

THE OLD MASTERS ART COLLAGE: AN ART THERAPY TECHNIQUE FOR HEURISTIC SELF-DISCOVERY*

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Kindly nature has given the artist the ability to express his most secret mental impulses, which are hidden from himself, by means of the works that he creates; and these works have a powerful effect on others who are strangers to the artist, and who are themselves unaware of the sources of their emotions. (Freud, 1910, p. 84)

The first part of the above statement suggests basic Freudian theory underlying traditional art therapy: what an individual creates from the deepest recesses of the unconscious can provide clues to unknown psychic material.

The second part of the statement suggests the possibility of a different sort of art therapy: art created by the artist has power to elicit emotional reactions buried deep within another person who has no real connection with the artist.

Coming into the world of therapeutic healing from a background of art history rather than the creative arts, I chose for my Master's Degree thesis in Counseling to do an art therapy research project, working with Old Masters art rather than client-created art. This paper describes an experimental study in which it is shown that the affect created by great art can bring about change in self-perception, thereby being potentially growth producing.

The "Old Masters Art Collage" is the title I have given to one of the multi-media techniques developed at the Palo Alto branch of the Psychosynthesis Institute. Psychosynthesis, as an inclusive humanistic approach to personality and growth, was created by

Dr. Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974) who, as one of the pioneers of Freudian psychoanalysis in Italy, came to feel that Freud had not given sufficient weight to a holistic view of the human animal (Assagioli, 1971).

The "OMAC" represents an example of the increasing body and variety of multi-media psychotherapeutic methods which in recent years have grown out of the larger movement of humanistic psychology. Until now the Old Masters Art Collage has not been experimentally tested or presented in any formal literature. It, briefly, can be described as follows:

Approximately 2000 postcard reproductions of Old Masters art are spread face up on the floor.

Instructions given to the group participating are in four sequential steps, each set of instructions being presented following group completion of the previous set.

1. "Select about 20 cards to which you have a *strong* response - *both negative and positive*. Your only criteria for choosing any card should be that you feel strongly attracted by it or strongly repelled by it."

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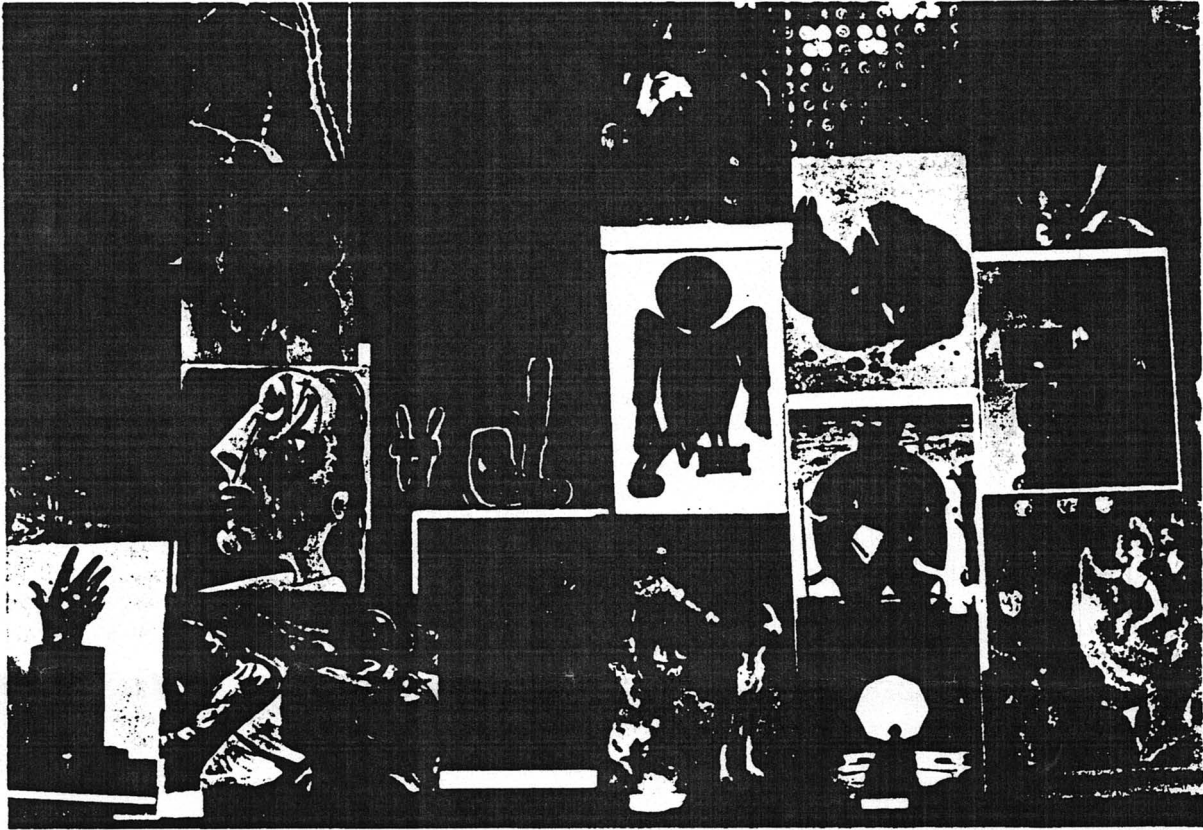


