A Place for Art in Prison:
Art as A Tool for Rehabilitation and Management

Lee Michael Johnson
University of West Georgia

ABSTRACT
An analysis of the contemporary literature on prison art programs reveals that art can be a valuable tool in corrections, despite a decline in support of such programs. Scholars with diverse backgrounds in research, teaching, art, therapy, and administration report that artistic activities have several benefits for prisoner rehabilitation and institutional management. These benefits fit into four general categories: therapeutic, educational, prison quality-of-life management, and societal (community involvement). Photographs of drawings made on the interior of a county jail are included to illustrate the creative potential that exists behind bars. Art programs may be widely useful because artistic activities respond to prisoners’ basic human need for creative self-development, autonomy, and expression. While research testing the effectiveness of prison art programs is needed, it appears that artistic activities have the potential to improve prisoners’ involvement in rehabilitation programs.

Key Words: prison art programs, rehabilitation, management, jail wall drawings

INTRODUCTION
Correctional strategies have yet to prove their effectiveness in reducing re-offending (Newbold, 2003). Criminal sanctioning itself does not respond to individuals’ criminogenic needs and is not linked with reduced recidivism (Bonta, 1996). However, while many conventional approaches to prisoner rehabilitation do not “work” very well (Palmer, 1994), it is false to claim that “nothing works”—some correctional programs show successful outcomes and others show promise (Gendreau, 1996; Palmer, 1994; MacKenzie, 2006). Also, there is evidence that the failures of correctional programs are exaggerated. Some states recently experienced reductions in re-incarceration rates (Austin, 2001), and crude recidivism rates can be deceptive in that they include re-arrests for less serious offenses and technical violations (Newbold, 2003). Further, prison rehabilitation programs may work in ways other than preventing future crime, such as humanizing the prison environment (Newbold, 2003) and improving prison...
management. For example, a study of an in-prison therapeutic community treatment program in Delaware reported lower levels of institutional disorder (grievances filed and rule violations by prisoners) compared to non-treatment units, and offered strong evidence against the possibility that the treatment unit simply houses better behaved prisoners with less severe criminal histories (Dietz, O’Connell, Scarpitti, 2003).

Efforts at rehabilitation are worthwhile, but better methods need to be developed. Generally, the search for better programs should involve the replication and refinement of successful strategies, as well as the development of new ones. Integrated, or, “multi-modal” programs that address a variety of offender needs, including personal development, are being targeted as promising correctional approaches (Harper, Man, Taylor and Niven, 2005; MacKenzie, 2006). At issue here is the possibility that creative activities such as art can perform an effective role in offender rehabilitation. This essay is the product of an extensive analysis of the recent academic and professional literature on prison art programs. It covers diverse scholarly work produced in the disciplines of the social sciences and professions of corrections, education, and art.

ART IN PRISON

Prison art programs foster the creation of many fascinating works of art, such as those presented in Phyllis Kornfeld’s Cellblock Visions: Prison Art in America (1997) and Gussak and Virshup’s (1997) anthology text, Drawing Time: Art Therapy in Prisons and Other Correctional Settings. These works articulate the aesthetic and rehabilitative value of prison art programs and the artwork they produce. Kornfeld (1997) argues that the value of such programs is multi-dimensional—they offer simultaneous opportunities for therapy, education, vocation, and recreation. Despite the apparent need to explore alternative approaches to corrections, and the well-established functions of prison art programs—such as therapy, humanizing prisoners, producing fine works of art, and providing constructive alternatives to destructive behavior (safer environments)—there has been decreased support for such programs, and many of them have been cut altogether (Kornfeld, 1997).

Art has a long tradition in prison (Ursprung, 1997). Gussak and Ploumis-Devick (2004, p. 35) remark that “creativity and artistic expression are naturally inherent in correctional settings.” During the twentieth century, prisoner art and craft work became widely recognized as a viable category of art in western countries and adopted by governmental and correctional authorities in work, vocational, educational, and therapeutic programming (Cardinal, 1997; van der Hoeven, 1988). Some prisoners and ex-prisoners have even been able to achieve mainstream popularity. Both current and past works of prisoner art dealt with the same ideas and themes expressed by non-imprisoned artists—the broader social, cultural, political, and aesthetic concerns of the time—not just the more immediate concerns of imprisonment, with some expressing protest and feelings of discontent and others more mundane or benign everyday matters (Cardinal, 1997).

