# THE KRAMER METHOD OF ART THERAPY

## *Exploring the Third Hand*

DAVID R. HENLEY

Foreword by Judith A. Rubin, Ph.D., HLM

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Self-portrait by Edith Kramer, circa 1936.

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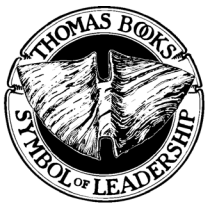
*By*

**DAVID R. HENLEY, Ph.D., ATR**

*With a Foreword by Judith A. Rubin*

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*Dedicated to Lani Gerity and Jim Pruznick*
*Artists, Colleagues, and Friends*

# FOREWORD

It is an honor to write a Foreword to a book about "the Kramer method of art therapy," since I believe that Edith Kramer was a true genius, as well as a generous human being who helped me in a respectful and attuned way from the beginning of my career until her death.

I was lucky to stumble into the new field of art therapy in 1963, having been invited to do such work with hospitalized schizophrenic children by my first supervisor, a child psychologist who was also Fred Rogers' mentor.[1]

Because I was an art teacher and not a therapist, I wrote to the two women whose books about "art therapy" I had read in graduate school. One was Margaret Naumburg[2]. The other was Edith Kramer, whose Art Therapy in a Children's Community (1958) excited me greatly. I was very lucky that both were willing to answer my letters and to meet with me when I visited New York.

Edith not only gave excellent advice about what to do to become a competent art therapist; she also allowed me to attend her classes at the New School and Turtle Bay. And she invited me to observe her doing art therapy with children at the Guild for the Blind and at Jacobi Hospital.

I have many memories of this uniquely gifted individual whose independent thinking helped to define the profession of art therapy, and whose insatiable thirst for knowledge led her to contribute an incredible number of thoughtful ideas for over 50 years.

One of these is that art therapists need to learn to look with a "Third Eye," inspired by analyst Theodore Reik's Listening with the Third Ear (1952). As Rudolf Arnheim did in Visual Thinking (1969), Kramer was defining the kind of nonverbal knowing that is uniquely possible and essential in art therapy. For me, the idea of observing with a completely open yet focused kind of attention applies to the process of creation, as well as to the art product itself.

When Edith added the concept of the "Third Hand," she articulated the

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[1] Fred Rogers and I worked for the Department of Child Development of the University of Pittsburgh and for three years I was the Art Lady on his public television program, *"Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"* (WQED-TV)

[2] Margaret Naumburg's articles about the art therapy she did at NY State Psychiatric Institute were collected in a 1947 monograph, providing extensive literature references and inspiring case studies of the children she saw.

therapist's use of their artist-self as a way of supporting the creative growth of those they serve. It may come as a surprise to contemporary clinicians, but the very notion of making art in the presence of clients was initially frowned upon for a variety of reasons. These included the fact that: if absorbed in creating, the art therapist's attention could not be totally on the client, their greater degree of skill could be intimidating, and their own unresolved issues were more likely to emerge in art in ways that might interfere with the therapeutic process.

In the decades since then, however, art therapists have increasingly felt permission to create art in the presence of clients and, in fact, have conceptualized a wide variety of interventions, such as "response art." David Henley's imaginative extension of Kramer's third hand concept in this book expands it to include not only interventions in the art process itself, but also those that make possible enhanced creative expression, many of them related to "setting the stage." What is essential throughout is fidelity to what Edith's colleague Vera Zilzer called an individual's "pictorial handwriting." I agree that a deep respect for each person's unique style, voice, and mode of expression is central to effective art therapy.

