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### Understanding Client Imagery in Art Therapy

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## Understanding Client Imagery in Art Therapy

### Cover Page Footnote

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# Understanding Client Imagery in Art Therapy

Erica K. Curtis, Loyola Marymount University<sup>1</sup>

*This study offers a preliminary investigation into the question: How do art therapists make meaning from viewing client-made art? Art therapy literature on making meaning from client art is reviewed. The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) model used in art education and museum education is also briefly discussed for its parallels to this study's findings. An adapted form of grounded theory for data collection and analysis was used, leading to emergent themes that suggest that understanding client art requires more than analyzing content and aesthetic elements. More specifically, this inquiry offers the consideration that viewing client art is a dynamic practice that can be described by three processes: cyclical, relational, and personal.*

“The need to learn to read visual images is an urgent one that touches at all levels of our society” (Oring, 2000, p. 58). To effectively harness the potential of visual communication in therapy, it is essential to understand how art therapists make meaning from images. Other fields such as art education and museum education have adopted the notion of *visual literacy* asserting that, like the development of reading skills, understanding imagery involves the development of certain competencies (Debes, 1969). Sprouting from this theory, scholars have further described the model, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), which describes *how* people develop visual competencies and the *process* by which they are applied to make meaning from imagery (Housen, 2002). The American Art Therapy Association’s required curriculum (Masters Education Standards, 2007) similarly proposes that specific visual competencies are necessary for understanding imagery. This investigation considers not only common skills for making meaning about an image but, like VTS, suggests common processes as well that can inform clinical art therapy practice.

Though limited in its scope and scale, this inquiry explores how professional art therapists combine critical thinking skills (including observing, hypothesizing, evidence-seeking, questioning, and refining) with unique art psycho-therapeutic skills (including other perspective-taking, recognizing formal elements, and attuning to the psychological quality of the imagery) to make meaning from art. Art therapy literature (e.g. Gordon, 1985; Malchiodi & Cattaneo, 1988; Tinnin, 1990) has embraced the notion that when clients make and view their art, it is an active and dynamic process that engages the whole person. This investigation explores ways that the art therapists’ process of making meaning might be described in similar ways.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While a full exploration of meaning-making from imagery would necessarily include a range of disciplines, theoretical stances, and models, this review is specifically limited to art therapy literature that directly confronts the question of how meaning is made by looking at art. The one exception is the inclusion of a model used in museum education and art education: Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen, 1992, 2002). I became familiar with VTS almost ten years after completing my own preliminary investigation into the process of meaning-making. The striking parallels between VTS and my limited master’s thesis research findings prompted me to return to my study after ten years working as a clinical art therapist to reconsider its potential usefulness in the ongoing dialogue about meaning-making in art therapy. Although the primary focus is the art therapy literature, it is for these reasons that a discussion of VTS is also included here.

Although meaning-making through art is a complex process, how it has been articulated in the art therapy literature can be categorized under one of three basic understandings: meaning-making as (a) a process of decoding common images (e.g. translating diagnostic material from images), (b) reliant on the client’s explanations and socio-cultural contextualization, or (c) an integrative process involving subjective experiencing. As an example of the first two, Kramer (1992) uses an evolutionary lens to outline “categorical” perceptions (focusing on the commonly recognizable) and “territorial” perceptions (focusing on contextual specifics), while McConeghey (1994) refers to these processes as “primordial” (focusing on the universal) and “personal” (focusing on contextual specifics). Though couched in different terms, these two concepts repeatedly appear.

Rudolph Arnheim (1997), renowned aesthetic theorist, assessed that historically art interpretation has involved either measured analysis (similar to decoding universal meaning mentioned above) or intuitive experiencing. Interestingly, art therapy literature has focused on the client’s personal interpretation and contextualization of art as the postmodernist alternative to measured analysis possibly because, as Acosta (2001) suggests, intuitive responses to understanding art are regarded as overly subjective. However, art therapy literature does discuss the role of subjective and dynamic perception, but in consideration of the client’s interpretive process. Art therapy literature that focuses on the client’s experience commonly asserts that visual perception is an active process involving the whole person who dynamically constructs meaning (e.g. Gordon, 1985; Malchiodi & Cattaneo, 1988; Tinnin, 1990).

