



ART THAT HEALS

Painting the Pain Away

Can art heal? Apparently, it can – and it does. That is according to researchers, experts and art lovers across the world. What is, however, less-known are these art-inspired locations and artefacts that many profess have the ability to heal. Throughout Africa and the world, from ages past to the present day, there are pockets of encounters of art that saves, heals and redeems human beings from physical ailments and mental inhibitions. Here are such narrations, texts and artefacts that portray art that surpasses mere aesthetic appeal.



“Yes, art definitely can heal. It is one of the most therapeutic processes because it involves creativity and the right brain. Also, there is an amazing therapeutic process called art therapy. It involves art and can be used to conjure up images from the past and be used as an avenue that opens one up to healing. Art heals. On a personal note, it healed my mom – an artist with over 150 sculptures – from her horrible childhood,” says Charissa Bloomberg, celebrity psychologist and integrity leadership specialist in an exclusive interview with *Signature*.

HEALING ART

According to Bloomberg, art can play a role in facilitating healing. She saw firsthand how her mom, a renowned lefthanded sculpturer, used art as an avenue to heal. Art therapy can be described as the use of artistic expression to promote personal transformation, emotional purging, spiritual rejuvenation and healing.

Make no mistake; the concept of healing art is not a new one. According to *Art That Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia* by Jacques Mercier, this connection was present even in the Mediterranean world. It transcended geographical, racial and denominational demarcations to dwell in the consciousness of Christians, Muslims, Jewish and Greeks, to mention a few.

Shaun McNiff, one of the leading authors in this discipline, wrote *Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul* and *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*. In as much as texts and research affirm this connection, various tourists have taken the concept of healing art beyond book covers and online platforms in a quest to pinpoint pockets of art that allegedly truly heals.

SOUTH AFRICA: DRUMMING UP HEALING RAIN

There was not a single cloud in the sky. The seasonal downpour had not yet started. Back then, working at a tertiary academic institution, science was the order of the day. Yet, one could not shake off the rumours that enshrouded this event that was graced by representatives from of the well-known Modjadji, Rain Queen dynasty. Word on the ground was that once all protocol was observed and we heard the sacred drum thud – albeit on the screen – the heavens had no choice but to release the rain.

Speaker after speaker praised the sacred drum. It was said to be more than an artistic portrayal but a vessel that could journey to the “Other” world, conjure up spirit, clear space, instigate consecrated dance, honour the departed, facilitate trances, and heal. We listened, clapped and watched the sun begin to set on a cloudless day in Pretoria. Finally, just before we closed, the long-awaited recorded clip with the sounds of the notorious drums was played.

