

Art: Persevere, Attune & Configure

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Artwork has both shone and been discredited in the world of psychology. Before focusing upon benefits, some problems will briefly be identified. Attempts have been made over the years to diagnose with artwork. Any Axis I or II pathology has several criteria that need to be investigated, and confirmed or ruled out before a diagnosis is made (APA, 2000). As well, in DSM, personality is a heuristic of patterns that become more rigid as a person moves closer to a disorder. Evaluating art in search of Axis I or II tends to lack the validity and brevity of approaches such as interviews,

tests, historical documents, and secondary sources. Even drawing tests lack sufficient psychometrics or are mind-boggling such as scoring the Rorschach Exner System (2002).

While it may be questionable to use artwork to evaluate personality, art may be more useful in the understanding of character. Personality is a typology model, while character looks at the diverse aspects of a client, some of which will be accepted and others unrecognized or rejected by the individual (Hillman,

1999). The goal of character development is an endless process of integration. Both models of personality and character have their uses, but are very different. When clients show interest in art, therapists may want to shelve their DSM and instead focus on healthy aspects of integration such as perseverance, attunement, and configuration.

PERSEVERE

The ways we persevere show aspects of character: maintaining a direction or purpose in spite of difficulty. Recently the Vancouver Art Gallery (2012) had a show that included several Matisse paintings, including *Large Reclining Nude*, 1935. One wall was covered with photographs of the work in progress over several months, where the artist went between abstract and realistic, clear and diffuse, pattern and simplicity. Often in life we underestimate the amount of effort needed to accomplish something, also evident in some clients who expect an easy or quick fix. One aspect of perseverance is the balance between comfort and struggle. Sometimes we need to pursue discomfort to accomplish something worthwhile, but ongoing or overwhelming struggle often leads to anxiety, escapism, and loss of sensitivity.

Another more subtle aspect of perseverance involves the balance between directed focus upon achieving a specific goal and being open to change along the way. If we adhere too strictly to an anticipated outcome, then opportunities along the way to improve the design or life goal are overlooked. On the other hand, not enough consistent vision and steadfastness lead to incomplete projects and half-hearted achievements. For instance, an art therapy student decided to listen to the same favorite song repeatedly while painting to capture her feelings about the music. However, as she listened to the song over and over, she became increasingly sick of it. She was disappointed in the outcome, as she no longer liked the painting or the song. It seems that she missed an opportunity to adjust the goal to a more interesting theme such as how feelings change. By being fixed on a limited goal, she missed an opportunity to explore something more complex and interesting.

ATTUNE

The word attune describes moving towards and away from being in tune, as in the process of tuning a guitar and it slowly edging out of tune. Similarly, an artist makes discriminative decisions to move towards what resonates. However, creativity theory indicates that we are best to generate ideas first and later judge them, as creating and evaluating can interfere with each other (Davis, 2004). Yet, to attune artistically, both sensitivity and judgement are needed at the same time. James Lord (1965) posed for Alberto Giacometti and kept a diary describing the artist's dramatic behaviours and multiple over-paintings. He was interested in how both the peaks and valleys enhanced progress, not just the brief times of being in the zone.

A basic attuning exercise involves developing sensitivity through colour mixing and adjusting the colour to match particular emotional states. The goal is to get absorbed, while just using red, blue, yellow, black, and white. While increasing sensitivity during activity shows mindfulness, the discriminative process also needs to be called upon, which can include moving towards and away from the desired outcome. Like with Giacometti, the process includes getting closer to a goal, finding it slipping away, and feeling lost at times. The art therapy client can document the process of colour mixing for later discussion by putting dabs of paint on paper, without the need to create a specific picture.

CONFIGURE

Putting aside the scary expectations and mysterious qualities surrounding creativity, it can be helpful instead to operationally consider configuration. In this regard artists tend to first find what interests or inspires them and then bring varying interests together in their own work. Interests are often generative, where one triggers another. For instance, have you gone to a library and found an interesting book sitting next to the one you were looking for? The convergence of interests can be most easily seen in art history books or retrospective shows, where influences are pointed out and patterns displayed before your eyes. In this manner, what is considered highly original also makes



sense in a context. For configuration to happen, an artist connects sufficiently with a community to develop influences, but balances this with enough separateness to be able to stand out and be unique. Broadening this concept, art reflects life. For instance, teenagers often magnify the dilemma of both trying to fit in with peers, but also avoiding being too average or uninteresting. In this regard, they want to shine individually in a manner appreciated and accepted by others, which can be a parallel discussion when looking at their artwork.

ART REFLECTS LIFE.

Art students often talk about finding one's voice or style, what will make them unique and identifiable in the art community. When making images, these students may cling to the first thing that seems to work for them, where there is some glitter and praise. A student mistakenly identifies with what was made and tries to reproduce it with diminishing outcome. Instead, the student would do better to tolerate ambiguity (what will be my style?) and let several interests or loose threads accumulate and converge over time. In this regard, it can help for there to be a conviction or non-religious faith that things will come together, as part of tolerating ambiguity about art or identity.

As an example of more genuine configuration, the elderly photographer Freeman Patterson considers his nature-based images as being an autobiography. He sees himself as having lots of experience, working in Canada and Africa, but also "where the unconscious

runs ahead" and forms patterns in his work that have become more evident to him over time. Once the "weave" is noticed the meaning begins to clarify and become symbolic. For instance, on CBC radio (2012) he described photographing a fresh snowfall, where soon afterwards there was a fleeting thought, "the fields look like my life to this point". In this regard, he had faith that components would jell and form a more intricate configuration than something forced for quick satisfaction.

The purpose of this article is to convey how artwork can be used therapeutically to reflect and integrate diverse life processes. This is not done through diagnosis or weak art-based psychometric testing, but instead by helping clients see parallels between art and life such as how to persevere, attune, and configure pursuits.

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