Fig. 1. "A Collage of Self."

2. "Divide into groups of three or four, and spread out around the floor."
3. "Think about each card you have chosen, and try to discover why you were drawn to it. What in you was identifying with it? Arrange all your cards on the floor in front of you in a sort of meaningful collage representing your self. Cards which seem related should be so placed." (Fig. 1)
4. "Taking turns, verbally describe to each other your Collage of Self. Be as honest and open as you can. Each of you is free to ask questions of the other members of your group."

For this experimental study the plan was to use the OMAC as an intervention treatment, administering it to only half of the selected population between pre- and post-personality tests. The Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) was chosen as the standard personality test because of its non-threaten-

ing character, and because it had been specifically designed to measure Maslow-type self-actualizing healthy traits, rather than unhealthy ones (Shostrom, 1974).

The population chosen was public high school students drawn from two psychology classes. The students were from 15 to 17 years old. They were racially mixed, and in socioeconomic levels ranging from low to high-medium.

Ten hypotheses were developed to compare the individual test scores on twelve different personality traits measured for each subject. These data were analyzed on three different types of computer programs. More subjective data were derived from a short personalized questionnaire given each subject at the completion of the experimental process.

On the basis of the obtained statistical results it was found that measurable change had occurred in the self-perception of all subjects. However, demon-

strably significant change had occurred only in the self-perception of the experimental group who had experienced the OMAC.

Confirmation of the statistical test-result findings was had when comparing the personalized subjective data derived from the short questionnaire. The total experimental process had been rated as being personally meaningful by 66% of the OMAC-experiencing group as against 26% of the control group who had not experienced the OMAC.

Although difficult to measure actual psychological change or growth, the significant statistical results of the Old Masters Art Collage experiment indicate that demonstrable change in self-perception can be supplied by using this technique as an instrument for stimulating heuristic change in the individual.

The heuristic change in self-perception seen in the change in POI scores for the OMAC-experiencing subjects may reflect Clemens Benda's contention (1961) that great artists have the ability to combine powerful unconscious drives with controlled and mature integration of experience, thus producing a new order in painted images and symbolic forms.

The emotive power latent in great works of art permits the viewer to make full use of his unique gestalt perceptual powers. He is able to make a connection between the artist's visual symbolization and his own inner storehouse of psychic images and symbols. In his making the connection between artistic visual symbols and his own unconscious ones, the individual is able to release for himself curative forces of both healing and psychic growth (Slowchower, 1968).

Kris posits (1956) that artistic communication lies not so much in the prior intent of the artist as in the consequent recreation by the audience; and re-creation is distinguished from mere reaction by virtue of the fact that the person responding to an artistic masterpiece contributes something of himself to the stimuli for his response.

Research on the special place of heuristic learning in psychological growth and change — as opposed to simple accrual of knowledge for practical use — has shown that in order for an individual really to learn something "new," he needs to have some sort of prior connection so that he can make a meaningful transfer between what is already familiar and what is as yet unknown and irrelevant (Bruner, 1966; Ornstein, 1973). Information acquired simply through memorization may be useful for specific purposes or for a specified time span, but only when learning occurs as

a joint process between inner and outer — when it is actually self (or heuristic) learning, is its value lastingly integrated into the individual as a part of his deepest self (Benda, 1961).

