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Escape and Art Therapy: The Need for a New Art

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we see a rise in the incidence of mental health disorders. A lack of social connection is understood to be a leading cause of the nation's growing mental health statistics and a poor sense of personal well-being. At pivotal points in our U.S. history, we have seen evidence of relationships between the visual arts and our improved overall well-being. Indeed, art has been a historically powerful force in effecting social and psychological change. Since the advent of art therapy in the US in the 1940s, art and artmaking have become a resource that can impact the rise in mental health needs in our country. In contemporary society, new forms of art have the ability to repair or create a social connectedness that has been lost during the pandemic. This research compares and contextualizes the artworks of specific historical artists from the U.S. interwar period with today's immersive, high tech visual culture. Specifically, digital installations and gaming contain elements of escapism that provide a respite from the stress and anxiety of reality. The benefits of this new genre of "escapist art" include the opportunity for the viewer and the artist to disconnect with reality in an effort to support healing, health and well-being.

Perhaps no truer words have been spoken than those of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky in saying that "Art would be useless if the world were perfect, as man wouldn't look for harmony but would simply live in it. Art is born out of an ill-designed world."[1] It's this ill designed world that can often overwhelm and sometimes overcome us. Whether it's the everyday stressors of life or the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, every human suffers. We all need a healthy outlet to decompress, release and often escape from the rigors of life. Art is that outlet. Aside from being an expression of our creative selves, art can heal. Art can save. Art possesses the power to transport us to another dimension. Art is that voice when we cannot speak.

On a personal level, art provides us with support whether we color in an adult coloring book or take a virtual tour of the Louvre. In my own life, I have struggled with a learning disability that was coupled with ADHD and anxiety. As a child, my mother enrolled me in art

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[1] Andreĭ Arsenʹevich Tarkovskiĭ, *Sculpting in time*. (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 22.

classes to not only enrich my life, but to provide an outlet for expression and stress relief. I thrived in my art classes and continued to take these classes until I graduated from high school. I explain in my college application essay, "Art saved me." Art fostered in me a world where I could retreat and escape from not only my academic struggles but what later would become emotional pains from family dysfunction, including my parents' divorce. Art was a central part of my sense of well-being and provided an identity for me. Whatever the struggle, my family and friends knew me as "the artist." This label became a badge of honor and reinforced that art was therapy for me. My personal sense of well-being and a positive mental health have always centered around my intimate engagement in creating art and enjoying art as a viewer.

Indeed, the Arts appear to surge in times of world crisis and need. Like all other aspects of our culture, the Arts typically adapt to meet the changing needs of our society. As we have endured the COVID-19 pandemic and the latest ramifications of economic issues, social isolation, and an increase in the rate of depression, we once again turn to what gives us solace. Our continually evolving mental health crisis in America has created the need for an equally adaptive set of new mental health resources. This thesis proposes a new field of "Escapist art," i.e. artworks that can be employed as art therapy and which specifically draw on elements of "escape" to therapeutically benefit both the artist and the viewer.

I will be arguing for a new era of Escapist art that follows the precedents of artworks made between WWI and WWII. The first World War left the world in a grave state of turmoil. The silver lining of the interwar period was a world wide time of reflection. The concept of identity became important for intellectual and political reasons. Intellectual developments arose most notably in the fields of philosophy and psychoanalysis. This political, social and intellectual change was followed by a plethora of artistic activity that responded to the changing

environment worldwide. After WWI, artists began to explore new forms of abstraction as they rejected the avant-garde styles, such as Cubism and Futurism, which had previously been very popular prior to the war. Escapism became a common theme of this time as artists expressed themselves through the more popular styles of Surrealism and Expressionism.

Art As Pivotal to Well-being in the Past

At pivotal points in our U.S. history we have seen evidence of the understanding of the relationship between art and our overall well-being. One of the most impactful components of Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1933 New Deal was increased access to the Arts for all people. Roosevelt valued art and saw it to be inherent to national pride and democracy. He believed celebrating the country's cultural past fostered a sense of connectedness. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) of 1935 and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) also of 1935 were New Deal relief programs that employed professional artists to create art that was displayed in public settings. More than 100,000 paintings and murals and nearly 20,000 sculptures were created to be featured in schools, hospitals, libraries and local government buildings nationwide.[2] Roosevelt's address at the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939 stated:

> The arts cannot thrive except where men are free to be themselves and to be in charge of the discipline of their own energies and ardors. The conditions for democracy and for art are one and the same. What we call liberty in politics results in freedom in the arts. There can be no vitality in the works gathered in a museum unless there exists the right of spontaneous life in the society in which the arts are nourished.[3]

These types of public speeches helped to cultivate not only healthier attitudes during what were largely depressed years but also to instill a sense of national identity coming out of a crisis.

