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’

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.

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.

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’.

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.

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.
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. In Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) Jane’s amateur watercolours are assumed to have important personal significance. 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.

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’.

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.

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