

excerpts from

# Creative Minds in Medicine

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# case study

art therapy studio



"CityScape" by Scott Mars, a participant in the Art Therapy Studio's community art program  
Photo courtesy of Art Therapy Studio

# color helps

Art makes Scott Mars feel better.

He likes to look at it, yes, and knows about a wide range of artists and styles. But he especially likes to create it. When he does, he also creates what he calls his “safe space,” a space “that nobody can invade.”

Mars copes with depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. He’s been coming to the Art Therapy Studio on the eastern edge of Cleveland since 1995 to take classes, where he makes paintings and ceramics, honing his increasing skills. On this November day, he’s about to begin a triptych, a painting in three panels influenced by the recent loss of his brother. Color helps: The triptych will be full of yellows, greens and reds, and though the content will be “extremely ambiguous,” some things will be recognizable, Mars says.

Does working with paints and clay cheer him up when he’s sad? “Absolutely,” he says. “One hundred percent.”

Science agrees with him. “Human beings have been making [visual] art since the dawn of time,” observes Jennifer Schwartz Wright, executive director of the Art Therapy Studio and an experienced therapist trained in both psychology and art.

Our brains have evolved accordingly, she explains, giving us not only the aptitude and desire for art-making, but also a sense of pleasure when we do it. In fact, creating art engages the same pathways in the brain affected by antidepressants.

“So it feels good,” Wright says. “To me, it’s like eating fresh fruit. You need to do healthy things.”

And studies agree that art is one of those. Scientists have looked at the effects of art-making on various types of patients, including those suffering from trauma, chronic ailments, mental illness, social disconnection or specific physical illnesses such as neurological disease, juvenile diabetes and cancer, and have found evidence that creative art therapy helps people in numerous ways. Whether subjects are lonely, grieving, stressed, ill or injured, making art reduces their anxiety and allows them to express feelings they hadn’t been able to talk about. It also provides safe social interaction, improves bonds between patients and their loved ones, and helps patients with limitations improve their capacities, such as dexterity or concentration.

For instance, in a 2007 German study led by Harald J. Hamre, M.D., and four other scientists that followed 161 chronic-disease patients under the care of 52 different art therapists, art therapy was found to reduce the patients’ disease symptoms long-term and improve their quality of life.

Therapists such as Wright work with a patient’s doctor to determine the right kinds of therapies for that patient’s unique problems and needs. Choosing art materials is important, she says. They need to be culturally familiar to the patient, so he or she will feel comfortable with them, rather than daunted or bewildered, and they need to be





Desiree, a participant in the Art Therapy Studio's program at Louis Stokes Veterans Affairs Medical Center received Best of Show for her watercolor landscape at the Cleveland Wheelchair Veteran's Art Show. Photo courtesy of Art Therapy Studio

things that the patient can handle easily despite any disabilities. Aluminum foil, masking tape, empty jars and other everyday items can serve well, Wright notes.

Patients don't have to know how to draw, either. Therapists know a wide range of artistic disciplines and techniques helpful to art novices, and can engage them in basic art forms, such as collage, that provide the needed benefits. Wright used a technique in graduate school that involved passing a piece of clay around to every person in a therapy group for inpatients with schizophrenia, so each could make a change in it. Eventually, the class shaped the clay to look like a rabbit.

The task encouraged teamwork and connection, and kept each patient in the moment, Wright notes. "Talk about focusing on the here and now," she recalls with a laugh.

Goals of that kind make clear the difference between therapists and art teachers: With their training in psychology, therapists are scientists for whom art is both a diagnostic tool and a primary means of healing people. They know how to set up the structure of a session so that it has certain predictable elements and provides a grounding experience for the patient. Just as important, they know how to "read" the artworks that patients create over time for hints of what's on their minds and for signs of change, and so can help physicians interpret the artistic evidence and detect the presence of symptoms.

None of this takes place under a cone of silence. To learn about their patients, therapists need dialogue to go with the pictures. "You want to know what their motivation is. You have to talk to them, ask them about their art," Wright says. "That's a big deal in art therapy: intention. The art doesn't lie." Talking also leads to trust and a sense of safety for the patients, she adds. "We are clinicians more than artists, but we come to that relationship through art, which is safe."

Studio therapists work with brain-injury and stroke patients as part of the MetroHealth Rehabilitation Institute of Ohio team. They hold community classes at four locations: their headquarters at Fairhill Partners at Fairhill Road and 124th Street in Cleveland, the Ursuline College campus in Pepper Pike, River's Edge in St. Joseph Center at Kamm's Corner on Cleveland's West Side, and at MetroHealth Senior Health & Wellness Center in Old Brooklyn. And they also provide group and one-on-one services to patients at such locations as the Louis B. Stokes VA Medical Center, the Cleveland Clinic, Westlake High School, United Cerebral Palsy and Eliza Bryant Village.

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Often, art-therapy patients don't have any clue what to make, at least at first. In those cases, Wright says, the therapists try to guide them, suggesting themes familiar enough to be accessible.

Mars has his own ideas – lots of them. Among the ranks of ceramic pieces lining the windowsills in the studio room, Mars has a striking wizard sculpture made Gaudi-style with cascading blobs of clay. His sketch book teems with complex arrays of small black-on-white scroll and cup shapes, triangles, pinwheels; on one page, he's drawn an arresting ink sketch of rock star Jimi Hendrix in a scribbly style, intricate and vivid. In one of his paintings, thick lines separate Edvard Munch-style figures, describing the distance between people, Mars explains. "I love my canvases," he says.

Desiree Douglas loves hers, too. An Air force veteran, she was introduced to art therapy through the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center, where her work now adorns the dining room. Though she had always loved drawing in pencil and ink, multiple sclerosis had affected her ability to do the detailed sketches and forced her to give up art. Or so she thought, until Denise Cooper at the Art Therapy Studio helped her discover painting.

"It was like a life just came back," Douglas says.

Now she works in watercolors, oils and acrylics, and has won awards for three years. "It uplifts me, it keeps me on a positive note," she says of her art. "It's amazing what it does when you've been sick."

The activity also gives her a sense of accomplishment. And when she's working in a group, it relaxes her and helps her feel a bond with her fellow painters, Douglas notes. Best of all is the feeling she gets when someone enjoys what she's made. "When I see someone light up, it does an amazing thing on me," she says. "When you bring someone joy, that makes everything worthwhile."



WheelArt – Wheelchair artists roll through colorful pools of paint to create unique designs on fabric using their wheels as paintbrushes. Photo courtesy of Art Therapy Studio

## About the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture

CPAC is a nonprofit with a mission to strengthen, unify and connect greater Cleveland's arts and culture. Research is a core component of our work, and one of many ways we support arts and culture. CPAC provides counsel related to public policy that benefits the sector and the broader community. It provides a number of tools through [cultureforward.org](http://cultureforward.org) and [mycreativecompass.org](http://mycreativecompass.org) for arts and culture professionals and those who would like to engage with them. CPAC also carries out a variety of programs and services that help build the sector's organizational and business practices to support a vibrant, thriving greater Cleveland. [www.cultureforward.org](http://www.cultureforward.org)

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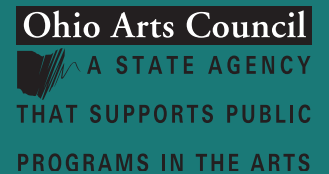


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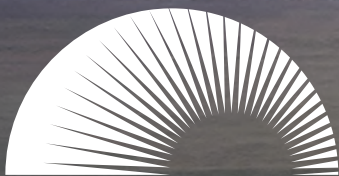
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