ABSTRACT

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The caring and healing image—Encountering works of visual art in the caring context
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The present study aims to uncover and bring light to a caring and healing dimension when suffering humans encounter visual art in the caring context. The search for knowledge is carried out within two studies. The first study (I) is an iconographic interpretation of the German painter Matthias Grünewald’s (ca. 1460-1528) Isenheim altarpiece. The study interprets the expressions of suffering and unfolds its narrative messages as well as symbolic representations of caring and healing through selected parts of the altarpiece. The interpretation emanates from the reconstruction of the original late medieval context of the altarpiece, along with the Isenheim monastery hospital, where patients who were seriously ill and dying were cared for, and where sacred pictures presumably constituted an integrated part of caritative care in this particular era. In study II, the search continues within the context of modern Finnish hospice care with the help of a qualitative interview study, researching the symbolic meanings patients created from the encounters with works of visual art of their choosing (donated oil paintings and water colors by Finnish artists). The research methodology is inspired by Gadamer’s hermeneutical esthetics, and, in addition, by more recent theories of visual arts.

The results of the present research show that the visual arts within the context of caring has potential on both an environmentally esthetic level, as well as on a deeper symbolic and individual level. In the medieval monastery caring context the decorative signification of the paintings of the altarpiece coincides with spiritual and healing purposes. In the current hospice context the works of visual arts in the patient’s room can compose a decorative design, which adds to the creation of an esthetic atmosphere in compliance with the patient’s personality. On a deeper level of reception, the observer’s insight is activated to become a transcending movement beyond the actual room and the boundaries of real time. On visits to the world of the image, memorable events are replayed from the past and even the future is faced by the receiver. In an existential situation in life the human being searches for the answers to the questions of suffering. When threats of existential loss occur, images offer remedial forms on a symbolical level. They can show the connection to the healing of life or demonstrate a cohesive form of restored health. When life diminishes and pales through illness, the symbolic world of the picture answers the gaze of the suffering individual with shining violets. The blooming and glowing flowers give vitality and confirm the person’s dignity when life is withering away. When agony and insecurity draws near, the observer is invited for a visit to a landscape of a picture, which expands the walls of the hospital room toward the safety and protection of home. When life is threatened by perishableness, the world of the image shows the eternal rebirth of nature. The experience of being a part of a greater whole paves the way out of isolation of suffering. In the medieval caring context, the sacred image formed a collective and healing Symbolon, which made the invisible visible. In the modern encounters with images in the caring context, it was the nature themes that opened the door to the secret room in the depths of the heart. Even though the creation of meaning in an encounter with the works of art is dependent upon the epoch, social values, context and the type of images, the symbolic form of an image, understood as a remedial and corrective form, at a general level, can display a healing and hopeful order in the chaos of suffering.

Key words: caring science, suffering, caring, healing, hermeneutics, iconography, visual arts, symbol, hospice care, Middle Ages.