

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

The Ritual of Los Dias De los Muertos and Community Art Therapy

Justine Brown and Christine Kerr

Abstract

This article explores a possible connection between Los Dias de los Muertos, cultural community art-making, group dynamics, drive theory and art therapy. The position that this article advances is that community and cultural rituals serve a purpose for the art therapist. These cultural rituals may operate as a “third hand” or facilitate sublimation, therein directing emotional discharge as well as, eliciting creativity and group cohesiveness for the community at large. These possible connections are relevant for the cross-cultural art therapist, in that the power of community art making appears to provide a creative cultural outlet as evidenced by the celebration of Los Dias de los Muertos in Mexico. This cultural outlet may enhance kinship and cultural group cohesiveness.

Key words: *art making, art therapy, community, drive theory, grief, group dynamics, healing, ritual, sublimation, symbolism.*

Introduction

This article explores a connection between *Los Dias de los Muertos*, the days of the dead, cultural community art making, group dynamics, drive theory and art therapy. The position that this article advances is that the art therapist has much to learn from traditional community and cultural rituals. Cultural rituals may act therapeutically by promoting positive emotional discharge while simultaneously enhancing the communities bonds. Secondly, from an art

therapy theoretical perspective, we are aware of the term used by Kramer of the art therapist being a 'third hand' in the relationship between, patient and art materials (Kramer, 2000). When there has been a disaster in a community the art therapist may be able to adapt art therapy theory from individual work to community work and also draw on traditional rituals which centrally use community art making, like *Los Dias de los Muertos*. The power of community art making is that it can provide not only creative and therapeutic outlets, but also enhance and serve as a healing structure.

The Origins of Los Dias de Los Muertos

The most well known Mexican holiday is undoubtedly *Los Dias de los Muertos*. It is held on November 1st and November 2nd. This is a holiday with sensory overload. Men and women decorate breads, paper cutouts, dancing skeletons, and sugar skull candies. *Oferencas* (altars) and artistically crafted caskets are displayed in the community to honour the dead.

One important aspect of *Los Dias de los Muertos* is the use of art symbols. These art symbols take root in pre-Hispanic culture. Actually, the celebration of *Los Dias de los Muertos* is a melding of pre-Hispanic and Catholic practices. Haley and Fukuda (2004) make use of early Spanish chroniclers to report that as early as the 16th century, people would dig up the remains of their ancestors. They would clean the bones, paint them with bright colours and put both a prayer and the name of the deceased on the forehead of the skull. When the Spanish government put a stop to this practice, the people created an alternative in the sugar skull. These sugar skulls are brightly decorated with coloured icing and have a small rectangle of foil on the forehead.

In Mexico, *Los Dias de los Muertos* is a cultural ritual. This holiday allows the community to come together, celebrate and grieve for lost loved ones. The yearly event promotes a popular belief that the souls of the dead are given permission once a year, to celebrate in the company of those living (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1993). *Los Dias de los Muertos* is a mortuary ritual (Brandes, 2006) in which Mexican communities offer their artistic gifts to the dead. In cemeteries, the art is often made in a humorous fashion.

Additionally, *Los Dias de los Muertos* is a time for family and community. Many Mexicans' use *Los Dias de los Muertos* as a chance to visit and spend time with relatives and friends (Norget, 2006). It can be said that the time taken to reflect on death brings *life* to those who are still living. Additionally, Derives (1996) views this ritual as a mechanism through which this culture helps "render life predictable". (Derives, 1996. 407).

Materials

The art materials used in *Los Dias de los Muertos* are laden with symbolic content. They add a purely Mexican context to this ritual. These materials are often found objects. Found objects are un-prescribed art making material such as household objects, clay, paper, wood scraps and aluminum foil. Kalmonowitz and Lloyd (1999), note that found objects are often used out of necessity, due to a lack of availability of traditional art materials. Poverty remains high in Mexico.

Seiden (2001) argues that found objects have a positive and transformational value. He believes that their ordinariness can be made into the extraordinary. Mexican families elaborate and construct these art objects with a great respect and deep caring for the loved ones they are honouring (Haley, Fukudo, 2004).

From an art therapy and social perspective, the use of found objects may also be a cultural metaphor. According to Kerr (2013) cultural metaphors specifically synthesized through art making, may allow greater access to topics that are painful and not easily spoken about. Metaphors allow the client some emotional distance from threatening material. Additionally Moon (2010) supports the use of found objects in contemporary culture, when she cites such events like September 11th, 2001.