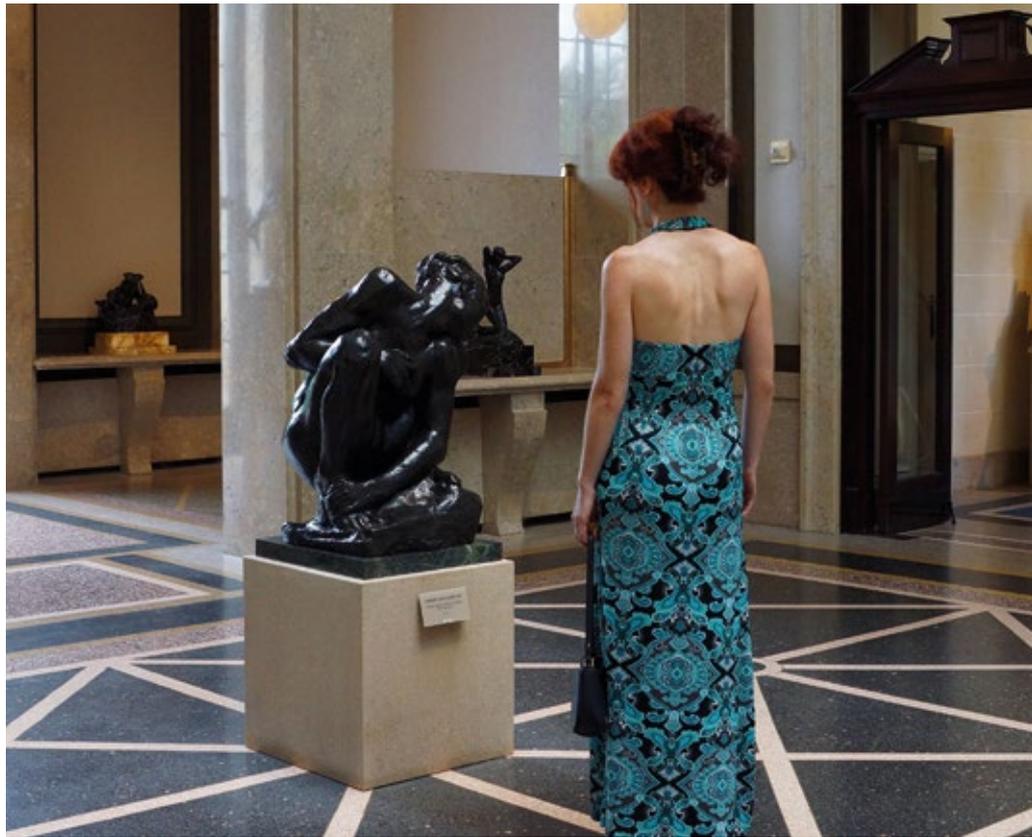
Let’s just say between leaving the venue to walking to our vehicles in the nearby parking area, it began to rain like never before. This was contrary to the forecasts of the weatherman. Some say it was a coincidence, luck or maybe just maybe, the sacred drum.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: HEALING ART MUSEUMS AND ALTERNATIVE SPACES

Sometimes, healing is not confined to one particular artwork, but fostered in healing art galleries and alternative spaces. For the most part, such areas transcend the display of relics, by fusing art with psychotherapy. This concept has gained enormous traction among local and international tourists who flock to



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these spaces in an attempt to latch onto that healing.

One such place is the Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery at the Smith Center for Healing and the Arts in Washington, DC. Although somewhat experimental at its core, art is used as a catalyst for expression, self-awareness, understanding feelings, processing thoughts, communication and healing.

The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art has also raised its voice to contribute to the healing arts dialogue. Healing art paintings and sculptures form part of their permanent collection. There is art depicting medicine, art that connects the secular and sacred, as well as art that calls upon divine power for personal and societal healing.

**UNITED KINGDOM:
PAINTING HEALING**

Painting helps many mental health patients in UK hospitals come to terms with their own torment. This is primarily because of the extensive groundwork laid by Edward Adamson, also known as “the father of art

therapy in Britain”, who worked tirelessly to give patients some form of expression. Art is not only a hobby or something one can take for granted, but it can be a healing remedy. Painting can be used to promote a state of rest for the physically fatigued.

Adamson encouraged healing with paint to patients from the hospital where he worked. His main interests involved dealing with people who suffered from mental health issues. He discovered that through art, especially painting, he could help to ease their symptoms.

Gary Molloy, one of the patients who suffered from severe bipolar disorder, was inspired by the paintings in the ward, which were created at Core Arts, a centre for people with mental health issues. He found painting as a distraction that allowed him to be free of his pain. Painting eased his symptoms and transformed into effective therapy. Painting helped him manage his condition and build his self-esteem. Molloy is just one of many who benefitted from paintings.

All in all, whether it is in the artistic depictions of Alexander “Skunder”

Boghossian's Ethiopian healing scrolls or Kagiso Pat Mautloa's abstract art on wood that depicts South African township life and the impact of HIV/Aids; artists from all over the world press on towards the hope that the creation of art can continue to foster healing. You see it in the abstract and ordinary, such as how Kwere artists of Tanzania depict the medicine containers carried by Kwere women healers as containing an element of the divine.

At times, the healing properties of art are not seen, but experienced. This is in instances such as how museums in Athens now often house yoga classes and art therapy classes, to teach children from a young age how to open up to such experiences. Whatever the medium, art can be used by the living to press on towards wholeness, clarity, and healing.

*by reneilwe komane & phindiwe nkosi /
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