Prison art, education, and therapy programs in the United States declined sharply in the 1980s, likely due to broad political and perceived public demands for prisons to cease providing prisoners with what were thought to be unwarranted privileges and amenities (Hillman, 2003). Arts programs seem to be more highly regarded in England (Schoonover, 1986), but programs there too experienced sharp cuts in the late 1990s (Clements, 2004). It is difficult to find evidence that prison art programs largely failed in meeting treatment and institutional
management objectives. The decreased support for art programs in corrections actually seems to contradict their demonstrated value (Hillman, 2003) and the professional opinions of the people doing their planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Benefits of Prison Art Programs

In various forms, prison art programs have received a great deal of validation from researchers, teachers, artists, therapists and counselors, and administrators. The benefits identified by this community of scholars and practitioners fit into four general categories: therapy, education, institutional management, and societal (outside of the prison).

Therapeutic Benefits

Art Therapy with Offenders, edited by Marian Liebmann (1994), is an anthology of articles written by therapists with extensive experience working with prisoners that makes a strong case for the benefits of art therapy in corrections. Liebmann summarizes seven key benefits. 1) Art can be a form of communication for those who have problems with verbal communication. 2) It can act as a bridge between therapist and client for dealing jointly with issues that make clients uncomfortable. 3) It is a means of self-expression and self-exploration. 4) It provides a safe and acceptable way to express, release, and deal with potentially destructive feelings like anger and aggression. 5) It yields concrete products that can be used to initiate discussion and note developments over time. 6) It gets the client actively involved. 7) It lets clients be creative and perhaps enjoy themselves. Gussak (1997a, pp. 9-10) too sums up the advantages of art therapy in prison: it communicates concrete nonverbal messages not available through verbal therapy, bypasses one’s reluctance to explore treatment issues honestly, removes the vulnerability associated with verbal expression, allows one to make expressions that would be threatening in verbal form, allows one to make expressions socially acceptable to both the prison subculture and outside culture, taps into the creativity that stems from the intense need for diversion and escape in prison, “produces mitigation of symptoms without verbal interpretation,” and provides another option to those with poor literacy and verbal communication skills.

Art’s products—“art as craft” (as good artwork) and processes—“art as self-expression” both have demonstrated therapeutic value (Riches, 1994a). Art therapy is seen by many as an important part of treatment plans aimed at helping offenders overcome problems associated with issues such as substance abuse and traumatic childhood experiences (Williams, 2003). It can be particularly helpful in treating prisoners with vulnerabilities due to mental illness and disability (Cheney, 1997; Day and Onorato, 1989; Delshadian, 2003; Edwards, 1994; Karban and West, 1994; Sundaram, 1997; Teasdale, 1997; Woodall, Diamond, and Howe, 1997) and physical impairment (Sundaram, 1997; Taylor, 1997), and as a potential way to identify those who are at high risk of committing self-harm (Cheney, 1997; Day and Onorato, 1989). During the past decade, some therapists have begun to use art therapy with incarcerated females with histories of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Day and Onorato, 1997). Day and Onorato’s (1997) work with incarcerated female trauma survivors led them to view art therapy as an effective way to treat prisoners and propose that it be more widely used. Merriam’s (1998) case analyses of incarcerated female survivors showed that art images enabled women to safely reconnect with and contain potentially destructive thoughts and feelings associated with traumatic experiences. One pilot program used visual art, storytelling, music, and journaling to heal and empower incarcerated women with histories of abuse largely through self-concept
change and a reconstruction of their identities as survivors. This program established a model that could be applied to other populations, including male prisoners, and other intervention topics (Williams and Taylor, 2004). Art therapy may also be used to respond to other types of traumatic experiences. For example, a pilot study program used art therapy to treat incarcerated women who were grieving the death of a loved one, with favorable results (Ferszt, Hayes, DeFedele and Horn, 2004). By putting more of a focus on the artistic image, separate from the person, art therapy gives clients some distance with which to more easily discuss disowned thoughts and feelings (Merriam, 1998).

