

# **ART AS THERAPY**

*By*  
**JYOTI SAHI**

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Jyoti Sahi directs the Indian School of Art for Peace, in a small village away from the busy city of Bangalore. His art is directed towards a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

At his suggestion exhibition of paintings done by an inmate of Asha Niketan, a home for mentally handicapped, was arranged at the Indian Institute of World Culture. During its course a discussion meeting was arranged at which Jyoti Sahi read this unusual but thoughtful paper, which is now printed here.

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## ART AS THERAPY

By Jyoti Sahi

(A talk given by Jyoti Sahi at the Indian Institute of World Culture on June 30th 1988 on the occasion of an exhibition of paintings done by John St. Martins of Asha Niketan)

Ananda Coomaraswamy is supposed to have said:—

“The artist is not a special sort of person, but rather every person is a special sort of artist”. Inspired by this understanding of art, we have tried to discover and recover those often unrecognized sources of creativity which is hidden in our community, and are needed as resources for the creative growth of all of us. We do not see the artist just as an individualist, a person who in a selfish way does his or her own work, but rather as a gift to the whole community, to be a sign, and to help everyone grow. Since the time when we first came to Bangalore in 1970, we have been associated with Asha Niketan. It has not just been a place which we have felt the need to give to, but rather a place which we have wanted to learn from and grow with. The ideas of Jean Vanier concerning community and growth have been very important to us. As a small community of artists and educators we have felt immensely enriched by our association with Asha Niketan.

Let one begin by saying a few words about what we are doing. We live in a village about 25 km. out of Bangalore, and my wife runs a small experimental school for village children. I myself am a professional artist, concerned with the relation of art to the society as a whole. In 1983 I started with a few friends a small art school which we have called “The Indian school of Art for Peace”, or “INSCAPE” for short. Already in 1985 we held an exhibition in the Indian Institute of World Culture concerning images of Earth Caring, which we did in association with the Religious Department of the United Theological College.

Soon after we began our art school we were invited by Asha Niketan to participate in a kind of retreat and workshop of the four Asha Niketans, which was held at Sri-rangapatnam in 1983. At this workshop there was a small exhibition of the paintings done by different mentally handicapped people in the various homes of Asha Niketan.

This exhibition was brought together through the initiative of young English artist called Yolanda. The story of Yolanda is itself interesting. As a child she was thought to be mentally handicapped and was sent to a school for mentally handicapped children. She was in fact severely distoxic, which meant that she found it very difficult to read and write. In the school she attended there was a very creative art department, and there she discovered that she had a talent in art. Because this in fact seemed to be the only field in which she could naturally excel, she put all her energy into developing this talent of hers. The result was that she was accepted into one of the best art colleges in London, and later won a scholarship to the Royal Academy. Now she is one of the promising young artists in London— and in fact has been given a further post graduate scholarship to study Art Therapy in America. She has been very much involved in the homes for the mentally handicapped founded by Jean Vanier, because she feels a very close bond with those who are called “mentally handicapped”, seeing that she herself was classified in that way for many years.

R. D. Laing speaks of the “Politics of Experience”. What we call creative and useful to society is determined by the society itself. In a way it is the society which creates the category “mentally handicapped” by marginalizing those who do not fit in with the main thought processes on which the whole community is based, and which are considered normative. As

you know, it is not at all uncommon for artists to be called either mentally disturbed, or mentally handicapped. Tagore himself tells us that he was thought to be stupid and unteachable as a child. People thought the same of Krishnamurthy before he was “discovered” by Annie Besant. It was this question which inspired the philosopher Rudolph Steiner to start teaching a mentally handicapped youth in Vienna, which led him finally to his theories on education.

The mind is a very mysterious entity. Society—at least modern technological society — puts a high premium on words and discursive logical thinking. But the part of the mind which is concerned with this aspect of knowing is on a fraction of the whole mind. What about the analogical imagination? Is that not also important? Today we are looking at the paintings of a so called mentally handicapped person. I can honestly say that we as a group of artists have learnt a great deal from the paintings of John, not concerning how we should not paint, or what is wrong with his paintings, but rather how we should paint, and how we should see the world in which we live. Many very intelligent people with very important positions in the society might, if given a piece of paper and some colour, find themselves quite mentally handicapped in comparison to John.

