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AUTHOR Herman, William E.

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ABSTRACT

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The Wall of Remembrance: **Images and Themes of the Holocaust**

William E. Herman

Professor

Department of Psychology

State University of New York

College at Potsdam

Potsdam, New York 13676-2294

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Abstract

This pilot study included a content analysis of the Wall of Remembrance (also known as the Children's Tile Wall) on permanent display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. This artwork is composed of 3,324 six-inch square tiles depicting the impressions of children, adolescents and a few adults regarding the Holocaust. The following dominant visual images were found in this work of art: Jewish Star of David, Christian cross, Taoist yin-yang, Islamic crescent, Totemism totem pole, swastika, heart, flower, peace sign, rainbow, candle, butterfly, dove, and doll/teddy bear. The written messages included the following thematic categories: courage, anger, unfairness, pleas for help, love, remembrance, aggression, death, despair, spirituality, universality/equality, peace, hope, confidence, sadness, and freedom. The findings suggest that a full-scale exploration of this artwork is warranted in the future. The enormity and complexity of this artwork may make it difficult for the average viewer to quickly absorb these powerful messages about the Holocaust.



The Wall of Remembrance: Images and Themes of the Holocaust

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, reminded people living in the United States of America of our human vulnerability. Although this event brought us closer together as Americans, many individuals struggled to make sense of this event and cope with the cognitive, physical, and affective elements of healing and moving onward in life. Since human beings throughout history have experienced tragedy, it would seem that the lessons from the past might inform us regarding how human beings can successfully cope with such horrific events. One historical event that might help us learn about the elements of human suffering, loss, and recovery is the Holocaust. A central question guides the inquiry process of this project: How might artistic expression help humans learn to deal with terror, loss, and tragedy?

Art can be a useful visual window to better understand horrific events. It has the ability to touch the mind, heart, and soul at precisely the same instant. Art can become indelibly etched in our long-term memory. It can stir hidden thoughts and emotions and provoke deeper reflection. Art is personal and private, as well as public and provocative. It has the potential to educate and inspire future generations.

Art therapists have long known of the healing and growth potential of artistic endeavors. For example, Junge (1999) explored the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Wall and the AIDS Quilt as tools for personal meaning-making and social healing. Others have suggested that the Art of Trauma (AOT), due to its indirect, unaestheticised, and dialogic nature might be the most effective way to represent trauma (Laub & Podell, 1995). Totten (1988) proposed that the magnitude of the horror of the Holocaust has



compelled artists to attempt, time and time again to penetrate its darkness and mystery.

Even those Jews not directly affected by the Holocaust may carry intergenerational scars according to evidence from analytical art psychotherapy groups focusing upon Jewish identity (Schaverien, 1998).

Aretha (2001) posed an important lingering question: "What can literature and art teach us about the Holocaust?" The author of this paper remembered visiting a public work of art nearly a decade ago that seemed to capture intriguing messages regarding how some had expressed powerful thoughts and emotions related to those who died in the Holocaust. A pilot study was developed to analyze this work of art in order to determine if a more extensive systematic study of this art was feasible and worthwhile.

Focus of Research:

The Wall of Remembrance (also known as the Children's Tile Wall) is a powerful work of art that helps us recall that a million and a half children were murdered in the Holocaust. Unfortunately, my observational research revealed that most visitors to this exhibit at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C., spend only 30 seconds to 15 minutes examining this complex work of art.

The Wall of Remembrance was dedicated in 1993. It is composed of 14 panels (note one four-tile panel is located well above the 13 major panels) and a total of 3,324 6-inch square-shaped painted tiles. The tile creators were mostly young people along with a few adults. After a Holocaust lesson these tile makers were guided by teachers and art instructors in the tile creations that expressed thoughts and feelings related to what they had just learned. Participants came from 48 of the 50 states.



The following research questions guided the content analysis of the Wall of Remembrance in a pilot study:

- (1) Since it is likely that the typical visitor is only able to digest a small portion of this artwork, how might research assist viewers in more deeply and fully appreciating the visual images and written messages on the tiles?
- (2) Might a content analysis of the tiles yield interpretable results that can help us better grasp the manifest (surface) and latent (hidden) content of the artwork?
- (3) What categorical themes might emerge from the visual images and written messages that could guide a future full-scale content analysis of the artwork?

