

## RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW IN ART THERAPY: CREATING A VISUAL RECORD OF THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

Michael J. Hanes



### Abstract

Among the unique attributes of art therapy has been the ability to retain a lasting reminder of each session through the creation of an art product. The permanent and enduring quality of the art has offered notable contributions to the continuity and recapitulation of the therapeutic process. Accordingly, two vignettes demonstrate how retrospective review of art work allowed patient and therapist to view the therapy as it unfolded. By reviewing the art chronologically, patients and therapist were able to identify links and emerging patterns which might not have been apparent had artwork been viewed separately.

Furthermore, the patient's artwork served as a permanent record of the therapeutic process and provided tangible evidence of the patient's recovery.

### Introduction

Many art therapists have described the distinct advantages of using art therapy. These have included expressing feelings that are difficult to put into words, thereby releasing feelings in a safe and acceptable way and promoting spontaneity and creativity. Liebmann (1986, 1994), Malchiodi (1998a, 1998b), Rubin (1999), and Wadeson (1980) have provided a comprehensive overview of these and other benefits.

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**Michael J. Hanes, ATR-BC, LPAT, LPC**, is a graduate faculty member at the University of Oklahoma and at Oklahoma State University's Oklahoma City Campus. He is a review coordinator for the Oklahoma Foundation for Medical Quality and a consultant to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections and the Oklahoma County Jail. He has written several articles, as well as a text, *Roads to the Unconscious: A Manual For Understanding Road Drawings*.

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Among the unique attributes of art therapy is the ability to record a lasting reminder of each session through the creation of an art product. Wadeson (1980) has stated, "Unique to art therapy is the permanence of the object produced" (p. 10). Others have recognized art therapy's creation of a lasting record through the production of a tangible product. This permanence and tangibility of the art product gave art therapy a dimension that verbal therapies did not possess; for, once completed, the art object existed beyond the session and was not subject to distortion or flawed memory. Rather, it remained intact for days, weeks, months or, if necessary, years (Byers, 1992, 1998; Case & Dalley, 1992; Malchiodi, 1998b; Schaverien, 1987, 1992; Wadeson, 1980; Wilks & Byers, 1992).

The art product's physical quality was unique in capturing moments and experiences otherwise short-lived, allowing the therapist and the client to revisit them at a later juncture (Hall, 1987; Malchiodi, 1998b). Case and Dalley (1992) contended, "The images survive over time and so even if these issues cannot be talked through immediately, and might remain on an unconscious level, it is possible to return to them in later weeks when the patient feels more able to look at the content of the imagery" (p. 190).

The art object's enduring quality has contributed notably to the continuity and dialogue of the therapeutic process (Wilks & Byers, 1992; Byers, 1998). The object could link or bridge sessions, providing continuity during the course of therapy (Case, 1987; Hall, 1987; Landgarten, 1991; Rubin, 1999; Schaverien, 1987). Schaverien (1992) recognized how the art object's permanence provided the means to retrieve something from a previous session. Furthermore, viewing the patient's art chronologically has allowed therapist and client to identify possible links and emerging patterns which might not have been apparent when the art works were viewed individually (Schaverien, 1987, 1992). Birtchnell (1984) argued, "A sequence of pictures can often graphically reveal changes in attitudes or relationships over time" (p. 37).

Landgarten (1991) asserted that the "art tasks review," or retrospective review, was a unique benefit of art therapy and often provided a reference point that allowed the patient and therapist to view the therapy's course as it unfolded. Naumburg (1953) originally introduced this technique, which

typically occurred during the termination phase. The review process could often increase understanding and permit re-examination of insights gained during therapy. The review was capable of circumventing linear modes of communication, thus allowing therapy's progressive indicators to be viewed holistically and simultaneously. The retrospective review could also be used periodically throughout therapy to clarify the work completed thus far (Case & Dalley, 1992). Yet, the preceding authors warned that, if used without clear and knowledgeable intent, this approach could impede therapy, rather than promote it.