I think this has been one of the basic insights of Jean Vanier. Too often we look on the mentally handicapped as objects for our concern, our social conscience, our pity. Unwittingly, the very attitude with which we come to the mentally handicapped further marginalizes them. We come to the mentally handicapped as somehow not totally human they are supposed to have something vital missing. I would like to invite you to look at these pictures from a completely different angle — it is we who have something missing, it is we who have something to learn.

When I was putting up this exhibition I kept on asking myself. What is this exhibition meant to show? It is meant to show that John over a period of say six years from the time when he was first encouraged to hold a brush to this day when he is quite expert in handling his materials, has been steadily developing. Sure, it cannot be denied that in his control over a medium John has learnt much. There is a strength and confidence in his handling of colour and form which is in advance of his earlier more hesitant attempts. Let us not forget that when John started to paint he found it very difficult even to hold a brush — now he turns out a picture a day! But is that all we mean by development?

If you look at the first three pictures in this exhibition which were done soon after Anjali D’Souza started regular painting sessions with John in 1985, you will feel a kind of fluidity — almost wistfulness, as if John is a little hesitant — he is surprised by the forces of form and colour which are welling up in his own heart. It is almost as though he is being swept along by an energy which lies beyond his control. The Chinese might call this force Yi—the energy which springs from the very origin of the cosmos, and which the artist merely becomes possessed by. Some would call it an accident of nature — but are not all of us accidents of nature? I think nobody was more surprised by his own talent than John.

John is a very humble person — would that all our leading lights in the art world had his humility! And this humility is not affected in anyway, and is basic to his art when he sees something; he sees it for the first time with surprise and wonder, like a child. To say that John is profoundly childlike is not to look down on him in anyway, but to discover our own insufficiency, our own complication, and lack of creativity. The first thing I would like to say about these paintings is that they are filled with a wonderful playfulness. It is this playfulness which is the key to his art.

But let me return again to the difficult question: In what way has John progressed over these years? In one sense I really feel that there has been no progression whatsoever. The same creative force which we intuit in his earliest pictures is there in his latest ones. It is the same John. He has seen and felt delighted in different things. He has discovered trees, the garden, birds, friends, houses. He has looked at everything with a fresh eye. He has played a lot with colour. He has enjoyed himself. In many ways he is a very happy person. He is happy that you like his pictures — he really appreciates your interest. That, I am convinced, is the essence of his art — he has painted these pictures for you as much as for himself. He finds it very difficult to talk so these are his words. These pictures come bubbling out of John — they are his way of communicating. They are his talking. John is very happy to go round with you to show you every one of his pictures. It really means a lot to him that you have come to see his pictures but he does not care a damn for the pictures in themselves. If you take down a picture and screw it up, I will be upset, but he will not be. Once he has made a picture it just does not any longer mean anything to him, except in so far as you respond to the picture™ His delight is in you, and not in the picture. The picture is his link with you.

But that does not mean that he is not interested in painting. There was a time, I remember, when Anjali was really worried. She knew that John waited impatiently for her visits. If she even arrived half an hour late he got very upset. He would be standing there by the gate, (I will return to this image later), waiting for her to come. Was he becoming too dependent on her? What would happen when she left ? Would he stop painting?

It was a great relief to her when after several months of absence, Anjali came back to find that John was still painting. Now he paints everyday. It has become part of his life. John now has got infused with being an artist. It is now a dimension of his identity. Everyone in the community knows him as the artist. It is his way of being in the community. It is something he can give. Actually being human is very closely connected with being able to give something to the community, which the community recognizes and appreciates. But still, I would like to stress that John is not interested in the picture as a product, but rather in painting as a process of being John.

Here we come to something really very important. As I said, perhaps looking at the pictures in themselves, we do not clearly see how John has grown over these years. But I think it would be true to say that John has grown into the community through these pictures, he has begun to communicate to us, and he knows that this is the main way in which he can communicate with others. Through these pictures he has found a voice, and he, as a person, is certainly growing through being an artist.

