

# The Art of Incarcerated Women: Its Functions and Consequences in the Culture of Taycheedah Correctional Institution

Rachel M. Williams

Copyright © 1999 Working Papers in Art Education.

---

## Recommended Citation

Williams, Rachel M. "The Art of Incarcerated Women: Its Functions and Consequences in the Culture of Taycheedah Correctional Institution." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 15 (1999): 34-42.

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## **The Art of Incarcerated Women: Its Functions and Consequences in the Culture of Taycheedah Correctional Institution**

**Rachel M. Williams**

### **Abstract**

This research documents the art, experience, and institutional journey of women who are incarcerated at Taycheedah Correctional Institution (T.C.I.) in Wisconsin. Using quasi-ethnographic methods, 31 women were interviewed for a period of 30 minutes to one hour. Four women agreed to engage in intense conversations with the researcher for a period of eight weeks; during this time, case studies were constructed using information and artifacts gathered through these interviews. The theoretical implications for this study should be viewed in the larger realm of interdisciplinary knowledge that is constructed using a historical analysis of the culture, ideas about the culture of other women's prisons taken from feminist criminology scholars, and the context of art that has traditionally been produced in prisons. The propositions that were explored focus on art's functions within the culture of T.C.I. and the lives of these individual women.

Lucy Lippard (1995) states, "Clearly everyone looks forward to the time when the distinctions between male and female are minimized and equalized. This will not happen until we understand the elements and conditions that underlie the experience of each sex" (p. 38). This notion is true in terms of modern day correctional systems. Male and female offenders have different experiences, different needs, and different circumstances that encompass their present lives, offenses, and institutional journeys. One way to determine the constituents and circumstances that surround the experience of incarcerated women and men is to engage in dialog with them and examine the products of the culture in which they exist. These products and conversations offer a reflection of culture.

Anderson (1995) states that, "... a number of thinkers claim that the structures and institutions of culture, including language and the arts, frame the consciousness of those embedded in culture" (p. 202). Graeme Chalmers (1996) addresses this idea in a very concise manner in his text, *Celebrating Pluralism*. He discusses how various individuals have addressed the idea of art's function. Why is art made? What is art and, what is art for? These are important questions that can be addressed by looking at the functions of art within the contextual culture of prison.

In the past, there has been little written about women offenders and even less about their art and culture. The culture of incarcerated men has been the focus of criminology scholars for many decades, however the culture of incarcerated women has only been investigated in depth during the past three decades. The artifacts and art of incarcerated men have been recently examined

by Phyllis Kornfeld (1997). Her book merely grazes the surface of the art and artifacts of women who are incarcerated. Miriam Liebmann (1994) also examined the art and artifacts of incarcerated men and women who engaged in art therapy, but only a small portion of the book was devoted to the images and experience of incarcerated women.

Part of this paucity is due to the ratio of incarcerated women to incarcerated men. The majority of the incarcerated population is male, but over the past few decades the population of incarcerated women has risen. It is of growing importance to devote more time to researching this expanding population. In 1995, women made up 10% of the jailed population, 6% of the state prison population, and 7.5% of the federal institution population (Chesney-Lind, 1997). In the past four years these figures have continued to rise. Women often are overlooked, because of their small numbers, by researchers. Dixon, Fletcher, and Moon (1993) cite, as further reasons for the paucity of research in the area of female incarceration, that females are less "criminal," in terms of the crimes that they commit than their male counterparts, and most people in academic posts of power are male, including correctional scientists. In order to understand and compensate for the needs and unique culture of women who are incarcerated, more research is necessary in this area. Looking at the art of women who are incarcerated and engaging in a dialog about the functions of the art, the culture that produced it, and women's existence within that culture can contribute more information to the shrinking void of research in this area.

The method employed in this research is important, it was developed using feminist criminology scholar's previous work in this field as an example (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1990). The simple conversational ethnographic approach of this research was also inspired by Suzi Gablik's (1995) text, *Conversations before the end of time*. She engages in dialog with many artists to try and discover the meaning of art in our time. She quotes David Bohm in her preface:

This is part of what I consider dialogue--for people to realize what is on each other's minds without coming to any conclusions or judgments. In a dialog we have to sort of weigh the question a little, ponder it a little, feel it out. . . .Then everybody is sensitive to all the nuances going around and not merely what is happening in his [sic] own mind (p. 25-26).