When David invited me to write this Foreword, he suggested that I describe some experiences with Edith. Recalling our encounters, I found myself trying to name what it was that she gave me, and for the first time I realized that she had actually used her third ear, eye and hand by getting to know who I was, in order to guide me along my own path. This may sound trite, but the more I think about it the more profound it seems. Here are a few examples:

- From her response to my first letter, Edith was available to help, although we had yet to meet in person. She always answered my requests for guidance or information. For example, when I became the first art therapist at the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Center, my child psychiatrist supervisor asked me how to decide who should be referred for art therapy. I wrote to Edith, who sensibly suggested that the youngsters served by this outpatient clinic be asked during intake whether they liked art (!).
- Since my parents lived across the street from the New School for Social Research where Edith had invited me to attend classes, she cheerfully came to our apartment, and got to know not only me but also my family over my mother's tuna fish sandwiches. I realize now that, although our upbringing and life experiences were radically different, Edith wanted to help me in a way that was synchronous with who I was.
- Her supportive attunement to my evolution as an art therapist was reflected in a lunch after one of her classes at Turtle Bay Music School; she had invited a fellow my age she was then mentoring since we had so much in common. We soon became friends.
- Similarly, when we went to the Jewish Guild for the Blind she introduced me to the art teacher, Yasha Lisenco. Because I was an art educator, the discussion with Yasha focused on the different roles that he and Edith played at the Guild. Because of the overlap of these fields, it was vital for

me as well as for the young profession to clarify and differentiate the two closely related disciplines.

- We were both invited to a mini conference on "Art Education and the Exceptional Child" at Queens College in 1973. Waiting to choose food in the cafeteria line I asked Edith whether she could advise me about my work with a rather disturbed blind boy. She replied that "art therapy cannot fix everything." Since my wish to cure was unrealistic, her calm statement of art therapy's limitations was incredibly helpful.
- Perhaps the most generous act of all was that, after writing a rather critical review of my first book, Child Art Therapy (1978), Edith agreed to help me with a 1984 revision. In preparation for meeting she had penciled detailed suggestions throughout the entire book. We sat together in her loft for many hours going over each page, discussing and debating her suggestions. Edith was willing to help to edit a book about art therapy with children, her acknowledged specialty, because she was secure and kind enough to help me find the right words to express what I intended – my approach in many ways quite different from hers.
- We were both speakers at a 2002 conference in Salzburg on art therapy for trauma. After my presentation Edith told me that I always tried to include too much for the audience to digest, advising me to be more selective. Because of her respectful way of saying it, I was able to digest the feedback which was, in fact, accurate. The conference organizer, Karin Danneker, had arranged our stay at a charming Inn. One of my fondest memories is of Edith starting to speak to me in German at breakfast the morning after the talk.
- Another favorite memory is of sitting next to her on a panel at an AATA conference. I was studying child analysis at the time and Edith, who was friendly with many child analysts from her youth in Vienna through her work in New York, whispered to me that she was sure I would leave art therapy and become a child analyst. I asked why she thought so, and she replied that analysis was a more respected profession, and that it was probably a better fit for me. I reassured her that I couldn't imagine doing so; and years later she apologized for her inaccurate prediction.

As I recall multiple interactions with Edith over the years, it now seems to me that she was consistently using her third eye, ear, and hand – by helping me to become myself, not a carbon copy of her or even – as she often said of her relationship with her teacher Friedl – her "disciple." Since I believe that an art therapist's highest goal is to help each person find their own style, voice, rhythm, and truth, I am even more grateful now that the Kramer method worked for me. I hope it will resonate for those who read David Henley's thoughtful book.

Judith A. Rubin

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This project would not have come to fruition without the support of Michael Payne Thomas, President of Charles C Thomas, Publisher. His patience with this temperamental and technologically clueless writer deserves the strongest acknowledgment. From its inception, art therapist Jessica L. Solomon has believed in me, giving constant encouragement and emotional support. Her discerning criticism of the manuscript has gone beyond the pale, especially when my strength and energy began to falter. The author would like to thank Dr. Karin Dannecker for her contribution, who was for many years Edith's closest friend and colleague in Berlin. Dr. Katherine Jackson's accounts of 'service learning' with the underserved Lakota Sioux and Nepalese have enlivened and expanded the book's narrative. Art therapist and friend Shannon Pearce is thanked for sharing her most sensitive and poignant case material. Laura McCann and Janet Bunde at New York University, Bobst Library Conservatory and Archives are acknowledged for allowing me access to the Kramer papers and client art that is held in the collection. Photographer and art therapist Herschel L. Stroymen is credited with documenting the earliest works in Kramer's oeuvre, and for also being one of Edith's most loyal friends. My children, Kyle David Henley, and Kimberly Henley Malito have provided me with a lifelong education in understanding children, whether it be an abject failure or whatever humble successes I have attained. Dawn Henley is acknowledged for her work with one of her most challenging and gifted artists in this volume. Friends and colleagues, the late Lani Gerity and Jim Pruznick will be remembered for their steadfast loyalty and decades of being invested in my work. Judy Rubin has been influencial throughout my career with special children, especially informing my work with the deaf community when few other resources were available. Finally, to Edith, whose life and work I still hold in awe.