The Ofrenda

Some of the traditional art pieces made during this holiday are the *Ofrenda* which is usually referred to as the altar, even though it does not resemble a traditional Catholic altar or shrine (Haley, Fukuda 2004). The *Ofrenda* is

constructed out of found objects. It can be made as a simple diorama or alternatively, an elaborate structure.

Ofrendas are built and decorated to honour the dead. Typically they are decorated with a cloth covering, fruit and flowers. The green, red and oranges colors of the flowers are thought to mimic the Mexican landscape. The symbol of the marigold, the *Flores de Muertos* (flowers of death); are central to its usage and signify the colour of death in pre-Hispanic Mexico (Haley, Fukuda, 2004). Photos of the deceased are then placed on the Ofrenda. Ceramic skulls, tiny skeleton figurines and little toys will be more prevalent on a child's Ofrenda to symbolize the need/desire to play. Food offerings are put on the Ofrenda such as candies, fruit, chocolate, and *pan de Muertos* (bread of the dead). The exact arrangement of these goods depends on the individual family's traditions (Haley, Fukudo, 2004). Figure one depicts an example of an Ofrenda.



Fig. 1

Included in most Ofrendas is a personal photograph of a lost loved one. There is an inherent intimacy in the use of these photographs. Pioneers of phototherapy Krauss and Fryrear (1983), state that the use of personal photographs in reconnecting metaphorically with lost love ones, helps the mourner to reexamine his/her' past.

Boxes, paper mache, mask –making, and ceramics in *Los Dias de los Muertos* and art therapy

Boxes are often used in the *Los Dias de los Muertos* ritual and also in art therapy. Wadeson, (2000) discuss the use of boxes therapeutically, as a *building of the self*. In the article "Secrets, symbols, synthesis and safety", the

role of boxes in art is a useful symbolic activity. Boxes can enclose *secret* contents; they can safeguard or conceal what is valuable. Metaphorically, boxes are symbolic of both the internal and external. Boxes create interior spaces providing a framework. Placing something in a box cannot only signify the value of the object, but also may actually provide a mundane object with newfound importance (Farrel-Kirk, 2001, Kaufman, 1966). Figure two illustrates examples of hand made boxes found at a Mexican market.



Fig.2

Paper is an important material in *Los Dias de los Muertos*. Paper is used to make puppet skeletons, games, miniature tomb replicas, skulls and masks. *Papel picado* (which literally means punched paper) is sheets of tissue paper with intricate cut-out designs. Paper puppet skeletons are made to amuse children in cemeteries on November 2nd (Haley, Fukuda, 2004). However, masks and skulls are typically made out of paper mache. The masks are usually worn by individuals, but also can be used as puppets.

Figure three is an image of *Papel picado*.

