

Creative Expressions: Community-based Art Therapy

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The Emergence of Art Therapy

The undoubted growth and evolution of mental illness and its effects upon communities has caught the attention of the World Health Organisation and every health care service across the world. Mental illness knows no boundaries and can affect anyone at any time regardless of race, age, ability, culture or education. Managing this crisis on an individual and community scale requires creative responses and partnerships, and a willingness to embrace new and old ideas alike in a process of continual reflection and change.

Western Australia is no exception to the mental health crisis, and one way in which it has managed to support mental health is by incorporating the 'expressive arts' into mental health care to affect positive changes at the individual, community and political levels.

Art therapy and mental health care in WA has a substantial history and has continued to evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of consumers and communities. In 1903, the Claremont Hospital, the largest asylum in the State for the mentally ill and intellectually disabled, was built. With 2000 beds, its main focus was on custodial care with many patients living there on a long-term basis. Patients were encouraged to participate in work-oriented pursuits to support their rehabilitation, such as farming and light industrial practices.

After World War II, advances in research led to the development of new pharmacological

medications, which, from the 1960s onwards, began to profoundly change the face of mental health by echoing the end for large asylums and the opening of doors to the community. Claremont closed in 1972 and was split into two smaller hospitals: Graylands for the 'acute' mentally ill and Swanbourne for people with a 'chronic' illness. Heathcote Hospital was also available and supported short-stay patients with mental illness. In the 1980s, Mental Health Services was included in the State's Health Department, and the Division of Intellectually Handicapped remained separate for people with an intellectual disability as a result of the growing awareness of the differences between these two populations.

Attitudes towards mental health around the world were changing, presenting plenty of opportunity for innovative approaches to recovery. In 1952, Dr Archie Ellis, the Superintendent for Mental Health in Victoria, was inspired by his work with UK psychiatrist Dr Cunningham Dax and his theories of 'psychiatric art'. Dax was at the forefront of the Therapy Through Art movement taking place in the UK mental health system in the 1950s, having published books on the topic and owning the largest collection of psychiatric art in the world. In the 1960s, Dax introduced art therapy to psychiatry in Australia at the Royal Park Hospital in Melbourne. He employed John Lowther, a colleague well-connected to the local arts scene, to coordinate a studio