

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Obituary: Harriet Wadeson (9 Jan 1931 - 26 Jan 2016)**

**Luminary and Explorer of Art Psychotherapy**

**By Dr. Jill Westwood**



Figure 1: Harriet at work in Sydney, Australia in 2001

Harriet Wadeson, Ph.D., LCSW, ATR-BC, HLM was a significant figure in pioneering art therapy in the USA and also across the world to the many places she travelled. Harriet was an irrepressible spirit and her influence was felt widely. I was fortunate to meet Harriet and benefit from her experience and expertise when I was in Australia in the 1990s. From that meeting we became friends and it is with sadness I acknowledge her contribution with these words and memories. Much of the detail in this piece arises from her own account of her life and career in *'Architects of Art Therapy'* (2006) and I encourage you to read her words to hear the 'music of her voice' and to see her life story depicted in a series of specially selected photographs. These images show Harriet firstly as a child lying on the floor engrossed in making a picture, then as a beautiful teenage girl in a swimsuit, followed by a stunning young bride, and then an iconic image of her as an art therapist with her characteristic headscarf by the exhibit 'Portraits of Suicide'. Next a quintessential image of Harriet being a midsummer solstice Goddess with a garland of flowers in her hair at one of her many summer schools in Sweden. These images hold the 'magic' of Harriet and say so much about who she was. But for now I hope these few words and personal snaps will pay tribute to Harriet and convey something of her life and work.

Born in USA, Harriet's childhood was spent in Washington DC where she grew up within a relatively conservative and by her own account "dysfunctional" Jewish family (2006, p.84). In her memoirs Harriet described the importance of her grandmother's love and encouragement as saving her from emotional meltdown. It's curious how, to some extent Harriet fulfilled a similar "fairy godmother" role for me in a professional capacity when she appeared in my life in Sydney, Australia in 1996 when circumstance had plunged me, with almost no experience of teaching, into leading a nascent art therapy programme at the Western Sydney University (WSU). With her striking long white hair, flowing attire and her creative ways, she swept into the art therapy scene and transformed and deepened my outlook of art therapy. She gave me the surety to trust the art process at every turn and to grow in confidence. This was so typical of Harriet, to be bold and seize the day. It was a pivotal convergence for me personally

that also created an ongoing developmental influence in the Australian art therapy context. It is also a testament to her capacity to lead, inspire and to inculcate enjoyment in the field of practice and bring us along with her.

Harriet's path towards the field of art therapy was marked by a series of formative experiences and connections. As a young girl she had a natural and enduring interest for art and was also inspired by reading her psychiatrist uncle's books on Freud while babysitting her cousins. As an adolescent she experienced feelings of depression; this fostered a desire to understand herself and led her to studying psychology at Cornell University. She was taught by a leading psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and was able to work on his research project. She also won first prize in an art competition at the Smithsonian Institution. These early experiences laid down the foundations on which her interests grew. Soon after graduating, Harriet married and had children. She lived in Munich for a couple of years and on returning to Washington began pursuing her career. She wanted to do a PhD in psychology and began taking courses. It was then she met Hannah Kwiatkowska, a significant figure in the first wave of pioneering art therapists in USA. In 1961 Hannah began training Harriet to be an art therapist at the National Institutes for Health (NIH) before there were any art therapy training programmes. This was a fortuitous opening as Harriet found herself in a progressive research context that led to her developing her practice and considering her work with research awareness.

Through her apprenticeship with Hannah, in an adolescent unit in NIH, Harriet ran art therapy groups. She wrote a paper about the groups that was published in the second issue of the Bulletin of Art Therapy in USA. As Harriet's confidence grew she made valuable connections and moved into working within an affective disorders project and published another paper in 1970 with the head of the project William "Biff" Bunney in a respected journal of psychiatry 'The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease'. She also won the Benjamin Rush award for Scientific Exhibits for a show of art therapy works on "Portraits of Suicide". These ground-breaking activities were historic and reflect the way Harriet was always opening up awareness in the field and in a largely male dominated

environment. She stayed at NIH for 13 years until the rise of biochemical approaches took over from psychodynamic research. During this time Harriet extended her experiences into working with adults with a wide range of mental health conditions and published 29 research papers! During this time, she also managed many personal challenges in her family life, including having a third child who was born prematurely with disabilities, navigated divorce and made her way as a single mother.