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[2] Helen A.Harrison., "American Art and the New Deal." *Journal of American Studies* 6, no. 3 (1972): 289–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553012.

[3] James M. Dennis.,Review of *Government Art: Relief, Propaganda, or Public Beautification?*, by Richard D. McKinzie. *Reviews in American History* 2, no. 2 (1974): 275–82. https://doi.org/10.2307/2701668.

A common theme in art during these difficult times was the unparalleled courage and dignity of the common man and woman at work and in everyday life. Art had a practical purpose to inspire and promote the wellbeing of the common person. Art was meant to enrich the lives of Americans while also giving a vocation back to artists.[4] An example of art that came out of this era can be seen in Hale Woodruff's 1938 *Amistad Murals,* a work supported by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration. The *Amistad Murals* at Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama depict the uprising aboard the famous Spanish ship, La Amistad, that was a victory for enslaved people. In 1839 the ship, headed for Cuba, was taken over by a group of captive Sierra Leoneans who had been sold into the Spanish slave trade. This mutiny exposed the inhumanity of the slave trade and the ills of treating humans as commodities. This mural, and other works created during the Harlem Renaissance, gave agency to people of color. These murals tell a narrative that is not only historically significant, but that speaks to the necessity of human dignity.

Woodruff had a mentor in the famous muralist, Diego Rivera. Rivera not only inspired Woodruff's technique but he also shed light on the power of heritage and narrative within murals. Woodruff viewed these three murals as a way to foreground the past in an effort to improve the future of equality. The figures in the three murals are colorful, prominent and animated. The forms show great dimension in the way that they are shaded. Light shines down on these forms illuminating details in the musculature. The figures are evocative in their depictions. Sinewy bodies depict intensity and definition in the face and limbs. Bold, bright colors give a vibrancy to the works that draw in the viewer. Draping and cresses of clothing come to light with detailed shading and layering of colors. Facial expressions on each figure help

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[4] National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed October 2, 2023.
https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/index.html.

tell the stories of retribution, accusation and liberation. In the first mural, *The Mutiny on the Amistad* (Fig. 1) we see the captive Africans take control of the ship from the crew. The second mural, *The Trial of the Amistad Captives* (Fig. 2), depicts the Africans gaining their freedom after confronting their captors in the U.S. Supreme Court. The last mural, *Repatriation of the Freed Captives* (Fig. 3)*,* shows the Africans landing on the shores of their homeland accompanied by missionaries.

Woodruff was one of many artists employed to create art that shared the American vision. As importantly, Woodruff advocated for artists of color to be recognized without the negative impacts of segregation. He founded the Exhibition of African American Artists (1929) in which African American artists could "convey a telling quality in terms of what we are as a people."[5] The New Deal's programs not only sponsored artists but also gave opportunities for leadership roles for artists. This in turn led to an improved sense of well-being for artists.

How Art Can Combat Trauma

In addition to art serving the needs of our well-being, art can also adapt to our changing societal needs and demands. Art can react to historical and cultural influences, and it is forever morphing into different genres and modalities. World War I was a significant catalyst that encouraged academics, politicians, and artists alike to confront the world around them. Devastated by the vulgarities of war, Sigmund Freud is not only credited with many famous theories of psychoanalysis, but he was also an influential voice in many new genres that impacted the arts. His research in understanding the workings of the human brain later inspired many acclaimed artists.