The rationale for the content analysis of this artwork stems from the belief that the Wall of Remembrance needs to be better understood at the following two levels: (1) the expression of ideas on the part of the tile creators and (2) the impression it leaves on the viewer. Such a dualistic interpretive mode is essential, since it might be successfully argued that children and adolescents were simply expressing the thoughts, emotions, and ideas of influential adults when making the tiles. The children and young adult tile makers could have even influenced each other as they shared brushes and paint jars and observed the images and messages others were depicting on the tiles. Thus, it is impossible to ensure that the tiles reflect exclusive viewpoints of individual pre-adolescent and adolescent tile makers. Even if this non-authentic developmental and individualistic viewpoint was to be accepted, the powerful impressions of the Holocaust as absorbed by children, adolescents, and adults viewing the artwork means that the images and themes deserve to be studied in their own right.

Method



Background Information

A brief and basic set of Holocaust course educational materials was provided to teachers across America. After the instruction, teachers, in conjunction with art instructors, encouraged children to express their feelings about what they had just learned. Additional tiles were made by visitors to the USHMM and traveling exhibitions around the country. The creators of the tiles ranged from students in kindergarten, elementary school, and middle school to a small number of adults. Author markings on the tiles indicated age ranges from 3 to 45 years of age for tile creators with most participants being in the 9-14 year age range.

During the course of 6 years (1987-1992), over 35,000 approximate six-inch square tiles were received by the USHMM. Unfortunately, many tiles arrived cracked or were improperly fired and glazed. Quite a few tiles were disqualified for such reasons. Tiles in the final artwork reflected contributions from tile creators that represented nearly every state in the United States of America (only two states were not represented). The Wall was dedicated by the Remember the Children Committee in April of 1993.

The current Director of Exhibitions, Stephen Goodell, supervised the staging of the tiles. The selection of tiles for inclusion was based largely upon the use of bright colors other than black or white. However, predominantly black or white tiles that offered something compelling in writing were chosen. Tiles were organized onto the major thirteen individual panels which were staged by taking into account such things as sight lines, placement of panels with respect to the "dedicatory tile," the doorway, etc. Each of the thirteen lower panels is square in shape measuring 16 tiles across the top/bottom and 16 tiles across the sides. All these panels contained 256 tiles each,



except for one panel where the dedication tile was surrounded by eight blank tiles as a frame. As mentioned earlier, a 14th panel of four tiles is located considerable above the more visible 13 panels and might easily be overlooked at first. This small panel is also visible through a window outside the USHMM near the 15th Street Entrance. The total number of decorated tiles in the art exhibit numbered 3,324. Each British decorator tile measured six inches square. Above these tiles is the following quotation from Yitzhak Katzenelson: "The first to perish were the children...From these a new dawn might have risen."

Content Analysis Strategy

Content analysis is a useful research technique in educational, historical, and ethnographic research that has been used to more deeply understand literature, popular magazines, songs, comic strips, cartoons, and movies (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Manifest (surface) content and latent (hidden) content were both deemed worthy of exploration, since the tile visual images and written messages appeared to hold intense emotional characteristics.

Visual content depicted on the tiles was analyzed according to the constant comparative method characteristics of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the pilot study, analysis began by coding visual images, words, and phrases during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The tile visual content constituted the basis for categorical coding. Each panel of the lower 13 panels was scrutinized for 30 minutes in order to ascertain the depiction of repetitive tile content and observational notes were made.



Visual images were analyzed first and the following prominent depictions emerged from the data: Star of David, Christian cross, Taoism yin-yang, Totemism totem pole, Islamic crescent, swastika, heart, flower, peace sign, rainbow, candle, butterfly, dove, and doll/teddy bear. Some categories with relatively small frequencies were included in the data analysis because they were related to a higher order categorization (e.g., Religious Icons: cross, yin-yang, totem pole, and crescent). Since only 15 hours could be devoted to the analysis of the tiles during the pilot study, visual symbols were analyzed on all 13 lower panels and words and phrases were analyzed on only 7 lower panels. The scanning of over 3,000 artistic tiles for specific visual images in a limited time frame meant that the recorded statistics for high frequency symbols (e.g., Star of David, swastika, heart, flower, and rainbow) probably resulted in substantial underreporting of such occurrences. Such frequency errors can be easily substantially reduced in follow-up research. Other possible visual tile images to explore in future research include the appearance of a weapon, drop of blood, barbed wire fence, torah, menorah, flame, teardrop, and flag.

