

The Artist's Mind

George Hagman

[Routledge Publications, 2010 pp.179]

Gerald J. Gargiulo, PhD

The world is created anew by each human being

DWWinnicott

There is, as we all know, a long history of psychoanalytic exploration of artists and their productions. Historically analysts, when speaking about art, focused on the dynamics of repression, displacement and over-determination. What was repressed in the psyche found expression through art. Such an approach, of necessity, has a limited perspective, i.e., the individual artist's mind and/or his/her specific work (Kuhns, 1983). The work of Donald Winnicott (1971) enabled analysts to approach art through a

more complex study of an individual psyche and its developmental environment. Through such concepts as the mirroring function and the caretaking mother, the ever-present need to create the found world, transitional space and transitional phenomena, which is the seedbed of art, religion, philosophy and psychoanalysis, Winnicott provided analysts with a wider relational canvas to interpret art and the artist. With such models the psychoanalyst looks at art beyond, but obviously not excluding, the primarily intrapsychic functions of the individual. Heinze Kohut, building on the many theoreticians that went before him, further refined and expanded Winnicott's understanding of the mirror function of the mother/child relationship and enabled us to understand its pervasive presence throughout life via his expansive concept of the self-object. The self-object model is obviously not limited to early mother experiences but is operative throughout an individual's life, in various situations. Using Kohut's insights as a primary paradigm, Hagman proposes in *The Artist's Mind* that *Successful art involves the artist's creation of an opportunity for self-object experience...* (with all the joy of unity of the idealized and grandiose self-object as well as the dejection at its loss). He defines *self-object* by noting that *...throughout life people seek out proximity to and engagement with idealized others. These relationships function psychologically to give form,*

vitality and meaning to subjective life. Self-psychologists use the term selfobject experience for this psychological state and for the object, which provides the opportunity for the experience (p.29). Hagman situates his study by appreciating the cultural, historical, physiological as well as, obviously, the psychological factors that are formative of the artist and his/her works. Obviously an ambitious goal. Hagmen is aware of this and offers his speculations for reflection and consideration only; his study of the eight artists is consequently more evocative than extensive.

His selections go from Edgar Degas to the seemingly obvious works of Andy Warhol. Hagmen introduces his readers to each artist by giving a brief summary of their cultural and familial lives; he shows how their psychological predisposition, primarily in terms of their early object relational experiences and their self-object quests, contributed to their work.

As with any work of this kind the questions that arise relate to why the author selected these particular artists; why some works were chosen and not others? What was the artists' significance in their own time and for subsequent artistic developments? Hagman tells us that *I have selected artists whose psychological lives and artistic careers seem clearly intertwined* and he states that he is not *claiming any internal connection between the lives of any of these artists that might explain modernism (p.34).*

The first four artists are Edgar Degas, Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse and Marcel Duchamp, European artists, all. The author relates their influence on the art world and in the case of Duchamp, who migrated to America, his influence on some of its artists. Although I think the biographical outlines of these artists could have been further developed and more carefully edited, the text introduces the reader not solely to their contributions but primarily to the formative psychological roots of their creativity, as Hagman conceptualizes them. For anyone not familiar with these men, this first section of the book should be rewarding. Although Hagman's goal is to deepen the reader's understanding of these artists, his approach is modest...*In the end all that the analyst can offer is an interesting psychological perspective on the artist that may enhance the reader's experience of the artwork (p.35).*

The second series of artists are all American and, in this reviewer's opinion, this section will be the more rewarding study. The artists in this section are Joseph Cornell, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol. In each of these chapters the author shows an impressive knowledge of his subject matter. He discusses each of these men not only with significant biographical, social and psychological facts, but also with an enthusiasm that I personally felt was absent in his studies of the European

artists. The reader feels as if he has met the reclusive Cornell and his idiosyncratic and enticing boxes; the enormously creative and flamboyant Wright – a true genius - in his dialogue with nature; the popular and iconoclastic Pollock with his painting in air and its canvas residues, along with his drinking which led to his death on an East Hampton road and, finally, Andy Warhol who, as Hagman understands him, put the final touches on any preceding artistic expectations, even those of abstract expressionism, in order to wake up the viewing public to the everyday art they lived with as well as to its obvious banality. His discussion of these artists is informative and interesting, particularly that of Andy Warhol. With many of these artists Hagman includes little known, yet pertinent biographical information, e.g., that Warhol's mother lived, for many years, in the basement of his East side townhouse.

I was puzzled, however, that Hagman employed, when analyzing Warhol's homosexual life choice and art, the traditional psychoanalytic term *perversion*. He alternates between describing Warhol's psychological dynamics and what Hagman labels Warhol's *perverse aesthetic*. Although the author is not judgmental in any way whatsoever, he refers to the standard developmental dynamics implied by the use of the term *perversion*. Given the historical use of this term in psychoanalytic writings and its connotative

meanings as a punitive assessment about a homosexual life choice, I found its use unfortunate and misleading. Rather than being simply descriptive, the use of the term *perverse* suggests a reductionistic diagnostic approach.

Notwithstanding this criticism anyone interested in understanding a significant aspect of 20th century American art would gain by reading these chapters. They bring together pertinent psychoanalytic insight, biographical information and historical perspective in an enjoyable and informative way. Hagman, as a writer, conveys his observations in a relaxed, communicative manner. His writing is clear and unpretentious – that is a welcomed gift. I believe that the text would have achieved more complexity, however, if he had employed and discussed, rather than the in-passing mention of the reality of transitional space, some of Winnicott's subtle insights about inner and outer, about the me and not me, about how we continuously create the found world. No analyst stands alone, not even Freud, as Makari (2008) demonstrates. Cross-fertilization gives life, particularly in a humanistic science such as psychoanalysis.

Finally, I would have preferred, if possible, for the text to have at least one example of each artist's works but, recognizing the publishing cost, I understand their absence. For any future editions, I would recommend an

Internet address be offered for each of these artists so that any reader unfamiliar with their specific works could view them.

As anyone knows who visits art galleries, or museums, combining one's knowledge of the artist and his art with the lived transitional experience of seeing a particular work, with its personal resonance, is difficult to capture. Hagman has taken an important step in conveying some of the elements of such an experience and consequently has made such viewing more accessible. As I viewed some of the works of each artist discussed, I knew that my appreciation of them had deepened. That is reward enough. This is a text worth reading and enjoying.

References

Kuhns, Richard. (1983). *Psychoanalytic theory of art*. New York. Columbia University Press.

Makari, George. (2008). *Revolution in mind*. New York. Harper Perennial.

Winnicott . D.W.,(1971), *Playing and reality*. New York, Basic Books.

Gerald J. Gargiulo is a former president of the NPAP Training Institute; he is on the editorial board of this journal as well as *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. He has lectured throughout the States, in Europe and Canada

and has authored two books and numerous articles on psychoanalytic theory and practice, particularly focusing on the work of Donald Winnicott. He was a staff writer for *The East Hampton Independent* newspaper (1996) where he wrote art reviews. He maintains a practice in Stamford, Ct.