Art therapy literature that addresses the therapist’s experience, rather than the client’s, regularly focuses on the role of the art itself in meaning-making. The importance of attending to and

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repeatedly returning to the art's sensory and formal qualities to look for meaning has been discussed theoretically (e.g. Betensky, 1995; Malchiodi & Cattaneo, 1988; Tinnin, 1990) and applied to measured assessments like the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (Gantt & Tabone, 1998). While the importance of turning to the art itself is not debatable, some (Acosta, 2001; Leclerc, 2006) suggest that less tangible factors can add to our understanding of the therapist's process of meaning-making. This is an experience that Leclerc (2006) suggests "exceeds the realm of something visible or readable that cannot be directly translated" (p. 132) and that Acosta (2001) asserts involves the observer's whole, personal self.

The role of the whole, personal self is discussed elsewhere by art therapists (e.g. Huss, 2009; Levine, 1994) interested in the idea of integrating divergent ideas about meaning-making. Indeed, Huss (2009) says art therapists often naturally and unthinkingly do integrate different ways of seeing client art but suggests that how this integration occurs, and what exactly is integrated, has yet to be articulated. Leclerc (2006) refers to a similar phenomenon as the knowledge one knows without knowing one knows it (or what may be called countertransference). These ideas are not far from Acosta (2001) who, building on the work of Arnheim (1966), affirms that art therapists must use *all* resources and information in an investigative manner such that the image is understood as more than just an amalgamation of parts. Others who recognize the value of Arnheim's (1966, 1997) work to inform the field of art therapy (Franklin, 1994; Levine, 1994; McConeghey, 1994; McNiff, 1994a, 1994b) may agree.

Other than Arnheim's (1966, 1997) work on visual thinking, art therapists have also referenced scientifically-based ideas about visual perception (Klager, 1992; Kramer, 1992; Levick, 1984; Silver, 2001; Tinnin, 1990) and, more traditionally, drawn from a number of psychological models to understand how meaning is made in art therapy including, but certainly not limited to, Jungian, analytic, humanistic, behavioral, and systemic models (Huss, 2009; Leclerc, 2006; Rubin, 2001). Less examined in art therapy literature, but pertinent to this topic, is work in other fields including, but not limited to, visual literacy, graphic design, art education, and museum education. While an examination of these fields' relevance to art therapy is outside the scope of this discussion, one model from outside the art therapy literature is discussed next for its notable parallels with the findings from the preliminary study.

Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen 1992, 2002) emphasizes the process of discovery, guided by the questions: What do you see going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find? More than a set of questions, VTS is a developmental theory that explains how people construct meaning given different levels of experience with imagery. Housen's (1992) findings show that experienced image readers apply feelings and intuition, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving strategies to understand an image's meaning. They tend to experience image-viewing as a "personal encounter" (Housen, 2002, p. 127), interweaving personal with universal concerns and knowledge. They also see meaning as open to reinterpretation; viewers continually return to the image to contemplate new meaning, synthesize ideas, and justify their hypotheses through

visual evidence such as content, line, shape, and color. While VTS outlines curriculum used to train museum goers and art students to make meaning from imagery (Housen, 1992), its potential applicability to discussing client artwork in art therapy is noteworthy.

## METHOD

### Research Approach

This paper describes a grounded theory study which, although limited by size and scope, offers an understanding about meaning-making from imagery that is strikingly similar to Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen, 1992), discussed above, which resulted from years of lengthy and rigorous research with hundreds of participants. Grounded theory was chosen due to its simple yet thorough approach as well as its theoretical acknowledgment that meaning is ever-changing and subject to interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Qualitative strategies for data-gathering and analysis included two interviews, applying systematic coding schemes to organize and condense text from the interviews in order to illuminate emergent themes and patterns, and acknowledging and taking steps to reduce potential researcher bias. A non-directed interview was used to access the experiences of participants, while a second, semi-structured interview was used to explore how participants perceived their own experience of meaning-making. The second, semi-structured interview was also used to clarify and further explore emerging themes. Since participants were aware they were being studied, it is important to note that participants may have acted in a manner not entirely consistent with how they would act in a clinical environment.