This research parallels Gablik's approach and approaches employed by feminist criminologists by using conversation as a way to construct meaning. The topic itself relates to the needs of incarcerated women, the methods employed were qualitative, and the process rejects the objective paradigm of interviewing (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1990). The conversations that took place had a profound effect on the content of this research and the personal philosophy of the researcher. These conversations caused a conscious reshaping of personal values, an extension of empathy, and a more developed understanding of incarcerated women to occur in the researcher. Another by-product of these conversations was the view that they offered into the daily experience of being incarcerated.

Garber (Collins & Sandell, 1996) states that, "A narrative and conversation imply an emphasis on understanding and acceptance, rather than judgment" (p. 25). These are important facets to entertain when looking at the culture and artifacts of incarcerated individuals. The status of incarcerated women in society has so many stereotypes, and negative images attached that it becomes easy to assume a superior position, lack empathy, and pass judgment. Prison is a restrictive environment, conversation was employed as a method that would allow the researcher to function as participant-observer within the culture. In order to be a participant and an observer of culture one must relegate themselves in the culture and understand how this position is affected by their conditioning within their native culture. The artifacts and art of incarcerated women must be viewed from a position both outside and within our popular culture. At first this seems like an impossible outlook, but one must realize that inmates are minor participants of mainstream culture; they consume information from the culture as well as a miniature proportion of the goods produced within the larger culture of North America. T.C.I. also contributes to the North American culture through a small number of goods, employment, and services. Simultaneously, inmates are set apart from mainstream culture through a system of separation and isolation. They are part of the culture of the institution which provides the structure of their daily lives and interactions. This culture is foreign to members of our larger society that are not incarcerated or employed by a correctional facility. North America's grasp of correctional culture is largely based on movies, literature, and the media. These ideas tend to be somewhat false in portraying the everyday existence of a typical inmate. They often fail to portray the monotony, social system, oppression, personal conflicts, and needs of inmates; instead they focus on the sensational by addressing topics such as sexual violence.

A goal of this research was to examine the role of art within the culture of T.C.I. and employ artifacts as a vehicle for conversation. This entails maintaining the view that art is a product of culture. Garber (Collins & Sandell, 1996) stresses:

Understanding an artwork as part of a cultural narrative--that is, as part of the history as well as an outgrowth of the nutrient experiences of its maker--makes it easier to learn to think about art as a cultural artifact related to its maker's cultural environment (p. 25).

Art was a vehicle for conversation, and it also reflected the inmate's values, through its form and purpose. Art and art making have specific functions within any culture. At T.C.I. art served many functions and there were many reasons that inmates produced art. There were many emergent themes visible in the art-making, art, and culture of T.C.I.: separation, human relations, deprivation, spirituality, creativity, and exposition, necessity, and comfort. These themes were identified through conversation, imagery, symbolism, and purpose.

The function of the art and art-making is often tied to the needs of the individual who created it. These needs are connected to the women's roles in the culture and their interaction with other individuals. The women who identified themselves as artists could be classified into a few distinct groups: (a) those who

participated in the popular art of the culture through correspondence, knitting and cards; (b) those that had previous training in the arts that used art works as commodities and acted in a similar manner to practicing artists in the free world through their research, production, and art-making habits; (c) those that made art as a meditational exercise to relieve stress or boredom; (d) those that engaged in art-making to establish an identity and elevate their status. Many women fell into two or three of these categories. The women added to this characterization by separating art and artist by their methods of production. Value was associated with art that was “freehanded;” less value was attached to art or artists that traced. After these initial findings were established the women that agreed to participate in the construction of case studies, Hannah, Tabitha, and Ann, revealed even further clues about the art and culture of T.C.I.

Hannah, Tabitha, and Ann have many factors in common. They are all classified as maximum security inmates, they are all serving long-term sentences, each was involved in a homicide, they are Wisconsin natives, and they all identified themselves as artists. These three women began to develop a serious interest in art-making during their incarceration in county jail, preceding their entrance into T.C.I. County jail is a transitional time for most inmates to come to terms with their life, ideas, beliefs, and identity. It is a nexus of personal change for many women.

