



## Identification and characterization of symbols emanating from the spontaneous artwork of survivors of childhood trauma



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### ABSTRACT

This study defines the visual symbols in the spontaneous artwork of 10 women who are survivors of childhood traumas involving loss or sexual abuse. The analysis was based on 379 artworks and a semi-structured, in-depth interview with each creator. Seven main visual symbols were identified using qualitative methodology and an art-based research approach. The symbols were characterized and interpreted according to a Jungian approach that uses amplification to process and expand upon the products of the unconscious. The symbols were found to tell the story of the trauma and perhaps even hint at the direction of its healing.

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The wellspring of creation and dreams that arises from the depth of the psyche<sup>1</sup> has engaged psychoanalysis from its outset to the present time. Symbols emerging in dreams and artistic creations are perceived as windows to the unconscious and are the subject of interest in psychoanalytic studies (Freud, 1959). Various psychoanalytic theories see symbols as objective representations of deep, latent, invisible contents with hidden meanings, even to the person dreaming or the creator (Schneider, 2010). Analyses of the significance of these symbols are especially important in trauma cases, especially childhood trauma, in which the conscious, verbal conceptualization of the experience is impaired (Hermen, 1994).

### Trauma

According to DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), trauma is defined as an event experienced by a person as life threatening or as a threat to one's own or another's physical wholeness and is an event that causes the individual to respond with great fear, helplessness and terror. The person feels helpless in the face of a greater power. Some victims deal with the trauma

by employing defense mechanisms such as denial, splitting, dissociation, somatization or amnesia. These mechanisms lessen the anxiety related to the traumatic memory. Some will develop PTSD in which invasive, repetitive, recurring memories of the frightening traumatic event are expressed (Bar-Sade, 2008). When the traumatic injury occurs in early childhood and continues over a long period, the post-traumatic-defensive reactions eventually become part of the personality structure (Herman, 1992). In such situations, people experience enormous difficulties integrating the traumatic-dissociative experience into their autobiographical memory sequence (Avrahami, 2006; Fivush & Nordenberg, 2013), which may also impede their ability to symbolize the traumatic contents that, as a result, remain outside the memory sequence (Maoz, 2006).

### Symbolization and Trauma

The ability to symbolize memories is of paramount importance during the process of coping with trauma. Information recorded by the senses during the symbolization procedure is processed, symbolized and undergoes long-term preservation as meaningful verbal, visual and somatic material (Bucci, 2007). Cassirer (1953) maintained that the human being is a symbolic animal and that knowing, speech and memory are symbolic structures. He believed that no content can be present in a person's consciousness unless it is symbolized. Symbols are the natural language of the psyche

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<sup>1</sup> The psyche, according to Jung (1981), is the totality of all psychic processes, conscious and unconscious. The psychic structure is layered and is based on the personal and collective unconscious.

(Jung, 1964) and exist on the individual level as well as in the collective unconscious, which contains symbols common to numerous people (Jung, 1933).

The ability to symbolize may regress in traumatic situations due to difficulties in processing the traumatic experience and symbolically containing the complex contents (Markman-Zinemanas, 2011). In cases of severe trauma, traumatic memories may be unconsciously articulated as sensory perceptions, affective states and behavioral expressions (Young, 1992). In time, and with certain forms of processing, the extensive use of symbolization can be seen in dreams and the artworks of those experiencing trauma, especially in cases of ongoing childhood trauma. Certain symbols have been found to characterize trauma victims (Kalsched, 2010; Spring, 2004). The manifestation of a symbol is thought to show that the person is ready to cope with the traumatic contents and bring them into consciousness (Lev-Weisel, 2005). There is evidence that the emergence of these symbols is related to traumatic memory processing and the departure from stagnation and paralysis towards recovery (Kalsched, 2010; Maoz, 2006). This use of symbols facilitates the expression of the traumatic experience, the gradual encounter with dissociative parts and the emotions accompanying them, and helps reconstruct the biographical sequence (Avrahami, 2006; Bonomi, 2003). Eventually, this process can help create an experience that integrates the split and disconnected parts of the victim's psyche (Greenberg & Van der Kolk, 1987; Thomson, Keehn, & Gumpel, 2009).

