



The Healing Power of Art in Healthcare Settings

Introduction: The Intersection of Science and Art

The connection between science and art has always been compelling, particularly in healthcare settings. While science focuses on treating the physical body, art has the power to soothe the mind and spirit. Recent studies have shown that art, particularly visual art, can play a significant role in improving patient outcomes in hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and other healthcare settings. From reducing stress and anxiety to improving overall mood and even shortening hospital stays, the inclusion of art can transform the healthcare experience.

In this document, we explore the tangible benefits of integrating art into healthcare environments, supported by research and case studies, and share a bit of my personal journey from running pediatric emergency departments to focusing on landscape photography for healing spaces.

The Science Behind Art and Healthcare

Art has profound effects on psychological and physical well-being, particularly in healthcare environments where stress is often heightened. Numerous studies have shown that exposure to art can lead to measurable improvements in patient outcomes, including:

- **Reduction of Stress and Anxiety:** Research has shown that visual artworks, particularly those depicting nature, reduce stress and anxiety (Law et al., 2021; Timonen & Timonen, 2021). A scoping review found that exposure to art in hospitals helped lower cortisol levels, a key indicator of stress among patients (Law et al., 2021). Another study by the Cleveland Clinic revealed that patients exposed to contemporary art collections reported better moods and reduced anxiety; 73% of respondents said their mood improved and 61% said the artwork reduced their stress levels (Karnik et al., 2014).
- **Enhanced Healing Environments:** Art contributes to creating healing environments. Hospitals that integrate art report improved pain management and better overall outcomes (Malenbaum et al., 2008). A study in the *Journal of Applied Arts & Health* suggested that a multi-disciplinary approach is optimal, incorporating collaboration between designers, staff and patients to optimize the healthcare environment (Timonen & Timonen, 2021).
- **Improved Staff Well-being:** Not only does art benefit patients, but it also supports healthcare workers. In high-stress environments, such as emergency rooms, staff exposed to calming art report feeling less burned out and more focused, improving their ability to care for patients. It has been reported that emergency departments that include artwork as part of their design can reduce aggressive behavior towards staff (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

The Role of Nature and Representational Art

The presence of nature-themed art—landscapes, oceans, forests—has been found to be particularly effective in reducing stress and promoting recovery. This is tied to the biophilia hypothesis, which suggests that humans are innately drawn to nature for psychological well-being.

- **Biophilia in Hospitals:** Studies show that patients who view nature scenes, whether in real life or through art, recover more quickly and require fewer pain medications. Nature-themed art helps create a calming atmosphere, promoting relaxation (Lankston et al., 2010; Malenbaum et al., 2008).
- **Case Study: Visual Art in Patient Rooms:** A study on visual art in hospital settings found that patients who could choose nature-themed art for their rooms experienced greater control over their environment, improving their sense of well-being (Karnik et al., 2014).
- **Reducing the Psychological Distance:** Nature-based art helps patients mentally escape the confines of their rooms. Viewing serene landscapes or oceans allows patients to feel a sense of relief, reducing psychological stress (Law et al., 2021).

How Art Enhances the Patient Experience

The impact of art on the patient experience is significant (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Law et al., 2021; Trevisani et al., 2010). In sterile clinical environments, art introduces warmth and a sense of humanity, making spaces feel more inviting. Research has shown that patients with access to visual art:

- Feel more in control of their environment.
- Report higher satisfaction levels during their hospital stay.
- Are less likely to need sedative medications or report severe pain.

In mental health facilities, art therapy is particularly effective. It helps patients externalize emotions, reduces feelings of anxiety, depression, and stigma, and improves self-esteem.



Nature imagery in the Emergency Department promotes relaxation and calm for patients and staff.

The Role of Art in Assisted Living and Nursing Homes

Art can play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life for residents in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. These settings cater to older adults who may experience isolation, depression, or cognitive decline, making art an important therapeutic tool. Research has shown that art can:

1. **Enhance Cognitive Health:** Art can stimulate cognitive function by engaging memory, attention, and communication skills, particularly for individuals with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. The environment in nursing homes can make a significant positive impact on older patients' well-being and satisfaction (Chang et al., 2013).
2. **Reduce Feelings of Isolation:** Art serves as a medium for social interaction, providing opportunities for residents to engage with staff, visitors, and each other. Community art projects which incorporate visual art can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of loneliness.
3. **Improve Emotional Well-being:** The presence of calming, nature-themed art can reduce agitation and anxiety, contributing to improved emotional health among residents.

