

# The influence and development of painting therapy on psychological treatment of Chinese teenagers

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**Abstract.** With the satisfaction of material basis, people have paid more attention to the spiritual field, and psychological treatment has attracted more people's attention. As an important form of psychological treatment, art therapy plays an important role in regulating psychology. As the group with a high frequency of psychological problems, contemporary teenagers should be the main target of social attention. As an effective healing method that is more easily accepted by teenagers, art therapy needs to be noticed by more people. This article focuses on painting therapy and summarizes the development of art therapy. At the same time, aiming at the Chinese youth group, summarizes the current situation of Chinese art therapy, and puts forward suggestions. This paper has conducted research in two aspects: Firstly, through case studies, the effectiveness of painting therapy was explored; Secondly, through a literature survey, the effectiveness of painting therapy on teenagers was explored, and the influence of different painting styles and different fields on the healing effect is explored. The research results show that painting therapy can effectively improve the psychological condition of teenagers, and natural art is the most effective form of painting for teenagers' healing effect.

## 1 Introduction

With the continuous increase of academic pressure on the adolescent group, a variety of negative emotional disorders will accompany them. Common anxiety disorders include panic disorder, specific phobia, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. However, in most cases, the mental state of the adolescent group is not taken seriously by parents and teachers. Facing the many challenges of teenagers' psychology, society has paid timely attention to it. The treatment measure of art therapy has a great advantage in many auxiliary psychological treatment activities [1]. Art therapy has low thresholds and is easy to accept, which has a high attraction for the adolescent group. Secondly, art therapy can adapt to different psychological traumas of adolescent individuals at the same time, which has the nature of easy promotion and is not limited to the audience. Painting therapy is one of the main discussion directions of art therapy, which turns the

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subconscious into analyzable solid works and plays a supporting role in the specific treatment of psychological diseases.

Based on the background that Chinese art therapy is in its early stage and there is a lack of involvement in painting therapy for teenagers, this study focuses on the improvement of painting therapy on psychological problems of teenagers and explores the effectiveness and influencing factors of painting therapy for teenagers. This research is of great significance for filling the gap in the academic community's understanding of the effectiveness of painting therapy for adolescent groups. This study relies on the previous psychological theory research results to gradually expound the scientific and effective nature of painting therapy. Then starting from specific cases of painting therapy, combined with literature analysis to search and read relevant data and documents. The ultimate research goal of this study is to prove the effective impact and development potential of painting therapy in the field of art therapy for teenagers and to provide a theoretical basis for the development of painting therapy in China so that painting therapy can gradually receive attention from all sectors of society.

## **2 The art of psychotherapy healing**

### **2.1 The concept and essence of art therapy**

In the face of physical and psychological pain in the human body, human beings combine the two fields of art and medicine to form a new field. This form is called art therapy or art treatment in psychotherapy. Scholars have a broad and narrow definition of art therapy. In a broad sense, when art is applied to psychological construction, the art activities carried out around the theme will have the effect of reducing pressure and emotional output. Rebuilding a new psychological world in artistic activities will help one jump out of the old dilemma. From a narrow perspective, art therapy refers to the process of using fun art forms, primarily painting, as a medium in the field of psychological treatment. Firstly, the effectiveness of art therapy mainly lies in the form of Non-Verbal or Pre-Linguistic Visual Arts. This effect is unparalleled with the psychological treatment using the speech part. Secondly, art therapy with painting as the medium. Painting art, as a medium of art therapy, can form a major system independently. This system also involves the concepts related to art therapy, classification, and application of different therapy theoretical systems [2].

### **2.2 The current development of art therapy at home and abroad**

The practice of contemporary art therapy mainly began in psychiatry in the first half of the 20th century. Freud's psychoanalysis theory and Jung's analysis theory have far-reaching effects on the development of art therapy. The psychoanalytic personality theory is still a powerful field. In general, the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung has played an important role in the analytical methods of psychoanalysis and art therapy and has been widely applied in the conceptual framework of many art therapeutic methods.

Art therapy is relatively more mature in foreign countries, Art therapy in the West and the United States became a specialized research field in the 1950s and 1960s, forming a group of art therapy research with different theoretical orientations, the main orientations of art therapy are psychoanalysis theory-oriented art therapy, humanism theory-oriented art therapy, Gestalt psychology theory-oriented art therapy, and cognitive behavioral theory-oriented art therapy. In foreign countries, many disciplines such as education, psychology, art, psychiatry, and so on, have discussed the impact and value of art therapy [3].

The psychological counseling and treatment work in China started a bit late, and art therapy is a relatively new subject in China. Research and application in the field of art

therapy in China started in the 1990s, and have been applied in special education, psychological medicine, post-disaster psychological intervention, and adjuvant treatment of mental illness. Healing exploration for the adolescent group mainly appears in the field of education and psychological counseling.