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[5] Oral history interview with Hale Woodruff, 1968 November 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Freud's impact on artistic thinking was profound in that his innovative theories were an inspiration for a generation of creative minds. Freud's lasting imprint on Surrealism is perhaps one of the most memorable ways in which he influenced the Arts. His techniques of free association and automatic drawing related to artists who wanted to express unconscious thoughts. The works of Paul Klee and Joan Miro mirror Freud's ideas of improvisation and free flowing ideas. Other artists such as Dorothea Tanning brought their dreams and nightmares into the alternate realities of their work.[6]

 Salvador Dali is one such artist who immersed himself in Freud's theories.[7] Dali read Freud's 1899 book, *Interpretations of Dreams,* and was profoundly inspired by his words. Dali was spellbound by Freud. Not only was he obsessed by his concepts of psychoanalysis but he desperately wanted to meet him as well. Many of Dali's works were either heavily embedded with Freudian philosophies or dedicated to Freud himself. Dali utilized Freud's ideas of the unconscious, dreams and psychosexual development. His obsession was undoubtedly good for his creative processes as many of his most famous works of art were inspired by Freud. As much as Dali idolized Freud, he could not seem to win him over on a personal level. Freud was distrustful of Dali and thought that he was a fanatic. Their one and only meeting was a monumental event for Dali and not much more than a curious meeting for Freud.[8]

The City of Drawers, c. 1936 (Fig. 4), is an excellent example of work dedicated to Freud's lasting impression on Dali. Freud's impact on Dali can be seen in his repeated use of the "idea drawer", a metaphor for the hidden secrets of our subconscious and memory.[9] Dali once

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[6] Gaston Criel. "Surrealism." *Books Abroad* 26, no. 2 (1952): 133–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/40090932.
[7] Rose, Gillbert J. "Sigmund Freud and Salvador Dalí: Cultural and Historical Processes." *American Imago* 40, no. 4 (1983): 349–53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26303571.
[8] Sharon Romm, and Joseph William Slap. "Sigmund Freud and Salvador Dalí: Personal Moments." *American Imago* 40, no. 4 (1983): 337–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26303570.
[9] Stephanie D'Alessandro. "Venus de Milo with Drawers." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006): 64–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4104510.

stated, "The only difference between immortal Greece and contemporary times is Sigmund Freud, who discovered that the human body, purely platonic in the Greek epoch, is nowadays full of secret drawers that only psychoanalysis is capable to open."[10] The work depicts a sinewy, disproportionate human form sitting on the ground with both legs crossed diagonally in front of them. The figure's head is hung low and their left arm is tensely pressing into space as if warding off an unknown object. The arms and legs are unnaturally muscular with one hip enlarged. The chest of the figure is made of six stacked drawers that are at different positions of being open while its contents spill out. The figure appears to be female due to the length of the hair, enlarged nipples and absence of male genitalia. The figure's tense and defensive body language signifies that the figure may be resisting the literal chest of drawers that is opened and exposed, with its secrets spilling out for all to see. The figure may represent the vulnerable nature of the human psyche as we hide interior fears and desires that we don't want others to see. Not only was Freud a muse for Dali, but he acknowledges that many of Freud's principles helped him therapeutically to address his own fear and psychological neuroses by creating art.

In the same way that art helped Dali process hidden secrets of the subconscious mind, art also assisted Frida Kahlo process personal trauma. "I paint self-portraits because I am the person I know best. I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to and I paint whatever passes through my head without any consideration."[11] Kahlo's words express the therapeutic nature of the world that she created for decades. Her work chronicles the joy, pain, loss, politics, love, and health in the biography of her life. Art is influenced by historically poignant moments that arise out of crisis, such as illness, war, and tragedy. These pivotal

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[10] Haim Finkelstein. "The Incarnation of Desire: Dalí and the Surrealist Object." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 23 (1993): 114–37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20166870.

[11] Malka Drucker, *Frida Kahlo,* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico press, 1991) ADD PAGE NUMBER/S.

episodes in history call for reflection, reaction, and social change. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) is an excellent example of just this sort of historical period that encouraged artists, such as Kahlo, to express her frustration, fears, and desire for new leadership for decades to come. Kahlo found that her creation of art was therapeutic and it could be posited that art was an escape from the many pains and sufferings of the world around her and her relationships.

Two Fridas is a self-portrait created in 1939 which depicts the artist's emotional world (Fig. 5). This work is much bigger than the artist normally painted and it is surreal in that it celebrates the unconscious mind and connection to multiple realities. Kahlo was an independent, strong woman who was very proud of her Mexican heritage. She expressed her national pride through symbolism in her art such as allusions to Aztec practices and Mexican cultural motifs.[12] Cultural and personal identity feature prominently in this painting. The painting depicts two Fridas both of which are seated closely side by side on a bench and staring at the viewer. The figures sit very erect and in a formal pose, yet they hold hands in connection with each other. Their bodies are slightly turned into each other but they gaze in opposite directions at the viewer. They hold our gaze as if to look at the viewer questioningly.