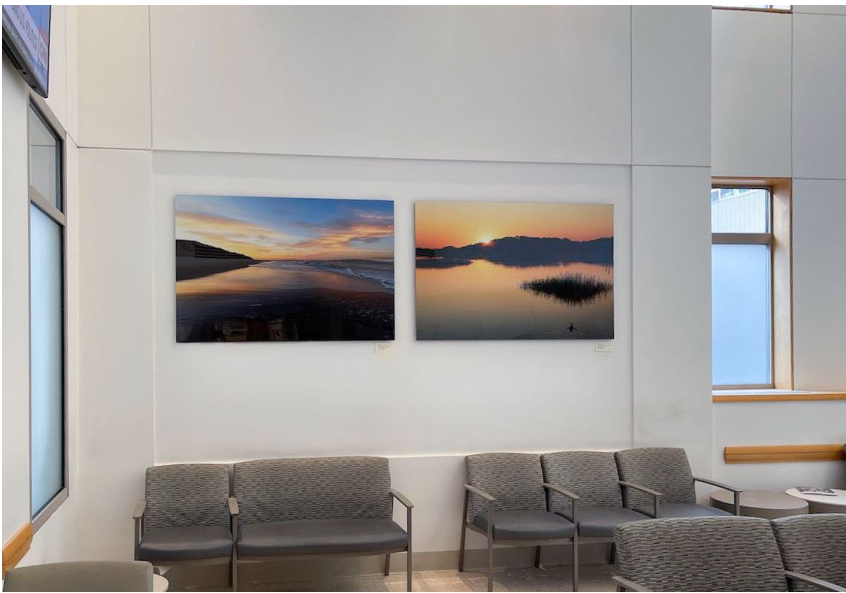
Case Study: Visual Art in Nursing Homes: A study conducted in Taiwan found that placing familiar, comforting art in nursing homes enhanced the psychological well-being of residents. The art helped orient residents and created a more homelike environment, fostering dignity and well-being (Chang et al., 2013).

Art in Pediatric Healthcare

Art in pediatric healthcare settings offers a unique opportunity to enhance the healing environment, though its impact may differ from that seen in adult patients (Eisen et al., 2008). Pediatric patients often rely more on social support, such as parental care and interactions with child life advocates, which can lessen the influence of environmental factors like visual art. Pediatric units typically offer more social engagement and structured activities, reducing the need for the same level of environmental enrichment that adult patients might benefit from.

However, research still supports the value of visual art in creating a welcoming and soothing environment for children. Nature-themed artwork, in particular, is often preferred by pediatric patients and can contribute to a calming atmosphere in their rooms.

1. **Nature-Themed Art:** Pediatric patients respond positively to nature-based art, which can provide a comforting presence in the room. The familiarity and tranquility of these images help create a reassuring environment for young patients during their hospital stay.
2. **Supportive Environment:** While social support may be the primary factor in reducing pediatric patient anxiety, the presence of calming artwork can still enhance the overall supportive atmosphere of pediatric units, contributing to a more pleasant and healing environment.
3. **Impact on High-Stress Situations:** Further research could explore whether children experiencing sustained levels of stress, such as those undergoing intensive treatments, might benefit more from the calming effects of visual art.



Soothing landscapes displayed in the Emergency Department Waiting Area (left) and Entrance (above) provide respite in times of stress and uncertainty.

Art in Rehabilitation Centers, Outpatient Clinics, and Dental Practices

While specific research findings on the impact of visual arts in rehabilitation centers, clinics, and dental practices are limited, the general consensus from broader studies supports the integration of art in healthcare environments. Visual arts can transform these spaces, often associated with anxiety and discomfort, into more calming and supportive environments.

1. **Rehabilitation Settings:** Although specific studies are lacking, it is widely believed that art can aid in emotional and physical recovery. Calming imagery, such as nature scenes, is thought to promote relaxation, reduce stress, and create a positive healing environment. Art therapy may also help patients regain motor skills, express emotions, and rebuild confidence after injuries or surgeries.
2. **General Clinics:** While direct research is sparse, anecdotal evidence suggests that art in clinic waiting rooms can alleviate anxiety. Serene landscapes or abstract art with soothing colors are considered effective in creating a tranquil environment, thereby reducing stress and improving the patient experience. Nature-themed art and soothing music have been shown to effectively reduce perceptions of pain during medical procedures. (Diette et al., 2003).