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# INTRODUCTION:
# LAYING GROUNDWORK

## A REMINISCENCE

Some years ago, while staying with Edith Kramer at her loft in SoHo, helping with the usual projects, it was finally time for a break. It was later in the evening, about the time she would start cooking something, dining late in the continental style – as is the European tradition. She lamented not having enough playful time, after hours of painting, reading books of poetry or student papers, penning letters, and other pursuits that were always somehow task related. We decried our lack of leisure time in New York City, a place where the intense pace creates tension between enjoying its cultural offerings while maintaining a grueling work schedule is a challenge. Our chatting eventually turned analytical, as there was rarely room for small talk. It became a lesson on the dynamics of play in animals and children, which, she said was not simply play for the fun of it, but serious 'practicing' for survival in an animal's later life. We spoke of the play activities of 'typical' adults, with their numbing television, video gaming or sports watching – each not very appealing to this serious-minded woman. The next morning, we began our Saturday ritual as we ambled across Sixth Avenue to her favorite antique shop, The Pequod, and on our way, she began musing over the story's namesake. Melville's ill-fated whaler which of course is an 'old read' but still held her fascination. She was especially interested in the exotic Queequeg, the Polynesian harpooneer, who, though considered a savage, commanded unusually high status on the ship, with his deadly skill, and otherworldly strength. Everything was a teachable moment with Edith. We entered the shop where the owner greeted her warmly. She then disappeared into the aisles carefully examining the artifacts. I noticed some boxes in the side room and inquired about them to the owner. They were pottery

sherds he said, spanning all epochs, from Greek to Pre-Columbian vessels. Without discussing them with Edith, I purchased a box that contained the remnants of an Athenian Greek vase. She bought a beautiful piece of petrified amber for a gift, as Edith was always giving little 'treasures' away, for children, and those visiting from all over the world. Returning to the loft, I casually presented the box, and she immediately began pouring over the individual pieces. It was a small modest vase, something a middle-class Athenian could afford. Being incomplete and not worth his restoring, it was thus affordable to me. Dated to the sixth to eighth century B.C., made in the 'red on black' clay slip style, the figures of damsels, griffins and warriors were beautifully painted, and the finish was still burnished like it was taken out of the kiln yesterday. She began fiddling with them, playing around trying to fit the pieces back together, becoming increasingly engrossed. Meanwhile, I brought out the specialized adhesive purchased from the owner which he used in repairing damaged artifacts. We needed a space to work. Clearing a space was not an easy task, as all manner of books, tea sets, slides, papers, and sketchbooks all littered the old farmhouse table. Her honeypot and teacup seemed always stuck in honey that had drooled down its sides, encasing all manner of things, as though they were petrified and preserved in, well, amber. With a work area finally cleared I set up some cardboard, where she glued a few pieces together while I silently slipped away leaving her alone with this project. She did not notice of course, for when Edith Kramer became self-absorbed, the world could end, and she would still be working away. She took out the project between worktimes and especially towards the night's end. The reconstituted end product was very pleasing to her, as tactile as she was, it would often be stroked and held despite its fragility (Figure I.1). This would become in the coming years an important activity for Edith – the missing 'play' we had discussed the night before, of enjoying a puzzle that was not just time-occupying like the cardboard versions but reassembling something crafted from anonymous hands in the ancient past. Already having owned a large restored Pre-Columbian vessel, this was not an alien idea, as she was already appreciative of having remnants of interesting objects. It became a new pastime, of making regular treks to the antique dealer's 'side room,' where the fragments of pots and skulls and scrimshaw ivory could be bought cheaply. The owner began to save and even phone her when something interesting came his way. The pastime offered a relaxing leisure time experience that culminated in an aesthetic object, whether it be an old pot or skull.

