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The Persistence of Memories

Pioneering programs at MoMA and other museums show that engagement with modern art can improve quality of life for Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers

Francesca Rosenberg leads people with Alzheimer's and their caretakers in a discussion at the Museum of Modern Art.

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Kirstin Broussard, a guide at the Museum of Modern Art, gathered a dozen senior citizens in front of Joan Mitchell's exuberant 1957 painting *Ladybug* one recent afternoon to discuss the luscious blue, green, and orange slashes animating the large expanse of white canvas. "It's chaotic," observed one visitor. "But it's beautiful chaos." When Broussard wondered aloud why Mitchell had titled the picture *Ladybug*, another member of the group suggested that it captured the spirit of spring. "No! It's set in winter," protested another. "Look at all that white." And a fourth participant offered up the ditty: "Ladybug, ladybug, fly away."

Had other visitors passed this group, they might not have guessed that the participants had something in common in addition to the their ages: Alzheimer's. Part of the museum's broader effort to reach diverse and underserved audiences—such as people with vision, hearing, physical, or developmental disabilities—the "Meet Me at MoMA" tours give people with dementia and their caregivers a chance to enjoy modern art.

MoMA's pioneering work with the Alzheimer's population began in 2006 with a pilot program at a nursing home, developed by Francesca Rosenberg, director of the education department's Community, Access, and School programs. In 2007, the MetLife Foundation awarded Rosenberg and her team a $450,000 grant to develop an arts-and-dementia program that could be adopted by other institutions. A second grant of $400,000 two years later funded an outreach effort that saw MoMA educators visiting institutions around the world to train museum professionals, caregivers, teachers, and health-care providers. A third MetLife gift, earlier this year, will underwrite yet more training.

In late March, more than 100 experts in Alzheimer's programming met at MoMA for a daylong summit. Museum educators from as close as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and as far away as Oslo and Tokyo gathered to hear neurologists, teachers, and Alzheimer's sufferers themselves discuss the disease and how an involvement with art can improve the quality of life for many patients and their caregivers.

Keynote speaker Richard Taylor, a Texas psychologist who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's eight years ago, at the age of 58, urged the audience to stop thinking of Alzheimer's as a death sentence

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and to see it like any other chronic condition. "I need to be enabled, not disabled," he said. Each patient experiences a different progression of the disease, he explained, and each patient deserves to be seen as a "whole person living with dementia" who needs companionship, conversation, and stimulation. About 5 million Americans are currently diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Visual art is particularly well suited to helping Alzheimer's patients, research has found. According to Anne Basting, director of the Center on Age and Community at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, art can trigger the emotional memory that often remains strong in Alzheimer's patients, and can give them access to other memories as well. And participants in art tours don't feel that they must already know something or that they will be expected to remember dates, names, or information. "The beautiful part of the program is that nobody mentions the word dementia. It's all about the art, and they can all connect to that. Nobody's sick, nobody's different," is how Kara Berringer, an art therapist at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum, explains the benefits of the program.

Research by the Ad Arte project in Naples, Italy, has demonstrated that exploring art encourages patients to speak and increases their self-esteem. Other studies have shown that people with Alzheimer's are able to rank their favorite colors, demonstrate esthetic preferences, and make associations between painted and real objects long after other kinds of memory recede. In St. Louis, the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts builds on "profound ability" of Alzheimer's patients "to live in the moment" by bringing them together with schoolchildren who use storytelling and movement to enhance discussions about art. And, according to a recent report by the New York Consortium for Alzheimer's Research and Education, "there was a significant improvement in mood of both family caregivers and people with dementia that was measurable immediately, and sustained for at least a week" after art tours.

Diana Holbrook, a volunteer for "Meet me at MoMA," can attest to this benefit. Her husband, David, an original participant in the program, looked forward to the monthly outings. "I'm learning so much," he would tell his wife. They would talk all evening about the work they had seen that day. "For me, it was something I could enjoy with him. I didn't have to protect him," Holbrook says. After he died, in 2008, she became a volunteer.

A key component of the many programs seeded by MoMA and MetLife is that caretakers participate in the discussions, providing a fresh conversation about a shared experience and also helping to ameliorate the isolation of caretaking. As MoMA educator Riva Blumenfeld notes, "50 percent is for the caregivers rather than for the patients." She remembers a visit by an Alzheimer's patient and her curator daughter, who had an "amazing interaction" in the galleries. Being able to discuss art made the mother "proud of her daughter again, proud of what she did, and happy that they could connect," Blumenfeld said.

Institutions that offer Alzheimer's programming also stand to benefit. At the recent summit, Yale theater professor and critic Elinor Fuchs stressed that "engagement is the most important thing we can learn from this discussion. The learning process soars in groups." Fuchs is the author of a memoir about her mother's struggle with Alzheimer's, *Making an Exit*.

According to Amir Parsa, former director of MoMA's Alzheimer's Project (he is now chairperson of art and design education at Pratt Institute), working with Alzheimer's patients has changed education department pedagogy for all types of visitors. "In other educational interactions, we did not necessarily champion personal narratives intervening,

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because we were very focused on information transfer," he says. "With this group, we absolutely have to allow it. The digression allows them to internalize the meaning of the work in a very personal way. And we now believe we should allow this with all populations."

Back in the MoMA galleries for another tour, Rosenberg engaged her group in a discussion of Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*. One visitor said that she enjoyed looking for the differences and similarities among the cans. A second noted that the monumental series made her remember the different varieties of soup she ate in her youth. And a third observed that the paintings had greater impact as a group rather than as individual images.

Rosenberg described how a silk screen is made. She explained that the series represented each of the 32 soup varieties available when Warhol painted the piece, in 1962. "The label has been the same since the 19th century," she added. Then, describing Warhol's Factory and the social life his circle enjoyed at Studio 54, she playfully asked her group if anyone had ever been to either place.

Participants laughed and shook their heads. "And what were you doing in the '60s?" she asked. "Raising a family," responded one participant. "Working all the time," said another, shaking his head. Before returning to her script, Rosenberg let these memories linger for a few minutes, as her group smiled and reconnected to an earlier time.

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