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But still, I am not quite satisfied. As a professional artist, a person who looks at a lot at pictures, and tries to understand what one might call the pictorial language, I want to look deeper at what John is saying — What is he communicating ? Is there any growth, any development in what he is trying to say? Let us take the analogy of ordinary conversation. We all know that words are an important means for communication. Often words themselves do not carry the real meaning, but rather the whole context in which the words are spoken, and the process of sharing through verbal signs which we call language. John cannot speak in that

way. That is precisely why we call him “handicapped”. It is not that he is dumb or deaf— he has a very good ear and is very sensitive to music. There is nothing physically wrong with him. For his age he has very good health. How many of us, much younger than him, can stand on our heads like he can? His inability to speak has a deeper cause. But let us not forget that what he lacks in the ability to handle verbal signs, or that process which we call spoken language, he makes up for it by a tremendous power over visible signs, a power which many of us present here would not be able to match. But how can we listen to his mode of speaking to us?

That after all is important if communication is to take place. And communication is definitely what John is interested in. When you go round looking at these pictures, what do you see? Most people in our modern society are visually illiterate. They just do not know what to look at — because the language of images has to be learnt, like any other language. It has its grammar and syntax, without which it simply remains meaningless. The purpose of this exhibition, I feel, is not just to say “Oh good heavens, a mentally handicapped person can paint! He is not so stupid after all!”, but much more. It is to try and listen to what John has to say. This, I feel, is a unique opportunity to enter into the mind and heart of a so-called mentally handicapped person — a person, who feels deeply, sees profoundly, thinks analogically, but has seldom, for all these years, been able to communicate his deepest insights to other members of the community because he has not had a language with which to share his mind with others. Let us be frank, there is most probably nothing wrong with John’s mind in itself. But the trouble lies in the way in which it functions, which is not recognized, or at least is not normative for our society, therefore people like John get marginalized. Our way of thinking, the conventions of communication in modern society are getting so specialized in one particular direction, that more and more people are seen as deviating from that direction, and are being classified mentally handicapped leading to their rejection by the society. Finally speaking, it is a fact that we are discovering more and more mentally handicapped people as our schooling system, and beyond that our whole social system, is becoming more more specialized in one particular direction, which is after all only one way in which the mind can function. So what are we going to do about alternative direction mental growth? If we carry on the schools which we are developing, the way they are, then we are definitely going to get more and more mentally handicapped people who do not think in that way. Let us not forget that if society is to be whole, it must recognize other ways of thinking. What John is showing to us is necessary for the therapy not only of John, but of the society in which we live. In this respect he is the doctor and we are the patients!

Let us return then to what I have called the visual language. How can we read these pictures? The basic process of the therapy which we have been exploring is presented in the first 5 pictures exhibited here. These pictures are themselves a kind of dialogue they are not just a monologue, coming out of John. Now we were clear ourselves what we were trying to do with him. We realized that John was interested in reaching out, in communicating. He had a problem (it was ours also) of finding a visual language through which that communication could take place. This we might call the representative element in the picture. When somebody paints a picture, we ask “What does it represent”? There are those who will disagree with the question right from the outset. What does it matter what is represented? Much of modern art has become aggressively non-representational. Take for example the first picture. John said it represented Ulsoor Lake; the members of Asha Niketan had gone to the lake for a picnic. After coming back John painted the picture. It represented what he saw. Picture 3 is more mysterious. John said it represented a temple, but where is the temple, you may ask? What Anjali found was that John represented forms, in terms of rather horizontal or

vertical lines which seem to flow on beyond the bounds of the paper. She began to use a way of entering into the visual medium developed by Rudolph Steiner, called “form drawing” which is basic to his whole understanding of art therapy. For him, symmetry and wholeness is the foundation for the image. An image is created out of a discovery of the symmetry or wholeness of an entity — and this is related deeply to our realization of our own body. We begin with our own body. So Anjali began with some simple body gestures or movements, which makes a person aware of the language of the body. This is linked in a way to Steiner’s stress on Eurythmy. It was noted that John not only found speaking difficult but also certain physical movements.

Again let me stress there is nothing wrong with the body of John — he is absolutely normal. But there was a way in which his movements seemed to be inhibited. Had he found the rhythm and symmetry of his body? So the early exercises were similar to what one might call a very basic dance therapy or yoga. This discovery of movement and symmetry in the body led to the first mandala picture. In structure this painting was radically different from anything John had painted before. Here form became contained and was not just flowing and limitless. This led to the first discovery by John of the growing principle of a tree. I would like you to notice the difference between the tree image which arose out of the body exercises of symmetry and movement compared to the tree images, say in the Ulsoor lake picture earlier. Actually, throughout John’s paintings we found two types of trees. One is a characteristic representation of a tree which resembles a kind of telegraph pole. The other tree image arising out of what Herbert Read might term “feeling from within”— the process of being oneself a tree. This process you will discover in his garden and mango grove series of pictures.