### Participants

While it is accepted that context, theoretical orientation, education, and personal history influence the understanding of art, this inquiry was primarily concerned with uncovering a common denominator for art therapists, regardless of these specifics. For this reason, three participants were randomly selected based on the following criteria only: practiced art therapy within the past two years, involved in art outside of the art therapy context, and previously unknown to the investigator. All three participants were graduates of an American Art Therapy Association approved master's level art therapy program and were randomly selected from a list of art therapists meeting the above criteria. These criteria established that participants possessed advanced education, training, and experience with intentional and prolonged viewing of visual stimuli, specifically in an art therapy context. A limited number of participants were recruited to allow for rigorous and in-depth examination.

### Materials and Procedure

Data collection took place in three recorded individual interviews each lasting an average of one hour. Each participant was presented with the same preselected image which was positioned on a small table-top easel (see Figure 1). The image (a) was client-made, (b) contained color, (c) was two-dimensional,



Figure 1. Client-made art participants viewed.

(d) was not characteristic of any specific or discernable population, and (e) used a significant amount of space on the paper. These criteria were utilized to provoke a complex viewing experience in the participants and invite careful and thorough exploration.

Participants were asked to narrate their thoughts while engaging in an in-depth visual exploration of the image with the intent to draw meaning from it. This portion of the interview was non-directive and uninterrupted, allowing for an uninfluenced stream-of-consciousness. Participants were permitted to take as much or as little time to view and speak about the image. When participants indicated they were finished, each was given a final 60 seconds to view the image. During this time they were asked to continue verbalizing thoughts and observations. If participants were not finished at the end of the 60 seconds, the task ended when participants were finished.

Participants were then asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their viewing of the art: What was the overall experience of participating in this study like for you? Do you have any thoughts or feelings about the piece of art? Do you have any thoughts, feelings, or questions about the viewing process? Do you feel that you omitted or edited any thoughts, feelings, or ques-

tions? Do you feel that you came to new meaning or understanding about the art through this process? Other than asking these questions, during the interview the investigator limited comments to only elicit clarification when needed.

### Data Analysis

Basic systematic coding schemes to organize and condense text from the interviews were adopted in order to illuminate themes and processes. To begin, transcribed interviews were dissected and clustered, allowing emergent themes to surface. Next, to understand how these themes contributed to the *process* of meaning-making, three additional strategies were used. First, thematic patterns in the transcripts were analyzed. Second, references to a focal point in the art piece, selected due to the high number of comments about this specific area, were analyzed to identify how the themes contributed to the process of meaning-making about this focal point. Finally, participants' answers from the semi-structured interview, during which participants were asked to reflect on their experience of making meaning about the image, were analyzed and compared to the themes and processes that emerged from the previous analyses.

## FINDINGS

Although this study was limited to only three participants, four themes and three processes clearly emerged. The themes that surfaced from the initial dissection and clustering of data represented recurrent attention to or use of certain observations, skills, and affective and cognitive experiences: (a) formal art elements (e.g. color, value, texture, shape), (b) spatial relationships (e.g. between parts of the image, the gestalt and discrete parts, the participant and the image), (c) meaning (e.g. labeling, story-telling, affective experience), and (d) memories/associations (e.g. personal memories, historical events, and existential matters). Once these themes were re-contextualized in the transcripts and analyzed in relation to each other, three overarching processes emerged that suggested participants made meaning in a process that was (a) cyclical, (b) relational, and (c) personal. Finally, analysis of the semi-structured interviews suggested that participants, upon reflection of their own experience, identified similar themes and processes thus lending support to these findings. To illustrate the three processes (cyclical, relational, and personal), transcript excerpts are provided from each of the process analyses described above: analysis of themes as they appear in the transcript, references made to a single focal point, and participant reflections on their own experience.

