



The Life and Legacy of Robert Ault, Art Therapy Pioneer

Libby Schmanke

ROUTLEDGE


“It has been more than 15 years since the passing of pioneer art therapist Bob Ault, and Libby Schmanke has given us the gift of bringing him back among us. Both literally and figuratively, Bob was a towering figure who helped to galvanize and carry forward this incredible field. While there are many of us still around who knew him, I would imagine only a very few were privy to the depth and breadth of the numerous roads that Bob travelled. Libby has allowed us to travel these roads as if we’re walking alongside him. This all-encompassing series of essays, reflections, presentations, and musings is an indispensable resource that reminds us of the vision and fortitude that helped create this field and provides us with a prototype of what we could – and dare I say, should – be. Thank you, Libby, for this incredible gift.”

**David E. Gussak, Ph.D., ATR-BC, HLM, Professor of Art Therapy,
Florida State University, Program Coordinator of the FSU/FDC
Art Therapy in Prisons Program**

“Libby Schmanke captures the wisdom and character of art therapy pioneer Robert Ault as only she could, as a student, mentee, colleague, and friend. Schmanke’s words paint a portrait of a remarkable human being: a prolific painter, theorist, and innovator of art therapy, co-founder of the American Art Therapy Association, and founder of one of the first master’s programs in art therapy. After 50 years of advances in the fields, Schmanke’s biography of Robert Ault is a refreshing reminder for art therapists about our foundations in art and meaningful human interactions. Art therapy students and young professionals today may not be familiar with Robert Ault. It is important they are! Through this book, they will become grounded in the fundamental role of human relationship in art making and learn that many topics in the field today, from brain function to community settings, were addressed by Robert Ault.”

**Holly Feen-Calligan, Ph.D., ATR-BC, Art Therapy Program Director,
Wayne State University**

“Libby Schmanke has created a fabulous valentine for art therapists everywhere. In this book, both scholarly and personal, Schmanke has collected and annotated the often-unpublished works of Robert Ault, an original founder of art therapy whose work is still relevant today. In addition to his far-reaching accomplishments in professional service, academia, and the provision of therapy, Bob was an accomplished painter and a collector of jokes. He loved art therapy and called it ‘The Movement.’ He was a *mensch*, and Libby has done him proud.”

**Maxine Borowsky Junge, Ph.D., LCSW, ATR, Professor Emerita,
Loyola Marymount University**

“I joined the faculty of Emporia State University’s Division of Psychology and Special Education, as it was known at the time, in August 1986. Meeting my new colleague and Art Therapy Director Bob Ault was the beginning of a cherished friendship and my introduction to the dynamic discipline of Art Therapy. Undergraduate psychology majors in my Experimental Psychology course planning to pursue a master’s degree in Art Therapy used research in the discipline to meet the course’s requirements, which connected me with the abundance of empirical data that might be identified in works of art.

My conversations with Bob, listening to his presentations, and attending Kansas Art Therapy Association conferences provided building blocks of knowledge and experience to understand and appreciate the value of Bob’s clinical work, the research richness, and Bob’s leadership and impact on the discipline. Bob’s presence in Art Therapy was as indelible and vibrant as his presence in my life, and I am so grateful to Libby that her rich and engaging book will allow him to become known to a new generation.”

**Ken Weaver, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Psychology,
Emporia State University**



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THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ROBERT AULT, ART THERAPY PIONEER

This accessible book provides an edited and annotated compilation of selections of Robert Ault's previously unpublished work, from presentations at psychiatric conferences to examples of his paintings and drawings.

Ault's manuscripts for presentations, workshop protocols, and art therapy directives that are otherwise unavailable are of great value to current and future art therapists and clinicians in fields like expressive arts therapy, counseling, social work, and psychology. As a mentee and close friend of Ault for the decade before his death, and with access to the full range of his unpublished and self-published material, author Libby Schmanke is ideally qualified to provide biographical and historical context and personal observations.

This reference is beneficial for conceptualizing and applying art therapy, as well as having the historical value of preserving and honoring the work of a pioneer who sought to keep the art in art therapy.

Libby Schmanke, MS, ATR-BC, ATCS, LCAC, MAC, is a longtime faculty member of the Emporia State University graduate art therapy program and the author of *Art Therapy and Substance Abuse*.



