6.5.4 Pictures and art

The integration of pictures and art into healthcare and healing environments has been widely studied for its psychological, emotional, and physiological benefits. Since the 1980's researchers have steadily moved from anecdote ("patients like pretty pictures") to a robust, multidisciplinary literature tying art to measurable outcomes such as heart-rate variability, pain killer demand, mood, and even length of stay. Research indicates that visual art can reduce stress, alleviate pain, improve patient outcomes, and enhance overall well-being in clinical settings[1] and it's reasonable to assume that it would do the same in our healing environments.

6.5.4.1. Theoretical foundations behind art's effect

These frameworks are not mutually exclusive; together they predict physiological, psychological, and behavioural effects that researchers have since documented.

- **Biophilia hypothesis** As discussed previously under the water and plant sections, the biophilia hypothesis suggests that humans have an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. Synthetic nature, such as photographs and images of nature, have a similar effect to actual nature. This theory has influenced healthcare design, leading to the incorporation of nature-themed artwork, landscapes, and organic patterns in hospitals to promote relaxation and stress reduction[2].
- **Psychophysiological effects of art** Art can influence the autonomic nervous system. A study across three Scottish hospitals found colours that elicit high levels of pleasure with low levels of arousal are most likely to induce a state of calm, reducing cortisol levels and promoting parasympathetic activity, which helps in relaxation[3]. However, colours causing displeasure and high levels of arousal may provoke anxiety[4]. The patients involved frequently expressed a preference for landscape and nature scenes, consistent with the biophilia hypothesis[5].
- **Neuroaesthetics** show that viewing art engages dopaminergic reward circuits and modifies limbic structures involved in processing pain and emotion. This helps

[1] Ulrich, R. S., et al. (2008) "A review of the research literature on evidence-based healthcare design" *HERD, 1*(3), pp.61-125.
[2] Ulrich, R. S. (1991). "Effects of interior design on wellness" *Journal of Healthcare Design, 3*, 97-109.
[3] Lankston, L., Cusack, P., Fremantle, C., & Isles, C. (2010) "Visual art in hospitals: Case studies and review of the evidence" *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, 103*(12), pp.490-499.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

explain why patients often report feeling better when exposed to artwork. Studies using neuroimaging have concurred that viewing aesthetically pleasing art activates the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine and enhancing mood[6].

- **Positive-distraction theory** theorises that art captures involuntary attention, freeing cognitive resources and blunting the stress response triggered by illness[7].
- **Environmental psychology** Environmental psychology examines how physical surroundings affect human behaviour and well-being. In healthcare settings, art can create a sense of control, reduce anxiety, and improve patient satisfaction[8].

6.5.4.2. Psychological benefits of art

Art has long been recognized as a therapeutic tool, capable of evoking emotions and stimulating cognitive responses. Studies indicate that patients in hospitals or healthcare settings often experience heightened stress and anxiety, which can negatively impact recovery. However, the presence of art, particularly nature-based imagery, has been found to lower stress levels, reduce the need for pain medication, and improve overall patient satisfaction[9]. Some psychological effects of art have been discussed above so we'll now look at others.

- **Improved mental health** Beyond passive exposure to art, engaging in creative activities can be a powerful therapeutic tool. Art therapy allows individuals to express emotions, process trauma, and find meaning in their experiences. This approach is widely used in mental health treatment, rehabilitation centres, and even palliative care settings[10]. Creating art can serve as a form of emotional release, helping patients cope with their conditions and fostering a sense of empowerment. Art therapy has been used effectively in psychiatric units to help patients express emotions and reduce depressive symptoms[11]. Visual art in dementia care has been shown to improve mood and cognitive engagement[12]. It might be useful to occupy waiting children who have come into our environments for healing.

