

...Art In Mental Health Part II

by Frank Frontis

Art Education and Training

In part one, Judith A. Rubin discussed how art education can provide therapeutic benefit. In taking her point further she states, "Indeed, I think that the very best art teachers are growth-enhancing people who nurture the student's sense of self and of competence in a broadly therapeutic way."

Comments from instructors in the arts, particularly the performing arts, often reflect this concept. "A number of my students are recovering from family or personal problems of various kinds," notes Jerry Mills, a classical dance instructor. "Here at the Ritz Ballroom, while learning to dance, they're also getting a lot of benefit in their personal lives."

Carol Johnson, a former student of Jerry Mills, was depressed and withdrawn. "I was having serious problems," she says. Johnson decided to take up dance lessons, mostly for a social outlet.

"They helped me out a lot," Johnson says emphatically. "Learning how to dance helps to build and strengthen the self. It's energizing, and it releases negative feelings. Everyone has music in them, and when you learn how to dance, you discover that music," Johnson says. (Dance) helped to raise my self-confidence a whole lot — and my self-esteem. Now, I like myself a lot better."

Johnson says that dancing brought her out, and helped her to become more socially oriented.

"It's nice to have a place to come to," she says, "and have good clean fun, and meet friends and learn and share the same experiences with them."



Eddie Pryor, who teaches piano and organ at the Studio of The Performing Arts and Music at Shelby State, recalls working with students with emotional and mental disorders.

"Often, these people feel they've never accomplished anything productive in their lives. As they're taught to play, they acquire a sense of competence. And this is good for them," he says. "They develop a feeling of joy that I can see in their eyes."

Pryor, who is an instructor — not a music therapist — believes that in the process of learning their music, emotionally stressed students are allowed a degree of relief from their problems.

"A lot of times," Pryor comments, "they'd say things like they felt more relaxed, experienced a change of pace ... or just felt good."

Art Appreciation

What happens when we encounter a sublimely beautiful painting, so ethereal in quality that it leave us speechless? Do such aesthetic experiences have therapeutic value?

Ann Finch, CMSW, a psychotherapist trained in Jungian psychology, thinks so. "Great

works of art speak to us in a symbolic way about things we have no language for," she declares. "They put us in touch with a greater realm. They help us to enlarge our own realities. We're able to see and understand ourselves and our situations from a larger perspective."

Finch refers to this greater realm as the collective unconscious. She says that this is the part of ourselves that we share with everyone else. When works of art put us in touch with our collective unconscious, Finch believes we transcend the "small world" of our personal problems, as we come to realize that they're not unique.

Finch points out that humans have valued art since pre-historic times. "The caveman not only did art to communicate," she says. "He also did it to express himself ... to feel good."

Finch believes the true value of art lies in its ability to communicate to us in a certain way. "There's far too much emphasis on verbal and linear (sequential thinking) modes of expression in our society," she says. "Through art, we can learn more about the non-verbal, non-linear modes. It therefore helps to balance us."