

## ***Emotional wellbeing in an artistic journey***

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***'If I could say it in words, there would be no reason to paint.'<sup>1</sup>***



***Mountains and Sea by Helen Frankenthaler***

Confrontation with different situations and life experiences evokes different emotions in us, from happiness and joy to grief and sadness. This is an uncontested fact. But what should we do with it? How should we manage our mental relationship with our endless emotions in a way to secure our wellbeing? This is where the concept of emotional wellbeing comes into play. We all have emotions which are not always recognized but they are always leaving inside of us and affect our wellbeing, in ways unspeakable. This is why emotional wellbeing is so important, which is all about being aware of our emotions and accept them as they are. Bringing a personal memory in this regard, I had the good fortune of experiencing how art can awaken positive emotions in times of mental pressure; as a person with a highly sensitive personality, I had to confront with a stressful situation of going through a surgery. When I entered the hospital, I felt like my heart is beating so fast and my blood pressure is dropping out of stress, but all of a sudden, I confronted with a massive painting hung on the wall before my eyes with no specific details but vivid colours of blue, green and yellow. I kept staring at the painting. While I could not be completely sure

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Hopper

about what I was seeing, I felt the rivers of calmness flowing into my veins and washing away the common, stereotypical idea of what it means to be in a hospital environment. I took a picture of that painting but as many times as I look at the picture on my mobile phone, that specific emotional bond never re-enters my body like the way I experienced it in that very moment in the hospital simply because I am not with the same emotions as I was in that specific place and time. The message behind my experience is this: we confront with a piece of art with our own subjectivity of emotions. Thus, a piece of art is not the same, not only to different people, but also to the very same person with different mental states, as well. Thus, while an artwork is concretely owned by its owner, the emotional bond that you form with it is completely unique and can only be owned by you and when I say 'you', I mean that specific part of you in a specific time and place with particular emotions. To be able to talk about the interconnection of art and emotional wellbeing, I must first delve into the universe of art, and in particular, the things that are so unique about artistic experience that make it a powerful medium for enhancement of emotional wellbeing. In this regard, we must first have in mind that artistic experience has a value in itself and should not be approached with an instrumentalist mindset. To be in presence of art is in and of itself a journey worth taking and its value is purely subjective and dependent on your own personal stance towards it. The clearest definition of art which I find most relatable to what I want to indicate on the relationship between art and emotional wellbeing is '*a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers...*'.<sup>2</sup> What we realize from this proposition is that art is an end in itself and cannot be seen as merely an instrument to fix something, like a bag that helps you carry your things or a plane that takes you to a new place with a clear practical benefit. That being said, it does not mean that art cannot have significant advantages for our mental health but all its benefits are subsidiary to what it truly is: to serve no purpose other than the creation of an aesthetic experience. The other defining element of art is that it is either a representation or an expression of something.<sup>3</sup> In other words, artistic experience, like any other experience, is always *about something*.<sup>4</sup> But where is that *something*? For a long time, it was taken for granted that art is merely a description of things in outer world. In other words, art was conceived to be a *representation* of something concrete that can be pointed out with our fingers. But as time went on, new schools of art emerged with the premise that art is not supposed to always look outward but sometimes it can turn the spotlight on and be a true observer of what is happening inside of us. This internal journey can well depict the artist's and the audience's mentality: in this view, art is an *expression* and not a pure representation of things. Abstract art is precisely a product of this aesthetic vision that speaks of the deepest of our emotions. I believe that the nexus between art and emotional wellbeing is of particular significance in the realm of abstract and expressionist art; a case study done in the Aalborg University in Denmark<sup>5</sup> supports this proposition, as well;

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<sup>2</sup> Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment,

<sup>3</sup> Levinson, Jerrold (Ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics, Oxford University Press, 2003, 138.

<sup>4</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

<sup>5</sup> Reddy, Vineet Pasam, Examining the Therapeutic Potential of Visual Art in Clinical Settings: a Review, Journal of Hospital Management and Health Policy, 2019, 2.

but this does not mean that representative art has nothing to say when it comes to emotional wellbeing. As it is well said by Julia Cameron, 'the creative process is a process of surrender, not control'.<sup>6</sup> This lack of control in creating art is just a lack of control of emotions, because all you learn in an artistic journey is that there is no right or wrong in your aesthetic creation. This recognition creates a space for acceptance and acceptance is the very first step in finding a solution or making a correct move in confrontation with a situation. But this is just one side of the story; on the other side of this process of art creation, there is audience. A piece of art can touch on significant aspects of our 'self'. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the specific exhibition 'Fruits of the Spirit: Art from the Heart' with the highly abstract themes of direct connection with mental health which were love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.<sup>7</sup> During the exhibition, Dr Lepine, curator of the exhibition, realized that the Monet painting of 'Water lilies' made some people cry and she associated this with '... some aspects of [them] that seems to deepen in the presence of beauty'.<sup>8</sup> The most valuable lesson that we can learn from this is that while art is one of the most powerful mediums of acknowledging individual emotions, it can well make people feel united and connected with each other by creating a *shared* experience that surpasses all barriers of *time*, *place* and -most importantly- *language*. This shared experience is in essence a shared understanding that makes people relate to each other, the result of which is the beautiful space it creates for empathy and understanding of each other's needs and emotional burdens.

Either part of the journey of art creation you are, it is undeniable that art is a powerful medium that can narrate the highs and lows of your emotional journey. Sometimes, this narration is only delivered to yourself and sometimes it leaves your hands and flies away beyond you; what can be more wonderful than letting people see your subjectivity and try to bridge their personal emotions with yours?! At the end, different life experiences add up to each other and make your piece of art a kaleidoscope of subjectivities that are all beautiful, valuable and meaningful in their own place. That being so, I would like to inform you about an "Artist" Workshop taking place during the Wellbeing Week in the Graduate Institute. This workshop is about the practice of self-consciousness through art with particular focus on miniature painting of Gol- O- Morgh that with it's highly intricate shapes and designs is the practice of patience, rootedness, solitude and mindfulness in an aesthetic form.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://artofquotation.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/the-creative-process-is-a-process-of-surrender-not-control/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://fruitsofthespirit.moyosaspaces.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=AAjVEaiC9dk&pp=ygUgQXIsYSBMZXBPbmUgTmF0aW9uYWwgYXJ0IGdhdGxlcnk%3D>

