

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Obituary: Edith Kramer**

**By Karin Dannecker**



Figure 1 © Karin Dannecker

Edith Kramer is widely known not only as a prolific painter but first and foremost as the “mother” of art therapy – a pioneer who formed the thinking and writing in the field and influenced art therapists worldwide. On February 21<sup>st</sup> 2014 she died at the age of 97 in Grundlsee in the Austrian state of Styria.

Born in 1916 in Vienna Edith grew up in a liberal environment, which was closely linked to the progressive youth movement of the beginning 20<sup>th</sup> century. Members of her family were artists and psychoanalysts of the Freud-circle like her aunt Elisabeth Neumann-Viertel, who was an actress at the Vienna Burgtheatre and married to Siegfried Bernfeld, a Freud scholar. Her uncle Theodor Kramer was a well-known poet. They all were part of the noted avant-garde artists and intellectuals who spent their summers between the wars in the marvellous mountainous countryside around the Grundlsee, where the spirit of progressive, leftist thinking determined the atmosphere and lifestyle.

The parents sent their daughter Edith to progressive schools; one was the Schwarzwald-School in Vienna known for its liberal education. Early in her life Edith got involved with painting and sculpting. Her first art teacher was Trudl Hammerschlag, who had studied with the influential reformer in art education Franz Cizek. His art teaching encouraged children to find free and unconventional expression of unconscious feelings in their art. Hammerschlag`s way of understanding the art process introduced Edith to the therapeutic power of art. While studying painting and drawing Edith also was a disciple of the sculptor Fritz Wotruba in Vienna.

Later in her youth it was Friedl Dicker who taught her about painting. Dicker was a Bauhaus-instructor in the circle of Johannes Itten, who put a lot of emphasis on the artist`s creative self-unfolding. From her Edith also learned that painting and drawing could help even the most difficult children and adolescents to work through traumatic experiences and derive positive effects. Friedl Dicker became known for drawing with

children in the concentration camp of Terezin, organising exhibitions and lectures there until she was deported to Auschwitz and murdered there.

Being Jewish Edith was forced to emigrate in 1938. She fled from Prague to England and was able to get on to of the last ships with refugees leaving for America. After her arrival in New York she soon was employed as an artist in a therapeutically oriented school for street-children, “The Little Red School House” in Greenwich Village. There, painting and drawing were valued as being far more beneficial to the children than verbal therapy. For Edith her knowledge about both – art and psychoanalysis – proved to be advantageous. Quickly the term *art therapy* was coined for what she did.

From 1942 on she also worked as a machinist in the industrial war defence industry. In her free time she painted the machines and the workers. Industrial and city landscapes continued to be a life long subject in her art.

After the war Edith Kramer briefly returned to Europe to travel through England and France and then decided to return to America. She found, that the new American painting was much more interesting to her then the centuries of classic old European art. Also she felt, it was much easier to survive and make a living as an artist in America. She found an apartment in Delancy Street in the Bowery and lived at the same place for many decades. Later she could afford to buy a studio in Soho with the money she inherited from her father, who had owned a candy store in Uptown Manhattan. Her first exhibition of her paintings and drawings was in 1943 in the New York Public Library. In New York she also continued her personal psychoanalysis with Annie Reich, which she had begun with her in Vienna before the war.

From 1949 on Edith worked for seven years the “Wiltwyck School for Boys”, a therapeutic residential community, where she established an art therapy programme. The results of art therapy with these boys were so successful, that Edith was asked to write up her experiences: in 1958 her first book *Art Therapy In A Children’s Community* came out, later two more books and many essays followed. *Art as Therapy with Children* belongs to the classics in the field. It is translated in nine languages and reprinted until today. Her third book *Childhood and Art Therapy* appeared in 1979, *Art as Therapy: Collected Papers. Edith Kramer* was edited by Lany Alaine Gerity in the year 2000.

Later Edith established another art therapy programme at the Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx and additionally worked as an art therapist with blind children in the Jewish Guild for the Blind for more than 13 years.