One Frida is dressed in a traditional Tehuana outfit to represent her indigenous Mexican roots. This brightly-hued blouse, the traditional *huipil* tunic, and the skirt are relaxed with little embellishments. This figure holds a miniature portrait of her ex-husband, Diego Rivera, as a child. He was a loyal supporter of the rights of indigenous people. The second Frida is dressed in traditional European garb and holds forceps that have cut a blood vessel. Her dress is much more formal with lace, raffles, and embroidered flowers than her counterpart. The high collar is not only in keeping with European fashion, but also symbolizes the contrast between the more

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[12]Janice Helland, "Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo's Paintings: Indigeneity and Political Commitment," *Woman's Art Journal* 11, no. 2 (1990): 8–13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3690692.

relaxed indigenous garb and the fanciful high society European elitist fashion. Blood vessels connect both Fridas as the vessels spiral up the arm of the Tehuana before crossing over to the back of the European Frida who clamps the bleeding vessel with forceps. The figures hold hands to represent their unity. The Tehuana Frida has a healthy, red heart that is wholly intact but the European Frida has a heart that is cut open and vulnerable. This heart has been bisected to reveal its innards of vessels, valves, and muscles. These twin Fridas represent the idea of the indigenous Frida versus the European Frida.

The background of the painting shows a stormy sky which may suggest struggle and turmoil. The ominous sky creates a foreboding mood . The background is close to the two figures and also demonstrates shading which helps to increase the element of space. The portraits have some three-dimensional characteristics while the background is flat. The folds in the figure's skirt demonstrate skillful shading that creates dimension. The colors in this portrait are neutral in tone even though she uses subdued yellows, reds, and greens. This was typical of Kahlo's work in oil. The neutral tones in the piece help the burgundy hearts pull the focus of the viewer. The simplistic background and some shading do give this piece some dimension in the figures. The artist conveys that within any one person may be two different, multi-faceted versions or identities.

This painting was completed by Kahlo shortly after her divorce from Rivera. Some scholars speculate that Diego would have treasured the Tehuana Frida and rejected the European one.[13] Kahlo rejected the Porfiriato that had supported Mexican president Diaz in the past yet she encouraged the country's connections with indigenous Mexican peoples.[14]Kahlo may also have

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[13] Rebecca Block, and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1998): 8–12. https://doi.org/10.2307/1358399.
[14] Janice Helland, "Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo's Paintings: Indigenity and Political Commitment," *Woman's Art Journal*11, no. 2 (1990): 8–13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3690692.

been alluding to the Aztec practice of sacrifice, or her own tragic accident that left her with health issues. Additionally, the artist may be speaking to the impact that European colonialism had on the racial demographics of Mexico. As a mestizo woman of mixed Mexican and European descent who was also labeled as androgynous, Kahlo explored issues of identity and gender binary opposition in her art. Kahlo lived in a world where many women had to choose between their professional ambitions and their domestic duties.[15] The images of the two Fridas are not frail yet they convey vulnerability. The artist may be demonstrating the duality of people to be both strong and weak at the same time.

Frida's unique identity and style in both her personal life and her art helped to propel her as one of the most famous Mexicanidad icons. She was a champion of Mexican national identity. Kahlo demonstrates here the importance of expressing one's identity and exposing "each side of the coin" through her art. Kahlo was very forthcoming in regard to the power that art had to transform her emotional self. She tells us, "My painting carries with it the message of pain ... painting completed my life ... I believe that work is the best thing."[16] Frida Kahlo is one of many artists who have created art for the benefit of self expression.