### Meaning-Making as Cyclical

The process of meaning-making about an image is complex, cyclical, and dynamic. Far from increasingly refining meaning in a linear fashion toward more clarity and depth, participants all cycled through various combinations of assertions, tentative hypotheses, and outright doubts throughout the process. Second guessing occurred with as much frequency as asserting meaning, suggesting the importance of questioning and reconsidering original hypotheses in the process of refining meaning. This some-

times presented as statements concerning what the image was not, in order to identify what the image was, for example: "I don't know necessarily if it's peaceful. It doesn't feel peaceful...It feels dynamic."

The cyclical process of meaning making also arose in the interplay between exploring meaning and returning to the observable qualities of the image. In other words, the relationship between questioning and asserting meaning was mediated by evidence-seeking in order to help support, dismiss, or clarify hypotheses. In order to refine meaning, participants searched for verification, most frequently in the form of formal elements (e.g. color, composition, style, texture, value). Evidence-seeking, itself, also appeared to be cyclical as participants attended to details in the image, the gestalt, and compared and contrasted parts as well as parts to the whole.

The following text illustrates both the use of formal elements and shifting focus between parts and the whole in order to refine meaning:

What I'm seeing is some sort of outdoor forested area that is in a particular time of the year. It looks like autumn due to the coloration in these leaf-like things. They also – these areas are very abstract. I can look at them separate, separated from the rest of the work. Different areas, such as this, produce interesting abstractions.

Initially, an easily readable label is assigned to the image ("forested area"); the gestalt is considered and meaning is general. The participant becomes increasingly specific ("a particular time of year" and then labeling, "autumn"). The specific time of year could be considered more subjective; consequently, the participant attends to a formal art element ("coloration") to provide evidence for that hypothesis. The participant then continues with observations of formal art elements ("abstract") and moves away from attending to the gestalt in order to separate out distinct parts of the image ("separated from the rest of the work").

In addition to seeking observable evidence (often in the form of formal elements) to support or dismiss labeled meaning, participants also cycled between formal elements and memories or affective experience (see Meaning-Making as Personal below). The following text from the semi-structured interview illustrates the centrality of this cyclical process as articulated by one participant:

I was drawing on the formal way of looking at it and then maybe what the person might have been feeling as well as what feelings came up for me...I go through a range of ideas: formal, more of emotional, maybe what the intent might be because I – for the process I may start thinking formally but it becomes emotional at some point. Or the other way around. So by going through that process I give meaning to it.

### Meaning-Making as Relational

Relational themes emerged quickly in the initial stages of analysis. In their own words, participants came into relationship with the image itself through: "seeing," "sensing," "becoming attached," "imagining," "staring," "avoiding," "feeling," etc. Some

participants physically changed their position in relation to the image, whereas others imagined themselves physically entering into the image. Participants also attended to relationships between different parts of the image as well as parts to the whole. While it may be given that participants come into relation with an image in these manners, analysis into the process of using relational strategies and concepts yielded more striking suggestions about the significance of the viewer's relationship to the image.

During analysis of the single focal point, the relational theme emerged in the form of an intimate familiarity between participant and image. The following example is of one participant's references to the focal point and illustrates this relational aspect of meaning-making:

This little bit here; it's interesting; smack dab in the middle; don't quite know what to make of it; animate quality; plant-animal quality; making too much of it; I'm getting so attached to this little business here; non-human shape; not quite plant; I want to give it character; going to have to come back to this little thing; personal entity; this little quirky entity; helped generate the rest of the picture; this little thing is right here; not sure what to make of it; my little friend down here.

This excerpt demonstrates interplay between personalizing ("getting so attached," "I want to give it character," "personal entity") and depersonalizing ("making too much of it," "this little thing") in a manner that brings the viewer into relationship with the focal point. The first reference is ambiguous, impersonal, and distant: "This little bit here." This describes limited formal qualities (size) and relates it only to itself (here). The final reference, "my little friend down here," is personalized and relational, emphasized by a sense of ownership of and relationship to the image ("my") and a personification of the focal point ("friend"). Throughout the viewing process this type of relational experience was mediated not only by occurrences of depersonalization but also attention to formal elements, ruling out meaning, asking questions, and story-telling, to name a few. The above text demonstrates the way in which participants generally moved toward increased relationship to the image but in a way that was neither linear nor immediate (see Meaning-Making as Cyclical above for more on this process).