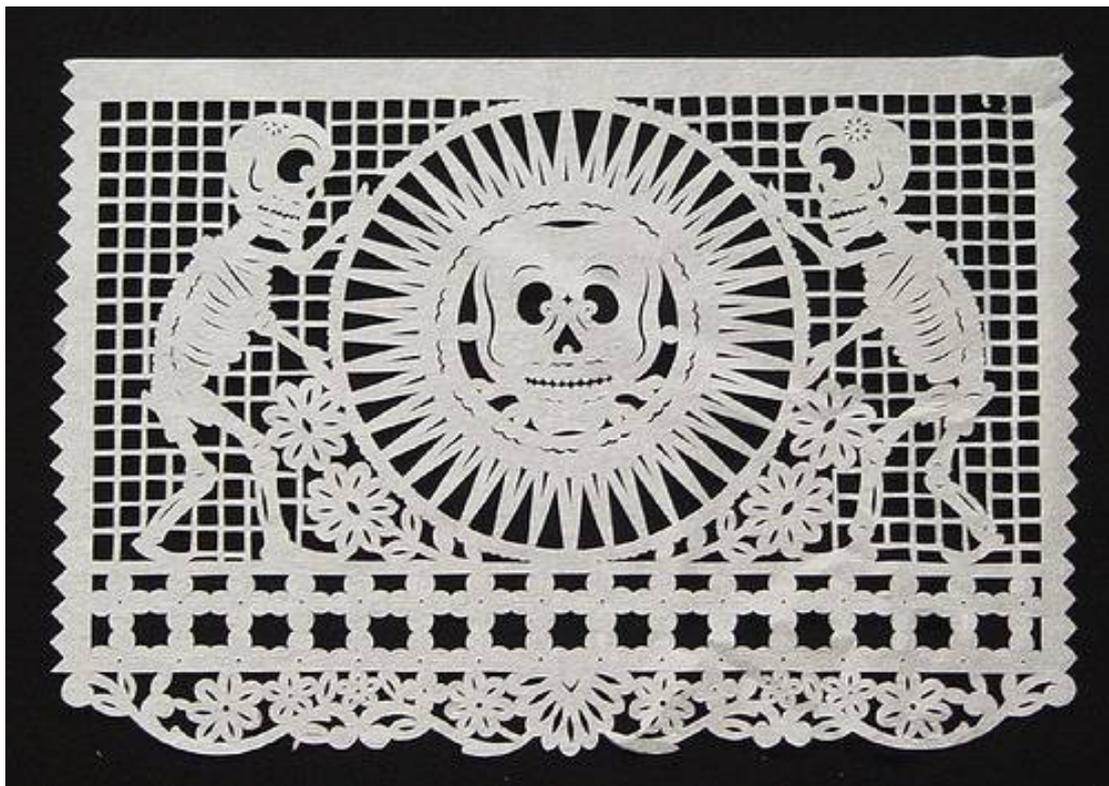


Fig.3

Mask-making is a universal art activity, seen across many cultures. Mask-making is used traditionally to denote life's transitions (Dunn-Snow, Smellie, 2000). Wadeson (2000) discusses how masks are also made to promote self-expression and disclose the hidden aspects of the self. Often, art therapists use mask making to help bring creative transformations in treatment (Dunn-Snow, Smellie, 2000). Mask-making may also enhance self-identity and awareness (Dunn-Snow, Smellie, 2000).

Figure four depicts intricately painted paper mache masks.



Fig.4

According to Moon (2010), the creation and therapeutic use of puppets may promote interactions with disassociated parts of the personality. Puppetry-making may engage and promote the development of a healthy sense of self, one with a variety of roles used in the ever-changing demands and circumstances of life (Moon, 2010). Steinhardt (1994) discusses the added component of puppetry, when he discusses how it serves to empower the client. The use of puppet-making and puppetry in *Los Dias de los Muertos* is connected to children. Often, they can be seen playing in the cemeteries with puppets.

Figure five highlights the expressiveness in some Dia De Los Muertos puppets.



Fig.5

Ceramics

In the *Los Dias de los Muertos* celebration, clay works are made into ceramic skulls and skeletons. The sizes range from two or three centimeters in height to those as large as a few feet. The ceramic skulls are made of clay and left to bake in the sun. Some pieces are ornately painted with colourful details with various embellishments. These skeletons and skulls are not to be confused with western Halloween-like depictions. These skulls and skeletons smile, have brightly painted decorations on them and they are infused with comical notations. They are often shown depicting various occupations and ordinary situations that are recognizable (Haley, Fukuda, 2004). These comical skulls and skeletons are made locally but generally purchased by tourists. More than any other single element, the prevalence of skulls and skeletons makes the Mexican Day of the Dead famous throughout the Western world (Brandes, 2006).

The use of clay as a therapeutic tool is a well researched therapeutic material in art therapy, with such pioneers as David Henley (2002) and Edith Kramer (1978) writing extensively about its usage. Clay is a versatile and adaptable medium, Clay has a connection to the land, which therein may connect directly to the people. Clay requires a relationship with the artist using it; it

requires physical, visceral and an investment of the senses. Clay holds a record of each touch (Seiden, 2001).

By working out in the field and extracting the clay themselves, a sense of ownership and investment is involved in the clay works process (Henley, 2002). Henley (2002) and Kramer (1979) both mention the regressive nature of clay and the clay's ability to hold intense feelings. Clay excites the senses (Henley, 2002).

This transformation of paper products and clay into crafts is an interesting topic to discuss in terms of art therapy. The dialogue surrounding craft in art therapy could be interpreted as skewed to diminish the therapeutic qualities. However, Moon (2010) quotes Edith Kramer's definition of craft as the "transformation of raw material... into useful and handsome objects by a logical, comprehensible process" (p 45). Art, is an "amorphous, malleable material, transformed not into a useful object but into a symbolic one" (p 45). Moon (2010), further mentions that Kramer views crafts as useful to those who are too fearful or constricted to make expressive art. What I see occurring in the "crafts" of *Los Dias de los Muertos* is rich in self-expression, symbolism and based on cultural ritual. This all may provide a framework for cultural expression that is very much a part of therapeutic art-making.