John Perry (1973) has suggested that the process of psychological breakdown and withdrawal, followed by sequential stages of integration, growth and emergent wholeness, can be induced by heuristic learning derived from making connections between outer and inner symbolic affect-images. This Jungian analyst has described the process of reorganization and rebuilding in which self-generated created symbols and images provide the psychodynamic energy necessary for both breaking up previous patterns of self-organization and for transcendence into more integrated and fully functioning vitality.

The traditional concept of art therapy involves patient and therapist working together — one supplying, the other interpreting. On these two themes there are two variations: either the patient himself creates visual forms from inside himself, or (as in the TAT and Rorschach projective tests) the patient creates personalized verbal reactions to visual forms previously tailored by others to suit standardized tests. In either case the patient himself learns little or nothing from his own responses — in fact since he supplies from inside himself material which he himself does not understand, he may feel fearful, exposed, mystified or threatened by the experience (Crampton, 1974).

The Old Masters Art Collage differs from traditional art therapy in that great art created by first ranking artists, rather than art works standardized on order or created by the patient himself, serves as the vehicle for stimulating self-awareness. Instead of creating his own art forms, or verbalizing to a therapist about pictures purposefully designed to serve as a diagnostic tool, the subject works with artistic masterpieces which he selects as having special and unique meaning at that moment to himself.

By focusing criteria for choice on both positive and negative reactions to the masterpieces, the OMAC exercise becomes one which emphasizes and exposes polarities of the personality. Successfully hidden and often unexpected realities of inner repressed and inchoate material are able to surface to the individual's consciousness through the media of visual art created by great artists.

The emphasis is on self-understanding and heuristic growth. The process involves, first, the individual's making aesthetic choices — second, analyzing these

choices — third, synthesizing the choices into meaningful relationships with various parts of his self — and, fourth, verbalizing to others his understanding of the unique inner meaningfulness of the entire experience.

By making use of both aesthetic-intuition faculties and cognitive-intellectual faculties, an individual is able to get in touch with unconscious factors without reliance on a therapist. No one else has quite the same access to his personal symbols. No one else is needed to interpret the meaning of what he has exposed from unknown dark parts of himself. Of course since the OMAC is a group exercise presented by a therapist or other leader, if an individual wishes further insight into his own new perceptions, the leader is available for this.

In humanistic psychology the emphasis is placed on the therapist's role as midwife to, rather than creator of, therapeutic change in the patient. The therapist serves as a catalytic agent in the patient's search to discover his own motives and inner conflicts. Once these hidden dynamics are exposed beneath outward observable behavior, the patient's task is, with assistance from the therapist, to integrate these powerful forces of his personality into a smoothly interacting totality (Progoff, 1959).

The insight provided by the Old Masters Art Collage is self-generated rather than provided by another's interpretation. It represents primary rather than secondary process learning. The individual supplies for himself the "Ah-Ha!" experience, and in the process learns heuristically through a uniquely personal communication with great works of art which have special meaning for him.

Humanistic psychology's emphasis on the patient's becoming his own teacher in the process of self-learning arises out of an increasing insistence that the intrinsic nature of the human organism is to seek health rather than pathology; and that the seeds of healing lie inevitably within the patient rather than in any outside therapeutic source (Rogers & Stevens, 1967; Maslow, 1968; Perls, 1969).

As an art therapeutic technique growing out of Assagioli's theories of Psychosynthesis rather than out of traditional art therapy, the emphasis on the Old Masters Art Collage is on heuristic discovery and on the use of great art's intrinsic ability to create

powerful universal symbols capable of stirring responsive and exciting chords of emotion in the viewer.

Back to Freud, "The artist is an ally of the psychoanalyst for he draws on sources not yet opened to science" (Collected Works, V9, 1960, p. 44).

And as Freud's counterpart, Jung expresses it:

... *looking*, psychologically, brings about the activation of the object; it is as if something were emanating from one's spiritual eye that evokes or activates the object of one's vision. (Jung, 1967, from Crampton, 1974, p. 10).

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