



ART THERAPY IN A CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY

A Study of the Function of Art Therapy
in the Treatment Program of Wiltwyck School for Boys

by

EDITH KRAMER

with a foreword by
VIOLA W. BERNARD, M.D.

American Lecture Series®



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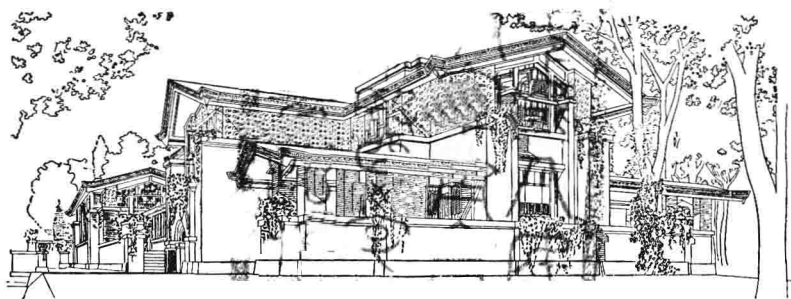
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With a Foreword by

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To the boys of Wiltwyck School

INTRODUCTION

Art Therapy, as evolved by Edith Kramer, engages the creative process, through painting, towards the goals of overall personality growth and rehabilitation. In presenting this remarkably original and lucid interpretive account of Art Therapy in a community of emotionally disturbed boys, the author through her rare facility with verbal as well as visual media, has herself accomplished a highly creative communication which actively involves the reader in moving and vivid experience.

I would expect this book to appeal to a wide range of readers beyond those immediately concerned with Art Therapy because of the breadth as well as depth of Miss Kramer's approach. Throughout her exposition she moves freely from the theoretical to the practical and back again, livening and documenting her generalizations with case material, and deriving general principles from specific clinical evidence. She keeps in view both the larger social perspectives and the individual minutiae of the complex processes—artistic, educational, developmental, intrapsychic and interpersonal—of which Art Therapy is a composite.

Art Therapy, as developed by Edith Kramer, differs in some respects from other reported Art Therapy programs. The broad basis of Kramer's program has been one of its distinctive features; she has worked with the total population of the same children's community over a period of years. (The Wiltwyck School for Boys will be familiar to some readers who may recall it as the setting of the film, *The Quiet One*.) This has enabled

her to observe and influence many facets of interacting creative processes within the individual and the group; it has also made it possible for her to study and stimulate therapeutic movement in a boy over a protracted span in relation to other dynamic ingredients of his life at the institution and with respect to his family.

Thus, individual and group interplay is brilliantly illustrated by the described rise and decline of artistic fashions at Wiltwyck, such as the King, Prisoner and Monster periods of painting. Each series was originated by an artistically gifted child out of the linkage of his talent with his emotional conflicts, and was picked up and maintained insofar as it provided a form through which, with individual modifications, prevailing psychic needs and problems among group members could find expression and attempted solution. Psychodynamic correlations with these paintings and their differentiated diagnostic and therapeutic implications become unmistakably meaningful as we are shown, for instance, Jerry's nonchalant decorative prisoner, Walter's despairing overpowered prisoner, and Bernard's mutilated night-marish prisoner, as these are illuminated by Kramer's vignettes of each boy's personal history, personality patterns and the progression of his art therapy productions in the context of his overall adjustment and treatment at Wiltwyck.

Or to choose among many of the case examples of shorter or longer sequences of Art Therapy during a boy's stay at Wiltwyck, it is an impressive adventure in empathy to follow the ups and downs of nine-year old Frank's struggles for growth and to get on friendlier terms with himself and his world, through his Art Therapy experiences over an almost three year period. The dramatic contrast between Frank's early painting of the rigid powerful Indian Chief as an ambivalent security

symbol and his painting of the Mexican, two years later, which "contains and expresses emotional content on a high level of sublimation", demonstrates with convincing impact Frank's developmental movement and gain of integrative capacity during the interval.

The author achieves unusual clarity of expression but without recourse to oversimplification or superficiality. Instead, this clarity reflects with what thorough assimilation she comprehends her very complex material. Original ideas are stated so simply that one feels one has always known them, and familiar concepts are put so freshly that they carry new impact of meaning. Miss Kramer's psychological insight, self-awareness, and consistent maintenance of her role as Art Therapist, has enabled her to master through understanding, and thus to bring into meaningful order material that might have overwhelmed a less well-equipped worker as a bombarding chaos of primitive and unconscious emotionality.

Indeed I felt in reading this book as though it were a distillate of a much greater quantity of ideas and observations that had been subjected to extensive refining and working through to its present highly concentrated form.

According to Miss Kramer, the art therapist must possess the specialized skills of artist, teacher and therapist all at once, and she finds occasions throughout the book to blend in how, when and why the art therapist should function. Theoretical explanations are offered for whatever practical methods she advocates, such as the theoretical usefulness of children's art folders and of a continuous exhibit of children's paintings in the dining room. On the other hand, her theorizing about the art therapist's roles and functioning is always concretized by specific examples, as with the therapeutic handling

of a child's acting-out and "transference" relationship with the art therapist, for example. She is also refreshingly willing to cite her own mistakes in order that the reader, as well as she, can learn from them, as in the case of the "the big fist" episode.

