

SOME ORIGINS OF ART THERAPY THEORY AND PRACTICE:
A JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVE

THE IMAGE AS ITS OWN BEST EXPLANATION

‘Concepts are coined and negotiable values; images are life’¹

An image claims attention and thereby tends to provoke a response. This may be a simple communication, as in the case of a *sign*, or as something more complex and possibly obscure, as in the case of a *symbol*. Psychologically, symbols invite *interpretation*. Interpretations can be based on expertise, perhaps by artists, art historians, critics, anthropologists, psychologists and therapists of many kinds, not to mention prophets, astrologers and healers in various cultures. Importantly, despite inevitable cultural influences, spontaneous image-making is now known to express aspects of personal *subjectivity*. Interpretations of images can never be regarded as absolute, adequate or comprehensive *explanations*, but they perhaps derive from:

Image-making as the evolving language of *Art*, from the first pre-historic markings, paintings and carvings.

Myths and Legends, as glimpses of unconscious and dynamic patterns in the collective human psyche. Jung identified these as *archetypal*. Freud’s insight that the myth of Oedipus had metaphoric relevance for many of his patients was later greatly extended by Jung, who recognised that many ancient myths were relevant in our own time and, if recognised, could shed light on psychological problems.^{2 3 4}

Healing practices in many cultures, where these entail the practical use of ritual artefacts, designs, sand paintings, mandalas, etc. in the alleviation of suffering.

Religious experiences, beliefs and teachings, sometimes represented in sacred images. Often outside a formal religious context, Jung believed that an unacknowledged religious *attitude* characterises both creative activity and psychological healing. This may focus attention on inner values and personal meaning in awareness of the *soul*.^{5 6}

Philosophical enquiry concerning the nature of the soul and the relation between creative inspiration and *states of mind*. Plato called creative activity ‘divine madness’ and Aristotle described artistic temperament as ‘melancholic’.⁷

The ‘secret art’ of *Alchemy* Jung saw as a largely unconscious attempt to bring about psychological changes by facilitating physical transformations in laboratory experiments. This insight identified an early form of psychotherapy in which fantasy *projection* into the materials and equipment played a major part. Numerous alchemical treatises relied heavily on graphic representation as well as text.^{8 9 10}

Medical research which, soon after 1800, included the study of spontaneous art-making by psychiatric patients. This led to the collection of such material in hospital ‘museums’ and early attempts to ‘diagnose’ a patient’s condition from his or her pictures. This sometimes led to a further readiness to attribute pathology to artistic expression, or even to see genius and madness as two sides of a coin.^{11 12}

Romanticism as a holistic perception of *nature* and the *subjective* derived from natural philosophy. This major influence on 19th century thought inspired and informed both medicine and the arts. J.C Reil (1759-1813) was one German Romantic physician who advocated involving patients therapeutically in art, drama and music.¹³ In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) Jane's amateur watercolours are assumed to have important personal significance.¹⁴ The cultivation of the subjective in literature, theatre, music and the visual arts offered possibilities for the very insights into human experience from which post-Romantic psychiatry initially drew back.^{15 16}

Educational assumptions that the arts have a civilizing influence upon human behaviour and, within this, the art educational thesis that intellectual and emotional development is promoted through art activities. Bernard Shaw said: 'I am simply calling attention to the fact that Fine Art is the only teacher except torture'.¹⁷

Depth Psychology: The work of Freud and Jung in the early 20th Century awakened interest in the *unconscious*, making the study of dreams credible and even vital sources of insight into human behaviour and psychological problems. In Jung's case he advocated *active imagination* as a way for individuals to explore, *amplify*, and work with images arising from the unconscious, and showed that this method could bring fresh insights and have a valuable healing function *compensatory* to the conscious situation.^{18 19}

Michael Edwards
October 2006

¹ Jung, CG: *Mysterium coniunctionis CW vol.14*, par.226

² Henderson, James: 'Ancient myths and modern man, in: Jung, CG (ed.): *Man and his symbols* Aldus, London 1964

³ Campbell, Joseph: *The power of myth*, Doubleday New York 1988

⁴ Graves, Robert: *The Greek myths, vols. I & II*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1955, 1960

⁵ Hillman, James: *Re-visioning Psychology*, Harper Colophon, New York 1975

⁶ Dunne, Claire: *Carl Jung, wounded healer of the Soul*. Continuum, London, 2000

⁷ Dodds, ER: *The Greeks and the irrational* University of California Press, 1951

⁸ Von Franz, M.L: 'The Process of Individuation', in Jung, C.G (ed.): *Man and his Symbols*, Aldus, 1964

⁹ Ellenberger, H.F: *The Discovery of the Unconscious.*, Basic Books, 1970

¹⁰ Edinger, E.F: *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical symbolism in psychotherapy*. Open Court, La Salle, Illinois 1985

¹¹ Prinzhorn, Hans: *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. Springer Verlag, Heidelberg, 1972

¹² MacGregor, John: *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*. Princeton University Press, 1989

¹³ Ellenberger, H.F *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Brontë, Charlotte (1847): *Jane Eyre*: Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth 1966 (pp.156-7)

¹⁵ Cardinal, Roger: *German Romantics*. Studio Vista, 1975

¹⁶ Edwards, Michael: 'Art, Therapy and Romanticism', in Gilroy, A. & Dalley, T. (eds.): *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Tavistock/Routledge, London 1989

¹⁷ Read, Herbert: *Education through Art*. Faber & Faber, London 1945

¹⁸ Jung, C.G (1916/1957): 'The Transcendent Function' in: *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, CW vol. 8* Routledge/Princeton University Press, London/New York 1966

¹⁹ Ellenberger, HF: *op cit.*