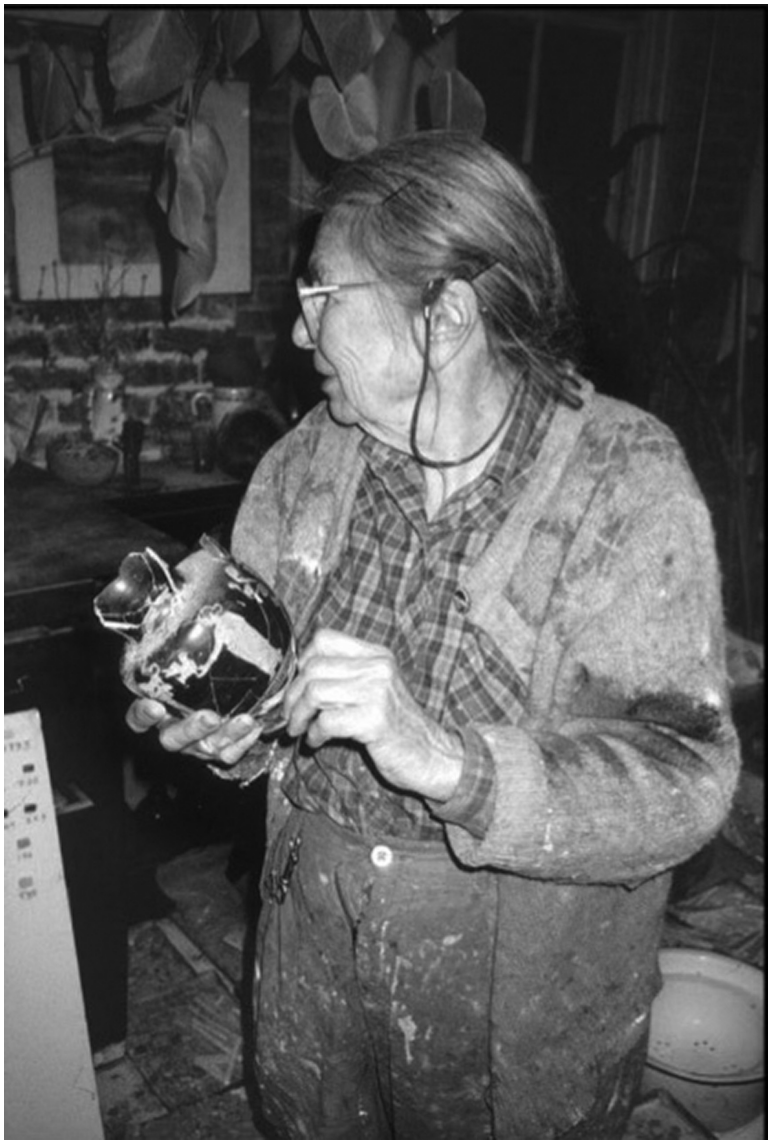

Figure I.1. Edith Kramer in her studio, after completing the leisure-time restoration of an Athenian vase.

It never occurred to her that I had made an intervention – in Edith-world of course, this pot had just appeared! I had simply set the stage for creative work, bypassing any resistance and allowing an activity to 'wash over' her – one she could have refused, ignored, or engaged. It would later become the basis for an intervention she termed the *Third Hand* – one that was not clinical or psychological per se, but just a thoughtful idea, an action or suggestion based upon the deep knowledge of our shared interests and a need that had previously gone unfulfilled.

The intervention is also aimed at engaging those who are challenging or resistant to new ideas and need a gentle push to 'help the process along.' It was facilitated by someone whom she trusted, who shared similar aesthetics, and who was attuned to her needs. I had simply set the table; as in the famous line from the film '*Field of Dreams*' build it and they will come.