Miss Kramer's understanding of the possibilities of Art Therapy for disturbed children of this age group (8-13 years) is fortunately coupled with her understanding of its limitations and her good judgment and sensitivity as to what not to do or say. It is clear that she wisely sees Art Therapy as one of several interdependent and mutually enhancing, rather than competing approaches to a troubled child. Thus with many of the children she works with she tells us of how this ties in for them with their psychotherapy, remedial reading, relationship with social worker or cottage counselor, etc.

Many of the emotionally deprived and disturbed children of the type who need Wiltwyck and other Wiltwycks are often discouragingly hard to treat by traditional clinical methods. Over-prone to the language of acting-out, they may not respond to solely verbal psychotherapy, nor dare to trust an adult psychotherapist or caseworker too soon in the frightening intimacy of a one-to-one treatment situation. Accustomed to school failures they may not risk further frustration and failure by accepting academic learning. Fearful, hostile, conflicted and immature they lack adequate resources for satisfying relationships with peers or adults and are the prey of their own primitive and unsocialized impulses. For such children the professional disciplines concerned are continuously seeking more effective ways of helping.

Much active debate is now current as to the best ways of planning in-patient facilities for emotionally disturbed children in terms of program, kinds of staff, etc. It

seems to me that Miss Kramer's book has important applicability to some of these issues. Need for skillful, patient individualizing of these children, as she has enabled many of them to communicate so poignantly to us through her book, is a telling argument against planning treatment centers that rely solely on a humane milieu with schooling, activities and recreation, but essentially no individualized treatment based on psychodynamic understanding. On the other hand, Miss Kramer's kind of work seems to reach a number of these children who are unable or unready to profit from certain of the other methods, and to help some of them to get more out of the rest of the treatment program.

In essence, Miss Kramer's treatment takes advantage of the natural bent of latency and prepuberty children towards art, and of the special ways that painting can foster emotional maturation. Her work is firmly based on psychoanalytic psychology of which she has an unusually sound and subtle understanding. In very readable fashion, enhanced by the children's paintings, she explains how art bears a particular relation to the process of sublimation and can serve to bind and transform primitive aggression through a variety of the mental mechanisms. Through painting, these isolated joyless children may take first steps in satisfactory communication with their peers and overcome their habitual frustration and failure through a sense of mastery that can come from successful achievement and the acquisition of skill. Thus, children whose lives have lacked the necessary relationships and experience for healthy ego development are helped to overcome their deficiencies in maturation. Kramer beautifully describes the gradual steps towards ego consolidation of several of these children during the course of Art Therapy.

Throughout this book there radiates a therapeutic spirit of a high order. The author neither resorts to defeatism nor pressure for impossible treatment results in the face of these children's great handicaps and limitations, and yet can maintain her appreciation of each child's assets and potentialities, and her enthusiasm for helping him liberate and fulfill them. She has also been able to learn from the children so that she does indeed come to "touch upon the mystery of the structure and development of the artistic personality".

VIOLA W. BERNARD, M.D.

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E. K.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>By</i> VIOLA W. BERNARD, M.D.	vii
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Part I

INTRODUCTION TO ART THERAPY	5
Definition	5
Art and Society	7
Psychology of the Artist and His Audience	10
Sublimation	11
Sublimation in Art	15
Childhood and Art	18
Conclusions for the Art Therapist	21

Part II

ART THERAPY IN A TREATMENT HOME	27
The Children of Wiltwyck	27
The Treatment Program	32
The Art Therapy Program	35
The Individual and the Group	41
Raymond and His Sun	43
Discussion	45
Clyde's Horror Faces	47
Martin, the Great Master	49
LEADERSHIP AND TRADITION	51
Paul and John	52
Conclusions	59
Martin the Ethiopian	60
Conclusions	63

KINGS, PRISONERS AND MONSTERS	66
Kings	66
Prisoners	71
Discussion	79
Monsters	81
Paul and Clyde	83
Clyde	85
Harry, Master of Monsters	87
Matthew	93
Discussion	96
The Little Boy's Monsters	98
Edgar	99
Harry's Later Development	101
Discussion	102
REALITY RELATIONSHIP AND SUBJECT MATTER	109
THE LEARNING PROCESS	125
Success and Growth	130
Jacky	130
Richard	132
Perception and Skill	134
Walter	134
Ralph	135
Pretense and Self-Acceptance	136
Continuity and Growth	138
ART THERAPY AND AGGRESSION	141
Aggressive Behavior	141
Transformation of Aggression in Art	143
Channeling of Aggression	144
The Big Fist	145

Contents

xvii

The Struggle with Aggression	148
Escape and Denial	148
The Fiery Tree	149
Conclusions	152
Counter Attack and Identification with	
the Aggressor	153
Marwin	155
Projection of Aggression	159
Theodore, Caricaturist and Illustrator	159
Building Fences around a Disturbance	164
Self-Destructive Behavior	169
CONCLUSIONS	171

Part III

TWO CASE HISTORIES	175
Frank	175
Concluding Remarks	193
Gordon	194
Discussion	222
INDEX	233

Art Therapy in a Children's Community

PART I