

# Art Therapist



## History

Art therapy emerged as a distinct profession in the 1940s when hospitals and rehabilitation facilities increasingly began to include art therapy programs along with traditional “talk therapies,” underscoring the recognition that art making enhanced recovery, health, and wellness. Since that time, the profession of art therapy has grown into an effective and important method of treatment and assessment with children, adults, families, and groups in a variety of settings. Currently, the field of art therapy has gained attention in health care facilities throughout the United States and within psychiatry, medicine, psychology, counseling, education, and the arts.

The American Art Therapy Association (AATA), the official member organization for professionals and students, was founded in 1969 to develop and promote educational, professional, and ethical standards for the field of art therapy. The AATA sponsors annual conferences, approves educational programs, and publishes *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* (first published in 1983), the quarterly *AATA Newsletter*, the *AATA E-Newsletter*, books, and monographs. In the 1970s, the first master’s degrees in art therapy were awarded. Today, there are 34 AATA-approved master’s degree programs, and university and college curricula across the US include undergraduate introductory courses and preparatory programs in art therapy.



## Career Description

Art therapy is a mental health profession that uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well being of individuals of all ages. It is based on the belief that the creative process of artistic self-expression helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight.

Art therapy integrates the fields of human development, visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms), and the creative process with models of counseling and psychotherapy. Art therapy is used with children, adolescents, adults, older adults, groups, and families to assess and treat the following:

- Anxiety, depression, and other mental and emotional problems and disorders
- Substance abuse and other addictions
- Family and relationship issues
- Abuse and domestic violence
- Social and emotional difficulties related to disability and illness
- Trauma and loss
- Physical, cognitive, and neurological problems
- Psychosocial difficulties related to medical illness

Art therapy programs and art therapists are found in a variety of settings including hospitals, clinics, public, social service, and community agencies, wellness centers, educational institutions, businesses, and private practices.

Art therapists use drawing, painting, and other art processes to assess and treat clients with emotional, cognitive, physical, and/or developmental needs and disorders. Using their skills in evaluation and psychotherapy, they choose materials and interventions appropriate to their clients’ needs and design sessions to achieve therapeutic goals and objectives. Art therapists also maintain

appropriate charts, records, and periodic reports on client progress as required by agency guidelines and professional standards; participate in professional staff meetings and conferences; and provide information and consultation regarding the client’s clinical progress. They also may function as supervisors, administrators, consultants, and expert witnesses.

With the growing acceptance of complementary therapies and recent research findings on art therapy with medical populations, there is an increase in the application of art therapy to a variety of patient groups. For example, art therapists work with cancer, burn, pain, post-surgery, HIV-positive, asthma, and substance abuse patients, among others, and with pediatric, geriatric, and other medical populations. In hospitals, art therapists may be part of psychiatric departments, child life programs, arts in hospital programs, or creative arts therapies or activity therapies departments. Many art therapists also hold credentials in mental health counseling or marriage and family therapy because of their training and experience.

An understanding of the application of various art media and art processes to treatment is central to the practice of art therapy. In general, an art therapist must be sensitive to a variety of human needs and possess emotional stability, patience, interpersonal skills, and a capacity for insight into psychological processes. An art therapist also must be an attentive listener and keen observer and be able to develop a rapport with people. Flexibility and a sense of humor are important in adapting to work with people with a wide range of mental health and healthcare needs and in a variety of settings.



## Employment Characteristics

Art therapists work in a many different healthcare environments, including, but not limited to, the following: hospitals and clinics (medical and psychiatric); outpatient mental health agencies and day treatment facilities; residential treatment centers; domestic violence and homeless shelters; community agencies and nonprofit settings; sheltered workshops; correctional facilities; elder care facilities; art studios; private practice; and schools, colleges, and universities.

An art therapist may work as part of a team that includes physicians, psychologists, nurses, mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, rehabilitation counselors, social workers, and/or teachers. Together, they determine each client’s therapeutic goals and objectives and implement a treatment plan. Other art therapists work independently and maintain private practices with children, adolescents, adults, groups, and/or families.



## Salary

Earnings for art therapists vary depending on type of practice, job responsibilities, and practice location. The average entry-level income (2006 data) is approximately \$32,000, median income is between \$38,000 and \$48,000, and top earning potential for salaried administrators is between \$50,000 and \$80,000. Art therapists who possess doctoral degrees and/or licensure or who qualify in their state to conduct a private practice can earn an average of \$85 to \$120 per hour as an independent practitioner. Refer to Section IV, Table 5 of this *Directory* for more information, or see [www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary](http://www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary).



## Educational Programs

Length. Art therapy master's degree programs are no less than 2 years and must include a minimum of 24 graduate credit hours in the art therapy core curriculum.

**Prerequisites.** Applicants to master's degree programs must hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited US institution or have equivalent academic preparation from an institution outside the United States. In addition, prospective students must submit a portfolio of original artwork and must document 15 semester hours in studio art and 12 semester hours in psychology.

**Curriculum.** Educational requirements include theories of art therapy, counseling, and psychotherapy; psychopathology; ethics and standards of practice; assessment and evaluation; individual, group, and family techniques; human and creative development; multicultural issues; research methods; and practicum experiences in clinical, community, and/or other settings.



## Registration and Certification

The Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB) Inc, an independent organization, grants a credential, Art Therapist Registered (ATR), after reviewing

documentation of completion of graduate education and supervised postgraduate experience. Registered art therapists who successfully complete a written examination administered by the ATCB are qualified as Board Certified (ATR-BC). Recertification is required every 5 years by documentation of continuing education credits (CECs).



## Inquiries

### Education, Program Approval, Careers, Resources

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