



7-1-2014

A Mosaic of Creativity in Occupational Therapy

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Recommended Citation

Bathje, M. (2014). A Mosaic of Creativity in Occupational Therapy. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1125>

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A Mosaic of Creativity in Occupational Therapy

Abstract

Martha Branson-Banks, OT, provided the cover art for the summer 2014 issue of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. The piece is titled “Garden with thanks to Klimt” and is one of several mosaic art pieces in her collection of works. She created the piece with art glass and resin on an abandoned door. Her use of a repurposed door represents her belief in the capacity for transformation and beauty within each individual she has treated and taught throughout her career. Martha’s work as an occupational therapist, educator, and artist reminds us of the foundational beliefs of the occupational therapy profession, including the benefits of engagement in meaningful and creative activities.

Keywords

Occupational Therapy, Mosaic, Creativity, Glass Art

Credentials Display

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DOI: 10.15453/2168-6408.1125

Martha Branson-Banks, OT, provided the cover art for the summer 2014 issue of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. The piece, “Garden with thanks to Klimt,” is one of several mosaic art pieces in her collection. She created the piece with art glass and resin on an abandoned door. Her use of a repurposed door represents her belief in the capacity for transformation and beauty within each individual she has treated and taught throughout her career. Martha’s work as an occupational therapist, educator, and artist reminds us of the foundational beliefs of the occupational therapy (OT) profession, including the benefits of engagement in meaningful and creative activities.

Martha’s home is a gallery and workshop for creativity. Whimsical displays of found and created art objects, including mosaic stepping stones, glass and wire sculptures, and colorful gardens adorn her front yard and driveway. The walls inside of her home are decorated with paintings from her mother; pictures of her siblings, children, and grandchildren; and her own mosaic glass and tile works. Her workshop overflows with tools and materials used for mosaic and glass art: bins of shiny and colorful stained glass pieces of all shapes; boxes of dishware with interesting colors and patterns; glass bottles of all sizes; hand tools and electric tools, including saws and tumblers; and window frames that will soon be filled with color and light. Many of the materials she finds are remnants of unfortunate circumstances, such as window frames from a house destroyed by fire, glass pieces from smashed car windows, and abandoned dishware. Martha is able to use these seemingly ordinary, sometimes broken, often

discarded fragments and join them together in interesting ways to create a unified piece with a new life ahead. In many ways, she has also engaged in this process during her practice as an OT practitioner and educator.

Martha’s initial exposure to the clinical work of OT practitioners was during her first semester of college at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy. As part of a course assignment, she observed OT in a psychiatric hospital for children. She enjoyed the experience so much she began to volunteer regularly at this hospital. Her love for OT in mental health settings continued as she was assigned to fieldwork placements. Two of her three level II fieldwork placements were in mental health settings. One placement was at a psychiatric facility in Hawaii where she worked with adults and older adults. In her next placement, at a VA hospital in New York, she applied concepts of mental health practice when she was assigned to treat patients in a Tuberculosis unit and a unit for young men returning from the Vietnam War with spinal cord injuries. Her first job as an OT practitioner was in a child psychiatry unit at John Sealy Hospital in Galveston, TX. Later she moved to Columbus, OH, where she worked in mental health at a university psychiatric hospital in the child psychiatry unit and then at Harding Hospital with adolescents, adults, and older adults with psychiatric illnesses. While in Ohio, she also practiced OT at the Hannah Neil Center for Children in both the child psychiatric unit and in the emergency intake department. Later in her career, after leaving clinical practice for academia and

management positions, she returned to her roots in mental health, practicing at a community mental health center in South Bend, IN. In each of these settings, Martha used her skills as an OT practitioner and her artist's creativity to help her clients engage in meaningful activities. Often, the children she worked with had extensive histories of abuse and/or neglect. Through participation and mastery in a variety of activities, including art, Martha guided clients to develop, refine, and/or repurpose skills and abilities. She also helped clients to recognize these skills and abilities as new pieces of their self-identity, encouraging them to integrate these pieces of self into their larger self-identity.

Martha also applied her talents and interests in creative activities to an extensive career in education. She was the chairperson of the Occupational Therapy Assistant program at Fox Valley Technical College in Wisconsin. There, she enjoyed working with all students but in particular enjoyed working with students who were initiating career changes from factory work to careers in OT. Martha taught coursework and supervised fieldwork experiences before transitioning to her role of dean of Allied Health where she oversaw programs educating future health care practitioners in a multitude of disciplines. After moving to Michigan and returning to clinical practice, Martha transitioned back to academia once more and developed the Occupational Therapy Assistant program at Lake Michigan College and assumed the department chairperson position. In these positions Martha relished in the team of educators with whom she worked. Additionally, she enjoyed teaching arts

and crafts courses with a focus on their use in OT assessment and intervention, but also as a means to improve students' observation skills and ability to create therapeutic objects, such as splints.

Her passion for teaching and art led her to a more recent role as an art teacher at a local Catholic grammar school. Despite not working overtly as an OT practitioner, in a recent interview Martha stated "My 'OT' eyes and heart are always with me!" The variety of children in the classroom, including some with developmental disabilities (often on the autism spectrum), required the skills she learned as an OT practitioner. She incorporated developmental and sensory techniques into teaching, such as prehension, gross motor, and regulatory sensory activities. Although no longer teaching art in schools, she continues her passion for teaching and art through individual and group mosaic art instruction in her home.