Art therapy focuses heavily on healing processes. The making of visual images generates self-insights, brings suppressed feelings to the surface, and helps participants cope with the stress of prison life (Hall, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Riches, 1994a; Schoonover, 1986; Teasdale, 1995). It offers prisoners a non-destructive, therapeutic release for their feelings of distress associated with the deprivation of prison life as well as states of mental health extending beyond the incarceration experience (Day and Onorato, 1989; Hall, 1997; Williams, 2003). Quasi-experimental studies (pilot and follow-up) conducted by Gussak (2006 and 2007) to quantify the effects of art therapy on prisoners found that art therapy groups significantly reduced depressive symptoms and improved mood. Further, feelings that one may be uncomfortable expressing outward or are hard to put into words can be externalized through visual images (Day and Onorato, 1989; Cronin, 1994; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Teasdale, 1995). A visual activity framework provides prisoners an appropriate opportunity to express pent up feelings—“to be able to see what one feels and thinks” (Teasdale, 1995, p. 9). Things that one cannot, or should not, say “out loud” can more safely be said with, for instance, colors, lines, and shapes (Hall, 1997). In this sense, art is “the ultimate hidden weapon” because of its ability to “hide” the therapeutic process—to allow clients to express themselves without the threat of retaliation from the “environment” (Gussak, 1997b, p. 61). Further, in making a contrast to verbal therapy, Teasdale (1997, p. 215) writes that art therapy “allows for a physical record of thoughts and ideas to be kept and matured. The storing of images enables a visual diary to be maintained for future reference and feedback.”

Art-making helps prisoners gain self confidence “by making them feel productive, normal, and human” (Williams, 2003, p. 3). Learning art can build self-esteem (Clements, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Riches, 1994a; Schoonover, 1986) and creating it can instill a feeling of self-worth (Grace, 1993; Karban and West, 1994). Engaging in artistic activities helps prisoners redefine and maintain their social identities in response to the loss of identity provoked by prison life (Hall, 1997). Prisoners can be made to feel valued and important through the individualized attention and compassion received from teachers and counselors (Day and Onorato, 1989), as well as the admiration and respect they receive for creating good work (Baroody-Hart and Farrell, 1987; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Kornfeld, 1997); the status of “artist” fosters favorable self-identification and counters some of the stigma attached to being in prison (Hall, 1997; Williams, 2003). Further, the self-confidence that clients gain from improving their artistic skills helps them achieve in other areas of their lives (Edwards, 1994).

One of the uncomfortable issues that prisoners deal with in therapy is one of the most important goals of correctional rehabilitation—taking responsibility for their offenses. Art can help confront offending behavior (McCourt, 1994; Teasdale, 1997), break the cycle of violence and fear that characterizes the lives of many violent offenders (Graef, 2002), and explore strategies against re-offending (Grace, 1993). It can be used as a process to help clients emerge from
avoidance and denial (Graef, 2002; Murphy, 1994), come to terms with the realization that they have hurt others, and cope with shame (Murphy, 1994). As a safer form of ventilation, art teaches an alternative outlet for angry and aggressive feelings that clients may tend to project outward as destructive behavior (Cronin, 1994; Graef, 2002; Gussak, 1997a; Hall, 1997; McCourt, 1994; Merriam, 1998). Also, art can help improve relationships between prisoners and their families on the outside. Artwork presented or given to families convey thoughts and feelings that are difficult to express verbally even to family members, give the family something concrete to enjoy and be proud of, and therefore help improve the imprisoned family member’s sense of self-worth (Murphy, 1994; Riches, 1994a; Schoonover, 1986).

Art can be a useful part of collective activities in prison. Art therapy is also highly effective in prison group therapy and therapeutic community (TC) programs. Group art therapy assists the members of a TC in being open and honest with one another about their emotions and treatment issues, and it allows them to carry over and further explore issues that arise in other group therapeutic venues (Teasdale, 1997). Even if addressing offender behavior is not the primary goal of an art program, working in groups, in theatrical and musical productions for instance, can go far to help facilitate the kinds of transformations expected of prisoners. As Aylott (2002, p. 5) put it, “The experience of working as part of a team, recognising and fulfilling your responsibilities, being valued for your contribution, and depending on and valuing the contribution of others, are part of the experience required to become a responsible citizen.”