From 1971 on she taught at various universities, starting at Hahneman University in Philadelphia, later also at George Washington University. From 1973 on she developed an art therapy master programme together with Laurie Wilson at New York University. As an Adjunct Professor she taught “Psychodynamic processes in Art Therapy”, “Art for Art Therapists”, “Art as Therapy with Children”. Each year, when the fall and winter semester were over she returned to Austria to her beloved Grundlsee for the summer, mostly painting the lake, alpine mountains, flowering meadows or portraits of friends. It was since after the war that Edith lived a life between two worlds commuting between New York and Europe. When she was in her eighties she settled in her village in Austria to continue painting and exhibiting her work.



Figure 2 © Herschel J Stroyman

Central issues in Edith Kramer's understanding of art therapy are the role of sublimation in the artistic process, focussing on the transformative power of art and the art therapist's specific competencies to use a "Third Hand" in order to help a client to find his own creative expression. Therefore it is vital for the art therapist that he/she is an artist.

The profound satisfaction, which can arise from the artistic process itself, contains much more therapeutic value than the mere visual expression of the unconscious or diagnostic assessment of an image. The enormous gratification and – psychodynamically speaking – the expansion of the ego – result from the involvement in the art process itself, when someone is able to put feelings, wishes hopes and fantasies into pictorial form.

Working on the artistic form is important, because “art is an entity, however elusive, however subject to controversy and open to error, that is distinct from all other forms of pictorial expression. Art is characterized by economy of means, inner constancy, and evocative power (...) since the artistic value of the work produced is a sign of successful sublimation; the quality of the work becomes a measure (though not the only measure) of therapeutic success. Insight into the psychology of artistic creation shows that the formal qualities of a product make manifest processes of great significance to the therapist.” (In: Art as Therapy with children, p. 47- 66,)

One of Edith Kramer’s most important concepts is about the very specific role of the art therapist: in order “to assist a patient in processes whereby pictorial communications of very personal material become therapeutically fruitful the art therapist must cultivate a “Third Hand”, a hand that helps the creative process along without being intrusive, without distorting meaning or imposing pictorial ideas or preferences alien to the client.” (The Art Therapist’s Third Hand, in: Art As Therapy: Collected Papers Edith Kramer; Ed. by Lani Alaine Gerity) The task of an art therapist is to accept the child with his inner conflicts and needs, and to help him by responding to even the most fragmented or bizarre or banal production. Then it may happen, that a child (or adult) can use this inner turmoil in a way that his feelings and impulses “become agents of extraordinary effort at integration culmination in unusually powerful artistic statements.” (In, Childhood and Art Therapy, p. 14) To support such processes is the art therapist’s most rewarding task. Something then may occur, what she calls *miracles* when the most heterogeneous productions can in the course of treatment herald unexpected, seemingly miraculous therapeutic gains, visible in miracles of artistic quality.

Edith herself had always remained a painter and sculptor. Her work was shown in numerous exhibitions in the USA and Europe. In 1994 the City of New York commissioned a mosaic at the subway station of Spring Street, a piece of art which delights subway riders every day.



Figure 3 © Karin Dannecker

In 1996 Edith received an honorary doctoral degree from Vermont College of Norwich University. She is honorary member of the American Art Therapy Association and several other art therapy associations in Europe. Until she had reached an old age she was much asked for speaking at conferences and training institutions. Generations of students and practicing art therapists are influenced through her thinking and writings, being convinced that art is the core of art therapy.

For me as a former scholar and a friend I share with many people – art therapists and non-art therapists, the experience that it was always a huge pleasure to sit down with Edith and get into talking with her. Her wisdom, her unconventional thinking and her enormous knowledge about what moves the world inside and outside was profoundly

inspiring and enriching. It is sad to know that this will never be possible again. But her invaluable contribution to the field of art therapy and much more remains. We think of her in gratitude.



Figure 4 © Herschel J Stroyman



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