The Mental Health Crisis Understood Today

Just as the world reacted to the interwar period (1918-1939) and adjusted to the new realities, the world adapted to our recent crisis and aftermath of COVID-19. We are in the middle of another mental health crisis following the pandemic and as a nation are searching for additional tools that can be used to combat the mental health issues in our society. Mental and

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[15]Rebecca Blockand Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1998): 8–12. https://doi.org/10.2307/1358399.
[16] Kimberley Masters, "The Quotes of Frida Kahlo," The World of Frida Kahlo, 1996, <http://members.aol.com/fridanet/quotes.htm> (28 September 2002).

physical health are equally important components of overall health. Steven Galson, former US

Surgeon General, tells us that our mental, physical, and social health are all interdependent

entities. "Mental health and wellness are essential to overall health," says Galson in "Mental

Health Matters."[17] When categorizing why mental health is important he links the comorbidity of

certain illnesses like depression with cancer. So, our ability to treat mental health conditions has

a lasting impact on our physical wellness. The author argues that like other chronic illnesses,

issues of mental health are treatable, avoidable, and just as impactful to our overall health.

 Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the United States.

Some numbers that drive this home are the fact that:

- More than 1 in 5 US adults live with a mental illness.
- Over 1 in 5 youth (ages 13-18) either currently or at some point during their life, have had a seriously debilitating mental illness.
- About 1 in 25 U.S. adults lives with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression.[18]

One of the challenges we face is that there is no single cause for mental illness. A number of

factors can contribute to the risk for mental illness, such as adverse childhood experiences,

chronic medical conditions, biological factors such as imbalances in the brain, the use of alcohol

or drugs, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. The Center for Disease Control reports that

13-20% of all school-age children experience a mental disorder in a given year (2013).[19]

Additionally, nearly 22% of children have first-hand experience with a traumatic life event that

has negatively impacted their development, decreased their engagement in school, and made

them more susceptible to mental health disorders of their own. The need for mental health

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[17] Steven K. Galson, "Mental Health Matters." *Public Health Reports (1974-)* 124, no. 2 (2009): 189–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25682191.
[18] "About Mental Health." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 25, 2023. https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm.
[19] "Mental Health Surveillance among Children - United States, 2013–2019." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 24, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7102a1.htm.

assessments and therapies in schools is increasing every year.[20] Mental health interventions are even more necessary than ever in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Historically, the understanding of the concept of well-being has varied greatly during the evolution of psychology. Theories of psychological well-being are many and include Abraham Maslow's conception of self-actualization and linear growth, Carl Roger's view of the fully functioning person who has embraced existential living, and Carl Jung's formulation of individualization in which a person realizes their innermost uniqueness.[21]

Unfortunately, we know far more about psychological dysfunction than we know about psychological well-being. More focus has been placed on what mental illness looks like as opposed to what well-being is and how to maintain it. We know that well-being is much more than simply the absence of mental illness. Carol Ryff in *"Psychological Well-Being in Adult Life"* tells us that to equate well-being with happiness would also be selling this concept short. The author suggests that a more appropriate definition of well-being may be "the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potential."[22] This definition focuses less on the hedonistic pleasure of happiness and more on the individual bettering the personal self.

An integral element to understanding the concept of well-being is social connectedness. Social connectedness is an essential part of our development and can be defined as our network of positive, subjective relationships with others in the social realm. Research over several decades demonstrates that social connections impact our overall life longevity and are

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[20] Bethel et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences: Assessing the Impact on Health and School Engagement and the Mitigating Role of Resilience," 11.

[21] Carol D. Ryff, "Psychological Well-Being in Adult Life." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 4, no. 4 (1995): 99–104. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20182342. page 99.

[22] Carol D. Ryff, "Psychological Well-Being in Adult Life." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 4, no. 4 (1995): 99–104. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.ep10772395.

responsible for many positive benefits to our general health and our psychological health.[23] In "Social Connection and Compassion: Important Predictors of Health and Well-Being" Emma Seppala, Timothy Rossomando, and James R. Doty state that social connectedness is a basic and necessary human need. They reflect on the works of psychologist Abraham Maslow, who established that a person's most important, primary need is the formation of a loving connection with other people.[24] Developmental psychologists argue that this need extends through one's lifetime and doesn't diminish as we age.