### **3 Relevant theories of art therapy**

#### **3.1 Jung's theory of spatial symbolism**

Jung's theory of spatial symbolism suggests that the layout of different elements in the picture space reflects the painter's understanding of the living space [4]. When analyzing a painting, it is necessary to focus on elements such as images, colors, and lines, and pay attention to their positions in the picture. These changes in position reflect the painter's values, self-subconsciousness, and unconscious conflicts. Jung's psychological analysis provides a theoretical basis for the analysis of painting space. He analyzes the potential personality characteristics of individuals from human consciousness, which is divided into the conscious level, the individual consciousness level, and the collective consciousness level. Among them, the collective consciousness level is particularly important. Collective consciousness emphasizes universality and innate quality, which is the experience of the real world in the subconscious mind. Collective consciousness is reflected in painting works through "prototype", implying the emotional conflict of the unconscious. Furthermore, Jung summarized the image quadrant model and it has been continuously improved by later researchers as a foundation.

According to Jung's consciousness theory, the process of painting is dominated by personal consciousness and influenced by the personal unconscious layer and collective unconscious layer. Painting works reflect these four prototypes in the collective consciousness to a certain extent.

#### **3.2 Theory of painting psychological projection**

Freud's personality analysis theory divides personality into id, ego, and super-ego. The desires of the id are constantly agitated, and it follows the only principle of the "pleasure principle". The "I" also pursues happiness like the "ego", but it knows how to assess the situation endure temporary pain, and make certain compromises before releasing energy. According to Freud's theory, the painting process is a release of repression and compromise in the self, and the work is a psychological "projection".

"Projection" originates from Freud's theory, which refers to the act of glamorizing unacceptable behaviors or opinions to overcome psychological barriers and achieve self-satisfaction. The great dictionary of psychology defines it as transferring unbearable impulses, desires, and thoughts to others or things to alleviate the unease [5]. Based on this, researchers have developed a projective thematic drawing test to represent psychological characteristics, value orientations, and so on through image representation, which has become a widely used method. Painting activities can bring a pleasant experience. Participants can express their emotions in a relaxed way, and there is no requirement for painting skills, with a wide range of applicability.

### **4 The healing power of painting and case studies**

## **4.1 The healing power of painting**

In 1966, the American physiologist Sperry discovered through the study of the two hemispheres of the brain that the left and right hemispheres of the human brain have different ways of information processing when they are operating. In this study, he found that the right brain is good at concrete image thinking and is sensitive to images, space, and sound; the left brain is good at logical analysis and abstract thinking [6]. When words are inadequate to express the inner feelings, the right brain takes effect and explains the feelings through intuitive ways.

Drawing therapy is based on the theory of brain division of labor. It bypasses the information processing of the left brain, activates the visual image storage of the right brain, and uses color, lines, and other painting elements to vent unspeakable emotions, thus achieving stimulation and healing. Margaret Naumburg recognizes that the transformation of the subconscious and consciousness in artistic creation has a healing effect on cases of catharsis, cognitive reshaping, and growth. Based on psychoanalysis, she applies unconscious painting to therapy, encourages patients to create spontaneously, uses artistic means to release psychological problems and repressed impulses, and insight into the unconscious to achieve conscious healing. Mental activities include unrevealed and unorganized subconscious content, which are the impulse and driving force of creation. The growth of human beings and social constraints have suppressed primary thinking and inspiration, but unconscious impulses still lie in the subconscious. Contemporary art creators use the transformation of subconsciousness and consciousness as a creative method, which makes the subconsciousness problem conscious, and through the interaction of the two, it satisfies the subconscious desires and achieves spiritual healing.

## **4.2 A case study of painting therapy**

Researchers have conducted some practical explorations in the context of art education. First, researchers experimented with individual painting intervention (which was classified as painting intervention therapy by the researcher). She successively chose two junior high school students as the experimental subjects, assigned them a painting theme, encouraged the children to create freely, and communicated with them a little during the process. It was found that the picture can correctly reflect the children's inner world, and one's inner world can be understood through painting [7].

In the second object experiment, the researcher divided the experiment into three stages of intervention. That is to observe and interpret the works after each creation, then communicate with the object, guide the object to tell the story that happened around him/her and encourage the object to relax with painting. After each intervention in the experimental stage, the psychological state of the subject has changed greatly, from initial timidity to active acceptance. After the end of three interventions, it was found that the painting works of the subject also changed significantly according to its psychological state. The experimental subject gradually opened up in the painting intervention experiment and conveyed the unspoken or unspoken words through the picture. In the subsequent collective intervention experiment, the interveners also conducted psychological communication and guidance for the subjects, as well as image feature analysis of the pictures. The experimental results were the same.