Educational Benefits
Art activities are believed to have a special place and value in the prison education curriculum (Billington, 2002), and many educational programs have included artistic components (Williams, 2003). Also, because education is so much a part of individual growth and contributes to one’s well-being, many aspects of art education are closely linked, and overlap, with those of art therapy (Edwards, 1994; Riches, 1994a). Teaching can take place in art therapy by encouraging clients to look at and learn about the world in a fresh way—not only by making artwork but also by analyzing the work of others (Edwards, 1994), and the arts can be used to develop multicultural awareness and appreciation among prisoners (Carlyle, 2000; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004). The creativity and new ways of thinking involved in learning art coincide with rehabilitative needs, especially as they concern emancipation and empowerment. Engaging in art offers prisoners opportunities to explore their inner potential and alternative interests, improve their communication abilities, appreciate their own and others’ ideas and cultures, become active citizens, and develop the critical attitude necessary to examine lifestyle (Clements, 2004).

Curricular and pedagogical innovations enhance the learning of incarcerated students. For example, a successful arts-based educational program for women in a Florida prison integrated art and health education as a way to promote wellness and global self-development (Mullen, 1999). There is reason to believe that prison adult-education programs that focus narrowly on sets of basic, key, and cognitive skills are much less rehabilitative (associated with low amounts of reduced recidivism) than those that also focus on arts and humanities. Perhaps this is because arts and humanities offer the creativity and heuristic learning, and encourage the self-discipline and autonomy, that enables the profound personal transformation demanded by true rehabilitation (Clements, 2004). It should be apparent that art and craft activities in prison are not merely recreational. They strengthen cognitive abilities—knowledge is acquired through the senses—
and in terms of development of the whole self, they help students integrate knowledge, feelings, and manual skills (Clements, 2004; Riches, 1994a). Recent research shows that programs that truly address prisoners’ multiple educational needs, and are well implemented, are more strongly associated with improved employment capabilities and reduced re-incarceration; these effective programs will likely contain academic, vocational, social skill, emotional self-management, and artistic education (Vacca, 2004). The arts, therefore, are more than supplementary to prison education—they are integral to achieving its primary goals (Graef, 2002).

Art education can foster student self-directedness (Clements, 2004). Self-direction affords individuals more of a chance to “turn their lives around,” and to desist offending. However, self-direction requires high degrees of freedom and autonomy. Freedom of exploration and expression is not just liberating, it is also empowering. If education is to truly rehabilitate incarcerated students, it must not only empower them through the acquisition of human and social capital, it must at the same time emancipate them from the confines of social psychological institutionalization. Art, as part of a more creative and expressive curriculum that encourages spontaneous and participatory learning, gives incarcerated students the ability and freedom to self-direct their personal transformations, and thus the rehabilitative process (Clements, 2004).

Educational programs are more effective when instruction engages topics that motivate and sustain students’ interests (Vacca, 2004). Art education serves to attract and enable incarcerated students who have experienced little academic success and may be reluctant to participate in educational programs (Clements, 2004; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Leach, 2002; Riches, 1994a; Schoonover, 1986); it is a hands-on approach to learning that offers the opportunity to do well at another important type of study (Riches, 1994a). For example, one county prison art project in Pennsylvania incorporated art-making and creative writing into basic general education programs (adult education/GED) that also included computer instruction. The project created a publication outlet for students’ works—the Anthology of Inmate Art—which increased enrollment in the overall education program, created camaraderie among students, and made a favorable impression on guards, members of the community, and other prisoners (Hawk, Bohna, Jr., Riddell, and Stark, 1993).

Benefits to Institutional Management

Many of art’s benefits are shared by prisoners and the institution (Grace, 1993; Graef, 2002; Riches, 1994b; Schoonover, 1986). For example, an outside evaluation of the women’s art and wellness education program mentioned earlier showed outcomes favorable to interpersonal safety (accompanied by fewer disciplinary actions) in addition to students’ personal and interpersonal growth (improved self-esteem, self-concept, and relationships with others) (Mullen, 1999). Art programs contribute to the security and quality of life of the prison (Clements, 2004; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Schoonover, 1986). They help build peaceful, cooperative relationships among prisoners, among staff, and between prisoners and staff (Day and Onorato, 1989; Hall, 1997; van der Hoeven, 1988). Artistic activities provide prisoners some respite or temporary escape from the harsh, tedious, controlling, regimented, and lonely life of imprisonment (Day and Onorato, 1989; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Hall, 1997; Riches, 1994; Schoonover, 1986) and can improve their attitudes and behavior in the short and long term (Graef, 2002). Many prisoners choose art as a way to deal with boredom (Baroody-Hart and Farrell, 1987; Clements, 2004; Gussak, 1997a; Williams, 2003). Art programs help humanize the prisoners and their environment by providing a form of recreation, a source of
decoration, a way to make gifts and items for sale or trade, and a connection to the outside world—sometimes symbolic, sometimes communicative (Hall, 1997; Williams, 2003), and they serve as an alternative way to vent frustration and aggression and as a distraction from acting out (Clements, 2004; Day and Onorato, 1989; Hall, 1997; Riches, 1994a).