## Trauma, Artworks and Symbolization

Several works have examined the associations between artistic expressions and trauma (for example, Avrahami, 2006; Huss, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Alttman, 2012a,b; Lev-Weisel, 2005; Somer & Somer, 1997). A study of women victims of sexual trauma in adulthood showed a connection between artistic expression and symbolic language in this group of sexual assault victims as compared to the control group (Spring, 2004). The author concluded that a unique artistic language is present in victims of sexual trauma. The findings also suggested that there are commonalities between all the victims of the same kind of trauma, which appear very frequently in specific graphic indicators expressed in paintings in diverse variations. Crucially, this study highlighted the need for a better understanding of victims' specific traumas and the detection and diagnosis of hidden, dissociative parts of traumatic memories so as to facilitate treatment.

Although many trauma victims and sufferers of dissociation are creative people (Fuhrman, 1992), no study has examined the symbols appearing in spontaneous artworks produced by trauma victims. Most of the material in the literature in this area is based on case studies from the clinical field (Somer & Somer, 1997).

In an attempt to bridge this gap, the present study provides a content analysis and explores the characteristics of the symbols emerging in spontaneous artworks of childhood trauma victims. In so doing, it aims to better delineate which symbols are expressed in the spontaneous artworks of adult victims of childhood trauma, what characterizes these symbols in terms of the way they are expressed and what meaning can be ascribed to these symbols in the creator's world and in the world of the trauma.

## Methodology

### Participants

The 10 women between the ages of 24 and 60 who participated in the study voluntarily responded to a request on internet sites that deal with trauma. The post-recruited adult men and women who

had experienced trauma in their childhood (age 0–12 years) and who pursue the visual arts spontaneously as a meaningful activity to participate in the study. Only women responded. Of the 16 responders to the ad, six decided they were not ready to delve into the painful contents again, or were subject to mental instability that precluded the possibility of an interview. Half of the participants reported that they had experienced sexual trauma and half reported undergoing a trauma of loss in childhood. Six of the participating women were married; five were mothers to children of various ages. All worked at diverse professions, two were artists with creation as the focal point of their lives. The 379 artworks that were analyzed are only some of the participants' creations and were chosen by them to be part of the study.

### Tools

The definition of visual symbols in this study was based on two sources: a phenomenological analysis of the artworks and a semi-structured interview while observing the works. There were two groups of artworks: works created by participants who had been sexually abused and works created by participants who had experienced traumatic loss.

### Phenomenological analysis of the artworks

The phenomenological analysis of the artwork was the primary investigative tool used, thus placing this study within the emergent research movement of art-based research (Huss, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Alttman, 2012a,b). As mentioned, the objective of the analysis was to identify and define the symbols expressed in the artworks of early trauma victims engaged in visual art. The phenomenological analysis was based on the four stages of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). To strengthen the validity of the analysis, two judges (experienced art therapists) each separately classified the artworks of each participant into subgroups differentiated by painting style. Each judge formulated a style description for each subgroup using the "formal analysis page for two-dimensional works" as defined by the phenomenological analysis approach at the University of Haifa. Disagreements between the judges were discussed until agreement was reached. Then, by applying a major component of Consensual Qualitative Research (CRQ; Hill, 2012), the second author of this article served as the auditor for the final style description of each painting subgroup.

After the groups of paintings were defined, the open coding stage began, in which each judge separately defined the repetitive symbols in each group of paintings. Symbols were defined based on the Jungian approach as an image or a phenomenological occurrence containing significance beyond the object itself. In addition to symbolic knowledge from the world of the visual arts, dictionaries of symbols were used to define each symbol (Cooper, 1978; Vries, 2011). In the next stage, axial coding, the two judges went through the list of identified symbols together for each participant and defined the categories of characteristic, repetitive symbols. The artworks were presented to the auditor at the selective coding stage, who examined the works with respect to the categories of symbols defined by the two judges in the previous stages. Final definitions were assigned to the core categories after the selective coding, and definitions were constructed for each group of symbols identified during the stages of qualitative analysis. Later, the number of paintings in which the symbol was present for each participant was tabulated. The data were arranged in a table of frequencies. A frequency scale and a hierarchy of the symbols were determined according to the frequency of their appearance. One participant with only abstract works was not included in the figurative image count (images of trees, the body and death).

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