

Art therapy in museums can help people explore themselves

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1 The idea of receiving therapy in a museum might seem unusual. However, art therapists are increasingly looking towards the rich resources of museums and galleries to aid them in their clinical work. Art therapy, or art psychotherapy, sees people expressing their feelings and experiences through art, as well as (or instead of) through words. It can be used to help people of all ages, living with a wide range of emotional or physical conditions.

2 Art psychotherapists usually work in special therapy rooms in hospitals, but one recent study explored how conducting art psychotherapy in a museum could be beneficial to a group with complex mental health difficulties. Research has found that people "see themselves" in museum objects, and that reflecting on our responses to objects can tell us something about ourselves. For example, an object can evoke powerful emotions, or symbolise an aspect of our current or past experiences. And looking at museum objects seems to help participants to develop greater self-understanding. Apparently, this was the first time that museum objects were used for this kind of art psychotherapy for adults accessing mental health services.

3 Research findings show that a museum setting could help to inspire creativity. There is also evidence that a non-clinical space could help people to feel more connected to each other and their local community, and less "set apart" by their mental health difficulties.

4 In one experiment, a group of seven adults aged 18-25 explored the museum exhibitions and then made some art using a variety of different materials. At the beginning, a task was suggested (such as finding three objects to represent their own past, present and future) but as the weeks went on, they increasingly found objects they connected with. At the end of each session there was time for verbal reflections, as a group.

5 Each art work or artefact can mean something different to everyone who views it. It was later discovered just how effective the use of museum objects can be, particularly for self-exploration. One participant, Susie, took inspiration from a model of a cross-section through the earth, drawing herself as a person with three layers and labelling it "what I show to others", "what those close to me get to see", and "what I feel about myself that hardly anyone knows".

6 Another person who attended the sessions, Ellie, was inspired by a repaired Roman pot. She made a collage which expressed her sense that she was "piecing together bits in my life".

7 Although not all the group members made artworks during the sessions, they still found value in their encounters with the objects in the museum. Tasha, for example, was not always able to create art in the group but still reported that "using objects for self-reflection was useful".

8 Several of the group members said that the exhibitions encouraged playfulness, as well as inspiring their creative work, and that this "meant that the group loosened up". Some said that they felt less defined by their mental health difficulties because the group was not held in a hospital or clinic. Such museum sessions also encouraged independence and helped participants to feel valued and connected to the outside world.

9 As one participant put it: "You feel like you are a real person working on your own personal goals rather than just a patient going through treatment ... You wouldn't necessarily have thought that pulling objects out of museum boxes and wandering around looking at artefacts would help you feel better, but you would be surprised".

10 There are many new studies that could help with understanding new art therapies and many more scientists are keen to step out of the usual therapy spaces and explore how art in museums and galleries can help other people too.

Adapted from an article by Alison Coles, The Conversation.com