Finally, participants not only came into relationship with the image but also with the artist/client whom none of the participants knew. In the question-and-answer interview, all participants reflected on the importance of empathizing with the artist/client. The following example illustrates how attention to formal elements assisted with speculation about the client's art-making process which in turn supported the development of empathy for the client's emotional and psychological experience:

I'm thinking that it started with this dark. I'm just thinking it looks like a frame, this darkness...Back there it looks like there's some, perhaps, fire or some light. It's hopeful...It looks like maybe someone worked from where they are, which is maybe some darkness trying to see through the trees and then they were able to move into seeing a little further.

The participant empathizes with the client who she hypothesizes

is, metaphorically, in darkness but starting to see the light and in this way comes into relation with this imagined other to make meaning of the image.

### Meaning-Making as Personal

Personal experiences and memories appear during participants' meaning-making; however, it is important to note that personal associations helped refine meaning, rather than distract from it. Participants did not make the image's meaning solely about themselves or their own projections; personal associations were mediated with universal themes, empathy toward the client, and observations of formal elements in order to clarify meaning about the image and the client/artist.

In addition to personal memories, collective memories (i.e. historical events or shared cultural context) and existential references (i.e. associations about life and death) also appeared. Worth noting, personal memories in fact occurred with the least frequency, whereas existential references occurred most frequently. The following text illustrates how one participant at first resists applying personal beliefs but then harnesses her existential ideas to enrich her understanding of the image:

I'm not going to start talking about what my beliefs... okay this is going to sound bizarre but now I'm going into my own existential – it's just interesting to me that dark; it's framing. There's something about protecting in this darkness...I guess without darkness there isn't light but...without depression, there's always sadness, there's always joy so...something to be said for all... emotions. In their own way they're all pretty wonderful here.

Another way in which personal experience arose during the viewing process was in participants' affective experiencing or "sense" of the image. Affective meaning was assigned to the image ("the feeling is the feeling sad") as well as to formal art elements ("hopeful color"). Participants also refined meaning by attuning to their overall sense of the image based on their personal affective experience of it, as illustrated here: "It feels dynamic... something's happening...it's a change; something's changing. Something's about to happen...That's the feeling it gives me."

Together, these findings were integrated with participant responses during the semi-structured interview. For example:

The process was, it moved toward me. It moved from looking at the piece kind of superficial – kind of out there, to who was in the room doing it, to who was there, to how I felt about myself.

Responses such as these revealed that participants were aware of their use of personal memories, ideas, and biases. Rather than rejecting these responses as overly subjective, participants embraced them as an integral part of their process of meaning-making.

## DISCUSSION

The findings regarding a dynamic and relational process during image viewing suggest that art therapists would benefit from moving beyond conceptualizing meaning-making as decod-

ing diagnostic material or solely relying on client explanations as the alternative. Findings imply that observers come to know themselves and the image (its separate elements, the gestalt, and their relation to each other), rather than thinking about the image as just a sum of its parts, a practice Arnheim (1966) and Acosta (2001) discourage.

This research echoes what Acosta (2001) calls "dynamically oriented pictorial interpretation" (p. 95) that involves the observer's whole thinking, feeling, and intuitive self in making meaning from imagery. It similarly aligns with Arnheim's (1966) emphasis on experiencing art where equal value is placed on the role of the observer (including intuition, values, memories, etc.) and the art (possessing not only unique form and color but also character). Specifically, findings point to the possibility that art, not only provides supporting evidence to viewers' hypotheses and serves as a stimulus for associations, affective experience, memories, historical events, and existential thoughts, but the art also acts as a relational entity that becomes known to the observer in the manner of an acquaintance or friend. In this way, it echoes the importance of returning to the art's formal qualities (e.g. Betensky, 1995; Malchiodi & Cattaneo, 1988; Tinnin, 1990) not only to look for and validate meaning but to support the emergence of a dynamic relationship between observer and image.

