

# ART STYLE PREFERENCES OF NURSING HOME RESIDENTS

## Research Findings and Implications

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*This study investigated art style preferences of cognitively impaired and cognitively nonimpaired residents of a Jewish nursing home. A slide test was used to determine subject preferences among four art styles. Both groups preferred realistic over abstract art. The findings suggest that realistic art is the most appropriate art style for Jewish nursing home environments if resident preferences are considered.*

**D**esigning a therapeutic environment for elderly residents of a Jewish nursing home is a challenging task, especially for residents with cognitive impairments. Art has been identified as an important medium in the therapeutic environment for both cognitively impaired and cognitively nonimpaired residents. For resident art style preferences to be considered, it is necessary for staff and interior designers to possess knowledge of those preferences.

In a recent book on nursing home design for elderly and confused residents, Calkins (1988) recommended the use of photographs and wall hangings in the environmental design of a special care unit. She stated that the use of pictures might stimulate conversation and reminiscences. Calkins did not provide empirical data, however, to demonstrate how such materials would be either therapeutic or considered desirable by the residents.

Alvermann (1979) described one of the few documented attempts to involve residents of a nursing home and its staff in selecting room decor, such as wallpaper, color, and furnishings. The purpose was to

involve the residents in decision making regarding their personal living space. Unfortunately, the author did not provide empirical data to indicate whether the goal of involvement was achieved as perceived by the residents.

In a study of art style preferences of 76 nursing home residents, Miller and Goldman (1984) included two art styles, abstract and realistic. The authors used 16 reproductions of paintings from which the subjects chose ten paintings, the five they liked the most and the five they liked the least. The results of the study showed that nursing home residents consistently chose realistic art over abstract art.

Although the Miller and Goldman (1984) study was the first to explore art preferences of nursing home residents, the study had several limitations. The authors did not use statistical tests to assess the significance level of their findings. The study also did not compare the art style preferences of cognitively impaired and cognitively nonimpaired residents. Subjects were instructed to select the five most liked and the five least liked paintings, a discrimination more easily accomplished by residents with higher cognitive functioning. The study was further complicated by inclusion of four types of subject matter

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within each of the two art styles, which made it difficult to determine whether the subjects chose the art for its abstract or realistic qualities or for its subject matter.

The purpose of this study was to identify art style preferences in cognitively impaired and cognitively nonimpaired Jewish elderly nursing home residents and to examine differences, if any, in their preferences. The major research hypothesis of this study was that nursing home residents prefer realistic art to abstract art. A second research hypothesis was that cognitively nonimpaired subjects would choose the abstract style more frequently than cognitively impaired subjects.

## METHODS

### Sample Selection

A resident census was used to identify a total of 256 residents in the Dallas Home for Jewish Aged. The population included individuals diagnosed with a variety of physical impairments and with differing levels of cognitive functioning. The residents had been in the facility as little as 1 week and as long as 32 years.

The departments of occupational therapy, physical therapy, social services, and nursing were given five criteria for identifying residents to be considered for the study. Subjects were required to be 60 years of age or older, have at least 8 years of education, be able to speak English and to answer "yes" and "no" questions, and have the visual acuity to view slides projected on a screen.

After residents were selected according to these criteria, they were divided into two groups, cognitively impaired (CI) and cognitively nonimpaired (CNI). A total of 100 residents was assigned to the cognitively impaired group (CI), and 76 residents were assigned to the cognitively nonimpaired group (CNI).

A sample size of 10% of the selected population was established as appropriate for determining art preference. Because

the number of residents in the two groups was unequal, 10% of the larger CI group was used to establish the size of each group. Thus, a total of 20 residents were included in the study sample, 10 of whom were cognitively impaired and 10 cognitively nonimpaired. To ensure an equal number of males and females in each group, the subjects were randomly drawn until five male and five female subjects were obtained for each group.

### Procedures

The study had two phases. In the first phase, the cognitive functioning of the subjects was determined. In the second, the subjects were tested to establish their art style preferences.

The Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) was used to determine the level of cognitive functioning of subjects in each group (Folstein et al., 1975). Subjects who scored 24–30 on the MMSE were considered cognitively nonimpaired. Subjects scoring 15–23 were considered cognitively impaired. The MMSE has been shown to be 87% sensitive and 82% specific in detecting dementia and delirium (Anthony et al., 1982).

The Slide Test of Art Preference (STAP) was designed by the investigators to be similar to the procedures used by Myatt and Carter (1979) to determine art style preference among school-aged children. The STAP consists of 24 paired slides representing four art styles: photograph, photo realism, impressionism, and abstract art.