### **Case Examples**

The following examples were obtained from individuals participating in group art therapy in an acute, inpatient psychiatric hospital. Group membership changed as participants were discharged and new individuals arrived. The group met twice weekly and averaged five to ten patients who stayed from several days to several weeks. All patients had to participate in art therapy. Staff provided time at the end of each session for patients who wished to discuss their artwork.

First-time participants were shown the art studio and oriented to materials and storage spaces. The art studio was spacious, allowing ample room for movement and play. Moreover, the studio included work tables and fold-up chairs, which allowed for flexible seating arrangements. Staff used a non-directive approach and provided participants with a variety of art media from which they could choose freely.

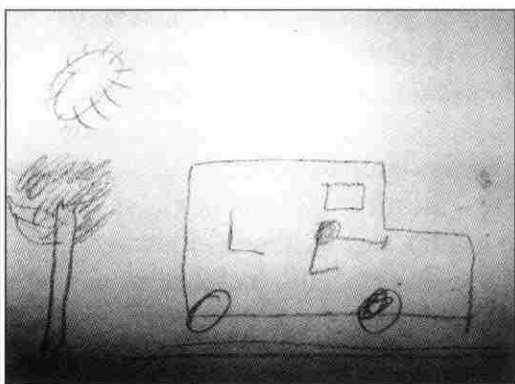
#### **Case Example: John (a pseudonym)**

John, age 43, was single and without children. He resided in a boarding house and was estranged from his family. He was a stout man whose physical appearance and agitated demeanor intimidated staff and patients. John was emotionally detached and avoided interaction with others. He was mildly mentally retarded and had a long history of schizophrenia that was managed adequately with anti-psychotic medications. However, John had begun to experience frequent and intense audio hallucinations. Additionally, his reality orientation had become increasingly impaired,

which heightened his agitation and anxiety. Therefore, he was referred to the hospital for stabilization of his anti-psychotic medications.

During his two-and-one-half week hospitalization, John's art therapy effort produced a series he described as "truck drawings." Each drawing, invariably created with crayon on 12 inches by 18 inches paper, consisted of a truck, a tree, a sun, and a ground line.

At his initial art therapy session, John appeared withdrawn and aloof. He was introduced to the art studio and its materials, after which he retrieved a box of crayons and a sheet of white drawing paper. John sat at the end of a table, angling his chair to place his back to other group members. Once engaged in his art, he hunched over his paper and shielded it from everyone's view. He approached the art process without hesitation and created a monochromatic drawing (Figure 1).



*Figure 1*

John's drawing appeared child-like and seemed consistent with his cognitive and maturation development. He began using a blue crayon to outline a motor vehicle, later identified as a truck. He quickly sketched two transparent tires, partially filling in the front wheel. He added a front passenger-side window, after which he portrayed the inner

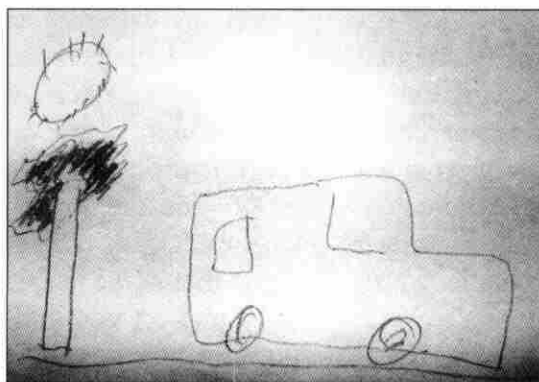
contents of the truck, including a front and rear seat, steering column, and steering wheel. Silverman (1991) asserted that the x-ray phenomenon was common in artwork of adult schizophrenic patients and could often be an indication of psychosis. Cohen and Cox (1995), Furth (1988), and Landgarten (1981) also observed that transparencies could allude to possible difficulties with reality orientation and psychosis. Yet, the preceding authors cautioned that reviewers had to consider the individual's age, maturation, cognitive development, and other factors when they determined the significance of transparencies or x-ray images.

Therefore, John's x-ray imagery might have been an indication of his psychosis as well as a representation of cognitive development.

