

## ON QUALITY IN ART AND ART THERAPY



**Edith Kramer, ATR-BC, HLM**

During last year's conference I was approached by a young colleague, who told me that she used my books with much success when teaching her students. She had difficulty only with my idea of *quality*. Had quality any place in our work? Did we not encourage our patients to forget about making "good" pictures or sculptures? Did we not reassure them that we did not care what their work looked like, that we would never be judgmental?

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In last year's conference I had participated in a panel on the artist's *Second Wind and Inner Satisfaction*. A discussion on *quality in art therapy* was a logical continuation of the dialogue begun the year earlier and a way of answering my colleague. When we talk to our patients about drawing, painting, and sculpting we are often confronted with the patient's feeling inadequate. "I can't draw a straight line." "I have not done any artwork since I was 6 years old" are familiar statements by patients. We reassure them again and again that it doesn't matter *how* they draw. Perhaps, we insist on this because we have become accustomed to the atrocious art that prevails in our western popular culture and in the media. We are fairly certain that any attempts to make a "pretty" or an "artistic" picture will yield either some revolting kitsch or an imitation of some of the worst examples of modern art.

Naturally, we must not hurt our patients' feelings by telling them that we expect their most serious attempts to paint a pretty picture would more often than not turn out to be something quite awful. And so we circumvent the issue and tell them that we do not care what their work looks like, conveying that in art therapy anything goes.

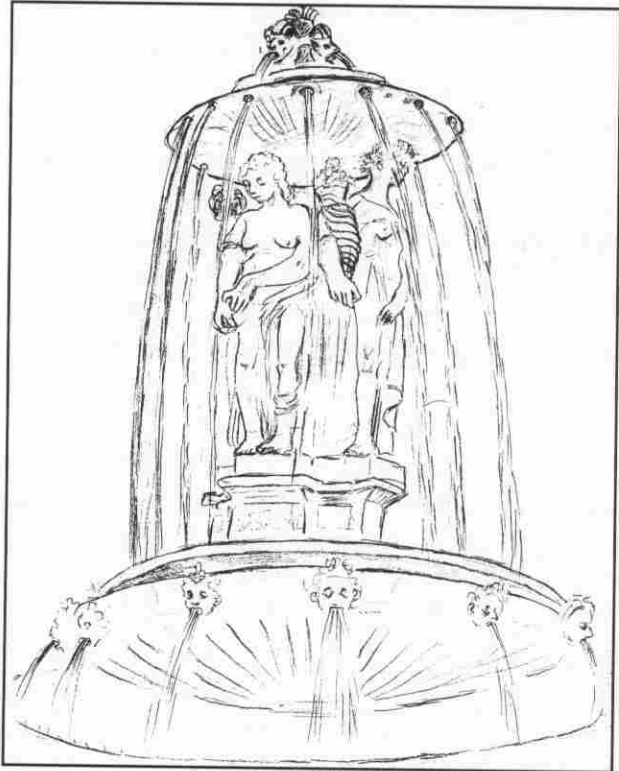
It seems that some of us have been taken in by our own propaganda and feel that we, as art therapists, indeed, do not care about the quality of our patients' art. Actually, we are attempting to free them from the constraints of artificial standards so that they can find their own expressive style.

We see that our way of working is largely determined by the cultural environment in which we function. Suppose, for example, we were doing art therapy in an environment where folk art flourished. The request to draw or paint something would not appear outlandish to our patients, for folk artists and craftspeople are continuously embellishing their work with delightful additions that constitute a kind of overflow of their pleasure in the work of their hands. The prevailing pictorial standards of this hypothetical cultural environment would probably be commensurable with the patients' faculties. Our hypothetical patients would probably have tried their best without excessive distress. Their artwork would have reflected the cultural environment, and each individual's artistic style, and emotional condition. I have encountered this kind of

evidence in the artwork of some members of the Shaker communities. While their superb craft gives no evidence of psychic distress that caused some of these individuals to seek refuge in these communities, their artwork may reveal emotional distress or disturbance.