The Psychosocial Function of Rituals

Rituals, in various forms are present in almost all known human societies. Rituals help us recognize who we are and what we value. Rituals help us value each other. Rituals aid in bringing disparate communities together to share and acknowledge both the joy and pain of existence (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1998). Freud (1929) spoke about rituals in that they enhance community bonds.

Types of rituals vary from culture to culture. We see rituals in relationship to illness or misfortune, life-stages, such as birth, initiation, and death, or seasonal changes (Imber-Black and Roberts, 1998). There is often a strong connection between rituals and religious beliefs, such as in the case of ancestor worship (Imber-Black and Roberts, 1998, Harris, 2009).

The rituals and customs of cultures, especially sociocentric ones, serve as healing structures. These community rituals aid in maintaining social cohesion, even in situations of mass grieving. These pivotal rituals may help to facilitating a community's capacity to re-establish norms in the community (Harris, 2009). What makes them rituals is that they are repeated each year and serve a cathartic goal.

Yalom (2005) states that there is an inherent human need for group belonging and group identity. He argues that people are social creatures who strive to belong to and maintain relationships in communities, groups, and families. (Yalom, 2005). Yalom argues further that "people are, to a greater or lesser degree, always concerned and influenced by the current evaluations of others-especially the evaluation provided by the groups to which they belong" (p 64). In correlating both the community ritual of *Los Días de los Muertos* with the tenants of Yalom's Group Theory, it may be possible to propose that *Los Días de los Muertos* rituals may help reinforce cultural group cohesion. It is in both in the symbolism that the image holds and in the art-making action that the community forms a bond and may achieve greater group cohesion.

Community is often looked at as an extended family to many Mexicans. (Fukuda & Haley, 2004, Norget, 2006, Jackson, 2009). Referring specifically to Mexican family, Fukuda & Haley (2004), Norget (2006) and Jackson (2009) state that the Mexican family identifies strongly with the community. The concept of the family is not just limited to one's immediate family. Fukuda & Haley (2004) describe the dominant family type as "extended or multigenerational" (p12). "This creates a sense of continuity because the family as a unit will always exist even though individual members will die" (p 12).

Norget (2006) speaks about the idea of the community in the Mexican city of Oaxaca and states that the community acts as a "socially cohesive, democratic unit". "Community solidarity is important to meet collective needs" (p59). Rural communities tend to have collective work projects that serve the community such as repairing a church, fixing the public roads or crop planting (Fukuda & Haley, 2004, Norget, 2006, Jackson, 2009).

Mexican religious and spiritual practices have historically combined pre-

Columbian and Catholic religious practices (Jackson, 2009). Fukuda & Haley (2004) state, "Depending on your view, you could define the Day of the Dead celebration as a purely Christian phenomenon, a pre-Hispanic event or as a synergistic celebration combining elements of both" (p. 135) , Norget (2006) states:

"To give voice or presence to the dead is, in a sense, to return them to life - to bring them from offstage, from the margins of social existence, to center stage, into the current of social life, not as ancestral ghosts or spirits but as persons who linger as present memories and feelings, influencing people's actions, contributing to their sense of identity and connection" (p 116)

Religious rituals in Mexico celebrate positive values related to collectivism, communality, and social equilibrium (Norget, 2006). It is in these melding of religious rituals and practices that the group achieves greater cohesiveness. A strong tie to ancestors facilitates the community to utilize this aid as a healing force. Wherever ancestor worship is found, the ancestors themselves are represented as "interested parties" in the current affairs of the living community (Rossano, 2007). By remembering the ancestors through cultural traditions, societies provide a means for the ancestors' rebirth into the community, and the existence of the ancestors is sustained (Rossano, 2007). Amanze (2003) states that one of the most distinctive characteristics of ancestor worship is that "at death they are endowed with great power and that through this power they impose their will and prescriptions on the living" (p.46). In *Los Dias de los Muertos*, it is the ancestors that cement group cohesion, allow for the possibility of sublimation and provide the framework for the rituals performed.

