

“The Art of Recovery”

by Marion Shoard

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Churches sometimes struggle to find new ways of helping frail elderly and disabled people in their midst. Here Marion Shoard reports on the activities of Conquest Art, a voluntary organization with close links with churches which trains and supports volunteers who wish to help people with physical disabilities to forget their problems and gain skills and confidence through engaging in creative art work.

In 1938 a brilliant textile-designer arrived in England, after a traumatic journey through Czechoslovakia. A refugee from Nazi oppression in Germany, this young German-Jewish woman had been forced to abandon her studies at the prestigious Reimann School of Art in Berlin. She had also had to leave the church in Berlin where she had been confirmed by Pastor Gerhard Jacobi, a key figure in the German Protestant church's struggle against Nazism.

Wartime saw our young refugee working as a nursing auxiliary at a geriatric hospital in Richmond, Surrey. When war was over, Ursula married Ernest Hulme, also a refugee from Nazi Germany, and then, after taking British citizenship, she worked for several years as a freelance textile designer.

While engaged in voluntary work at this time at London's Middlesex Hospital, the head of occupational therapy introduced Ursula to Joy Oates, a young patient severely disabled by rheumatoid arthritis. Ursula managed to teach Joy to create textile designs. Later, Joy had become too disabled to move any of her limbs. But she still wanted to express herself through art: "If only something was hanging from the ceiling that I could touch with one finger and so make a line, how happy I would be!"

Ursula had long been searching for a way in which she could truly fulfil Pastor Jacobi's charge at her confirmation to love her neighbour as herself while also using her own artistic ability. From the moment when Joy voiced her longing and Ursula's brain set to work to devise a means to fulfil it, she knew that she had found her life's work: enabling physically disabled people to express themselves through art.

The mother of invention

Ursula went on to invent a range of ingenious devices to enable other severely disabled people to paint or draw. For one who could move only his head, she built a head clamp to which a brush or pencil could be fixed. For blind and partially sighted would-be artists, she hit upon the idea of giving them threads or blobs of blutac to shape on paper: as they feel the raised material, they can visualize the forms they are fashioning. Later they can colour in, if they wish.

When Ursula first started helping physically disabled people through art therapy, she would encourage them to paint flowers from Nature or still life. Now, she uses a completely different technique - the free doodle. She explained to me: "When I was very ill in Germany one year, I read in a book that you can draw with your eyes closed. That made me think I would try it, and I was so amazed: rather than doing technical work or copying something, I suddenly broke out into being able to draw from imagination or memory. That's why I still use the doodle with the eyes closed as my beginner's method.

"People close their eyes, think of nothing and make a doodle. I am sure it's something like reaching out to heaven or the Holy Spirit that gives them the ability to draw. When they open their eyes, they try to see what they can in that doodle. If they say, 'Oh, that is a flower, or that is an animal, or that is a face of somebody,' I say: 'Put eyes in the face'. And then next time I develop this, because it must be their main interest, or what they observe, or what they like. So that if it is a fish, next time we do a pond full of fish."

A movement is born

In the early years Ursula started up art therapy classes wherever she could - from local authority day centres to the TB and geriatric wards of hospitals, as well as independently. Then, in 1978, a church in Ewell, Surrey offered to host an Ursula-led class in response to local demand, and the vicar's wife, Pat Spurin, became the chair of what became the first branch of Conquest Art. Ursula and Ernest Hulme and other enthusiasts formed a charity to run classes wherever volunteers could be found to set up local branches. Today, there are nearly twenty, mainly in the south of England, and the charity would much like to see many more.

Conquest Art at Dorking in Surrey is a typical branch. Set up in 2003 by United Reform Church member Isabel Quilley (who recently moved to Great Malvern where she hopes to set up another), Dorking URC continues to provide space for free - for the weekly class, for storage of materials between classes and for occasional exhibitions. The branch is now led by Frances Harber (a Quaker), with Carol Edden (an Anglican), and Rosemary Horton (a member of a New Frontiers church) helping on alternate weeks. They get out the materials, then go from person to person, with words of encouragement, while providing any physical help necessary. In the middle of the afternoon they bring round cups of tea and biscuits or homemade cake to the twelve or so participants.

"Whatever you do is OK"

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Dorothy Phillips, one of the attenders at Dorking, told me: "I enjoy coming to Conquest Art because it's nice and peaceful. My hearing's not good; I used to attend U3A lectures years ago, but they're no good to me now because I can't hear very well. But I really enjoy coming here. I can sit and paint or draw, and just go into myself."