Each feels as though prison has changed their lives, the images they hold of themselves, their spirituality, and their ideas about others. Much of this change is characterized as positive. These similarities lead to questions which involved the initial interviews of 31 women, in addition to the specific cases of Hannah, Tabitha, and Ann. At the center of these questions are issues surrounding the artists’ commonality and unique differences. The following etic issues are important to consider: (a) what led the women to produce art, (b) how they produce art, (c) what sort of obstacles they overcome, (d) where they make art, (e) how they decide on content, (f) what are the perceived benefits, (g) how does art-making affect their life and status at the institution, (h) what do they do with the art they produce, and (i) what are their long-range plans.

Many of these questions were easily answered after the first round of conversations with 31 women were completed. Additional information was gathered through case studies. The women at T.C.I. have access to traditional non-toxic art materials such as colored pencils, markers, and graphite pencils through the canteen. Women also incorporated everyday objects into their art-making such as sanitary napkin wrappers, tin foil, toothpaste, and ashes. In addition to canteen materials and non-traditional materials, the women are allowed to order some materials such as yarn and chalk from retail magazines.

Many inmates turned to art as a way to construct gifts for family members, fend off boredom, gain commodities and status, and establish some sort of identity within the culture. Some of the largest obstacles that inmates must overcome are the shortage and poor quality of materials, the storage of objects, and the rules that determine what is contraband. For example inmates are only allowed to keep 25 sheets of paper at one time, including letters, drawings, and

blank sheets. The paper that is available for them to draw on, within the institution, is yellow legal paper, and white typing paper. Another example of a necessary restriction is if the women produce anything that is over a certain size it must immediately be sent home, or destroyed if the inmate can not afford the postage.

The content of the art that is produced is usually taken from magazines, “jail male,” or photographs. If an image is captivating enough it might be “filed” for future use or circulated among inmates for the purpose of tracing. This flow of imagery for reproduction is culturally unique. Much of the imagery that is passed around is taken from envelopes sent into the institution by male inmates incarcerated in other facilities throughout the state. This mail is referred to as “jail male.” It is filled with popular imagery such as hearts, bars, birds, animals, cartoons, and portraits. The imagery infiltrates and becomes the popular imagery of the culture. Thereby creating a reciprocal relationship between male and female institutional imagery. T.C.I. does not sanction imagery that employs nudity, is erotic, gang related, or related to escape plans. This imagery is produced, but it is concealed from the administration. The administration also forbids the practice of tattooing. This practice is not commonplace, but does occur.

There are many benefits that the inmates pointed out that occur as a by-product of making art. Some of these benefits include: stress relief, positive personal expression, and the ability to structure some aspect of the environment and culture, thus adding an element of personal control to their lives at the institution. Confinement, boredom, and isolation are the main complaints about prison. Art making helps to make these burdens more bearable. Hannah, Tabitha, and Ann produce much of their art when confined to their cells. The day space is another popular area in which to produce art. However, it is a public area so creating art will draw attention to the artist. This attention can bring both status and obligation. Many inmates design envelopes in exchange for cigarettes, canteen, and stamps. The three women I interviewed had different opinions about the day space. Hannah socialized in the day space with her close friend and sometimes her roommate. Ann and Tabitha both found that the day space was an area where conflicts and rumors can easily erupt into physical or psychological violence. Sometimes the deals that are struck concerning canteen are not completed and conflict can arise. Each artist I interviewed had different opinions about publicly acknowledging their art-making.

Some of the inmates did have long-range plans that incorporated their art-making. Hannah plans to open a shop and sell a line of clothes that she wants to design, as well as tattoos, and music. Ann wants to pursue her career as a writer, and Tabitha simply wants to return home. Many of these questions, such as subject matter, the functions of the artifacts produced, and the impact of art making were easily answered.

Further emic issues emerged such as (a) what constitutes art in the culture, (b) what implications does this research have, (c) how does the experience of making art affect an inmate’s institutional journey, (d) how does art function within the culture, (e) and how have these conversations affected art making? Because of the variety of artifacts that were presented by inmates, the

definition of art within the culture is broadly defined to include traditional art forms, knitting, and latch hook, but also untraditional images and objects such as tattoos, boxes made from cardboard and covered with sanitary napkins, greeting cards and envelopes.

The implications of this research stem from the value of art within the culture of the incarcerated. Art-making allows individuals to exercise control over their environment, Dissanayake (1992) has a theory that art is a biological need; it is pleasurable; it helps us generate order and control which enables us to blend culture and nature; the arts enhance our bodies and culture; art helps us to feel what others feel; it connects us to the world through materials, aesthetics and emotions. The stories of Hannah, Tabitha and Ann further clarify many of these issues, and define even further the role of art in the culture of T.C.I., and the experience of life as an incarcerated woman.