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[6] Kawabata, H., & Zeki, S. (2004) "Neural correlates of beauty" *Journal of Neurophysiology, 91*(4), p.1699-1705.
[7] Dickinson, C. (2023) "The Big Picture: How Artwork Positively Impacts the Healthcare Environment", Vizient, 9Feb2023 extracted from www.vizientinc.com/newsroom/blogs/2023/the-big-picture-how-artwork-positively-impacts-the-healthcare-environment
[8] Nanda, U., Eisen, S., & Zadeh, R. S. (2011) "Effect of visual art on patient outcomes in hospitals" *HERD, 4*(3), pp.50-69
[9] Healing Photo Art (2025) "Scientific Evidence", Healing Photo Art, Extracted 28/5/25 from https://healingphotoart.org/about-us/scientific-evidence/
[10] Poppe, K. (2024) "How Art Can Heal", Kimberly Poppe: Art & Design, extracted 28/5/25 from https://kimberlypoppe.com/photography-art-and-design-articles/how-art-can-heal
[11] Malchiodi, C. A. (2012) *Handbook of Art Therapy,* Guilford Press
[12] Eekelaar, C., Camic, P. M., & Springham, N. (2012) "Art galleries, episodic memory, and verbal fluency in dementia" *Arts &*

- **Benefits for healthcare staff** Healthcare workers in environments with art report lower stress levels and higher job satisfaction[13]. Another study found that staff in well-designed, art-rich environments experienced less burnout[14]. I hope these issues don't apply to our spiritual healers!

6.5.4.3. Physiological benefits of art

- **Pain and anxiety reduction** Several studies have demonstrated that exposure to art can reduce perceived pain and anxiety in patients. A study found that patients exposed to nature-themed murals in bronchoscopy rooms reported lower pain levels compared to those in standard rooms[15]. Other research showed that art interventions in hospitals led to decreased anxiety and reduced need for pain killer medication[16].

- **Faster recovery times** Ulrich's (1984) landmark study found that surgical patients with views of nature had shorter postoperative stays and required fewer painkillers than those with views of a brick wall[17]. A review by Huisman et al confirmed that art in hospitals, which creates a visual distraction, contributes to shorter recovery times and improved patient satisfaction[18].

6.5.4.4. Types of art most effective in healing environments

- **Nature imagery** Nature-themed art is particularly effective in creating a calming atmosphere. Landscapes, water scenes, and greenery are consistently associated with stress reduction[19]. Research suggests that patients

Health, 4(3), pp.199-209.

[13] Nanda, U., et al. (2015) "Art and post-traumatic stress symptoms among veterans" *Arts & Health, 7*(2), pp.142-159.

[14] Maben, J., et al. (2016) "Exploring the relationship between workspace and staff well-being." *Health Environments Research & Design Journal, 9*(3), pp.16-25.

[15] Diette, G. B., Lechtzin, N., Haponik, E., Devrotes, A., & Rubin, H. R. (2003) "Distraction therapy with nature sights and sounds reduces pain during flexible bronchoscopy" *Chest, 123*(3), pp.941-948.

[16] Staricoff, R. L. (2004) *Arts in health: A review of the medical literature*, Arts Council England.

[17] Ulrich, R. S. (1984) "View through a window may influence recovery from surgery" *Science, 224*(4647), pp.420-421.

[18] Huisman, E. R. C. M., Morales, E., van Hoof, J., & Kort, H. S. M. (2012) "Healing environment: A review of the impact of physical environmental factors on users" *Building and Environment, 58*, pp.70-80.

[19] Ulrich, R. S. (1991), as above.

[20] New Zealand image by Kerstin Wießer-Buchholz from Pixabay.

prefer images of landscapes, animals, and serene environments over abstract art[21]. However, "nature" need not mean generic stock photos. Patients report stronger emotional uplift when art depicts familiar regional landscapes or culturally resonant motifs, underscoring the value of local commissions. Viewing nature scenes can evoke positive associations, providing a mental escape from the sterile hospital environment and fostering a sense of tranquillity. This effect is especially beneficial for individuals with cognitive impairments, as familiar natural scenes can help ground them in reality and reduce feelings of confusion or distress[22].

- **Abstract vs. representational art** While preferences vary, representational art (especially nature scenes) tends to have more universal calming effects[23]. Abstract art can be beneficial but may require careful selection to avoid confusion or distress in vulnerable patients. Intense high-contrast abstracts may raise arousal rather than soothe.

- **Patient-Created Art** Allowing patients or clients to contribute to art installations fosters a sense of agency and community[24]. You would need to be careful that the content was appropriate. Children respond well to having their art displayed.

6.5.4.5. Practical applications in healing environments

As healthcare facilities continue to evolve, the integration of art into their design is becoming more intentional. For example, the Cleveland Clinic, through its art program, integrated over 6,000 artworks into its facilities. Surveys revealed that 82% of patients reported reduced stress due to the art[25]. Their collection includes abstract pieces, nature photography, and culturally diverse works to cater to varied patient backgrounds.