This is more a conversation than a book. It is a means of mutually exploring, examining, and sharing the work of artists, most of them with varying degrees of special needs. It is based upon the precepts laid down by Edith Kramer and by others who came before her. Interventions will often be guided by the Third Hand, which I shall define throughout the text and put into action in a variety of guises. Such was the intervention just described – of luring this serious, sometimes cantankerous individual, to detach from her endless projects or endeavors which always involved 'big ideas,' and just relax and *play*.... It is a constellation of empathic-minded interventions, with the emphasis on being minimally intrusive, depending upon the person's or artist's ideas and needs – whatever their life circumstances. The book recognizes and celebrates the artistic creations and processes of those who are beset with varying degrees and challenges. It is hoped that the methods employed may be utilized by anyone with a deep and abiding sensibility in eliciting visual art.

Before we can begin this journey, laying the groundwork for issues relating to terminology, consent, ethics, and references, citations are in order. Starting with terminology, we may begin this discussion by focusing on the trends in the clinical, educational, or cultural use of acceptable terms that are used throughout the book.

References to people and their special conditions are sensitive, and are always in flux, with jargon being constantly redefined by leaders in the field and by the culture which propagates their references. In most instances, I adhere to the terms that are used in clinical and educational settings, such as *neurotypical,* or when describing those on the spectrum, *neurodiverse.* However, I do not prescribe newer categorizations such as *autism spectrum disorder*, which I find from a functional view is an over-generalizing catch-all term. In my last book, *Creative Response Activities for Children on the Spectrum* (Routledge, 2018), I described the shades of 'autism' as an arc that is made up of a multitude of *markers.* Markers are not symptoms as much as quirks which, if numerous and noticeable enough, may constitute some form of psychological involvement. An example might be an introverted person aversive to or anxious about social interaction, a character trait that millions of individuals adjust to every day. If markers pile up and become sufficiently debilitating the person might seek treatment and be considered on the mild end of the

spectrum, such as Asperger's Syndrome. If markers predominate and debilitate, they may lead to a diagnosis of autism – with the severity of markers being indicators that place a person on different arcs of what is termed the *spectrum.* The arc of the spectrum then begins with individuals who may present with eccentricities or personality traits which are suggestive of the spectrum, but that carry them invisibly in their productive lives. For others, it is a lifelong challenge requiring treatment such as art therapy.

Other means of referencing may appear minor but have significance for me and for this book. For instance, in my discussions on object relationships, one usually refers to the mother when raising an infant. I raise the point that in contemporary society, a mother may not be the biological mother. In fact, the person might be the father, a sibling, an extended family member, or even the community as a whole. In that case, we may speak of the 'collective mother'. Therefore, I will be using the term '*mothering-figure,*' who provides the infant with care, love, and sustenance. Although the biological mother remains the primary caregiver to her infants, it is incumbent upon me to include all of those who mother the infant and child.

The reader may notice that I use terms such as, '*artist-clients*' and *individuals with special needs.* These terms are often used interchangeably for the sake of the prose. They are not pejoratives, but simply commonsense descriptors. Almost all the artists in the book have undergone treatment or special education with specialized needs – with some individuals having more involvements than others. They will be referred to as *having features of*, rather than *being* autistic or obsessive. A person should not be defined by their condition. The exception is for those who are deaf or blind. They do not see themselves as 'impaired,' but as more of a minority culture. Therefore, when referring to either condition the correct form is 'the deaf' – not persons with hearing impairments. It is the same for those who are 'blind'; unless they are partially sighted and are then referred to as 'legally blind.' Another term that I have adopted is more contrarian to established norms. I prefer and use the word *handicap*, rather than the standard designation 'disability'.

I have utilized this term for years now, as a matter of advocacy. Handicapping conditions, in my opinion, imply that, for whatever physical or mental reason, a person requires adaptations to achieve what the typical person does – that is, if the playing field is leveled and if appropriate accommodations are made. The descriptor 'disability' to my ear and to my mind sounds negative – in fact, I find it 'disrespectful.' In almost any word, the prefix 'dis' indicates 'no.' The word disability strikes me as an individual 'not having ability,' and thus I consider it an insult and a pejorative. As a person with mobility handicaps, I feel