

PATTERNS OF THE MIND

Fighting dementia with the Arts

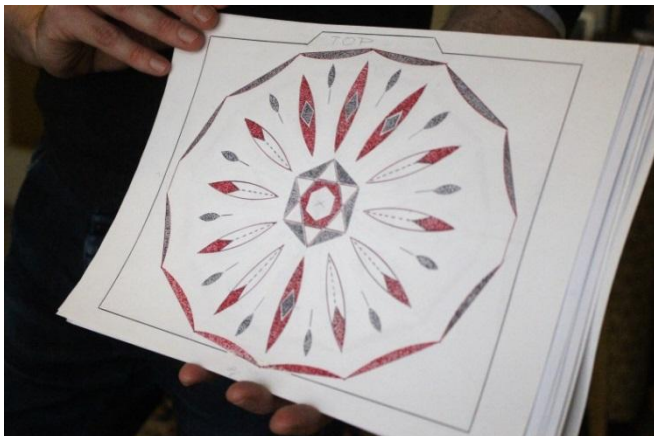
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Currently in the UK around 850,000 people suffer from dementia, a broad term for symptoms caused by degenerative brain diseases such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's.

In light of this epidemic, the Ben Uri Gallery has dedicated much of its wellbeing work to supporting art therapy workshops for dementia patients. It is through this initiative that we met Hannah & Jacob (names were changed for anonymity), a couple living in North London.

Jacob is 92 years old; he worked as a civil engineer, designing bridges and state projects all over the UK and many countries around the world, including Kenya, Nigeria and Australia.

His wife Hannah has been a carer for most of her life and still meets with fellow carers on a weekly basis.



Twenty years ago Jacob started showing signs of dementia, his short term memory was severely diminishing. Despite these harrowing circumstances Jacob and Hannah have managed to maintain a good life for themselves; when both of them are home, Hannah's expertise allows her to provide Jacob with any form of support he might need. Jacob attends a care centre four days a week whilst Hannah works with a group of carers.

As Jacob puts it, he's been drawing these designs for "as long as [he] can remember", the similarities between the patterns and his professional past are evident

His work always revolves around a central geometrical figure, generally the Star of David. He systematically uses an A4 landscape format and red, blue and black biro pens.

Nevertheless, every piece is unique.

This regular creative task allows Jacob to focus on one activity for several hours at a time, something which normally proves very difficult for someone suffering from severe short term memory loss. Hannah tells us:

"It has been amazing, because it keeps him occupied quite a lot."

Jacob's case is far from isolated, stories like his are becoming more and more frequent.

Integrating the Arts to the medical field is slowly but surely becoming common practice. Even though the idea of art therapy is only 70 years old and its application even more recent, music and aesthetics have long been considered to be a source of joy, knowledge and wellbeing.

Even in 1860, Florence Nightingale wrote in her *Notes on Nursing*:

"The effect in sickness of beautiful objects, of variety of objects, and especially of brilliancy of colours is hardly at all appreciated, [...] People say the effect is only on the mind. The effect is on the body too."

Observing, experiencing and practising the arts have proven to be a cathartic and even healing process for many people including renowned artists, both for physical and psychological ailments.

Namely, Frida Kahlo found solace in painting after a horrific tram accident which left her nearly paralysed from the waist down.



The Two Fridas, 1939 - Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, Mexico

In the last few decades research on the benefits of art therapy has steadily increased. Unfortunately, so has the number of neurodegenerative disease diagnoses amongst the elderly. People are living longer but the growing amount of dementia patients is a distressing sign of a worsening quality of life past 65 years old.

For the last eight years, the Ben Uri Gallery has conducted its own research through various projects and art therapy workshops. It is now in phase II of *PROVACAT* ([link to website](#)), a study seeking to measure the impact of practising and viewing art on cognitive decline and wellbeing. Over six weeks, two groups of four participants, with an average age of 93, attended one hour creative sessions and seminars. Participant wellbeing was measured immediately following each session using the UCL Museum Wellbeing Measures Toolkit.

Another ongoing project is *Picturing Memories* ([link to website and JR](#)), a programme supporting trainee art therapists working in various London care centres with groups of people suffering from dementia. Using works from Ben Uri's collection, they promote discussions and encourage artistic production.

Knowledge on neurodegenerative diseases, their cause and how to fight them, remains limited; researchers are far from a cure and are currently working on ways to slow them down.

This makes Jacob's case even more relevant. Although he often struggles to remember what has been said a minute ago, he knows who his wife is, recognises his designs and always remembers to take his drawing supplies bag when they leave the house. His sense of humour is also intact; when asked about his creative process, his answer is always the same:

"I've got a set square which gives me a 30, 60 and 90 degree angle, that's all I need. [...] As long as I can nick a sheet of paper on which I can do the drawing, I don't give a damn!"

He talks of the projects he has designed and the trips he has taken; all the while, Hannah provides useful explanatory details of when they travelled together.

Hannah's experience as a carer has given her invaluable insight in how to support her husband. Despite having worked with many different people, each with specific needs, she has rarely witnessed them enjoy or practise the Arts in the same way Jacob does. She is in no doubt that her husband's wellbeing benefits from his artmaking process:

"Sometimes he wakes up in the night and says - Oh I've got a design, I must do it."

In her spare time, Hannah enjoys listening to and occasionally composing music. Art and culture have always held an important place in their lives and it was only natural for that to continue even after Jacob's diagnosis. Neither of them consciously planned for the design-making to act as a therapeutic process, but it is undeniable that it has had a tangible positive impact on their life together.

Jacob is still active in the local community

and one of his designs is built into the concrete of his day centre. Hannah tells us his designs were even considered for a stained glass window in their synagogue.

Drawing these patterns has not only allowed Jacob to preserve his designing skills, it has also slowed down the dementia through a combination of his cultural heritage and love of aesthetics:

“You’ve noticed the main detail of most of those designs is the Mogein David in the centre. That is one of the best design details I can think of, that I’ve done.”

In the race against time that dementia poses, we must think outside the box. Much of the brain remains a mystery to even the most knowledgeable neuroscientists, yet stories like Jacob and Hannah’s suggest that art may help reduce cognitive decline.

Every person is unique and circumstances vary, but sometimes the simplest acts of leisure, such as drawing or painting can have incredible results. There is no need to be a confirmed artist, creative expression is a personal journey and as Adrian Hill, considered to be a founder of art therapy in the UK, once said:

“To be happily occupied is at all times a gift from the gods.”

The Ben Uri Gallery is open 7 days a week and offers free access to all. To learn more about its range of Wellbeing projects, talks and workshops, call 020 7604 3991, or visit www.benuri.org.uk.