In painting intervention therapy, one can find two effective steps of the therapy. The first is diagnosis, and the second is treatment. The path of painting therapy is to create a safe condition for the healing object, so that the healing object can stimulate self-awareness through full self-expression, adjust the deviation of self-cognition, and cultivate the ability

of self-reflection and self-acceptance, ultimately promoting the comprehensive improvement of individual self-concept.

Through this case, the effectiveness of painting therapy for teenagers has been confirmed. The paintings under the intervention of painting therapy can correctly reflect the subconscious and psychological conditions. Thus, the intervenor can make full use of painting to have a full understanding of the treated person to carry out targeted intervention therapy.

## **5 Issues and prospects of painting therapy**

### **5.1 Influencing factors of the effectiveness of painting therapy**

The effectiveness of painting therapy for teenagers is affected by many factors. There are significant differences in the impact of various painting therapy methods, different types of painting images, and different healing fields on the healing effect.

According to the existing research, the effectiveness of painting therapy varies in different school ages of adolescents. Students in different school age stages have different grasp and understanding of creative methods. Primary school students have weaker thinking and tend to choose imitation as the main method; Middle school students are in a period of thinking and cognitive growth and can accept diversified information. They can add a variety of appropriate painting methods into the painting practice; University students' thinking patterns are more mature, and some even have a stereotyped view of the world, making it more difficult to solve psychological problems; Specific healing guidance is still needed for teenagers in different school age stages.

#### *5.1.1 The influence of different painting image types on healing effects*

Different types of painting images have different effects on healing. In this issue, it must first clarify which type of image is more acceptable to teenagers, and then conduct theoretical research on this result to prove its healing effect.

Foreign researchers surveyed the preference for painting images of children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 in schools, and set up six types of images, each of them:

1. Impressionistic nature beach scene with human subjects.
2. Abstract, no identifiable subject with calm color.
3. Abstract, subject with intense color.
4. Abstract, with animal subject.
5. Abstract, complex, chaotic.
6. Representational nature of forest scene with water and animals.

Researchers conducted a quantitative analysis of the experimental results, and the results showed that natural art (artistic images mainly featuring natural vegetation, flowers, or water) was rated as the highest artistic preference. Based on the fact that children are in the stage of cognitive development, their art preferences always tend to nature [8]. The experimental results show that cognitive development does not affect art preferences. Natural art is considered the most desirable type of painting image for children patients to relieve pressure.

The painting images of natural art are more suitable for teenagers and children to express their inner feelings. This type of image is very common in daily life, and painting creation can be easily carried out without professional art education. After research, it is found that the works of painting therapy experiments carried out for the adolescent group in China are mostly dominated by natural images and have achieved effective therapeutic effects.

In addition, one also needs to explore the healing effect of abstract art style. Some researchers have pointed out that abstract art can connect with the depth of self-inner more deeply. Figurativeness is an expression of dualism, which is a way of expression between subject and object. Abstract art, on the other hand, belongs to monism, a way of expression that integrates body and mind, so it is deeper in self-connection. However, the extensive and deep connection of abstract art expression requires the premise of a high level of consciousness. If the abstract method is used in the worldview with a lower level, the work made will not have high-dimensional connectivity [2]. Adolescent children are in the stage of consciousness and thinking development, and in most cases, they do not have high consciousness level characteristics. Therefore, it is difficult for them to have good healing effects when creating freely or stimulating creativity. In normal circumstances, the application of the healing function on abstract-type images requires the intervention and professional guidance of a therapist. As an image, the mandala image has a unique healing mechanism. According to the research of domestic researchers, the characteristics of drawing mandalas can also be completed independently by one person in the absence of a therapist. Drawing a mandala can relieve the tension or discomfort of body and mind so that individuals can return to their inner selves and gain peace. In the process of constantly improving the picture, some deep-seated problems can be presented through professional interpretation. In theory, this method has a healing effect, and in practical cases, the effectiveness of healing has also been confirmed by relevant researchers in China.

### *5.1.2 The influence of different fields on healing effects*

Unlike other forms of treatment, painting therapy involves more frequent self-exposure, so it is particularly necessary to provide a warm, comfortable, and safe environment for visitors during the treatment process. This allows visitors to fully immerse themselves in the process of artistic creation and fully engage in personal free thinking and creation. In short, painting therapy requires providing environmental security for visitors. According to Naum-Burg's opinion, art therapy provides a safe, protected, and non-linguistic environment. In this environment, spontaneous creative painting is helpful for the release of subconsciously suppressed topics, emotions, and conflicts. Liu Li also stressed that the art therapy environment provides a quiet and free art activity space for visitors, which has psychological symbols such as openness, inclusiveness, and warmth. Visitors can tell their hidden feelings without any hesitation, fully relieve their emotions, constantly reflect on their thoughts, and lay a foundation for subsequent treatment. It can be seen that painting therapy needs to be realized based on a suitable art field.