John placed a tree near the left edge of his paper. A flurry of diagonal scribbles formed its crown, which appeared disorganized, and which possibly illustrated his agitation, confusion and distress (Bolander, 1977; Oster & Montgomery, 1996). The tree was severed at its base so that it appeared to be floating in mid-air. The lack of grounding might have depicted John's tenuous connection with reality and the world around him (Bolander, 1977; Wohl & Kaufman, 1985; Bertoia, 1993). John placed a sun in the upper left corner of his paper, directly above the tree. The sun's rays were quickly formed with short slashing lines. Finally, John drew parallel lines, later identified as a road, beneath the truck.

John remained aloof and quiet as members showed the group their drawings. Sensing his uneasiness, I reassured the group that they could present their art when they felt ready. John nodded his head in acknowledgment and did not show his drawing. Once the session ended, he stored his drawing and materials safely in a cabinet and quietly departed.

In his second session, John proceeded directly to the cabinet to retrieve his materials and drawing. He seemed pleased to learn that his picture remained unaltered and undisturbed. "Right where I put it," he remarked. Contrary to his previous session, John took a chair alongside other group members. He flipped over his picture, using the backside to create his next drawing (Figure 2). He used a purple crayon to repeat his

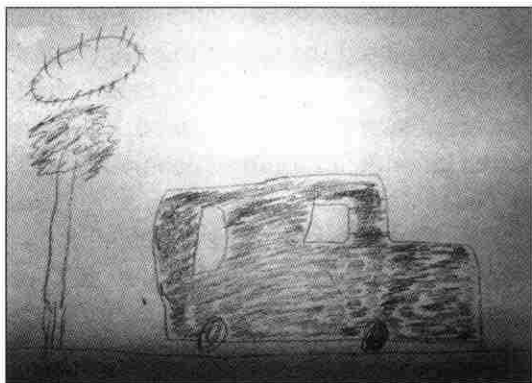


*Figure 2*

truck motif. After sketching the motor vehicle, he held up his paper briefly and uttered, "This is a truck." Group members responded with praise and encouragement. Next, he added rear and front passengers-side windows with the front window lacking complete closure. Unlike his initial drawing, the picture did not include x-ray

imagery. John quickly sketched two wheels, partially filling in both tires. The tree remained severed at its base and appeared groundless, yet the ground line was extended below the tree. Once again, he formed the tree's crown with a series of jumbled scribbles; however, John did use a green crayon to portray foliage. During group discussion, John was willing to show this drawing to his peers. He briefly identified the contents of the drawing and afterward received recognition from the group. John smiled and nodded his head in appreciation.

At his third session, John continued his truck motif, using a violet crayon to create a monochromatic drawing (Figure 3). He approached the art process in a focused and deliberate manner. The truck included a rear and front passenger-side window that were now completely enclosed.

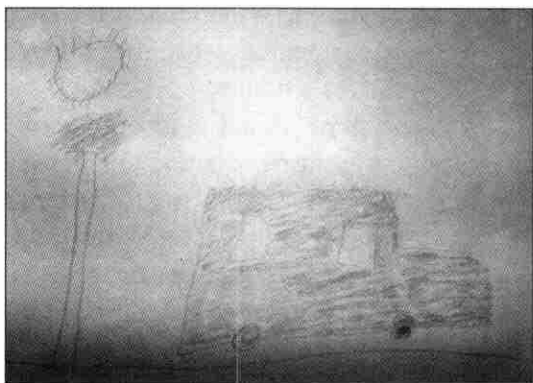


*Figure 3*

In addition, the truck's body and wheels were filled in, creating a solid, intact image. The tree continued to float above the ground line. However, John added roots which tied the base of his tree to the ground, suggesting that he was becoming more in touch with his surroundings as well as more grounded in reality. The tree's

crown appeared less chaotic and disorganized than his earlier tree, implying that his thoughts were more organized than they had been and that he was experiencing less agitation (Bolander, 1977; Oster & Montgomery, 1996). During group discussion, John volunteered to show his drawing to the group. He provided little information about the content in his picture; however, he did voice a sense of pride and accomplishment in his work. "This is looking much better," John voiced. Group members recognized the subtle, yet significant, structural changes in John's drawing, as well as his increasing ability to interact with others. A group member remarked, "He is filling things in, which makes the picture seem more real."