Authors Liesl Heinrich and Eleonora Guillone state in their writing "The Clinical Significance of Loneliness" that famous German psychiatrist, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann tells us that social connectedness is "… the longing for interpersonal intimacy that stays with every human being from infancy throughout life; and there is no human being who is not threatened by its loss…The human being is born with the need for contact and tenderness."[25] Our social relationships directly correlate with our feelings of happiness and well-being. There are a host of psychological benefits to these relationships including feelings of inspiration, efficiency, productivity, and general success in life. Additionally, the reverse is true that individuals who lack social connectedness experience psychological distress including jealousy, anxiety, hostility, and general negative social relationships with others.[26]

This idea of social connectedness is exactly what the world lost in the two years that the Covid pandemic was heavily upon us. However, even before the pandemic, research showed that social connectedness in the US was diminishing at a high rate due to many factors such as

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[23] F. Hobbs and N. Stoops, *Demographic trends in the 20th century.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office; 2002. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Special Reports, Series CENSR-4.

[24] Emma Seppala et al., "Social Connection and Compassion: Important Predictors of Health and Well-Being." *Social Research* 80, no. 2 (2013): 411–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24385608.

[25] L.M. Heinrich and E. Gullone, "The clinical significance of loneliness: a literature review.". *Clin. Psychol.* Rev. 26, 695-718.

[26] Emma Seppala et al., "Social Connection and Compassion: Important Predictors of Health and Well-Being." *Social Research* 80, no. 2 (2013): 411–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24385608.

smaller household sizes and geographical separation between family and friends. This research

conducted almost twenty years prior to COVID, shows that reports of loneliness and isolation are

direct consequences of decreased social connectedness, and as a further result we see a rise in

psychological therapy. During and after the most intense periods of the COVID pandemic–when

social distancing was enforced, daily living was altered drastically, and health care was

limited–we see a worsening of the potential risk for depression and anxiety. For many

individuals, the trauma of social isolation and loneliness has a lasting impact that needs to be

addressed to start the healing process toward greater well-being. COVID was impactful on the

lives of human beings worldwide, but the implications are much more severe for those who

already have preexisting mental health conditions. Therefore, mental health resources such as

therapies are all the more important.

Contemporary Escapism and its Therapeutic Possibilities

Our hectic lives often warrant the need for a distraction, a diversion, an escape. Robert B.

Heilman, author of "Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience" explores attitudes

about the idea of "escape" and how historically the necessity for it has been viewed negatively.

The negative connotations of escape stem from a Puritanical perspective. Escape was often

looked upon as needing to hide from dangers or protect oneself from predators. In the 1990s,

Roy Baumeister introduced the concept of an innate motivational force that is inherent in

escapism. His ideas on this power of escapism have been illustrated in cinematography, art,

sports, and media sciences.[27]

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[27] Roy F. Baumeister, *Escaping the self: Alcoholism, spirituality, masochism, and other flights from the burden of Selfhood*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991.

Our attitudes towards "escape" have changed to see it as a positive aspect of life. Heilman defines "escape" and discusses what it means to support a "flight from reality." [28]

> If we escape from destiny, we are freed from all pressures and restraints. Nothing is determined or, better, nothing is determined - except, presumably, a personal will all-libbing new liberties from moment to moment. Instead of a compulsory fate, there is only an omnipotent *I* continually choosing in unrestricted freedom and always with a "right to" whatever is chosen.[29]

John L. Longeway writes in "The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception" that escapism in general can be "rational, both pragmatically and theoretically, and healthy" as long as this is the type of escape that is meant to take a holiday from unpleasant beliefs.[30] However, entrenched escapism, which avoids a belief when it is extremely relevant to one's well- being, is not rational as a compensatory mechanism. For example, we wouldn't advocate that an individual use escapism as the sole rational means of avoiding a hostile environment when their best interest and mental health are at stake. He also argues that entrenched escapism can easily be self-deception in that the individual is disregarding needs and ultimately contributing to unhealthy behaviors. There are healthy means of escape but self-deception about reality is not one of them. Longeway continues to say,

> 'Escapist' entertainment's essential purpose is to draw us away from our everyday trouble, and, sometimes, to help us to fantasize ourselves as better, more important, or better off than we really are. Indulgences in such entertainment helps us avoid, temporarily, unpleasant truths that we must live with, and it is this escape from unpleasant reality that gives us the terms 'escapist' and 'escapism'. Sometimes we speak of a more serious escapism, in which we avoid thinking about what we know to be so, not in the course of recreation or to keep unpleasant thoughts out of mind as long as they are not necessary, but as a defense against reality itself.[31]

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[28] Robert B.Heilman, "Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience." *The Sewanee Review* 83, no. 3 (1975): 439–58. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27542986.