Sitting alongside Mrs. Phillips, Maria Brickwell commented: "I've done several silk scarves and it's very therapeutic. In the past I would have said I can't do art, but I was so excited after I completed my first painting on a silk scarf. It's emphasized here that you can't do it wrong – whatever you do is OK. There are certain colours that I think of as being my colours – blues, purples and mauves – soft colors, by and large. But I want to widen my horizons."

One of the exciting and liberating aspects of Conquest Art is the wide range of materials participants are encouraged to try out. Different members of a class might be absorbed in any one of the following activities: doodling with felt-tips; creating abstract patterns with pastels on paper or with paint on silk; painting representational pictures on paper, glass, plates or tiles; making picture collages using different types of fabric and/or cut-out illustrations from magazines; or marbling - you drop blobs of different coloured inks on to water in a tray, then imprint the pattern created as they mingle by placing a sheet of paper on the surface.

A key feature of Conquest Art's ethos is encouragement: nobody is ever criticized. One participant, Gladys Gibson, recalled years later Ursula's comment when she first arrived at a class. Forced to use her left arm as the right had been amputated after 18 unsuccessful operations, she lamented, "I can't even draw a straight line". Ursula's immediate rejoinder: "Wavy lines are much more interesting, my dear".

Ursula started Gladys off with marbling. This elderly woman, who was in a wheelchair, in constant physical pain and coping with the death of all six of her brothers and sisters, made remarkable progress, going on from marbling through other techniques to create precise, detailed paintings of flowers on silk, all with her left hand. When Ursula was trying to think of a name for her fledgling organization, she asked "Gibby", who replied: "Conquest over Disability". "Conquest: this is it!" exclaimed Ursula.

Relief, rehabilitation – and fun

For people who have been cut off from the outside world living alone or with one carer while coping with a challenging illness or disability, the positive encouragement and lack of any competitive spirit (as one sometimes finds in other art classes) can be tremendously helpful in building up social confidence. So too is the contact with others which develops as participants discuss each other's work and (often a completely new) interest in the visual arts. Gladys Gibson used to comment: "You can hear laughter even before you enter a Conquest class".

As well as relief and fun, Conquest Art can also bring rehabilitation and recovery. Doodling may seem on the face of things pointless, but one of its particular uses is acting as the first step to regaining dexterity. William Wilson found his previous life as a journalist and amateur pianist cut short by a massive stroke which left him paralyzed all down one side and unable to speak intelligibly, let alone to write. At Conquest he was helped to hold a pencil in his non-dominant hand and began to draw a little. Over the years, through painting, he learned to write again, and his speech improved. Ten years on, he was able to complete a set of complex and colourful watercolour illustrations for The Twelve Days of Christmas song.

What struck me about the Conquest Art work I saw at Ursula's studios and a recent highly successful exhibition at Dorking is the lightheartedness, sheer joie de vivre and real humour which pervade so much of it. I had expected to see variations of Edvard Munch's The Scream – expressions of anger and bitterness, dominated by tortured shapes and isolated souls. Not a bit. Far from dark and foreboding colours, vivid lemon and apple greens, warm oranges and peaches predominated. Very severely disabled have come to Conquest Art classes and there created joyful scenes of families and communities enjoying themselves at street parties, complete with bunting overhead; or carefree travellers wafting aloft in hot-air balloons amidst small airplanes; or a full orchestra of elegantly dressed, moustachioed cats.

Classes do not benefit only the participants themselves. Any family carers have free time while those for whom they care are busy in the class. The Conquest Art attender emerges with an interest which often spills over into their life throughout the week, altering the way in which they see the world and giving them a new-found passion they wish to discuss. It also provides plenty of two-way scope for birthday presents.

Before starting up a class, leaders receive one day's training at Conquest Art Centre at Ewell and £100-worth of art materials to get them started. Each branch is responsible for day-to-day running and finance; at Dorking a charge is made of £1 per week per head. Branches can refer back to the Ewell base at any time for ideas and advice, and they keep in touch with a Conquest Art magazine. Many volunteers have had some previous art training (although this is not essential) and find that their own artwork improves through the ideas sparked off at classes.

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If you are interested in learning more about Conquest Art, why not contact the organisation at;

Conquest Art Centre

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email: conquestart@hotmail.com

Website: www.conquestart.org.

A major exhibition is planned next year of the work of the people Conquest Art has helped over the years with that of Ursula Hulme, MBE, whose own portfolio includes highly original textile designs from her student days, grabbed by her mother as she fled from Germany.

Marion Shoard will be writing further articles for Plus on the range of ways in which churches can help frail older and disabled people.

If you know of any which you think might interest CCOA members, please contact;

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Marion@shoard.freeserve.co.uk. Marion is the author of a 640-page handbook published in 2004 entitled A Survival Guide to Later Life; her article Caring for Carers appeared in the April issue of Plus.