

Looking at art therapy book covers: An examination of visual content

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ABSTRACT

Visual information comes not just from the images that my clients or I, as an artist and art psychotherapist, create. From a visual perspective, information can be found not just between, but upon, the covers of the professional texts that I work with and recommend. As this is potentially as vital to, and informative of, my professional beliefs as the words I use to describe them, this article opens a discussion about two well-established art therapy books, and what their covers and early pages communicate about their content, contexts, and – by extension – their expected readers.

INTRODUCTION

Accustomed, as I am, to living and working in a highly visual world, I sometimes forget how much information is available to me, not just in my own creative works and those of my clients, but also in the choices I make about the professional texts I purchase, use, recommend and contemplate. I began to wonder how much information might be gleaned from a basic deconstruction of book covers and first pages, and what they might reveal about the authors' intentions and the books' contexts. From this position, the reader/viewer is critical and essential to the production of meaning, as no signifiers or messages are created or 'read' in isolation from an audience (Rose, 2001; Hall, 1997).

With this in mind, and in a spirit of enquiry, I selected two well-known texts from the art therapy canon, Cathy Malchiodi's *Handbook of Art Therapy* (2003), and Caroline Case and Tessa Dalley's *The Handbook of Art Therapy* (2006), and took a long, soft look at both (c.f. Gilroy, 2008), comparing and contrasting the visual elements each contain. In this instance, the term 'soft' is deliberately employed to indicate the multitude of

potential interpretations or readings possible for these covers (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009), and my offering of only some possibilities. What might the colour choices mean from differing cultural perspectives, and what emergent interpretations might apply to the images and layout styles employed? Is the content of the two books represented by their covers? Comparison of the tables of contents (TOC) and early pages (Forewords, Prefaces, etc.) with the layouts was made, to discern any patterns and rhythms present between the outside and inside of the texts.

There are two very distinct audiences for each of these books: Malchiodi's book is designed for use by a broad range of medical professionals (not necessarily art therapists, per se) working within the field of mental health; Case and Dalley, on the other hand, write primarily for postgraduate level students and practitioners within the art therapy field, as well as for potential clients who would like to understand more of the process before committing to a therapeutic journey. The purpose of this article is not to categorise or compare USA and UK pedagogies or approaches to practice, but from a certain perspective, the handbooks might be viewed