To reduce the bias of subject matter, a lion was chosen as the single subject included in all illustrations. Two illustrations of lions for each of the four art styles were obtained. The eight illustrations were developed into 2 × 2 inch color slides. The eight slides were copied to include all possible paired combinations of the four art styles; for example, impressionism and abstract, abstract and photo realism, photograph and impressionism. A total of 24 unduplicated pairs of slides was created.

*Table 1*  
 CHARACTERISTICS OF COGNITIVELY IMPAIRED AND COGNITIVELY NONIMPAIRED SUBJECTS AND  
 THEIR SCORES ON THE MINI-MENTAL STATE EXAMINATION (MMSE)

Subject	Age	Education	MMSE Score	
CNI-Female	1	83	2 years college	30
	2	72	8th grade	25
	3	91	college graduate	24
	4	90	high school	25
	5	78	high school graduate	29
CNI-Male	6	69	2 years college	29
	7	88	high school	25
	8	75	high school graduate	29
	9	74	high school graduate	28
	10	82	8th grade	30
CI-Female	11	85	high school	15
	12	95	some college	17
	13	84	business college	21
	14	75	some college	15
	15	83	some college	20
CI-Male	16	72	high school	19
	17	86	10th grade	16
	18	83	9th grade	16
	19	73	some college	23
	20	74	some college	15

The 24 pairs of slides included six slides representing each of the four art styles.

Two artists confirmed the validity of the illustrations used to represent each art style. The artists were shown the eight illustrations and given the task of assigning each illustration to one of the four art styles.

The tester brought each subject to a conference room where the Slide Test of Art Preference (STAP) was administered. The subject was seated in a comfortable, high-backed chair. Slides were shown individually to each of the subjects. For alternate subjects tested, the slides were presented in reverse order. For example, subject #1 viewed the slides front to back, and subject #2 viewed the slides back to front. This alternation of order was followed to reduce possible preference bias related to subject fatigue. Instructions were read by the tester so that the same information was given to all subjects. The tester sat next to the subject during the test procedure.

Subjects viewed each pair of slides on two screens composed of standard white poster board 28 × 22 inches. The subjects were asked to show their preference by answering the question, "Which picture

do you like best?," for each pair of slides. The subjects were given 20 seconds to respond by pointing their hand to the picture they liked the best. If a subject did not respond, the question was repeated until the subject indicated a preference.

### Results

#### *Subject Characteristics and MMSE Scores*

Table 1 shows the characteristics of CNI and CI subjects and their respective scores on the MMSE. The mean age of subjects in the CNI group was 80.20 and for CI subjects was 81.00. The mean age of female subjects was 83.6, and the mean age of male subjects was 77.6. The mean score on the MMSE for CNI subjects was 27.40, as compared to 17.70 for the CI subjects. All subjects had an 8th grade education or higher. Three CNI subjects and six CI subjects had attended college.

#### *STAP Findings for all Nursing Home Subjects*

Table 2 shows the preferences of all subjects for the four art styles. The subjects chose photo realism and photograph

Table 2  
PREFERENCES OF TWENTY NURSING HOME RESIDENTS FOR FOUR ART STYLES

Art Styles	Mental Status					
	CI		CNI		Total	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
Photograph	74	(49.7)	75	(50.3)	149	(31.0)
Photo realism	94	(51.9)	87	(48.1)	181	(37.7)
Impressionism	64	(54.2)	54	(45.8)	118	(24.6)
Abstract	8	(25.0)	24	(75.0)	32	(6.7)
Total	240		240		480	(100)

more frequently than impressionism and abstract (69% versus 31%),  $\chi^2(2, N = 20) = 67.5, p < .0001$ . The order of preference was photo realism (38%), photograph (31%), impressionism (25%), and abstract art (7%). A chi square test showed no significant difference in art style preferences between male and female subjects.

#### STAP Comparisons for CI versus CNI Subjects

A comparison of CI versus CNI subjects revealed a difference in STAP responses for the two groups,  $\chi^2(3, N = 20) = 9.124, p < .05$ . To determine which differences in art style preferences contributed to the total chi square, the data were analyzed using six  $2 \times 2$  chi square comparisons involving two art styles at a time: photograph versus abstract, photo realism versus abstract, photo realism versus impressionism, photograph versus photo realism, photograph versus impressionism, and impressionism versus abstract. The data were also analyzed to compare CI and CNI subjects on the combined categories of photograph and photo realism versus impressionism and abstract art.

