HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(11), 2174-2177
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

A Study on the Art Healing Function of David Hockney's Paintings: A Case Study of Modern General Hospitals in the UK and the US

Yilin Guo

School of Art and Design, Yunnan University, Kunming 650091, Yunnan, China.

How to cite this paper: Yilin Guo. (2025) A Study on the Art Healing Function of David Hockney's Paintings: A Case Study of Modern General Hospitals in the UK and US. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(11), 2174-2177.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.11.017

Received: October 17, 2025
Accepted: November 14, 2025
Published: December 10, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Yilin Guo, School of Art and Design, Yunnan University, Kunming 650091, Yunnan, China.

Abstract

This paper examines the application of David Hockney's paintings in four modern general hospitals in the United Kingdom and the United States, enhancing the precision of interpreting the healing functions of his works from an art therapy perspective. By summarizing the therapeutic effects of Hockney's paintings through case study analysis, it illustrates how his works transcend subjective boundaries, foster healing-oriented medical environments, and facilitate interdisciplinary interaction among art, medicine, and psychology in rehabilitation programs. The study further reveals their positive impact on specific patient groups, such as pediatric cases, renews the conceptual understanding of health, and reinterprets the relationship between art and well-being. This not only provides a modern reinterpretation of traditional painting therapy theory but also endows painting with new social responsibility and humanistic value, highlighting the profound implications of art-health integration for the advancement of medical humanities.

Keywords

David Hockney; Art Healing; Medical Environment; Painting Therapy; Healing Space

1. The Healing Nature of David Hockney's Paintings

David Hockney is one of the most influential masters in the history of contemporary art and is regarded by modern art history as a pioneer of British Pop Art in the 1960s. He is not only a key representative of British Pop Art but is also renowned for his unique exploration of color, composition, and visual imagery. His works, characterized by bright, saturated tones and dynamic, free compositions, create visual scenes full of joy and vitality, consistently conveying optimistic and uplifting emotional experiences to viewers. Particularly during times of rampant disease and widespread lockdowns, he sought richness in increasingly barren circumstances. Like other distinguished artists, especially those who continue to move forward and evolve, he teaches us a valuable lesson—not only how to see but also how to live (David & Martin, 2022). The visual pleasure and positive attitude towards life presented in his works resonate with the concept of "art healing" in psychology, which involves applying artistic creation to the diagnosis and treatment of physical and mental illnesses to regulate individual mental health and achieve healing or alleviation of disease. This also constitutes the core practical path and fundamental goal of art therapy (Liang, 2025).

2. The Rise and Conceptual Evolution of Healing Concepts in Art

Since the dawn of humanity, people have continuously sought to understand and discover themselves. Yuval Noah Harari, in Homo Deus, indicates that the three issues that once most terrified humanity were disease, war, and famine.

However, with the rapid advancement of technology, the traditional notion of "God as the source of all authority" has gradually dissolved, giving rise to new societal concerns—the pursuit of happiness, immortality, and divinity. People are increasingly turning their attention to their inner feelings rather than adhering to divine will. As Nietzsche stated in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, "For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred 'Yes' is needed: the spirit now wills its own will, and the world's outcast regains his own world" (Friedrich, 2016). This shift has led people to place greater emphasis on subjective dimensions such as happiness and spiritual experience, making emotions and desires a unique human domain that machines and artificial intelligence in postmodern civilization struggle to replicate.

Simultaneously, in the post-pandemic era, public psychology has further manifested diverse and deep-seated needs. These characteristically modern challenges are often diffuse and difficult to articulate clearly, yet art therapy is particularly well-suited to address this "unspeakable suffering" (Lin, 2025). It allows individuals to express complex emotional experiences through symbols and metaphors and to find a sense of control and meaning in the creative process, thereby helping them cope with stress effectively. Therefore, art therapy is destined to coexist with human life, becoming a significant pathway for promoting physical and mental health development.

3. The Importance of Art Healing in Modern General Hospitals

In contemporary society, with economic development and social structural transformation, public understanding of health has moved beyond the traditional scope of disease treatment to increasingly emphasize the overall state of body and mind and the quality of life. In this context, the role of medicine has also gradually shifted from maintaining basic life functions to providing more comprehensive and humanistic health services. Taiwanese scholar Wu Canzhong pointed out that healing and treatment are fundamentally distinct: treatment focuses on eliminating disease through medical means, whereas healing is grounded in the individual's physical and mental sensations. Healing involves integrating positive factors from multiple levels, transforming them into a force that stimulates positive self-power, ultimately achieving holistic physical and mental recovery (Wang, 2022). The rise of this concept has promoted the development of the idea of healing environments, which integrates environmental psychology and the new "biopsychosocial" medical model, emphasizing the comprehensive impact of the environment on psychological and physiological health.