As the NIH period drew to a close, Harriet consolidated her experience and qualifications. She gained an MA in psychology and art therapy at Goddard College, followed by a Masters in Social Work at Catholic University. Then she enrolled in a PhD at Union Institute and wrote her dissertation on her work at NIH with adults in art psychotherapy. This became the seminal text book "*Art Psychotherapy*" published in 1980 and this led to Harriet moving into education and training art psychotherapists (Wadeson, 1980/2010). Her first position was in the University of Houston and then soon after she was invited to the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC) in 1981, where she set up their first art therapy programme. She continued working there for 23 years graduating hundreds of art therapists. Harriet loved teaching and made the educational endeavour as creative and visual as possible. I learnt a great deal by replacing essays with creative projects and so did the students. This is one of Harriet's great legacies.

From the early days of the profession Harriet held various roles with the American Art Therapy Association and was awarded honorary life membership in 1992. Harriet was known for developing an eclectic approach to art therapy and while utilising psychodynamic, existential and phenomenological perspectives, she also encouraged acquiring a wide knowledge of human development, sociological theories and to adapt to the needs of the individual clients, groups or communities (Wadeson, 2001). My experience of Harriet was her emphasis on finding your own relationship with theory and of putting the therapeutic relationship and art at the centre. These principles were refreshingly clear and have been a constant and reliable guide.

Harriet also loved travelling and visited many countries all over the world. She led delegations to China, Indonesia, Bali; taught and presented in Mexico, Canada, UK, Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Korea, Japan amongst others and held a regular summer school in Sweden for many years. Her relationship with Australia began in 1981 when she was invited to give a keynote at a conference by some visionary pioneers there. This began a long relationship with Australia leading to several trips over the years. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have met Harriet in 1996 and to have her visit Australia on several occasions. This also paved the way for my participation in the AATA conference in Albuquerque in 2007 and then in 2008 a visit to interview her as part of my PhD in Chicago. I arrived the day after Obama was inaugurated as the first Black president of USA and there was a great feeling of hope and change. Harriet welcomed me into her home and circle of talented friends and graduates. She took me on a tour of Chicago and all its art therapy dimensions that I will never forget and then we went on to the AATA conference in Cleveland. Harriet was fabulous company, introduced me to many wonderful people and made it a momentous experience for me.

Officially, Harriet retired from UIC in 2003 but with her irrepressible lust for life she continued working and taught an art therapy program at Northwestern University, Evanston Illinois right up to the end. Even when she became ill in 2009 she transformed the experience by journaling and writing her latest book (Wadeson, 2011), which I recommend as an utterly compelling read. Harriet was never stopped by fear, she faced it, used it, made artwork and researched it and in this way she embodied the essence of art therapy. She had abundant qualities to admire, including her skills as an author. She influenced many with her teaching and has left an important legacy in her numerous publications (Wadeson, 1987, 1989, 1992, 2000). I will remember Harriet as a generous, warm, adventurous and open minded force. I enjoyed her company, I mourn her loss and treasure her contribution. Harriet's own words seem a fitting conclusion:

'Being part of an emerging profession, growing up with it, co-mingling with creative colleagues and the students it attracts, feeling like one of its

"architects", though at times a difficult path, always made my work an exciting adventure. ...I am grateful for every minute of it.'(2006, p.103)



Figure 2. Various photographs of personal memories.

**Biography:**

Jill Westwood, PhD, HCPC Art Psychotherapist, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. Jill is a Programme Convenor of the MA Art Psychotherapy, Goldsmiths. From a background in fine art she has worked as an art psychotherapist in adult psychiatry (NHS) and in art therapy education, including a period in Australia 1995-2008. Her

research interests encompass art therapy education, the transformative potential of art in relationships and art based approaches.

Address: Dr Jill Westwood

Goldsmiths, University of London, STACS, 21/23 St James, New Cross, London SE14 6NW

Email: [j.westwood@gold.ac.uk](mailto:j.westwood@gold.ac.uk)

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