In a comparison of photograph versus abstract, CNI subjects chose abstract art significantly more often than the CI subjects (92% versus 8%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 20) = 9.80, p < .01$ . In the test of photo realism versus abstract art, CI subjects selected photo realism more frequently than the CNI subjects (100% versus 75%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 20) = 8.88, p < .01$ . A comparison of preferences for photo realism versus impressionism showed that CNI subjects chose photo realism more

frequently than CI subjects (85% versus 65%)  $\chi^2(1, N = 20) = 4.266, p < .05$ . Comparisons of photograph versus photo realism, photograph versus impressionism, and impressionism versus abstract art revealed no significant differences in preferences between the two groups.

Comparison of CI and CNI subjects showed similar preferences for photograph and photo realism over impressionism and abstract. In the CI group, 70% preferred photograph and photo realism as compared with 67.5% in the CNI group. In the CI group, 30% preferred impressionism and abstract versus 32.5% in the CNI group.

## DISCUSSION

This study hypothesized that nursing home residents would prefer realistic art (photograph and photo realism) to abstract art (impressionism and abstract). The results strongly supported this hypothesis for all nursing home subjects. The subjects clearly preferred photo realism and photograph to impressionism and abstract art, and these preferences were similar for male and female subjects.

The second research hypothesis, which stated that CNI subjects would choose the abstract style more frequently than CI subjects, was also supported by the findings. The differences were dramatic; 92% of CNI subjects preferred abstract to photograph, as compared to 8% of the CI subjects. Significant differences were also found in preferences for photo realism versus abstract art—100% of CI subjects versus 75% of CNI subjects. These findings

seem consistent with Reisberg's (1986) supposition that CI individuals have lost the ability to interpret abstract ideas. It is not clear, however, why CI subjects chose impressionism over photo realism more frequently than CNI subjects. Perhaps some characteristic of the slides depicting impressionism was responsible for that finding.

Separating the category of realistic art into photograph and photo realism, and the category of abstract art into impressionism and abstract, did not seem to discriminate subject preferences within each of the two categories. A greater number of art styles, however, provides a wider range of choices for nursing home residents. These art styles might be discriminated by a more highly educated and artistically sophisticated population of nursing home residents.

The results of this study are consistent with Miller and Goldman's (1984) finding that nursing home residents preferred realistic art to abstract art. The present study used a broader range of art styles than the ones used by Miller and Goldman and a less complicated and perhaps more realistic method for determining art preference. Residents were instructed to make a choice between two slides, rather than to perform the more complex task of rank-ordering five pictures at a time according to preferences, as required by Miller and Goldman. This study also controlled for subject matter bias, which was not addressed by Miller and Goldman.

The preference for photo realism and photography over impressionism and abstract was consistent for all subjects except one, who was cognitively nonimpaired. The subject was a hairdresser by profession and painted in her leisure time. She chose abstract over other styles in 10 of 12 paired presentations.

Why the residents did not choose the abstract style is a complex issue. It may be that they could not assign a meaning to what they viewed. When viewing abstract art, comments from the nonimpaired

group ranged from "that doesn't mean anything" to "what's the one on the right for?" (abstract slide). The cognitively impaired residents responded similarly, with such comments as "[I would] like to compare with something that is meaningful" and "don't know what it is."

Research on subject matter preferences could be designed to compare the effects of single subject matter (for example, a portrait of a child) versus multiple subject matter (for example, a photograph of a child in a street scene with cars, animals, and buildings) on art preferences of cognitively impaired and nonimpaired subjects. Such research also might provide empirical data on the use of art to stimulate conversation and reminiscences (Calkins, 1988; Hiatt, 1991; Knopman & Sawyer-DeMaris, 1990).

Further research might compare art style preferences of nursing home residents with other elderly populations, such as those in assisted living and those who live independently. Other variables to be considered might include gender, education, religion, and ethnic background. For example, the small number of male and female subjects in this study might have been insufficient to prove gender differences in art style preferences. Because all subjects in this study were Jewish, their responses might differ from non-Jewish nursing home residents.

This study showed that the cognitively impaired and cognitively unimpaired nursing home residents tested in the facility could express their art style preferences. Those preferences were clearly for photograph and photo realism. The results could be expected for persons of this age group who grew up in an era before the popularity of abstract and modern art.

Federal laws, such as the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1987, have emphasized that nursing homes facilitate resident participation in quality of life decisions. Hiatt (1991) recommended that the physical setting be matched with the residents' needs. She also suggested that

residents, families, staff, and community be given the opportunity to select art for the areas they would be most likely to use. Because residents use the same public spaces as visitors, however, it seems reasonable that they should be entitled to have their preferences included in the decision for art placement in such areas as lobbies, hallways, dining rooms, and living rooms.

This exploratory study provided empirical findings that can be used for further research on art preference as it affects the quality of life of nursing home residents. These findings can be made available to potential art donors to assist them in contributing art that can be most appreciated by the nursing home residents.

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