So very clearly this was not just “free expression”. In a way John was introduced to the enclosed form by Anjali, and encouraged to make curves, as opposed to his natural tendency to work only with verticals and horizontals. The tension between enclosure and free flowing, uncontained pattern making is the basic dialectic to be noted in the development of John’s pictures. John by playing with this tension does not become a better artist, let us be quite clear about this. By stressing John’s need to find an enclosing womb like form, we are not suggesting that this leads to better form. But it does lead, I would suggest, to a holistic vision, or recognition of physical environment, which in turn leads to clearer representation. If you look at the process of John’s paintings you will find an increasing clarity in the use of representational form. In one of the last pictures you will see an aero plane. That would have been quite impossible 3 years ago. It was with great effort that John began to paint people. Here again, the initiative did not come from him. At least, there was a hint which occurred in the last of the mango garden series. While sitting in the mango grove actually, looking at the trees, and trying to feel his way into their form, he was very much disturbed and annoyed by some children who were playing in the branches. Notice these children who are included in the picture as kind of black creatures. Compare them with his later crows in the bird series.

John is a very warm hearted person who makes attachments with people. One of the problems of Asha Niketan is that people come and go and this has often deeply wounded John in a way that he has not been able to talk about. What does John feel about people? If we look carefully at his people series, I think we have a lot to learn. Notice, first of all the connection between his early portraits and the mandala right at the beginning. The painting about the two assistants who left the community rather abruptly has a lot to say about what John felt about people with whom he had made a close personal bond.

Finally, speaking the House takes on a special significance. It is something permanent

and contained— it does not fly away. It is in this connection that I would like to draw your attention to the importance of the gate. If you go to Asha Niketan you will see how visually important the gate is. There are often figures in John's paintings standing near the gate, generally on the other side of the gate from the observer looking over the gate. John seems to have a very strong visual memory for certain places, especially if these are related to emotive events. He has an uncanny way of recording things that have happened, like the figure of a person who climbed a tree in the garden of Asha Niketan, or the community sitting under the trees, where they have their afternoon tea which is an important social event. There is often a close connection between something significant that has happened in the community. There is a painting celebrating a birthday in the community when a card is often made and signed by all. If you look at the picture with writing on it, you will notice that "Happy" is the basis for this remarkable pattern of letters, which seem to dance below a rainbow — another important symbol of L' arche which commemorates the covenant God made with Noah by placing the rainbow in the sky after the flood. This picture of John was painted after a birthday party in the community.

This leads us to another interesting observation. Francis liked this picture so much that he wanted John to make another one for him — but in vain. John does not repeat things if he does not want to, though on other occasions he will make long repetitive series of pictures when he feels strongly drawn to an image, like his long bird series, or house series. There is an amusing story of a visitor to Asha Niketan who wanted John to paint him a picture of a stream. John was shown many photographs of streams, and it was impressed upon him that a stream picture was being commissioned. He always smiled and agreed to do a painting for the person whom he was genuinely fond of and anxious to please. But no matter how much he tried — while he was doing his bird series only pictures of birds came out — and while he was doing his house series, only houses were forthcoming. So far there has been no stream series.

This leads me to the last observation which I would like to make. This concerns the nature of what might be called "play therapy". We might think of therapy as coming from outside — as something given by the therapist. But actually therapy could be defined as an unfolding — a discovery of a process which is going on all the time inside each person.

By being playful, images themselves become agents of growth and transformation. We do not know what trees, flowers, birds, houses mean to John — how they function, so to say, in the semantics of language which he is using. It would be very dangerous to define what the House in John's paintings means. Obviously the image of the house means many things to John — Not just one thing. And so this house symbol must be situated in the total syntax of John's experience as expressed by his art. But that does not mean that those elements are not part of a visual language. There is a healing and growing process which is going on all the time as John discovers himself as an artist, and it is imperative that we who become co-sharers in this process of communication develop a deep respect for the grammar of his language, and do not try to impose our rules on his play.