



### **Arts, media and mental health** Erminia Colucci, Kamaldeep S. Bhui

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Arts-based practices reflect and challenge the multiplicity and complexity of meanings, beliefs and values found in societies. Arts can include theatre and performance, dance, music, poetry and literature, static visual materials, sculpture, certain forms of design and architecture, dynamic displays and a variety of visual methods (e.g. photography and film).

Both the content of the artistic/creative produce or material and the narratives of interpretation that these evoke offer a unique route to new understandings and knowledge that otherwise are difficult to convey. Art also offers powerful forms of dissemination of knowledge, especially where the content refers to traumatic, contested, or overwhelming issues; for example, when exploring conflict, trauma, ethical taboos, and when challenging societal conventions or norms. Globalisation and the digital age have also come together to offer new media to share arts across the world, to engage in group debates and deliberations about the purpose and meaning of life, and the challenges faced including human suffering, illness and disease.

The recognition of the power of arts and visual methods is, to some extent, established in disciplines such as anthropology with scholars like Mead and Bateson who, in the first half of the twentieth century, compiled one of the earliest and most significant uses of photographic research (in this case, an analysis of the Balinese culture). But it is not new also in disciplines studying the 'brain and the mind'. Arguably, in his studies of the physical states of hysterics in the late nineteenth century, Jean-Martin Charcot was the first to recognize that a photograph may show more than either the photographer or the subject of the photograph may have intended. Arts and visual tools have been growingly used since that time but, while various typologies of art forms have been exploited for their therapeutic benefits -from dance therapy to music therapy and theatre/performance- arts as a powerful medium to increase public understanding of mental health and illness, a tool for advocacy and an instrument for activism and social action have been insufficiently discussed, theorised or subjected to scholarly debate.

In order to create capacity and a forum for progressing this area of artistic-scientific endeavour, Jacques Arpin and Erminia Colucci jointly proposed and co-chaired a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the World Association of Cultural Psychiatry dedicated to Arts, Media and Mental Health. This group aspires to facilitate a reflexive and robust approach to improving our understanding about the power and mechanisms of arts as a research tool, a form of healing and as a medium to challenge and contest

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norms and stigma, where these hinder recovery or public mental health. This edition of WCPRR is devoted to the products of the first Essay competition ran by the SIG (Arpin & Colucci, WACP 2012). The winners of this competition were Anto SG (First Prize Winner, £600), Jie LI and Santosh Loganathan (Second Prize Winners, 200£ each). Their revised essay entries can be found at page 150 (“Free from pasung: A story of chaining and freedom in Indonesia told through painting, poetry and narration”), page 189 (“Play it street smart: A street play on creating awareness about mental illness”) and page 221 (“Visual arts in psychiatry: From theory to practice”).

This WACP SIG reflects the need to open onto more and wider opportunities in research and therapy and provides a broader platform for exchange and developments within the field of Cultural Psychiatry. For example, it may be timely to investigate digital media platforms in modern society, given the increasing use of ‘smartphones’ and other digital media tools to share, exchange, enjoy and even produce art. The emotional engagement with the creation of arts is one area of scrutiny that needs more attention, for example, what is the artistic and creative process, and what role do emotions play? How do different art forms, from painting, to sculpture to theater, engage with the full range of and intensity of emotional expressions found in people suffering with emotional distress? Do these conventions change in time over different historical periods, and how might they vary between different countries and societies? Indeed, which art forms are unique to specific cultural contexts and, if helpful, might they become more widely adopted and understood?

As part of the SIG activities, in addition to a call for essays on “Arts and media in mental health” for the essay competition, we invited submissions for original written papers for a WCPRR special issue, including visual materials wherever possible. The objective was to bring together the diverse experiences of people engaged in this area of practice. Both the essay prize entries and articles submitted for this special issue offer a window not only on what is being carried out in the field in different countries, from close to our homes in London to Israel, India and Canada, but reveal the various ways in which arts and media are used within mental health services and by practitioners and service users, and public and private institutions. We received a wide range of submissions, from first-hand narratives of arts as part of healing and recovery journeys to professional accounts of using arts to increase awareness and understanding about mental health. Through the fourteen peer-reviewed articles that form this Special Issue, readers will learn, for instance, about social media platforms, documentary film and animation to share findings about the role that cannabis may play in psychotic disorders among young people; trace the experiences of the inmates of the J Ward in Ararat (Australia) that “housed some of Victoria’s most notorious criminally insane prisoners for nearly a century” through images of the stone rubbings, scrapings and graffiti that were left on the walls; and encounter the reflections of a Brazilian team on their creation of a Santa Claus sculptures adorning a Christmas tree. WACP will continue to encourage future interest in this remarkably exciting subject of arts, media and mental health.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge once more Jacques Arpin who co-founded the SIG, was co-chair for the period 2011-2014 and was involved in the development of the essay prize and call for papers; Mic Eales and Sergio Javier Villaseñor-Bayardo who contributed to the selection of the essay prize winners, and WACP for financing the prize. We would also like to thank Ornella Lastrina, who has contributed to the peer-review process of the manuscripts submitted; Vittorio De Luca and Maria Patsou for proofreading the accepted papers, and the several authors for having made this special issue possible by contributing their works.

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