Folk art is never in bad taste, but it also rarely attains greatness, for this requires the total devotion that only the committed artist can give. However, whenever we encounter great art we usually also meet its shadow, kitsch or other manifestations of anti-art. It would indeed be worthwhile to write the history of kitsch that parallels the history of fine art.

I composed my lecture in France. I decided to investigate the nature of kitsch, by finding one small example that I could draw, tucked away



*Rue Lulli Paris*  
*Edith Kramer*

in a corner of Paris. One always learns more about the nature of a work when one draws it rather than when one just contemplates it. I found a charming Parisian park embellished by a fountain that featured three graces. The fountain consisted of three shell-like circular structures. Water sprang from the crest of the fountain and descended upon three devilish horned heads, or were they meant to be fauns? Their mouths, distorted into angry expressions, spat streams of

water upon a shell-shaped structure. From there the water descended in several distinct streams to the base of the fountain, so that a veil of cascading water surrounded the three youthful women standing in the middle. Their ample but graceful bodies were partially draped, allowing glimpses of seductive nude breasts, thighs, and graceful necks and shoulders. The shell-like structure upon which they stood was adorned by faun-like heads spouting water with what seemed to me a discontented expression, upon another shell-like basin, that constituted the base of the fountain. The total effect of the fountain was charming. But whenever I pursued any of the several elements of the composition with pencil and paper, I arrived at a dead end. The fauns, or devils, of the top structure spouted water with an angry expression. The heads beneath the shell that supported the three graces seemed to dispel water with a disgruntled expression. Whenever I tried to follow the flow of the drapery that covered the women's nudity, it somehow vanished to reappear surprisingly somewhere else, so that it remained elusive.

Within its overabundance of details the composition lacked logic or consistency. The designer of the fountain seemed to have no clear idea of what he or she wanted to convey. The designer seemed to have known only that there should be much live water and feminine charms sharpened by the masculine thrust in the three horned heads. Detail could have been added or omitted without it making much difference. Using this fountain as an example, we have a description of the *quality of kitsch*.

How can we characterize its opposite, *good art*? Three elements seem essential; evocative power, inner consistency, and an economy of means so that the quality of the work would be diminished if anything were added or omitted. Such work conveys an inner unity that gives great satisfaction.

Returning from our excursion into the realm of fine arts to the quality of our patient's art, can we hope that some of their work would attain inner consistency? Should we indeed desire and support such a development, or would this diminish the spirit of acceptance of all and anything the patient produces which may be essential in therapeutic work? Both psychotherapy and art therapy imply a search for inner truth.

Unlike psychotherapy, where the transference relationship between patient and therapist is central, art therapy focuses on the patient's artwork. Our communications remain within the symbolic domain the patient created. When our patient's artwork expresses inner truth, it invariably also attains formal consistency, thus good formal quality. In this work we are aided by the patients' desire to give form to their anxiety, preoccupation, and fantasy. We hope that giving form to such material will make it possible for them to contemplate their art and come to terms with what they see.

Not every kind of art therapy gives the emphasis to form that I have. Margaret Naumburg, who in the 1940's tried to make art therapy acceptable to the psychiatric establishment then in power, encouraged her patients to make quick sketches only, and then to free associate to their own productions. She also encouraged patients to make free scribbles, to find images in the scribbles, and elaborate on them. Such pictures are apt to bring forth latent material and can be helpful. But again, no high formal quality can be expected to emerge. We can understand that art therapists who apply such methods will have little opportunity to contemplate the phenomenon of quality in their practice.

To conclude, whenever a patient's drawing, painting, or sculpture, expresses some inner truth forcefully without being hindered by unnecessary additions, the work will attain good formal quality. Inner truth and good form constitute two sides of the same coin. In the cultural wasteland in which we function, it is surprising to encounter good quality in the work of artists, art therapists, and patients. It is not surprising, therefore, that young art therapists should be puzzled by the concept of quality.