Some evidence exists to suggest a relationship between art programs and reduced disruptive behavior on the part of prisoners (Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Riches, 1994b; Schoonover, 1986). Arts and crafts may even change the behavior of very difficult, seemingly incorrigible, prisoners who are reluctant to participate in programs that offer constructive activities (Leach, 2002). The necessity for disciplinary control measures such as restraints and isolation may be reduced when artistic activities are available as options for emotional ventilation (Day and Onorato, 1989). Those who take being an artist seriously, especially, have to depend on guards for some of the resources and privileges to engage in art-making, and so must conform to rules in order to develop mutually beneficial relationships with them (Baroody-Hart and Farrell, 1987). Thus, as a management tool, art programs can reduce violent behavior and harmful stress, and the financial costs of responding to such matters (Schoonover, 1986; Williams, 2003).

Prison is a harsh environment that threatens to deprive its residents of liberty, power, and individuality, and over time, erodes their relationships with the outside world. Artistic activities help some survive prison by making “doing time” less burdensome (Baroody-Hart and Farrell, 1987; Schoonover, 1986). Baroody-Hart and Farrell (1987) identified a subculture of serious artists made up of prisoners who use commitment to being an artist to distance themselves from the violent and exploitive threats emanating from the general prison population (by integrating into the safer artist subculture), as well as the disturbing aspects of prison bureaucracy. The controlled environment allows prisoners few outlets for creative expression, stimulation, and self-development (Williams, 2003). Art programs help meet “the need for constructive, creative, and purposeful activities to offset the deleterious and dehumanising effects of prisons life” and encourage “personal development, self-esteem, and a small degree of autonomy” (Riches, 1994a, p. 79). In the disempowering environment of prison, “Art therapy offers the possibility of self-empowerment… because art making is such a highly personal and self-directed activity” (Merriam, 1998, p. 158). Art involves acts of creation that are inherently liberating and exploratory, even inside the restrictive space of prison (Grace, 1993). Creative activities may then especially play a key role in directing the energies of prisoners with long-term and life sentences. Art may be one of their few opportunities to live creatively within the boundaries of social acceptability and develop as decent humans in such a long-term environment (McCourt, 1994; Murphy, 1994).

**Benefits to Society**

The benefits of creative rehabilitative activities extend well beyond prison. Incarcerated artists can make valuable aesthetic contributions to society. For one, their work can be put on display in museums, galleries, and other venues for the public to enjoy. One partnership between Frackville Prison and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—“Inside Out”—produced exhibitions of prisoner art that showcased several hundred paintings and drawings and earned favorable public response (Wisker, 1997). Artwork exposed to the outside may have the added benefits of raising the relevance and value of prisoners’ involvement with the arts and, potentially, attracting more involvement and appreciation from the outer community (Aylott,
2002; Wisker, 1997). Also, artists may be able to sell their work on the outside (Baroody-Hart and Farrell, 1987). Selling artwork can be used as a way to earn legitimate income (Riches, 1994b; Williams, 2003), engage in productive exchanges with the community before and after release, and as a way to help fund the art programs—proceeds may be split between the artist and the program (Williams, 2003). With guidance, education, and training, some participants in correctional art programs, although likely only a few, could put their various creative talents to use in artistic and vocational careers (Schoonover, 1986). One program in the United Kingdom, the Summit Group, seeks to engage prisoners in a variety of artistic activities through collaboration with the wider community (with schools, business, industry, etc.). One of the group’s projects was writing music for an original piece of drama performed at a local school (Aylott, 2002). Another prison in the UK has collaborated with a local theatre company several times, including a project that produced a video and resource pack on drugs for social workers and educators (Carlyle, 2000).

The Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), based at the University of Michigan, has worked collaboratively with prisoners and correctional facilities in generating several arts projects (Alexander and Gothard, 2006). These projects provide “creative spaces” inside of the harsh environment of prison and extend into the outer community. The PCAP’s Sisters Within Theater Troupe has performed over twenty plays and has held several workshops in prisons, juvenile facilities, and high schools. The Sisters of Unique Lyrics (SOUL) contribute readings and anthologies to prison workshops. The PCAP holds an Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners, and its Portfolio Project helps incarcerated young people present their work to judges, employers, and teachers. Its Speakers Bureau brings the voices of the incarcerated to the public, and its Linkage Project connects the formerly incarcerated with community arts mentors (Alexander and Gothard, 2006).

Art programming may better prepare prisoners for aftercare and community reintegration. Ideally, the integration process for released prisoners begins during incarceration—rehabilitation programs can be designed to help prepare them for eventual community re-entry (Elliott-Marshall, Ramsay, and Stewart, 2005). A study of over 4,000 male and female California state prisoners showed that increased time spent in prison-based therapeutic community treatment predicted increased participation in aftercare as well as decreased returns to custody during a 12-month period, and that increased time in aftercare too predicted decreased 12-month returns to custody (Burdon, Messina, and Prendergast, 2004). Also, one program in Florida—the “Life Skills Project,” a multi-agency project that works with participants from jail to aftercare/reentry, showed some reduced recidivism as well as favorable cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. The program’s curriculum included many topics, including self-development, communication skills, interpersonal relationship development, stress management, and accessing community resources (Jalazo, 2005). Any of these topics could incorporate artistic activities.

Finally, perhaps as a culmination of the many specific benefits of correctional art programs, another potential benefit is reduced recidivism—a benefit that may not be established because it has not been given enough of a chance (Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Schoonover, 1986; Williams, 2003). Teasdale (1995) proposed that art therapy be included as part of treatment services to counter criminality, and that the outcomes of such services be assessed especially in terms of recidivism. Art may motivate prisoners to purposely engage in therapy programs that assist offenders in changing their attitudes and circumstances in favor of desistance (Teasdale,
1995). In his Foreword to *Art Therapy with Offenders* (Liebmann’s anthology), Judge Stephen Tumim, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (1994) writes:

The making of art in prison provides an “enabling space” for the prisoner overwhelmed by the clatter and disruption of prison life. I see the provision of some sort of art centre as an essential component of a proper regime. To anyone who attended the performance of musicals in the London prisons over the last two years, it is clear that the therapy has extended beyond its obvious aims. It opens a prospect of useful work for those who can take part in it, one way or another, and it opens the possibility of a more creative life for many after release.

To summarize the benefits of prison art programs, artistic activities assist in prisoner rehabilitation by serving educational and therapeutic functions as well as providing opportunities to contribute to and connect with the community outside of prison. Further, prison art programs serve a managerial function by improving the quality of life for both prisoners and staff.

**Jail Wall Drawings: An Illustration of Creativity**

While little literature discusses the value of artistic activities specifically to jails, the potential to nurture constructive creativity may also exist in the more temporary holding environment of jail. In his analysis of jail wall artwork, Hanes (2005) features images drawn on the walls of a county jail and discusses the importance that creative expression has for enduring the conditions of incarceration. The following Figures 1 through 8 feature examples of several drawings made by men on the interior of a vacant county jail in Indiana. They were photographed in October of 2002.

**FIGURE 1**

(The writing at the top is “LOCK DOWN.”)
Figure 2
The next figures, 4 through 8 (pages 111–114), capture a collection of work created in one cell, apparently by one artist. Figure 4 displays a group of images, while Figures 5 through 7 break them down individually. These drawings were quite large, covering about the entire width of a wall and nearly one half of its height. The drawing in Figure 8 was about the same size as the other three and done in a separate space.

These drawings speak to the creative potential that exists behind bars and hopefully suggests the opportunity to get the incarcerated more involved in constructive creative activities—both as a way to “do their time” productively and as a way to prepare them to engage the community after release. The drawings show that incarcerated artists can be quite talented, their work can be fascinating and worthy of appreciation and support, and that they have a strong desire to express themselves.
FIGURE 5

FIGURE 6
Figure 7
CONCLUSION

An analysis of the literature shows that a great deal of work favoring the use of artistic activities in prison can be found. Arts in corrections are strongly supported by theoretical arguments, anecdotal testimony from practitioners, and empirical research. Of course, like any other program or technique, art rehabilitation programming will have to be properly implemented to know of its effectiveness. Many correctional programs fail because they are not properly implemented, not necessarily because they are based on weak theories (Bonta, 1996; Gendreau, 1996; Harper, Man, Taylor and Niven, 2005; Palmer, 1994; MacKenzie, 2006). To be properly implemented, correctional art programs need cooperation from everyone working in the correctional setting (Day and Onorato, 1989; Grace, 1993; Riches, 1994; Mackie, 1994), and art professionals need proper support and training (Schoonover, 1986). Riches (1994, p. 78) writes, “Treatment and reform programmes, including art education and art therapy, are generally successful when prisoners, prison staff, and teachers or therapists enjoy a measure of mutual trust, and respect and discipline is not jeopardised.”

