Making art is one of the oldest human resources, says Malcolm Learmonth

Changing our minds

In the art psychotherapy room, the art materials and paints, the easels and mess-friendly tables and floor (and the essential kettle and tea) look and feel like an invitation to use the paint, the clay, the charcoal and modelling wire – in short, to get creative. It is a studio not a consulting room.

People bring the whole range of mental health problems to this room. We work with depression, self-harm, addictions, voice hearers, distress and disturbance of all kinds. What amazes me about this work, even after 20 years, is not how fragile, damaged or vulnerable people are but quite the opposite: how strong, resourceful and creative we are. Making art – and having a close relationship with someone whose role and skill is to see, hear and witness what you say and make – strengthens and draws from this pool of human resilience and capacity to recover.

People often say things like, 'It seems strange, but being in this painting is like being in my own mind: it's as if I can literally change my mind', and 'I couldn't make sense of my story until it started telling itself through the pictures'. Why does art-making have this deep connection to our ability to solve problems, reach new understandings, make different relationships with our feelings and heal ourselves?

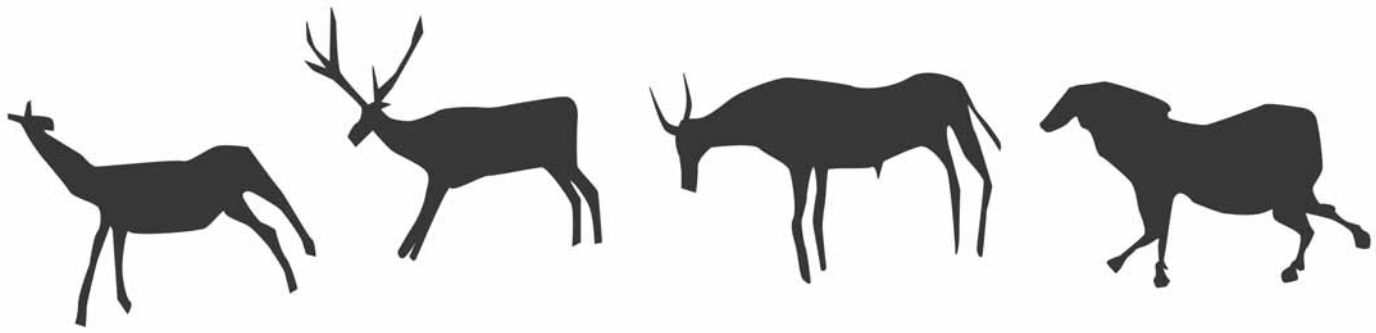
We've mostly grown up with the idea that art doesn't really count, or that the art that does count is made by special people called artists and certainly not by us. But what if it's the other way round? What if, as Krishnamurti said, 'Art is not the icing on the cake, but the yeast in the dough'? What if the studio is accessing one of the deepest and oldest of human resources?

I believe the answers lie in our evolutionary past. Art-making is a universal human behaviour. All times, all cultures have made art. Only language is as characteristically and universally human. Art must have a very powerful survival value. But art doesn't keep us warm. We can't eat it. It doesn't make babies and it doesn't help us to run away or fight if we need to. The advantage must be in doing something to our minds that does make us better at these things.

The preconditions for art-making exist in other species. Cats and dogs dream (watch their paws twitching). Dreaming needs a developed visual and story-telling imagination. The imagination is 'tuning up' and rehearsing real survival advantages. Sometimes people use art psychotherapy similarly. It is a safe space to imagine possibilities and rehearse and practice things that are difficult or that frighten us. With dreams and paintings we can 're-imagine' our worlds.

Playing, too, reaches extraordinary complexity in other animals. One wild young chimp was seen to adopt a log as a 'doll', keeping it close, building it nests, retrieving it when it got dropped. Like dreams, play helps us to rehearse safely. Often it's about learning to deal with what we don't understand or frightens us. This chimp, though, was doing something even more complex than that. He was using his imagination to understand more about relationships. As it happened, his mother was pregnant at the time he adopted his doll. To work in groups (as we and chimps have to) we need to empathise; in other words, to imagine feelings.