Architects and designers are increasingly recognizing the importance of aesthetics in patient recovery, leading to the incorporation of art installations, murals, and interactive exhibits in hospitals and clinics.[26] This trend reflects a growing understanding of the holistic nature of healing, where emotional and psychological well-being are considered alongside physical health.

- **Art selection guidelines**
  - Avoid distressing or ambiguous imagery (e.g. aggressive or chaotic abstract art).

[21] Healing Photo Art (2025), as above.
[22] Healing Photo Art (2025), as above
[23] Nanda, U., Eisen, S., & Zadeh, R. S. (2011), as above.
[24] Fraser, C., & al. (2015) "Patient-created art in hospitals" *Journal of Applied Arts & Health,* 6(2), pp.123-135.
[25] Cleveland Clinic. (2020) "*The role of art in healing: Patient survey results*" https://my.clevelandclinic.org .
[26] Cormack, E. (2012) "Contemporary art in healing environments" 26 Jun 2012, Architecture,Au, Extracted from https://architectureau.com/articles/contemporary-art-in-healing-environments/ .

- Prioritize soothing colours (blues, greens) and harmonious compositions.
- Incorporate interactive or changeable art to engage patients over time.

- **Digital and virtual art** COVID-19 restrictions accelerated interest in screen-based solutions.
  - Virtual reality (VR) nature experiences have been used in paediatric and palliative care to reduce pain and anxiety[27]. A 2025 prospective study delivering 10-minute virtual-reality (VR) "museum tours" to hospitalized adults reported that 97.5 % found the experience positive and 85 % would recommend it, with statistically significant drops in distress and loneliness[28]. While VR lacks the permanence of wall-mounted art, its portability allows individualized curation—an emerging priority as hospitals treat increasingly diverse populations.
  - Digital art installations allow dynamic, customizable environments. Allowing patients to choose or contribute to the artwork in their surroundings can foster a greater sense of control and comfort.

6.5.4.6. Challenges and considerations

- **Cultural differences** in art preferences must be considered[29]. Incorporating culturally relevant and personalized art into healing environments can enhance the therapeutic impact. Indigenous art, for example, has been used in healthcare settings to create a sense of belonging and representation for Indigenous patients[30]. However what one culture finds pleasing may have a different effect on another.

Gond art (India)[31]

- **Budget constraints** may limit high-quality art installations. Commissioning original artwork entails capital outlay. For low-resource settings, high-quality reproductions or community mural projects can deliver psychological benefits at fractional cost while fostering local engagement.

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[27] Mosadeghi, S., et al. (2016) "Virtual reality for pain management in hospitalized patients" *Journal of Medical Systems, 40*(4), pp.1-6.

[28] McDaniel S, Pines R, He EM, Collins F, Arshad F, Menendez M, Prabhu VG, Caruso TJ. (2025) "Virtual Reality Therapeutic Art for Adult Hospitalized Patients and Caregivers: A Mixed-Methods Project", J Patient Exp. 2025 Mar 25;12:23743735251330467. Extracted from https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11938894/ .

[29] Nanda, U., Eisen, S., & Zadeh, R. S. (2011), as above.

[30] Queen's University (2022) "The healing power of art: Indigenous artists bring to life Indigenous healthcare education resource", Queen's University Health Sciences, Extracted 28/5/25 from https://healthsci.queensu.ca/stories/feature/healing-power-art-indigenous-artists-bring-life-indigenous-healthcare-education

[31] Sumita Roy Dutta, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0> , via Wikimedia Commons

- **Maintenance and hygiene** concerns in clinical settings.

6.5.4.7. Learning for spiritual healers

The evidence supports the inclusion of art in healing environments. From reducing pain and anxiety to improving recovery times and staff well-being, art serves as a non-invasive, cost-effective intervention in healthcare design. Art fosters emotional resilience, reduces stress, and enhances overall well-being. The right art or photo will also add to your healing environment.

However, appreciation of art can be highly subjective. If putting art into your healing environment, consider something nature-based which seems to be the most universally acceptable. You could also consider having art supplies available for waiting clients to experiment with, especially for children who might get bored easily otherwise.