[29] Robert B.Heilman, "Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience." *The Sewanee Review* 83, no. 3 (1975): 439–58. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27542986.

[30] John L. Longeway, "The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception." *Behavior and Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1990): 1–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27759220.

[31] John L. Longeway, "The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception." *Behavior and Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1990): 1–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27759220.

One positive solution can perhaps be found in the immersive escape experiences that have been widely popular in the last decade. Almost one hundred years after Dali unveiled *The City of Drawers* and introduced a new way of understanding art, we see the unveiling of a widely popular new art experience in 2017.

Escapist Art

Escapist art has the potential to create the same social connections with others and support the efforts of self-expansion theory. One finds an early example of escapist art in the works of Vincent van Gogh, best known for his *Starry Night* and his intense struggle with mental health issues that lead to his early death by suicide at the age of 37. The irony of van Gogh's life is that the estimated 2100 peaceful, iconic landscapes and flower arrangements that he created, of which many have been labeled masterpieces, were never more appreciated than after the artist's death in 1890. His life was riddled with poverty and severe mental health issues yet his art expresses an unparalleled lightness that no other master has replicated. Scholars who have studied van Gogh's life document that he found great solace in creating his art, especially during times of intense treatment in institutions for those needing psychological interventions. Van Gogh stated, "The more I become decomposed, the more sick and fragmented I am, the more I become an artist."[32] Furthermore, scholars studying the connection between mental health and artistic ability reveal that van Gogh's most productive period was in the last two years of his life prior to his suicide. In "Art, Madness and Human Interaction" the authors tell us that:

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32 Vernon, McCay, and Marjie L. Baughman. "Art, Madness, and Human Interaction." *Art Journal* 31, no. 4 (1972):413–20. https://doi.org/10.2307/775545.

  … [Van Gogh's]ultimate fame rests with the masterpieces of the last two years of his life, a stage during which he experienced hallucinations he interpreted as mystical revelations. In parts of these two years, van Gogh created with an almost manic-like productivity over two hundred paintings, among which are some of his greatest works. Psychodynamically, this creative outburst occurred when van Gogh was able to tap primary process material and other inner feelings, yet retained the cognitive power and control to express this unconscious and preconscious material with the technical and artistic skill required of great painting.[33]

Modern Escapism in Immersive Art Experiences

  Van Gogh is undoubtedly not only an artist that people associate with soothing, therapeutic images, but an artist that directly benefited from creating art. In many ways, Van Gogh's work represents the two powerful ways that art can be therapeutic: art experiences can be beneficial to the viewer, and creating art can be cathartic to the artist. Van Gogh's tragic legacy of mental health crisis and suicide has been given a rebranding in the immersive art experience. The extremely popular Vincent van Gogh experience has attracted over 5 million participants worldwide since its opening in 2017. As seen in Figure 6, this virtual experience allows the viewer to escape into the realm of Van Gogh by literally walking into one of his famous masterpieces, *Starry Night*. Cutting-edge technology brings the participant in visual contact with over 300 of VanGogh's paintings during the immersive experience. Visitor reviews include verbiage such as "it took me to a whole new world."[34] We crave the ability to detach from reality for a moment to have an escape that provides respite and sometimes healing from the outside world. The escapist art experience of van Gogh has gained universal acclaim as it has been showcased in nearly fifty countries around the world and has hosted over five million participants.

33Vernon, McCay, and Marjie L. Baughman. "Art, Madness, and Human Interaction." *Art Journal* 31, no. 4 (1972): 413–20. https://doi.org/10.2307/775545.

[34] Mathilde Pulh and Rémi Mencarelli. "Web 2.0: Is the Museum–Visitor Relationship Being Redefined?" *International Journal of Arts Management* 18, no. 1 (2015): 43–51. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24587086.