Each six-inch square tile became the unit of analysis. This meant that multiple visual images detected within a single tile would not be tallied. For example, if a tile contained four (4) hearts, this would only be recorded as a tile that contained a heart. Multiple representations of similar images within a single tile would need to be documented in future research.



Due to time limitations for the analysis of the Wall of Remembrance, the following thematic categories are viewed as tentative. Future research is planned to refine and strengthen the case for these findings. The following themes were detected: peace, hope, remembrance, fighting, love, future, empathy, death, pleas for help, courage, spirituality, unfairness, anger, universality, despair, sadness, fear, and terror. No attempt was made to collapse thematic categories at this stage of the research, since this pilot study was designed primarily to determine if a qualitative analysis of the tiles would yield interpretable results.

Results

Table 1 offers a descriptive overview of the findings in the visual domain and related statistical results are reported here. The single most frequent visual symbol represented was the Star of David that appeared on 620 different tiles out of the total of 3,324 tiles (19%). The Nazi swastika was the next most frequently occurring symbol on the tiles since it appeared on 238 different tiles (7% of all tiles). Other commonly found visual images such as flower, heart, peace sign, rainbow, candle, butterfly, and dove seemed to suggest themes of growth, life, peace, love, hope, remembrance, and freedom. Some visual images were clearly representations of the books that tile creators had read about the Holocaust. For example, Anne Frank was depicted on several tiles with reference to the Diary of Anne Frank (Frank, 1958). The book title: *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (Volakova, 1993) was also sometimes identified on tiles. Several Holocaust stories have recounted the importance of a doll or teddy bear as a source of psychological comfort during these horrors of childhood.



The tentative thematic categories represented by text on the tiles will only be briefly highlighted by a few quotations off the tiles in order to capture the flavor of the findings.

Courage: "Be strong...believe." "Together we can make it." "They all had courage." "Be strong and of good courage—Joshua 1:8"

Anger: "The hurt still lives." "Never again, Never forget, Never forgive." "Stop the killers!" "This should never have happened." "Hate left its mark (1928-43)."

Unfairness: "Jews are people, so treat them fairly." "Why?" "Why us?" "It shouldn't hurt to be different." "What did we do to you?"

Pleas for Help: "Save us!" "Somebody help me!" "Free me!"

Future: "For if we learn our history, we'll never have to relive it." "No more hate!" "We cannot change the past, but we can make the future." "Don't let this happen again."

Love: "Why can't we just be friends?" "Learn to love the world." "Keep love worldwide." "Love is the answer."

Remembrance: "Their bodies are gone, but their spirits are still here." "Why forget when we can remember." "Freedom is a gift to remember." "Let remembrance be their eternal flame." "Uncle Bill survived."

Aggression: "Everybody has to fight Hitler." "We have to fight Hitler."

Death: "Taken to death." "I could have lived. You just did not let me." "Death had come to the children before it's meaning was understood." "Never again shall so many die." "Why kill the children?" "Why kill?"



Universality/Equality: "We're all the same." "Who is a Jew? Can't tell can you! So what's the difference?" "We are all equal no matter what." "Equal rights for all! Catholic, Moslems, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, & Lutherans." "Treat people like people." Despair: "Nothing can be worse than this." "The pain still lives."

Spirituality: "Think of God's children." "Life's murder, but heaven is the reward."

Peace: "Stop war before it starts." "Practice Peace." Peace has no color." Peace for all mankind." "No war in the world."

Hope: "Hope for a brighter tomorrow." "There's always hope in our hearts." "Hope—hang on." "Love is hope." "Don't lose hope." "Let the sun shine through."

Confidence: "Jews—no one can break us!" "Judaism isn't something to be ashamed of." "There won't be any next time."

Sadness: "Although the Holocaust children are dead, the echoes of their tears still burn in our minds."

Freedom: "There should be freedom." "Free me!" "Free at last!"