Finally, these findings suggest the potential usefulness of VTS (Housen, 1992, 2002) to art therapy, given the striking parallels between VTS and the preliminary findings from this study. Although not prompted, participants' processes seemed to be guided by the very questions outlined by VTS curriculum to enhance visual literacy: What do you see going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? and What more can you find? In this way, like participants in VTS studies and programs, participants in this limited study intertwined personal with universal concerns and knowledge while applying critical thinking and problem solving skills by grounding observation, speculations, and personal associations in visual evidence in order to contemplate, synthesize, justify, question, and refine meaning.

### Practical Implications for Clinical Art Therapy

One implication of this research is that processes for making meaning about an image in art therapy can be deconstructed and taught. Art therapy educators and supervisors can support students by providing strategies that move them toward more depth of understanding about complex images and the human experiences they represent by inviting students to apply personal and relational processes, for example. Understanding typical skills and processes for reading client imagery might also assist in outlining goals for student learning and, furthermore, help assess student growth over time in this domain.

A better understanding of the skills and processes used for understanding an image in art therapy could also help art therapists guide clients in the development of their own visual literacy. As art therapists work with clients to use and read images, they can provide more specific tools geared to the client's experience with imagery to help the client share the client's own meanings. Orienting clients toward developing and applying skills and processes for reading images through guidance, modeling, and ques-

tioning may not only help clients make meaning of their art but may also provide the opportunity to refine critical thinking and problem-solving skills through this practice. Follow-up Visual Thinking Strategies studies have suggested that the skills used to read an image (i.e. critical thinking and problem solving skills) transfer to other disciplines and situations (Housen, 2002). If there are, indeed, parallels between VTS and what occurs in art therapy, this offers exciting implications for understanding how skills developed in art therapy through making imagery and also reading imagery transfer to daily life situations.

Finally, findings suggest that a structure can be outlined for how to maximally read client art while respecting individual differences in making meaning by embracing both individual and shared understanding and by harnessing objective (e.g. visual observations of line, shape, and color) and subjective (e.g. personal and affective) experience. This could offer a flexible system of thinking when working with different clients. Such flexibility may also be afforded by the observation that naturally occurring cycles of ambiguity and self questioning appear to be a necessary part of making meaning and may, therefore, have the implication of deterring practitioners from relying on fixed meaning or finding right or static answers.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study provides only a preliminary investigation into the way art therapists make meaning from client art. Its parallels with Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen, 1992), while intriguing, warrants specific investigation. Due to the small sample size and basic qualitative analysis used, caution should be taken in generalizing findings to other art therapists. While limiting the number of participants allowed for in-depth analysis of interviews, future research should include more participants to more fully explore meaning-making from viewing client art. Another limitation is that analysis focused solely on commonalities between participants' experiences; much could be learned from examining differences and may be another area for future investigation. Comparisons between participants are tentative, and causal relationships should not necessarily be attributed to observed patterns. Finally, meaning-making from art is a complex process with many factors and processes that are outside the scope of this inquiry. Future studies might examine this process at various stages of professional growth or compare art therapists' and art educators' meaning-making in order to clarify skills or processes unique to art therapy. An investigation into clients' processes of making meaning from their own images might clarify how art therapists may improve clients' ability to read their art. As was done with VTS, a future study might also investigate whether clients generalize skills for looking at and understanding their art to other settings and situations. This could offer implications for how art therapy can improve observational, problem solving, and critical thinking skills in daily life.

### CONCLUSION

This inquiry has offered preliminary observations about how cognitive skills and affective experiencing intertwine to con-

struct meaning about art in art therapy. Findings support that making meaning when viewing client-made art involves, yet is more nuanced than, applying knowledge about psychological content and aesthetic elements. Subjective ways of knowing and observations of formal qualities are used in this investigative process to make observations, develop hypotheses, locate evidence, question hypotheses, and refine meaning. It is a process of discovery that is cyclical, relational, and personal and requires that the observer apply critical thinking skills to experience the image at a deep level. That these preliminary findings mirror Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen, 1992), a model I stumbled across years after completing this inquiry, suggests that scholarly work coming out of areas such as visual literacy, museum education, and art education can provide valuable information for articulating how meaning is made from viewing art and, furthermore, how image-reading skills can support art therapists' search for meaning that can contribute to growth and change.

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