Art has always been a theme in Martha's life. Her mother, who was an illustrator for Good Housekeeping magazine many years ago in Des Moines, IA, always kept a painting in a room she would pass through and would add to it each time she walked past. Her mother also kept a box of arts and crafts supplies under her bed, and she encouraged Martha and her siblings to stay active with creative activities throughout their childhood. In the ninth grade Martha wrote a paper about what she wanted to do after high school. She remembers finishing the project by copper tooling the cover of the manuscript she wrote about wanting a career in OT. She hoped to provide that same positive experience of having arts and crafts supplies available by always keeping art supplies in her

clinics and classrooms, thus encouraging her clients and students to engage in creative exploration. She believes that “everyone has art talent within them,” and she encouraged all to explore their creativity. In retirement, Martha continues to create and explore. In addition to the mosaic glass work she completes, she is also involved in directing and acting in community theater.

Working with mosaic art has been pivotal to Martha’s own recovery from a stroke. The stroke she experienced impacted her vision and balance, and she participated in OT and PT to address these issues. She was highly motivated to return to making mosaic art, which requires both physical and cognitive skills. A review of studies of creative arts occupations in therapeutic practice by Perruzza and Kinsella (2010) identified the themes of outcomes of participation as: (a) enhanced perceived control, (b) building a sense of self, (c) expression, (d) transforming the illness experience, (e) gaining a sense of purpose, and (f) building social supports. By engaging in mosaic artwork herself, Martha has been able to receive the above benefits as well as work on the client factors and the performance skill deficits she experienced.

The process of creating mosaic art requires creativity and skill. The first and most creatively driven phase of construction is designing the piece. This includes identifying the foundation of the mosaic, which can be anything from a functional piece, such as a tabletop or bench, to a 3-D object sculpture, to a hanging glass windowpane. The design process includes selecting the mosaic media from a variety of options, such as translucent glass, ceramic tiles, shells, beads, or porcelain. Artists

gather supplies in a variety of ways, including from art glass manufacturers, tile manufacturers, and, like Martha, through found pieces. Often, it is the media itself that inspires the design of a piece. The design phase also includes planning the composition and pattern of the piece and attending to the aesthetic appeal. In the case of a glass art piece, Martha draws and then tapes the design to the back of the piece as a guide throughout the process. The design phase challenges artists to be inventive and to see the potential in the disparate pieces of media. It also requires technical design skills and the ability to articulate the design. Most importantly, the design phase allows for the artist’s expression.

The next phase of creating mosaic art involves shaping the media to fit the design. Manufactured art glass can be ordered in small square tiles, precut shapes, and sheets of colored glass. The sheets of glass can be shaped to fit the design using glass cutters, glass pliers, glass nippers for trimming or creating small shards, and glass saws. Cut glass can also be sanded and tumbled. Each of the steps in this phase requires fine motor precision, strength, planning, and visual manipulation. Artists learn to anticipate the response of the media to manipulation, identifying how a glass sheet will respond to cutting, or how long the tumbler needs to be to soften the edges of a piece.

Once the artist gathers and prepares sections of glass for application, she applies the segments of glass and tile to the base following her design. This step requires fine motor precision and patience as each piece is laid into its location. Eventually, the pieces of small glass and tile begin to take on the

larger shape of the design and fit together to tell the artist's story. Finally, the glass art piece is completed using resin for a translucent mosaic work, or grout for opaque and tile pieces.

Engaging in each of these steps to create mosaic art supports Martha's recovery. An additional benefit to the process and motor competence she has gained, mosaic artwork has also helped her make meaning out of her experiences. Martha has prominently featured eyesight and vision as the subjects of recent pieces, something she has confronted in her own recovery. She created a large mosaic tile of an eye, highlighting the complexities and intricacies of the eye. She is currently working on a large glass mosaic window that includes a variety of faces donning different varieties of eyeglasses and visual aids. The process of creating visual art in response to her stroke allows her to express the emotions of the traumatic experience in unique ways. Additionally, her altruism shines through in efforts to impact positively other's lives. Her eyeglasses piece showcases the uniqueness and artistry of each pair

of eyeglasses on each unique face and begs viewers of the piece to embrace the beauty of eyeglasses. She also expressed that she hopes to inspire others who have experienced illness or disability to express themselves through art activities, acting as an example by engaging in creative arts herself.

Martha has used creative media throughout her career and in her personal life. Participating in creative arts has helped her, her clients, and her students engage more fully with their environment. Martha stated, "OT is always with me" and this is demonstrated through the process and outcome of her artistry. In creating mosaic artworks, she examines each small piece of media and identifies the exact location where the piece will fit into the larger whole of the project, bringing its own uniqueness and quality. As an OT practitioner and educator, Martha has followed this same process by identifying strengths in students and clients and assisting them in finding the just right fit where their strengths are highlighted and contribute to overall occupational functioning.

To view a video and samples of Martha's art work, visit:

http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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