Before ending then, a point should be made regarding what is likely one of the biggest challenges to the constructive use of creative activities in corrections: censorship. Factors such as institutional and program rules, political ideology, and personal opinions of correctional administrators and staff can suppress artistic creation and self-exploration (Kornfeld, 1997; Mullen, 1999), but so too can the prisoner subculture of toughness and the inner inhibitions
of the artists—they may be afraid to explore their own thoughts and feelings and expose them to others (Kornfeld, 1997). Censorship interferes with freedom of expression and, potentially, rehabilitation (Mullen, 1999). Just as many other artists, prisoner artists will often produce work that is shocking and offensive, even some which may seem to be inconsistent with the popular expectations of a rehabilitating offender. The status of offender prevents the prisoner from receiving the same degree of license to create controversial work that is granted to non-incarcerated artists. For example, authorities and the general public may be apprehensive toward violent imagery created by persons convicted of violent crimes, as it will be assumed that their artwork is an indicator that they still have strong violent criminal tendencies. However, this will be a misperception in many cases, and considerations such as therapeutic release and the opportunity to explore suppressed feelings should outweigh the discomfort associated with the imagery present in some prisoner art. Misinterpretations of prisoner artwork are fueled by a contradiction inherent in prison art: the prison is punitive, but creative activities are very rewarding. Prison is intended to strip power and deliver pain; art empowers and delivers happiness. Those who adhere strongly to the punitive ideology are more likely to be suspicious of creative activities and view prisoner art as a threat or problem, or, to have a “paranoid reaction” to it (Gussak, 1997b). Hopefully, administrators and staff can be assured that prison and jail art programs do not threaten processes aimed at security and offender accountability (Gussak, 1997b) and will support teachers and therapists in taking steps necessary to ensure great amounts of freedom of expression in prison and jail art programs.

Like most people, prisoners desire to be productive and will seek creative autonomy and outlets for expression. Aesthetics-enhanced rehabilitation programs provide such outlets for creative expression. Perhaps then, incarcerated individuals will become more seriously involved in rehabilitation programs if opportunities for creative expression are provided, which in turn should boost the programs’ potential to enhance reform and reduce re-offending. Also, it seems that art programs can improve the daily operations of the prison and promote a safer environment for both prisoners and staff. While the literature offers plenty of reasons to believe in the potential of prison art programs, their effectiveness has rarely been tested in empirical research (Gussak, 2006 and 2007; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004). Gussak (2006 and 2007), Mullen (1999), Merriam (1998), and Hawk, Bohna Jr., Riddell, and Stark (1993) are among the few published studies that evaluate art programs (each reporting favorable outcomes). Clearly, much more research needs to be done to judge art’s effectiveness as a tool for prisoner rehabilitation and institutional management.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lee Michael Johnson is an assistant professor of criminology at the University of West Georgia. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Iowa State University in 2001. His research interests are in juvenile delinquency, prevention, and intervention, as well as victimization and alternative corrections. His background includes work with behavior-disordered and delinquent youth in residential treatment, including creative and recreational activities. He has published on the topics of jail artwork, criminal justice system involvement and youth crime, victim blaming, and criminal victimization and depression. His teaching areas include juvenile delinquency, victimology, crime and social inequality, family violence, criminological theory, criminal justice, and social problems.

The photo project was funded by an Expense Grant from the Valparaiso University Committee on Creative Work and Research. All photographs were taken by Amy McFadden, B.A. Sociology & Art-Photography Valparaiso University. The author wishes to thank Chief Dave Lain for initiating the project, Sergeant Mike Krawczyk for getting him into and throughout the jail, and Drs. Daniel S. Murphy, Nathan W. Pino, Stephen C. Richards, Jeffrey Ian Ross, and Charles S. Suchar for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. He also extends his compliments to the artists for their fascinating work.