Hannah, a 20 year old African-Anglo-American, who is serving a long term sentence in the max building, is technically skilled. She produces the majority of her art for the purpose of correspondence and gift-giving. Her images are inspired by tattoo art, her friends, magazines, and her family. She renders many of her images as centrally isolated, with colored pencils on white paper. Hannah does not create images in exchange for material goods, nor does she publicly identify herself as an artist at T.C.I. She engages in art production much like a professional artist by creating deadlines, developing project lists, engaging in research, and constructing ideas from the culture. One example of her culturally inspired work is an envelope that contains an image incorporating her prison identification number, barbed wire, brick walls, and the silhouette of a woman. This artifact, specifically created as a product of the culture of T.C.I., was produced for the purpose of correspondence.

Hannah is also learning to knit. She was taught by her roommate and finds that knitting is not only functional, inexpensive to produce, and soothing, but could also open the door for prison employment in the community service project. Currently she is unemployed. Her first swatch is based on a sunset that she had seen from the bars of her cell. She quickly sketched it and diagrammed the position of each color in relation to the horizon. This sketch later served as Hannah's pattern. Hannah produces artifacts, such as drawings, envelopes, and knitting, as a remedy for passing time, as memorialization of her past, to communicate, to give gifts to others, and as a manifestation of expression.

Tabitha, a 27 year-old Anglo-American, produced art for similar reasons. She, like Ann and Hannah, began to create art on a daily basis in county jail. Before her incarceration she was a graffiti artist, and used art to mark her "squad's" territory and intimidate others. She has been living in the max building for the past four years; she will not meet with the parole board until 2021. The artifacts that she shared during our discussions were her latest attempts at portraiture, envelope art, and graffiti inspired drawings. Tabitha's development as an artist parallels her personal development. Tabitha seems to struggle with the self-proclaimed image of "the cold-hearted, dominating woman;" this was her street persona. This persona is linked to rap music and to her graffiti drawings.

This particular persona seems to represent to Tabitha all that is evil or negative in her character. Her attempt to divorce herself from her graffiti as a meaningless activity and shed her original persona are connected.

The other side of Tabitha is a mature woman, who has not only power and responsibility, but is helpful, generous, and giving. This side of Tabitha is family-focused, spiritual, and intent on personal fulfillment. This side seems to be metaphorically reflected in Tabitha's portrait making. Portrait making is a new way to express her ideas. Many of her portraits are of individuals that she is close to, unlike her graffiti characters who are based on cartoons or stereotypes. These stereotypes also influence Tabitha's cold-hearted dominating woman image that is associated with "gangsta's and thugs." Even Tabitha's choice of music reflects this split. She says that when she draws graffiti she listens to rap music. In contrast, while drawing portraits she enjoys softer progressive music.

My conversations with Tabitha were difficult because we were so close in age, and we share the culture of the late eighties and early nineties with nostalgia. I am horrified by her crime, but really enjoyed seeing her develop as an artist. During our seven conversations many different themes emerged: (a) art-making, (b) development, both artistic and personal, (c) time, (d) relationships, (e) and power. Each of these topics resulted in stress, happiness, and reflection.

For Tabitha, art-making relieves stress, allows expression, fills time, helps her to reach out, and to gain commodities. Part of the process of art-making for Tabitha is the exploration of new techniques, new materials, and new information. She seems to be looking for a formula that will equal success. Each week she would bring drawings that demonstrated her skillful advancement. Part of this development was perhaps spurred by our conversations and the attention she received from myself, her friends, and her teacher, an incarcerated male.

Her teacher writes letters with accurate diagrams that depicted the academic practice of constructing portraits with colored pencils. He also inspired her to purchase a text on anatomy, pastel paper, and professional quality colored pencils. These materials, his letters, her family's strong approval, the satisfaction that she gains, and the potential to sell her portraits to other inmates are the motivating forces behind Tabitha's exploration of portraiture.

