedom. The most obvious and most dangerous responses are anger and rage (French, 1981; Laing, 1984; Schneider, 1979). The county jail is often a hostile, harsh, and vulgar environment. Figure 4 shows a window from a cell door. The words “Fuck you” have been scratched in the Plexiglas. The message characterizes the hostility and aggression that resound throughout the county jail. The inscription shocks and repels the viewer and serves as a warning to unwanted visitors. Hall (1997) asserted that anger is carefully monitored in prison and when expressed, can be seen as threatening and promptly squelched.

Residents at the county jail have employed the image-making process to express intense hostility and rage. Cronin (1994) and Gussak (1997a) observed that inmates can use art materials to “draw out” anger and aggression without fear of retribution or retaliation. Milligan (1997)



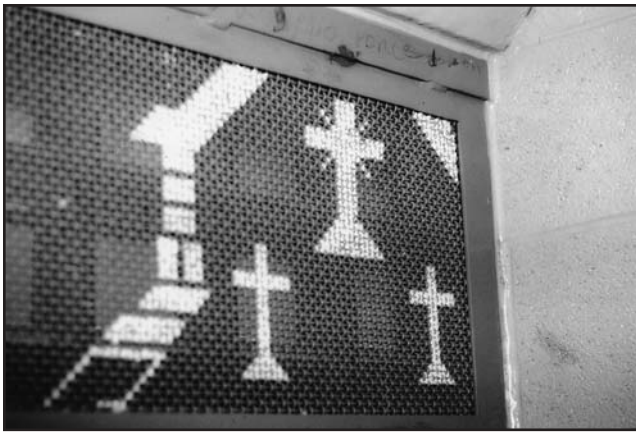


Figure 6

agreed and stated that art can act as a container where anger is expressed in a benign manner. Art can provide inmates with a safe and acceptable way of expressing forbidden emotions and aggressive impulses (Liebmann, 1994; McCourt, 1994).

Figure 5 portrays a cartoon-like effigy expressing intense anger and rage. The pencil drawing measures approximately 3' x 4'. The furrowed brow, piercing eyes, and immense teeth convey anger. The effigy is armed with several weapons suggesting hostility and aggression (Allan, 1988; Furth, 1988; Hammer, 1980; Oster & Gould, 1987; Oster & Montgomery, 1996). A sword is firmly clenched between his teeth. The figure's right arm is bent behind his back in an attempt to conceal a gun and serves to camouflage his aggressive motives. The figure's left hand is displaying the middle finger, illustrating his hostility and anti-social demeanor.

### Redemption and Atonement

One of the most frequent images in the county jail is the Christian cross. Cooper (1978) alleged the cross represents suffering, humiliation, atonement, transformation, and faith. The cross denotes the mercy of God giving redemption for the sins of man. It alludes to the crucifixion and the endurance of suffering (Bertoia, 1993; Day & Onorato, 1997; Jung, 1964). The cross may also represent the sign of victory over evil and life over death (Jung, 1964).

The mural in Figure 6 was created by forcing toilet paper into a metal screen that is used to secure cell windows. The mosaic-like picture measures approximately 3' x 2'. The image depicts a steeple-like structure. Inside the dwelling are the three crosses of Calvary, which represent the crucifixion of Christ and the two thieves. The thieves, one who sought atonement and the other who denied his guilt, reflect the duality and ambiguity that many inmates feel about their transgressions.

Figure 7 depicts a cross that was created with toothpaste. The image measures approximately 3' x 4'. A total of 12 circles are evenly divided on the horizontal and vertical planes implying cosmic order. To the left is a crescent moon, which signifies the ship that navigates the night sky. To the right is a star, which implies hope and provides



Figure 7

guidance though the sea of darkness (Cooper, 1978). Adjoining the cross are the words, "GOD'S ALWAYS IN CONTROL but we must give him control of our lives." The message and imagery advise onlookers to surrender control and have faith in divine guidance.

### Discussion

The intent of this paper was to examine self-directed, expressive endeavors of male residents at a county jail. Several themes were observed but discussion was limited to time, escape, anger, and redemption. The examples illustrated how inmates, despite their impoverished and restrictive environment, are able to employ the image-making process as a means of self-expression and adjusting to their jail surroundings. Taylor (1997) and her colleague Dr. Walsh asserted that art, whether in art classes or self-directed in individual cells, enables inmates to adjust better to their overall prison situation. Ursprung (1997) concurred and asserted that artmaking is a suitable coping mechanism to endure the oppressive and stifling environment of a prison or jail.

Residents at the county jail employed the image-making process as a means of enduring the bleakness and boredom of jail life. Weltdt (2003) asserted the image-making process enables a person to focus attention on a single activity, ultimately diverting awareness from the environment or even intrusive thoughts. The image-making process enabled county-jail inmates to "kill time" as they awaited bail, trial, sentencing, or transfer to a long-term prison. The images also enabled them to monitor the passage of time and generate visual records of their "time served."

The image-making process allowed residents to retreat into a fantasy world where current realities could temporarily recede from conscious awareness. The inmates were able to momentarily lose themselves and take leave from the jail environment. Landscapes and fantasy imagery allowed residents to temporarily transcend their somber and harsh surroundings and seek a place of bliss and tranquility.

Lastly, the image-making process provided inmates with a safe and acceptable means of expressing thoughts, emotions, and aggressive impulses. Anger and rage were expressed in a benign manner and without fear of retribution

or retaliation. Images of suffering, isolation, atonement, and faith and transformation gave testimony to their human condition.

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