As professional venues providing healthcare services, the environmental quality of hospitals directly affects patients' treatment experience and recovery process (Wan & Lu, 2025). Therefore, the systematic integration of art into medical spaces has become a significant trend in modern hospital design. The practice of Hockney's paintings in multiple hospitals in the UK and the US is a typical manifestation of this trend. Through its distinctive visual language and the shaping of spatial atmosphere, his work not only improves the sensory experience of the medical environment but also performs therapeutic functions on a psychological level, such as soothing emotions, evoking hope, and fostering emotional connection, vividly illustrating the unique value and application potential of art in the medical field.

4. Analysis of the Therapeutic Application of Hockney's Paintings in Hospital Spaces

Owing to their advantages of flexible composition, diverse materials, and rich colors, paintings are frequently displayed in the public spaces of modern general hospitals in the UK and the US. Given the variety of themes and content, hospitals typically select paintings with positive therapeutic effects to create healing spaces. From an architectural perspective and based on the concept of healing environments, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and Stanford Health Care have analyzed the expressive forms of Hockney's paintings in lobby spaces, waiting areas, and circulation spaces, as well as the psychological effects different works produce on patients.

4.1 Lobby Space: Nature Therapy and Emotional Soothing

Cedars-Sinai Medical Center is a non-profit academic medical institution located in Los Angeles, California, renowned for its excellent clinical patient care, cutting-edge medical research, and groundbreaking research outcomes. Currently, Cedars-Sinai houses a collection of over 4,000 works, including paintings, sculptures, and new media installations, involving 1,200 world-class artists. These artworks, accompanied by descriptive texts and displayed in acrylic frames, are thoughtfully placed in public areas such as hospital lobbies, corridors, waiting rooms, blood donation centers, and administrative offices, allowing patients, medical staff, and visitors to appreciate them up close at any time.

As a transportation hub, the hospital lobby is characterized by its large spatial scale, complex and multidirectional human flow, and an environment prone to noise and high foot traffic, which can easily trigger patient anxiety.

Therefore, introducing environmental designs with healing functions is particularly important. The theory of nature therapy posits that humans are part of nature, and through contact and interaction with the natural environment, they can effectively release stress and restore physical and mental balance (Wang, 2024). Guided by this philosophy, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center uses artistic creation as a visual medium for natural imagery, displaying Hockney's paintings on the lobby walls. Among them, My Pool and Terrace depicts bright Californian scenery, portraying natural elements such as pools and plants while employing a vivid color language reminiscent of Matisse to bring vibrant natural landscapes indoors. This initiative not only mitigates the institutional feel of the hospital space but also provides patients and their families with a visual environment imbued with natural healing connotations, thereby helping to alleviate their anxiety and irritability.

4.2 Circulation Space: Imagery Implantation and Environmental Translation

In hospital architecture, circulation spaces such as corridors, elevator lobbies, and hospital streets serve as hubs connecting various functional units. However, they often leave an impression of dim lighting and cold, impersonal walls. Nevertheless, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center displays Hockney's painting The Wind on its corridor walls, transforming public passageways into display spaces that serve art healing functions. The creative inspiration for this work stems from Hockney's trip to Japan. Through lithography techniques, the painting marvelously endows the climatic phenomenon of "rain" with a unique sense of moisture by depicting water droplets in motion; the raindrops move rhythmically with the wind against a serene blue background reminiscent of underwater stillness. This contrast between geometry and nature, the ordinary and the profound, quietly evokes associations with life outside the hospital walls. Without compromising spatial functionality, it infuses the environment with an atmosphere conducive to contemplation and emotional soothing. Here, Hockney, as the creator, accomplishes an emotional representation of natural phenomena and, assuming the role of a "healer," constructs a spiritual window through natural imagery and visual narrative—a space for patients and their families to pause briefly, reflect inwardly, and connect—thus realizing the conscious application of art healing theory in real medical scenarios.