The common fields of art therapy include art therapy in medical participation, art therapy in school education participation, art therapy in the community, art therapy in psychological counseling rooms, and art therapy in contemporary art galleries. Based on the fact that the research group in this article is mainly teenagers, through investigating and evaluating their psychological preferences and social activity scope, this article focuses on exploring the art therapy in contemporary art galleries and the art therapy involved in school education.

Some scholars have discussed the feasibility of applying art therapy in contemporary art galleries based on the social-oriented practice of art therapy and the social-oriented institution of contemporary art galleries and have taken serving society as a common point. They have also summarized the social value of applying art therapy in art galleries. Researchers believe that contemporary art museums are no longer simply exhibition, collection, and research venues like traditional ones. Instead, they are more of an artistic aesthetic experience space that expects public participation. They try to bring new experiences and experiences to people with more public cultural services, to change the traditional concepts and thinking of the public on the concept of art museums. The contemporary art gallery should not only meet the

audience's single visit to the exhibition but should further meet the deep-seated social and personal needs of the audience [9]. Through case studies, integrating art therapy into contemporary art galleries can meet the spiritual and psychological needs of the audience, which provides a theoretical basis for the application of painting therapy in contemporary art galleries for teenagers.

In China, the exploration of painting therapy mainly focuses on the teaching environment. In the "*Experiment and theoretical basis of psychological intervention through painting*", Professor Wang Dagen from the Academy of Art of Shanghai Normal University pointed out that free painting can convey the painter's emotions in the subconscious mind, and through the way of "listening to music while painting", it can provide psychological expression and intervention means for ordinary students, to achieve psychological intervention and treatment effects [10]. Through designing different forms of art teaching, such as combining music with painting for teaching, communicating with students on painting works and other forms, researcher Zhang Li conducted experiments and analysis and found that this improved art education curriculum has a good classroom atmosphere and effect [7].

There are many healing fields suitable for teenagers. The evaluation of the effectiveness of which field is not about which institution, but whether the field can accommodate teenagers and the specificity of healing. Such as psychological counseling rooms in schools, research and study activities for teenagers in art galleries, art courses in schools, etc. After research, it is found that these healing fields can achieve good healing effects under the guidance of professionals. The functionality, limitations, and long-term effects of each healing field still need to be explored through relevant practices in the future.

## 5.2 Insufficient existing

Art therapy started late in China and is still in the stage of gradual exploration and familiarity, without a professional discourse system yet. In 2016, the China Association for Expressive Arts Therapy was established in Wuhan, marking the establishment of the flag of art therapy in China, and the number of literature on CNKI has also increased significantly since 2016. Art therapy research has distinct interdisciplinary characteristics and different subjects. At present, there are common forms such as painting therapy, music therapy, performing arts therapy, photography therapy, psychodrama, and so on. The involved places include art galleries, concert halls, schools, off-campus educational institutions, various theatres, and so on [11]. Drawing therapy is the most common form in China, but this psychological treatment method has not yet been widely accepted. Many people still have doubts about the effect of painting therapy on promoting people's mental health. They think that painters and psychotherapists belong to different occupations, so there are different understandings. In the face of such a situation, more researchers need to get involved in this field and gradually establish a set of painting therapy systems belonging to China.

## 6 Conclusion

This article proposes some prospects and suggestions for the long-term development of painting therapy. Art therapy and cooperation with various social institutions will become a broad trend in the future, which is determined by the current emphasis on the mental health of teenagers. The future market potential of art therapy is also not to be underestimated. In the aspect of education, painting therapy is suitable for promoting the application of the person-centered teaching policy in painting therapy in China's early childhood education, primary and secondary schools, and universities. Relevant departments should give full play to the effective attributes of art therapy, to better provide an effective and healthy growth

environment for the mental health of Chinese students and provide safe and moderate art therapy solutions to solve existing psychological problems.

The research results of this study show that painting therapy plays an important role in adolescent psychological treatment and painting education, and with the assistance of professional therapists, it will produce effective healing for the adolescent group. In the practice of painting therapy, natural art (artistic images mainly featuring natural vegetation, flowers, or water) is the most popular type of painting image for adolescents and children. This type of image has a low threshold and high flexibility, which can meet the various painting therapy activities of therapists. This study provides a lot of valuable references for future research in this direction, mainly providing the basis of painting types and healing fields for adolescents in future art therapy institutions or painting therapy projects. Future research should focus more on improving the professional configuration of healing fields and developing more suitable painting therapy, to provide a more comprehensive painting therapy system for teenagers and patients with psychological problems.

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