Ann, a 30 year-old Anglo-American, is also confined to the max building. She has lived at T.C.I. for six years and is serving a life sentence. Ann brought up many themes over and over again in our conversations. She also presented me with several writings that were the result of our conversations. She even shared a journal entry from 1993, the first year she spent at T.C.I. These have proven invaluable for their insights, but have also helped me understand Ann as a writer. These writings further clarify the categories of conversations that we had. Ann's art production is minimal in comparison to Tabitha or Hannah. She makes cards, writes poetry, and knits. Occasionally she will create an artifact that is symbolic of a ritual or a relationship.

Two examples of art-making as a memorialization of ritual were shared during our conversations. The first was a tattoo on Ann's left ring finger. It was produced at T.C.I. using water, ashes, and a needle. The meaning behind the tattoo stemmed from an old relationship Ann had with a former inmate. Another artifact that Ann created was a ring woven from thread. It was produced as part of a wedding ceremony between Ann and her girlfriend Ester. Ann's art-making is meaningful, and it is made as a response to events, emotions, and as a form of communication. Her knitting serves as a commodity exchanged for money. I was never able to see her knitting, and under the circumstances of community service as employment, I am unsure if Ann would consider it art.

Ann was chosen as a case study for several reasons. She is open and willing to candidly discuss her life experiences and her institutional journey, she produced art, and she has been at T.C.I. for six years, this was one of the longest period of time that was found when completing initial interviews. She also seems to have a good relationship with the staff. I felt that her opinion would present a perspective of the staff's influence on inmate culture.

There are several threads that ran through our conversations. Some of the larger themes are: (a) isolation, (b) communication, (c) life in prison, (d) spirituality, (e) identity, (f) art, (g) relationships, (h) and family. These general categories fail to describe to nuances of our conversations, but they do provide a pathway to analysis. Ann's sexuality is one of the main issues that can be identified in our conversations as a factor in her isolation. She is a lesbian, and strongly considers this fact to have influenced her institutional journey.

Ann's art is created primarily for expression, as correspondence, to boost her self-esteem, to establish an identity, to commemorate rituals and relationships, and as therapy. Most of her work is in the form of writing and poetry, but she also creates visual images. Ann's insight into the culture of the prison, the interaction with others in her life, and her institutional journey are all important components of our conversations.

Obviously, art is visible within the institutions that our society relies on for the correction of people deemed deviant, criminal, and socially dysfunctional. One question that further research could perhaps give some insight to is, does art within this context function just as it would in most other societies/cultures? Art and artifacts have been prevalent in other cultures throughout time. Staniszweski (1995) states:

The most powerful and obvious truths within cultures are often the things that are not said and not directly acknowledged. In the modern era, this has been the case with Art. Everything we know about ourselves and our world is shaped by our histories. Nothing is "natural in the sense that it can be outside of its particular time and place. When we see, feel, touch, think, remember, and invent, create and dream, we must use our cultural symbols and "languages," Art holds a particularly visible and privileged place. By looking at Art, we can begin to understand the way our representations acquire meaning and power (p. 1).

## References

- Anderson, T. (1995). Toward a Cross-Cultural Approach to Art Criticism. **Studies in Art Education Journal of issues and Research**, 36 (4), 198-209.
- Brandreth, G. (1972). *Created in Captivity*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Cleveland, W. (1992). **Art in Other Places**. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Chalmers, F.G. (1996). **Celebrating Pluralism**. Los Angeles: The J.P. Getty Trust.
- Chesney-Lind, M. (1997). **The Female Offender**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Collins, G. & Sandell, R. (1996). **Gender Issues in Art Education: Content, Context, and Strategies**. Reston: The National Art Education Association.
- Dissanayake, E. (1992). **Homoaestheticus**. New York: The Free Press.
- Dixon, L., Fletcher, G., Moon, D. (1993). **Women Prisoners: a Forgotten Population**. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Gablik, S. (1995). **Conversations Before the End of Time**. New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Gibbons, J. (1997). Struggle and Catharsis: Art in Women's Prisons. **The Journal of Arts Management Law and Society**, 27(1): Spring: 72-80.
- Harrington, C.L. (1997). Time to Piddle: Death Row Incarceration, Crafts work, and The Meaning of Time. **The Journal of Arts Management Law and Society**, 27 (1), Spring: 51-70.
- Kornfeld, P. (1997). **Cellblock Visions**. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Liebmann, M. (1994). **Art Therapy with Offenders**. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Lippard, L. (1995). **The Pink Glass Swan**. New York: The New Press.
- Staniszewski, M.A. (1995). **Believing is Seeing**. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.