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Libby Schmanke

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*Dedicated to the past, present, and future students of
the graduate art therapy program at Emporia State
University: may this book inspire you to carry Bob's
legacy into the world.*

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Libby Schmanke, MS, ATR-BC, ATCS, LCAC, MAC, is Associate Professor at the Emporia State University graduate art therapy program, where she has been on the faculty since 2002. Prior to that time, she had a 14-year career in addictions counseling, incorporating art processes into treatment protocols. For nearly ten years, while teaching in a half-time faculty role, she ran a private practice specializing in art therapy to treat addictions and trauma. In 2014, she became a full-time faculty member, and in 2017, Jessica Kingsley Ltd. published her single-author text, *Art Therapy and Substance Abuse*, which is the first and only book devoted

solely and comprehensively to this topic. She is a co-author, with Huxtable and Wolf Bordonaro, of *A Graphic Guide to Art Therapy* (2022). Libby served for 12 years with the Art Therapy Credentials Board on its board of directors and committees and regularly presents about art therapy and addictions at national conferences. Her own artmaking and her friendship with Robert Ault have been foundational aspects of her life.

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No author is an island. I am truly grateful to the following people, without whose assistance this book would not have been possible.

Marilynn Ault, friend for years now, and widow of Bob, you've been eager to see this book come into being for a long time! Thank you for your unfailing support of this project as it evolved and for your support of the profession of art therapy for nearly all the decades of its existence.

Judy Rubin, friend and esteemed icon of our profession, thank you for writing the perfect heartwarming prelude to this book. I'm grateful to have known you better, for your having visited us in Kansas for such memorable times.

Maxine Borowsky Junge, your recommendation to accompany my book proposal to the publisher was unequivocal about me being the one to write this book. I took this as a high compliment, coming from one who had been Bob's close friend for years and who supplied the primary sources we have today for reading about his historical contributions to the field (reader, see Junge in the appendix!). As did your old friend, may you make art and revel in your retirement!

Cynthia Kane, Emporia State University Libraries and Archives, thank you for your ever-cheerful assistance with my most nagging queries. Bob's publication in a discontinued personnel journal would never have seen the light of day in modern times, were it not for your detective work to find the current copyright holder.

Graduate assistants at Emporia State University, you spared me weeks of agony by re-typing Bob's typewriter-produced papers. Haley Vivone, Vivian Mosier, Kristina Carbrey, Rachel Dahl, and Abby Stephens, thank you so much for your efforts. Willa Frazer, your enthusiasm and aptitude for research have been a boon to me in wrapping up some obscure details.

Gaelynn Wolf Bordonaro, colleague and director of our graduate program, thank you for having photographed some of Bob's paintings that are included here. To you and Clara Corn, our colleague on the ESU art therapy faculty: I am always grateful to both of you, perhaps most especially for our ongoing friendship and our relaxing Friday get-togethers (er, program meetings!).

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FOREWORD

Being With Bob

I am grateful to Libby Schmanke for introducing my beloved and much-admired friend, Bob Ault, to a new generation of art therapists. Bob was original, in every sense of that word. He was a gifted artist whose art, like his thinking, continued to evolve in new and fascinating ways during the 38 years I had the pleasure of knowing him. Like most highly creative people, Bob was always curious, always sincerely interested in new ideas and people, and, like my friend and colleague Fred (Mister) Rogers, he was always humble and genuinely excited about learning.

Being with Bob was like eating a chocolate ice cream sundae with hot fudge sauce. For me that has always been a heavenly combination – dense, rich, and nourishing. That was also true about being with Bob. It may sound like hyperbole, but it's the truth.

Of course, unlike eating a sundae, I didn't simply ingest what he offered, that is too asymmetrical a metaphor. Maybe being with Bob was more like dancing with an amazingly sensitive partner, where the interaction was relaxed and comfortable, and a feeling of mutual attunement was present throughout.

I can't honestly say exactly when we became friends as well as acquaintances. It evolved gradually during the early 1970s when we were each busy helping the young American Art Therapy Association get on its feet. Bob was the second president of the organization; I was the fifth. We never served on the same Board, but we did work with the same individuals, most of them older than us.

We were the same age and had many other things in common, both personally and professionally. We were each married to speech therapists and had

young families. We worked in treatment settings that served both inpatients and outpatients and were being clinically trained by psychiatrists who were also psychoanalysts.