Local, coastal imagery displayed in clinic hallways offers a moment of calm

Art in Rehabilitation Centers, Outpatient Clinics, and Dental Practices (*cont.*)

3. **Dental Practices:** Similarly, there is a lack of specific research on the impact of visual art in dental practices. However, based on general findings, incorporating nature-based art in waiting areas and treatment rooms is believed to help ease patient nerves. Art placed strategically, such as on the ceiling above dental chairs, is thought to enhance comfort and reduce perceived discomfort during dental procedures.

My Journey from Emergency Medicine to Photography

Before transitioning into full-time photography, I spent years leading pediatric emergency departments. My leadership roles were in several geographic regions, starting in New York City, then 2 major academic medical centers in Cleveland, and culminating in Boston. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tufts Medical Center placed several of my large-scale landscape photographs in the waiting room and entry areas at the Emergency Department. The response was overwhelming: patients felt calmer, and staff reported that the images helped them manage their day-to-day stresses.

This experience inspired me to pursue photography full-time, with the goal of creating images that promote serenity and healing. I founded **Soothing Scapes** to bring calm and tranquility to healthcare settings through nature-based photography.



Conclusion: Art as a Healing Tool

Whether in hospitals, assisted living facilities, rehabilitation centers, or other clinical settings, art is a powerful tool that enhances the healthcare experience and can enhance both patient and staff satisfaction. By reducing stress, improving mood, and fostering social connections, art helps transform sterile clinical environments into spaces of healing and recovery.

My personal journey, from pediatric emergency medicine to photography, has shown me the profound impact that nature-based art can have on patients and healthcare workers alike. It is worth noting that while bringing art into healthcare settings appears to be quite beneficial, the actual research has some limitations. Many of the studies are limited in scope, and even the articles that bring together the literature in summary form acknowledge limitations when looking at these studies. Probably the most important limitation is that it is obviously challenging to do randomized, controlled trials on art in healthcare, and clearly more research is needed. But all that said, it does appear that visual art can be beneficial, offering moments of calm, inspiration, and emotional relief in what can often be stressful environments.

To draw an analogy, integrating art into healthcare settings is like adding spices to a meal. Just as spices aren't the core ingredient but enhance the flavor, making the meal more enjoyable and memorable, art isn't the core treatment but enhances the healing environment. This integration creates a more soothing atmosphere, making the healthcare experience more pleasant and supportive, not just for patients but also for those who care for them. This subtle yet significant enhancement can dramatically transform the perception and effectiveness of care, just as the right seasoning can transform a dish from mundane to extraordinary.

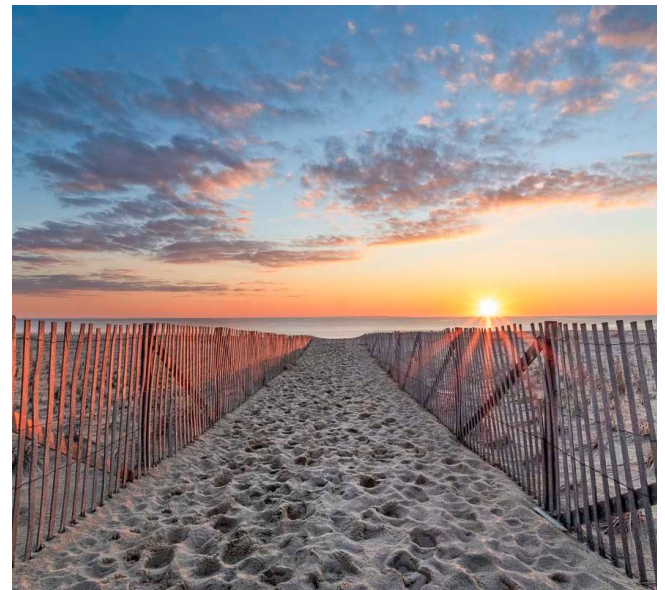
Transform your Healthcare Space with Serenity

Many healthcare organizations are already taking important steps to improve the patient and staff experience. Whether it's working to enhance communication between staff, improve interactions with patients, or participating in a patient experience committee, these efforts are vital but may still fall short of creating the desired outcomes. Perhaps first impressions aren't as welcoming as you'd like, or despite your best efforts, satisfaction levels aren't quite meeting your expectations. Art can be that missing element that ties everything together, creating a more welcoming environment and leaving a lasting positive impact.

If you are considering integrating or enhancing the role of art in your healthcare setting and are curious about potential collaborations, I invite you to contact me. Let's explore together how tailored art solutions can significantly uplift the atmosphere of your facility, benefitting patients and staff alike. Your commitment to enhancing healthcare environments resonates with my mission, and I am eager to discuss how we can work together to make a meaningful impact.



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