In his fourth session, John used a purple crayon to create another monochromatic drawing (Figure 4). His drawings were progressively becoming organized. The tree, originally floating, was presently anchored to the ground, suggesting that John now had a hold on reality (Bolander, 1977;



*Figure 4*

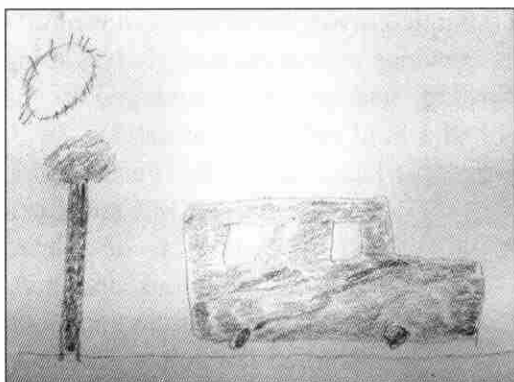
Hammer, 1958). Furthermore, the tree's crown was integrated and appeared less disordered than in his initial drawings. During group discussion, John identified the motor vehicle in his drawings as his father's delivery truck. John said that as a child he had often accompanied his father on daily deliveries in a company vehicle. He spoke fondly of these memories

and expressed a sense of satisfaction and comfort. "I had fun riding with my dad," he stated.

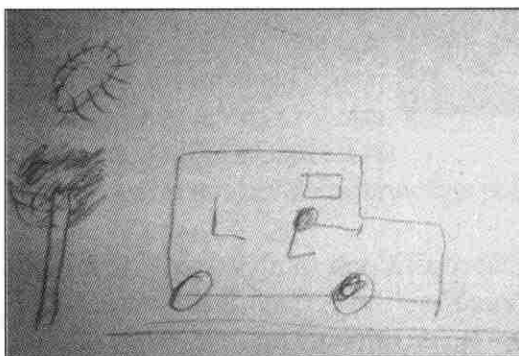
Malchiodi (1998b) asserted that repetitions could serve a useful purpose in the healing process by enabling the person to establish a feeling of control. John's series of truck drawings could have been an attempt to control his psychotic features. Malchiodi (1998b) observed that one might repeat a drawing of a simple image as a means of reassuring and comforting oneself, or John's perseveration might have reflected concrete thinking.

At his final session, John used a maroon crayon to create another monochromatic drawing (Figure 5). Here, both the tree and its truck were completely filled in, giving a more true-to-life appearance than in his earlier drawings. Furthermore, the drawing appeared more solid and structurally sound than had his previous ones. The tree was firmly attached to the ground line, and its crown appeared composed. I instructed John to display his drawings chronologically. Through this retrospective review, John and the other group members received evidence of his improved mental condition as it unfolded. His succession of truck drawings were a permanent record of his therapeutic process and served as visual testimony to his reori-





*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*

entation to reality. By viewing his art sequentially, John and the other group members identified emerging patterns and subtle deviations which might not have been apparent when they viewed the art products individually.

John smiled with pride and enthusiasm when I juxtaposed his initial and final drawings (Figure 6). When he was encouraged to compare the two drawings, he stated, "Things look better." Group members confirmed his observation and were stimulated by the undeniable improvement reflected in John's series of truck drawings. Before leaving the hospital, John retrieved his drawings as a lasting reminder of his progress.

### **Case Example: Mark (a pseudonym)**

Mark, age 23, was single. He lived with his parents on whom he was financially and emotionally dependent. Mark's mother was a dominant figure in his life who he described as "controlling" and "bossy." He was a timid individual who had difficulty establishing intimate relationships. Mark was admitted to the hospital for a depressive episode that included threats of suicide. He felt inept and ineffectual and often voiced intense feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. During his four-week hospitalization, he produced a series of clay figures.