Los Dias de los Muertos, Community Cohesiveness and Art Therapy

In their study of *Cross-Cultural Beliefs, Ceremonies, and Rituals Surrounding the Death of a Loved One* Lobar, Youngblut, and Brooten (2006) mention that the participants had difficulty separating the influence of culture and religion in

these rituals. The power of the creative arts produced is a synthesis of the creative process and the therapeutic process of the rituals.

The community directs and elicits creativity for their overall greater cohesion and the community's emotional discharge. As stated earlier, the subject of death in *Los Dias de los Muertos* may bring up conflicts and feelings related to one's own mortality. Yalom (2005) clearly states, "talking as well as taking proscriptive action related to the conflict, often enables the groups to embrace and derive constructive benefit from it" (p.72). This sentiment perhaps parallels Freud's (1929) and Kramer's (2000) ideas of drive theory and Naumberg's (1955) thoughts on sublimation respectively.

What can art therapists learn from cultural rituals such as Los Dias de los Muertos when confronted with tragedy in the community?

In art, the complete act of sublimation consists of the creation of visual images for the purpose of communicating very complex material to a group, which would not be communicated in another way (Kramer, 2000). We can see this at work in the ritual of Los Dias de los Muertos. Edith Kramer saw art as a "royal road" to sublimation, "a way of integrating conflicting feelings and impulses in an aesthetically satisfying form, therein, helping the ego to synthesize via the creative process itself" (Rubin, 1998 p. 99).

Sublimation is facilitated through the multi-layered process of the 'Third Hand'; the art therapist symbolically and literally assists the creative process. Kramer as cited in Rubin (1998) believes that this art process was non-intrusive on the part of the art therapist. The art therapist does not impose their ideas on to the clients. The *multi-layered process of the Third Hand* does not distort meaning or impose visual information or preferences onto the person one is working with (Kramer, 2000). Additionally, Kramer's concept of *the third hand* "assists in processes whereby pictorial communications of very personal material becomes therapeutically fruitful" (Kramer, 2000 p. 48). However, Kramer strongly argued that the art therapist is the organizing force and facilitator in the art-making.

In reference to *Los Dias de los Muertos*, it can be seen that traditional rituals may serve as a “therapeutic third hand”. The community may provide a framework and yet remain non-imposing; active in the art-making process which is an important factor in the cultural life of a people” (Kramer, 2000 p. 40).

Additionally, In *Los Dias de los Muertos*, art-making symbolically communicates very personal material. The themes of life and death are interwoven in almost all of the artistic rituals. It could be said that a religious fervour creates a symbolic “guiding” by lost loved ones.

Freud’s drive theory illustrates how the Mexican communities in *Los Dias de los Muertos* may refocus their energy (drives) into socially productive avenues. It is in their art-making that sublimation may occur. Freud states that “sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher physical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life” (Freud, 1929, p 51). Each ritual in this celebration appears to have a goal and process. What connects the rituals displayed in the *Los Dias de los Muertos* celebration and the creative arts are the use of materials and the psychological intent of the ritual. It is in their art-making actions that sublimation may occur.

In *Los Dias de los Muertos*, the art is symbolic speech. Margaret Naumburg saw “art as a form of symbolic speech, coming from the unconscious like dreams, to be evoked in a spontaneous way and to be understood through free association, always respecting the artist’s own interpretations” (Rubin, 1998, p.98). She states “it has played a major role in both the conscious and unconscious cultural expression of man throughout the ages” (Naumburg, 1955, p.435).

In correlating Naumburg’s (1955) position to art therapy and *Los Dias de los Muertos*, all activities may tap into both conscious and unconscious material. It is in both the images themselves and the art-making that the community forms a bond. The community itself acts in a therapeutic way. The community allows for what Naumburg thought was the purpose of the image to evoke a representation of the client’s inner life.

The importance of community art making groups for other communities

In this last section of the article we are looking at two modern examples of community art-making providing sublimation and containment for highly charged emotions.

The AIDS Quilt, also known as the NAMES project, grew out of a group of grieving strangers coming together to find a way to remember the loved ones who had passed away from AIDS. Started in June of 1987, the initial group began sewing patches to honour those they had lost.