Discussion

The visual images and words depicted on the Wall of Remembrance reflect powerful thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. The tile creators seemed to easily adopt a voice for the children of the Holocaust. Their comments were both specific and general, as well as directed back into historical time and forward into the future. They were able to step out of their own experience and consider the plight of those unable to speak for themselves today regarding the horrors they faced during the Holocaust. Empathy for the victims was clearly communicated. Tile makers often seemed to be able to connect



with their historical counterparts who experienced the Holocaust first-hand. Sometimes messages depicted a genuine lack of understanding related to how this event could ever happen or what some adults might term a naïve understanding of this historical event. This might be expected when children are asked to grapple with issues such as hate, war, genocide, murder, torture, etc. that even many adults find incomprehensible. In their struggle to make sense of the Holocaust, tile creators were able to reflect the anger, frustration, and senselessness of human suffering without being totally cynical about human nature. Messages communicating hope for the future, human potential for change, remembrances, religious convictions, and coping strategies also permeate the exhibit. The unity of all humanity irregardless of individual religious beliefs was also expressed.

A deep analysis of the Wall of Remembrance makes the Holocaust more "real." The conscientious viewer of the Wall is engaged in a retrospective trip back into history that is experientially based and capable of triggering deeper thoughts and powerful emotions. The simultaneous triggering of highly charged emotions and confusing thoughts help us to remember the individuals behind the million-and-a-half children who died. Even with the depiction of the horror and inhumanity of the Holocaust, it is truly possible, perhaps even likely, that the thoughtful viewer might walk away more personally dedicated to some of the ideals of peace, human understanding, respect for others, hope, and perseverance of the human spirit.

The preliminary evidence presented here supports the need for a full-scale and even more systematic analysis of the Wall of Remembrance. It is hoped that an even more thorough content analysis of the Wall could provide viewers with insight that does



not currently exist. Perhaps an instructional guide to the Wall of Remembrance could help some visitors find deeper personal meaning at an existential level. Those who have previously viewed the Wall might need to return to the USHMM to see what they missed in the few minutes they spent exploring this work of art. Those who have never seen the Wall might be more motivated to make such a pilgrimage to see this artwork when they understand more about its content. Few works of art challenge us to look critically at the past, examine our collective humanity, and confront how we might individually and socially confront human inequity and suffering in our own lifetime.

The author is currently designing a new undergraduate course offering on his home campus that will help students explore the similarities and differences between the terror, loss, and tragedy experienced as a result of the 9/11/01 events in the U.S.A. and the Holocaust. Some educational goals of the course will include helping students learn about the Holocaust, suffering, loss, social support mechanisms, and sense of community. These ideas will then be related to how students themselves experienced 9/11/01 events such as the destruction and tragic loss of life at the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the Pennsylvanian countryside. The author/course instructor hopes to employ the meaningful first-hand experiences of college students as a tool to better understand past events such as the Holocaust and prepare for future calamities that human beings might be forced to endure. The arts hold valuable inspirational, motivational, and educational potential that must be better tapped by those who wish to help students ponder universal human experiences that involve terror, loss, and tragedy. Students today need to be "better prepared" as the Scouting motto alluded to and inoculated to be better able to adjust



and adapt to whatever horrific personal, local, or national events might be experienced in the future. Clearly art can help educators accomplish such worthwhile goals.



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Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Symbols in the Wall of Remembrance

Visual Symbol	Total Frequencies	% of all tiles	Mean per per panel	S D per panel	Actual Range per panel		
Religious Icons							
Star of David	N=620	18.67%	47.69	9.09	34-66		
Cross	N=24	0.72%	1.85	1.21	0-4		
Yin-Yang	N=4	0.12%	0.31	0.48	0-1 /		
Totem Poles	N=2	0.06%	0.16	0.39	0-1		
Crescent	N=1	0.03%	0.08	0.28	0-1		
Other Symbols							
Swastika	N=238	7.16%	18.31	6.84	8-32		
Flower	N=175	5.27%	13.46	5.32	5-25		
Heart	N=173	5.21%	13.31	4.75	6-21		
Peace Sign	N=172	5.18%	13.31	4.79	6-20		
Rainbow	N=102	2.95%	8.62	4.61	2-16		
Butterfly	N=98	2.95%	7.54	3.84	1-13		
Candle	N=68	2.05%	5.15	2.23	2-10		
Dove	N=56	1.68%	4.31	3.15	1-11		
Doll/Teddy Bea	ar N=16	0.48%	1.23	1.48	0-4		

Notes: The operational definition used in this study required that only one visual symbol be represented in a tile in order to be coded and depicted in the above data set. Multiple symbols were often represented in a single tile.





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