

# Careers in the Arts

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## Art Therapy

Katharine Houpt

*Katharine Houpt is an art therapist who works in Chicago.*



### **Describe a typical work day for you.**

I work at a retirement community with older adults. For me, a typical work day would start with facilitating an art therapy group, ranging from 3 - 15 residents of the community. I like to have a wide variety of art materials available to meet the diverse needs of the residents. I might start the session with a suggestion, such as "make a piece of art or creative writing about something that makes you feel proud." Other times, we may begin making art without a topic. My role is to support the residents as they make art that is meaningful to them. The purpose of each person's artmaking could be self-expression, processing losses, strengthening relationships, reviewing one's life, or increasing self-esteem. Sometimes the purpose is "art-as-therapy," which can mean using art to relax, feel comfort, or practice creativity. In the afternoon I might lead another group or have art therapy sessions with individuals, or practice for a community-building event (a more open art experience that involves strengthening relationships between everyone in the facility, from residents to family members to staff). Recently, our expressive arts department, which includes another art therapist, a dance/movement therapist, and a music therapist, collaborated with the residents of the retirement community to plan and perform a fashion show attended by other residents, family members, and staff.

### **Why did you decide to become an art therapist?**

I am lucky enough to come from a family of artists and writers, so I have practiced art in many different forms all my life. After I graduated from college with an art degree, I practiced art at home while searching for a career that would allow me to feel satisfied every day. I tried graphic design, marketing, film festival programming, and food service. All of these things contributed to my realizing that more than anything, I was interested in people. I began reading books about psychology. A friend told me about the field of art therapy, and I knew it was the perfect way to combine my love of people with my love of art.

### **What professional training did you have to go through to become an art therapist?**

I received a Master of Arts in Art Therapy from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). It is a two-year, 60-credit program, providing the necessary curriculum for eventual registration and board certification (ATR-BC) with the Art Therapy Credentials Board. The program meets the requirements of a counseling degree as well as providing a well-rounded education in art therapy. I chose the art therapy program at SAIC because of its focus on maintaining one's own artistic practice as a vital part of being an art therapist. I also appreciate the SAIC faculty's encouragement to think critically about race, gender, class, sexuality, and other aspects of identity.

**What is your favorite part of the job?**

My favorite part is forming deep and important relationships with the people I work with. People consistently amaze me with their creativity and willingness to explore their own identities, communities, and positions in the world. Most days I go home from work smiling, and that feels wonderful.

**What is the most challenging part of the job?**

In my work with older adults, I deal with loss on a daily basis. Older adults in long-term care can lose a significant amount of their former independence as well as losing important people in their lives. In working with them, I face loss when people pass away. It is important to me to acknowledge sadness when it arises, and to practice taking care of myself while encouraging others to do the same.

**What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming an art therapist?**

I suggest strengthening your own art practice! Don't limit yourself. I love making comics, collages, creative writing, films, ceramics, knitting, and performing improv. Make art with your friends. The more you expand your idea of what art can be, the more you will have to offer when you are an art therapist.

*Interview conducted in 2014.*