When we make art, we're working with capacities for imagination, dreaming, playing and working with feelings



that are so important that they have co-evolved in many species. But we don't, on the whole, think of other species as making art – although elephants and chimps will make interesting paintings, and evidently get satisfaction from doing so, given the opportunity.

Looked at like this, art-making becomes part of our nature. This is a completely different idea to the 'icing on the cake' theory that art is 'high' culture, a distraction for when we're bored, or Freud's idea that art is nothing but 'a partial taming of our savagery'.

Yet while we share these capacities with other creatures, there is something special about humans and art. It all seemed to come together pretty quickly in the Upper Palaeolithic period (about 40,000 years ago – a blink in terms of evolution). This art explosion is sometimes called the 'Cultural Big Bang'. The breathtaking vitality, vision and creative power of images from the cave paintings of Lascaux and other sites are unforgettable. Theories such as that the images' survival value lay merely in familiarising a hunter with his prey, thus making him better able to catch it, can't account for this. Something else much deeper is happening.

Evolutionary psychology tries to understand how we are by thinking about how we got to be that way and why. It is a revealing way of asking important questions about being human. It can be made rigid and simplistic. But it is from here that we're seeing potential explanations for what it is that happens in my art studio every day.

One idea from evolutionary psychology is that intelligences have evolved in 'modules'. Evolutionary development has been a building process, each step marked by the development of new 'modules'; for instance, a 'tool use' or 'language' module. One writer on evolutionary psychology, Leda Cosmides, uses a Swiss army knife to illustrate the principle. The mind is like the knife and the different blades and tools are the modules.

This is an attractive idea. But it doesn't seem to help us much with art. What's the use of an 'art module'? But the Swiss army knife image gave archaeologist Stephen Mithen a brilliant idea.[1] What he saw was that the idea of modules was being conveyed by a metaphor. Of course, a mind isn't a Swiss army knife. Cosimdes was saying it was *like* a Swiss army knife. So what is a metaphor and how does it work?

A metaphor describes one thing by imagining that it is like another. Human beings cheerfully jumble our categories like this all the time. It may be that one of our biggest advantages is this ability to think across categories, to think metaphorically and symbolically. Writing, mathematics, science, religion and art all depend on it. (Category shifting is also the basis of most humour. We laugh because a meaning has suddenly shifted. A Buddhist walks into a Pizza Parlour and says 'Make me one with everything.') We're not just good at it, we seem to need to do it, and it gets some very tangible results. Mithen calls this ability 'cognitive fluidity'.

Cognitive fluidity is a perfect description of how 'changing one's mind' through image, metaphor and symbol happens in the studio. Perhaps it's also a helpful understanding of certain kinds of distress and disturbance. If human development has needed this capacity to think across categories, to join things up in unusual ways, it could be that some of us have developed the ability to a troubling degree. If we forget that metaphors are metaphors, we're in difficulties. So working with visions, voices and delusions through art helps because it gives these thoughts, feelings and images a container, a place where they can be returned to their creative and meaning-making function. Perhaps other people don't have enough 'cognitive fluidity', getting stuck in rigid and unhelpful ways of understanding ourselves and the world, like the arid stuckness of deep depression. Then, working with art helps our minds to become fluid again, to be open to different understandings that may lead us out of the dark desert.

The aims of psychotherapy have been summed up as developing a sense of our own stories as individuals and as members of groups, and developing ways of dealing with how we feel about them. Art-making fosters the unfolding of stories and is an everyday practice of emotional regulation. Giving our stories and feelings external form as art helps to make a relationship with feelings where we are neither overwhelmed by nor denying of them.

If we put this together with the concept of cognitive fluidity we have a strong way of understanding how art psychotherapy works, and why the art studio sees extraordinary transformations. It is because we are tapping into the same root capacity for re-imagining and for problem solving that were the difference between life and death for our ancestors. We are working with the grain of human nature instead of trying to conquer it.

Another writer on art's place in evolution said it is as natural for humans to make art as it is for wolves to howl. A successful wolf also knows how to watch, wait and work with others. Art psychotherapy is one place where this kind of nature can be rediscovered as the powerful ally of mental health that it is.

Illustration by Marie Harimoto
See also www.insiderart.org.uk

1. Mithen, Stephen (1996) *The Prehistory of the Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, Thames and Hudson.