I think our shared experience as artists who were supervised by analysts created a bond that enabled us to discuss our clinical work with a common language. Perhaps even more of a connection was that we were each relatively young leaders in an organization that had been inspired by the writings and efforts of our elders, many of whom remained active in its development.

Bob had been a member of the five-person committee that created Bylaws for the new national art therapy association that had been voted into existence at a meeting I had not been able to attend. The other members of that group were folks I had met and we both got to know the primary players very well. We enjoyed reminiscing about the drama of the early years, recalling both the personalities and the politics with a shared affection and admiration for everyone involved.

That was one of the many wonderful things about Bob; he was compassionate and kind, accepting and understanding of peoples' foibles and vulnerabilities. Bob genuinely liked almost everyone, even those whose characteristics led to friction with others. It was fun to reminisce about dramatic moments in our art therapy family history with someone else who knew the players and who liked them as much as I did.

But being with Bob was certainly not limited to discussing people or situations we both enjoyed recalling. What was infinitely more exciting was to exchange our developing ideas about theory and practice, about what really went on when one person was trying to help another person to grow while creating art. We were equally dedicated to the power of art therapy, equally curious about trying to understand the reasons it was so effective, and equally passionate about spreading the word to the public as well as to other professionals.

Libby has asked that I describe memorable moments with Bob, of which there were many. One that stands out, perhaps because of his investment in the relationship, was when he introduced me to Elizabeth ("Grandma") Layton, a woman whose recovery from a lifelong depression by doing contour drawings inspired and fascinated him. Bob became a close friend, supporter, and promoter of this talented lady; and he was also profoundly curious about how and why that practice had been so helpful to her. He began to invite his students and some of his depressed patients to draw contour self-portraits while looking at a mirror as Elizabeth had; and he also wrote and thought about the phenomenon and what it might reveal about how the mind worked.

Getting to Emporia, Kansas, was never easy, even before I needed to use a cane or a walker, and I am certain that all of my travels to the Kansas Art Therapy Association or the graduate program he founded at Emporia State were motivated primarily by a desire to spend time with Bob. And that is because, as noted



FIGURE 05.1 Bob and Judy relax at an Emporia restaurant after the close of the ESU annual art therapy conference in 2005.

earlier, it was always so pleasurable, even if the issues we were discussing were sad or painful or difficult. Being able to face the truth with a person as authentic as Bob was liberating. There was nothing superficial about him, nothing but depth in his thinking, his painting, and his very being.

I feel blessed to have had the good fortune of getting to know and love Bob Ault, a true pioneer in the field of art therapy, and a wonderfully kind, caring, and stimulating friend. He was extremely bright, perhaps overly modest, and a creative thinker who I believe was ahead of his time. I am so glad that you, the reader, are about to be introduced to some of his unpublished work. I thank Libby for putting this book together and for inviting me to say a bit about a very special fellow.

Being with Bob was truly wonderful for me, and I hope you will have the same experience as you read his thoughtful ideas and see his wonderful artwork.

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PREFACE

“Here I am at 68, having the best of all worlds.” I quote from Bob’s 2005 speech at Emporia State University, which is included as the final manuscript in this book. He had returned, after ten years of retirement from ESU, to provide a plenary luncheon address for our annual art therapy conference, excited that his old friend Judy Rubin was flying in to be our keynote.

That particular phrase didn’t stand out to me at the time, but it was touching for me to read as I prepared this book. Although I won’t be retiring from ESU that soon, I can say the same thing at the same age, when this book goes to press. It has been a long birth, in many ways more difficult than was the creation of my 2017 single-author text, *Art Therapy and Substance Abuse*. That book arose from my own 25 years of experience using art to work with people in addictions. This one required me to be an editor, and in places nearly a ghost writer, an annotator, and a historian; all while tiptoeing, so as not to disrupt the marvelous aura of a man who I admired and was fortunate to have for a mentor and friend.

As I described more fully in the preface to my first book, I met Bob after I was many years into a career as an addictions counselor and program coordinator in Kansas. I was an artist and a recovering person myself, and I incorporated art experiences into my treatment services. I discovered how they could level the playing field for people who had difficulty articulating their experience verbally, due to trauma history or lack of education; and I affirmed my experience that art provided an expressive container for those who had formerly medicated their feelings with substance use. However, until I had a life-changing chat with Marilyn Ault, whom I knew only as the director of the local domestic violence agency, I had no clue that “art therapy” existed. (It may be difficult for younger