4.3 Waiting Space: Spatial Symbolism and Stress Alleviation

Stanford Health Care, as the core teaching hospital of Stanford University School of Medicine, has established a dedicated art committee responsible for the systematic acquisition, selection, and display of artworks. Through donations and purchases, the hospital has integrated over four hundred artworks into various spaces within the facility, cultivating an overall artistic atmosphere in the medical environment. Considering patients' extended waiting times and their psychological state, the art committee specifically displayed Hockney's Dog Ruby series in the outpatient waiting area. This series, focusing on the artist's long-time canine companion, exudes warmth and a sense of companionship. By introducing such animal themes and domestic imagery, the waiting space is endowed with a familiarity and affinity akin to a home environment, effectively alleviating the dullness and anxiety patients may experience during prolonged waits. This practice not only reflects the regulatory effect of "environmental identity" from environmental psychology on mood but also aligns with the mechanism in art healing theory wherein "spatial symbolism fosters emotional connection." By evoking viewers' positive memories and emotional resonance through affectionate visual symbols, it achieves the alleviation of psychological stress on a non-verbal level, thereby enhancing the healing attributes of the space.

4.4 The Expansion of Art Healing in Clinical Rehabilitation and Staff Care

As a non-pharmacological innovative therapy, art promotes the improvement of patients' mental, physical, and emotional states through the creative process and their subsequent reflection on their creations (Edwards, 2016). This is fully demonstrated in practical medical projects. Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospital in the UK is a large teaching hospital located in central London, affiliated with the Guy's and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, and also a member of King's Health Partners, an academic health science centre. Notable medical figures such as Astley Cooper, William Cheselden, and Florence Nightingale have worked there. The hospital contains approximately 4,500 artworks and artifacts, with a history dating back to 1500. Over five centuries, the collection has been continuously enriched through donations, bequests, purchases, and commissions. More than half of these items are currently displayed across the Guy's and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust hospitals and community venues, providing better diagnostic and treatment environments for patients, staff, and visitors. Drawing inspiration from Hockney's pastoral and

mountain canyon themed paintings, the hospital uses simple art materials—including ballpoint pens, markers, ink, graphite pencils, colored pencils, pens, and even everyday items like black tea and coffee—for expressive drawing creation. This aims to provide psychological intervention for hospital staff and patients with dermatillomania (compulsive skin picking), promoting physical and mental harmony.

University Hospital Lewisham is an acute district general hospital. It originated as a small voluntary hospital within a workhouse and has now grown into a medical centre treating hundreds of thousands of patients annually. The hospital primarily improves the working and treatment environments for patients and staff through various art projects, including the artistic decoration of clinics, wards, and public spaces. It also provides creative art activities in inpatient departments, outpatient clinics, and the community to help patients cope with the anxiety and fear associated with medical visits. Within the hospital's creative arts program, inspiration is drawn from Hockney's swimming pool and splash series paintings. Painting therapy is utilized to provide psychological counseling and adjunctive therapy for pediatric patients. With the support of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), a series of "Healing Garden Art Activities" inspired by Hockney's garden courtyards has been launched. These include establishing painting workshops, hosting live music performances, mosaic-making workshops, and staff photography competitions inspired by outdoor activities.

5. Conclusion

The application of Hockney's paintings in hospitals in the UK and the US demonstrates that art can not only beautify spaces but also systematically participate in the construction of healing environments, performing multiple functions such as alleviating patient mood, supporting clinical rehabilitation, and enhancing the psychological well-being of medical staff. From the perspective of art healing, this study reveals the interdisciplinary value and social significance of painting in medical contexts, providing theoretical references and practical pathways for future hospital environmental design and the integration of art into the health field. The fusion of art and health not only expands the social responsibility of painting but also injects new vitality into the development of contemporary medical humanities.

References

Edwards, D. (2016). Art therapy (Y. Huang & C. Sun, Trans.). Chongqing University Press.

Hockney, D., & Gayford, M. (2022). Spring cannot be cancelled: David Hockney in Normandy (Y. Hu & S. Yang, Trans.). Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House. (Original work published 2021)

Liang, R. (2025). Art as a therapeutic approach [Master's thesis, Chinese National Academy of Arts].

Lin, Y. (2025). The proactive intervention of art therapy on human mental health. *Chinese Art*, *148*, 7-17.

Nietzsche, F. W. (2016). Thus spoke Zarathustra (H. Yu, Trans.). Harbin Publishing House. (Original work published 1883-1885)

Wan, D., & Lu, C. (2025). Exploration of hospital healing environment construction strategies from the perspective of doctor-patient integration. *Journal of Nanjing Medical University (Social Sciences Edition)*, *1*, 88. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract

Wang, Y. (2022). Research on the design of indoor public spaces in elderly care institutions based on the concept of healing environments [Master's thesis, Southwest Jiaotong University].

Wang, Y. (2024). Research on the principles and practice of healing landscape design based on naturopathy. *Tomorrow's Fashion*, *11*, 109-111.