Mark was quiet and detached at his initial art therapy session. He received introductions to the art studio and the materials, after which he cautiously retrieved a handful of self-hardening clay. Mark sat hesitant-



ly alongside other group members and slouched in his chair. Initially he remained motionless, but at one point he began squeezing and pinching the clay. During this process, he seemed in a hypnotic state, oblivious to the random impressions he formed in the clay. He glanced at the now-contorted clay and became inspired by its “accidental” depressions. Next, Mark discovered a resemblance to a human figure and created a clay sculpture (Figure 7).

The figure, later identified as Mark himself, had its legs drawn to its chest and its arms wrapped tightly around its upper torso and knees. The fetal-like position of the figure portrayed Mark’s insecurity and withdrawal and might also have denoted his fragility. Referring to the clay sculpture, Mark stated, “I feel like I’m falling apart. . . . I just want to hide from the world.” The figure’s face portrayed emotional distress and anguish.



*Figure 7*

When encouraged to describe what the clay figure was feeling, Mark replied, “He is depressed . . . tired . . . scared . . . angry.” Once the session ended, Mark safely stored his clay figure in an upper cabinet. “He can hide up here,” Mark announced. I assured Mark that his clay figure would remain safe and secure.

In his second session, Mark retrieved his clay figure and proceeded to build a forest around it. The forest might have represented the unknown and Mark’s feeling of being lost in darkness without direction (Cooper, 1978). “Everything is dark. . . . I can’t see a way out,” said Mark. Cooper asserted that the forest might also represent one’s need to retreat from the active world to contemplate existence. Mark often voiced his wish to withdraw and shelter himself from life.

The tree trunks resembled the bars of a cage and served simultaneously as a protection and a confinement. Mark draped a flattened piece of clay over the figure to form one large tree crown which weighed heavily on the figure. “It’s smothering me. . . . I feel trapped,” he said. Perhaps

the tree symbolized the feminine principle and the sheltering and protecting aspect of the Great Mother (Cooper, 1978). In fact, Mark associated his feelings of oppression to his own mother, whose need to nurture, shelter, and protect him was ultimately smothering.

For the next four sessions, Mark made several attempts to create a second clay figure. However, dissatisfied with his efforts, he soon destroyed each one. He remarked, "This is not turning out right!" He would then pound and squeeze the clay into a ball and begin again. Although he rejected his efforts on esthetic merit, his process might have represented his attempts to work through and actualize his transformation and change. During this difficult period, Mark simultaneously struggled to mold and shape a new self and a relationship with his mother. I provided an environment that encouraged continued experimentation and unconditional acceptance of his efforts.



*Figure 8*

Ultimately, Mark was able to work through his transformation, and in his seventh art therapy session he created a clay head (Figure 8). Its eyes were recessed, and its cheeks were sunken, thus giving the head a vacant, or hollow, appearance. "This is the old me," said Mark. At his eighth and final session, he added a figure surging from the head's crown. Mark announced, "This is the new me." The figure's arms were stretched outward and upward as it emerged victoriously from the vacant head. "He looks like he is being born again," a group member stated.

Other members noted the lack of detail in the clay figure. Mark responded, "The new me is just beginning; therefore, I'm not finished."

I encouraged Mark to juxtapose his clay sculptures (Figure 9). When he did so, Mark and the other group members immediately recognized his transformation from oppression to liberation and renewal. Moreover, Mark's rebirth and progression became dramatically appar-



Figure 9

ent to anyone contrasting his succession of clay figures, and the group members became inspired by the extraordinary transformation portrayed in these figures. Upon leaving the hospital, Mark retrieved his sculptures as a permanent record of his metamorphosis.

### Discussion

The intent of this study was to recognize art therapy's distinct ability to record a lasting reminder of each session through the creation of artwork. It was precisely the enduring quality of the art that enabled both patient and therapist to re-examine the therapeutic process. The preceding vignettes demonstrated how the retrospective review could provide a reference point that allowed the patient and the therapist to view the therapy as it unfolded. Furthermore, the patients' artwork permanently recorded their therapeutic process and provided tangible and undeniable testimony to their progress.

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