Over the years, the AIDS quilt has facilitated “tens of thousands calling for compassion, awareness and action in the age of AIDS on behalf of people from all walks of life, all around the globe”. (<http://www.aidsquilt.org>). On the AIDS quilt 2012 website, they state “Throughout its history, The AIDS Memorial Quilt has been used to fight prejudice, raise awareness and funding, as a means to link hands with the global community in the struggle against AIDS, and as an effective tool in HIV and AIDS education and prevention”

Held on display in Washington DC and online, The AIDS quilt serves as a physical reminder of the many lives touched by this illness. Each panel shares its own story and placed together, is a part of a much larger story. The website provides images and stories creating a digital archive and library of the panels. A quote on their website from Kofi Annan (Secretary-General of the United Nations at the time) states, "While Quilts consist of many different pieces, each piece fits together with others to form a patchwork of global solidarity. It is a response that has measured up to the scale of the pandemic. We must make sure that our response does the same."

Figure 6 shows volunteers unfolding the NAMES project AIDS quilt displayed on the National Mall in Washington (Ellis, 1996).



This project is a response to highly charged emotions of grief and loss, similar to the art and craft making and art pieces found in Los Dias De los Muertos. We see both of these community art making experiences come from a human need to process emotions grief as well as honour lost loved ones.

Another poignant example of community art-making ritual is found in response to the terrorist attack on New York's Twin Towers on September 11th 2001.

The impact of the September 11th attacks had many art therapists and mental health professionals responding to the community. Art seemed a natural response and a way to process the highly charged emotions connected with such a tragic event. Kathryn Shattuk from *The New York Times* (2011) published an anniversary guide, "9/11 in the Arts: An Anniversary Guide" that listed events related to the September 11th attacks. Scrolling the list of events, one will find a multitude of quilt projects, photography projects, installation pieces, even performance dance pieces, all in response to the attacks. This list shows the creative process at work both by professionals who lead them, artists who felt compelled to create, and everyday people who look to process their grief, anger and other complex emotions through the creative process.

Cathy Malchiodi discusses how after the September 11th attacks, a "greater recognition of art therapy's potential to illuminate our understanding of posttraumatic stress and why healing arts are important and effective approaches to trauma intervention for individuals of all ages" (2011). In Cathy Malchiodi's article (2011), there is a quote from Rudolph Arnheim who is an

art theorist and perceptual psychologist, “Art serves as a helper in times of trouble”. This single yet profound statement is the thread that ties Los Dias de los Muertos, The AIDS quilt and response art from September 11th together. In these three examples we can see how art-making can help solidify communal bonds and aid in processing complex emotions.

Concluding Remarks

This article has explored the Mexican celebration of Los *Dias de los Muertos* as a cultural community art-making experience. *Los Dias de los Muertos* in Mexico enhances kinship and cultural group cohesiveness. A uniquely cultural experience, this ritual may assist participants in achieving some degree of community sublimation in the service of cultural and religious norms.

Secondly and importantly, the position this article advances is that cultural rituals serve a purpose for the art therapist. For the cross-cultural art therapist, it is important to consider the community needs and to what purpose the art is serving. In *Los Dias de los Muertos*, we see the community coming together and creating art to honour their lost loved ones. The details, rituals and symbolic value that is interwoven in the art work and art-making process is communicating those complex ideas through the visual images created. For the art therapist, the recognition of this valuable social art-making experience is relevant to all of us within our own unique community and national experience.

Justine Brown ATR-BC, LCAT is a recent graduate from C.W. Post with a Masters degree in Clinical Art Therapy. For the past two years she has volunteered her time working with individuals with brain injury at Common Ground Alliance and works full time at Heart Share Human Services as an Art Therapist with at-risk families. Justine has conducted Art therapy groups, individual sessions and workshops all based on the belief that art has the power to heal, enhance lives and facilitate creative expression. Justine is a member of the American Art Therapy Association and the New York Art Therapy Association.

Christine Kerr, Ph.D., A.T.R.-BC, C.G.P., LCAT, Director of Art Therapy Programs, has been a practicing clinical art therapist since 1974, with 39 years of clinical experience. She is a board certified clinical art therapist and currently is certified as a group psychotherapist. Dr. Kerr holds a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. Dr. Kerr's seminal textbook in family art therapy, titled *Family Art Therapy*, was published by Taylor-Rutledge in August 2008 (245 pages); this text has been translated into four languages. Her new family art therapy book will address family treatment from an international perspective. Dr. Kerr has a wealth of experience and knowledge in family and couples treatment and family art therapy.

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