The digital reproductions — particularly of the 1888 Arles street scene "Café Terrace at Night" — strongly recall the escapist fantasies of anime, and the childish moral sentiments that go with them…The art's personal anguish and social tensions both dissolve into a mist of let's-pretend; this van Gogh is less an artist than a craftsman of other worlds. As for the technology: although these immersives have been touted as breakthroughs in exhibition design, room-filling cinema projections go back many decades. The shows hark back in particular to multi-projector attractions at the World's Fair in Queens in 1964 and at Expo '67 in Montreal, which cast humanist visions of the future in all directions.[35]

Van Gogh's immersive art experience of 2017 revolutionized the idea of being part of the visual landscape. Participants can literally step into van Gogh's canvas to become part of the artist's most popular works. In 2022, Exhibition Hub brought the sister experience of Claude Monet's immersive experience to the world (Fig. 7). Viewers step into a room with two story projections of Monet's work that surround them in a 360 degree digital art exhibit. Over 400 of Monet's artworks pair with cutting edge projection technology to bring his world to life. This immersive experiences have been met with rave reviews for the ways in which "Imagine stepping into Claude Monet's actual atelier…it felt as though we were truly being transported to Giverny".[36]

Many art museums in the 21st century have faced the challenge of needing to reinvent themselves to offer experiences that other museums cannot compete with. These competitive pressures have caused the rise in immersive art experiences worldwide. These interactive experiences are employing technologies such as virtual reality, digital art, 3D art, stereoscopic

[35] Jason Farago. "Submerged in van Gogh: Would Absinthe Make the Art Grow Fonder?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 June 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/06/09/arts/design/van-gogh-immersive-manhattan.html.
[36]Marie-Angèle Zoungrana. "We Went to Monet: The Immersive Experience, Here's Our Review." *Secret Atlanta*, 22 June 2023, secretatlanta.co/monet-experience-review-atlanta/.

glasses in an effort to reconstruct a new world for the viewer to participate in and with.[37] The

Frameless digital art experience in London, Atelier des Luminiere in Paris and Area15 in Las

Vegas are just a few of the art experiences that are becoming more and more popular. These

immersion experiences allow the viewer to depart from reality and escape the world around

them. Scientist Joseph Nechvatal tells us:

> Therefore the role of immersive art remains the prosthetic task of artificially facilitating
> such an unrestricted state; as such, it remains associated with the most fleeting
> elaborations of artistic conscious-ness. This erudite desire to exist in an anti-mechanistic
> state of expansion is temporarily realized (albeit symbolically) in engaging immersive art.
> Immersive art thus posits itself as a meta-symbol of and for expanded human potential.[38]

The use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) adds value to the cultural

experience for the participant by contributing sensoring stimulation that assists in the escapism

that is inherent in immersive art experience. ICTs help visitors to dive deeper into another

dimension for an escape experience.

　　Superblue is Miami's popular immersive and interactive art experience where you can

walk under and through art as integrated participants. "Forest of Us" is part of the larger

Superblue exhibition in Miami (Fig. 8). Created by Es Devlin, a theatrical designer, this virtual

installation presents a maze of reflective surfaces to convey a forest theme of branching, growing

and taking the undiscovered path. The exhibit starts with a short film about branching which

shows natural depictions of branching such as the limbs of trees, the forks in a creek and the

bronchi in human lungs. The theme of human respiration is also evident in the film. The film

screen then opens to allow the visitor to fully immerse themselves by walking into the maze of

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[37] Collin-Lachaud, Isabelle, and Juliette Passebois. "Do Immersive Technologies Add Value to the Museumgoing Experience? An Exploratory Study Conducted at France's Paléosite." *International Journal of Arts Management* 11, no. 1 (2008): 60–71. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064975.
[38] Joseph Nechvatal. "Towards an Immersive Intelligence." *Leonardo* 34, no. 5 (2001): 417–22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1577234.

shiny walls and ceilings. Mylar, mirrors, glass, aluminum and other reflective materials create

this pathway of twists and turns (Fig 9.). The participant is surrounded by their own image and

reflections of light as they walk through the maze. Eventually the participant arrives at a 6 x 35

foot pool of water where they are invited to enjoy their reflection as a living breathing being

interacting with their world.[39] This exhibit was created to invite the participant to reflect on their

place in the environment as they immerse themselves in this escapist exhibit. Reflecting on the

self in relationship to the rest of the living, breathing world is cathartic for the viewer. The vision

of Superblue is to break down any barriers that exist between the art viewer and the artwork.

Modern Escape in Gaming

The electronically and digitally manipulated images produced for gaming are certainly

art, but are not as widely recognized as such. These ever morphing technologies that bring us

three-dimensional virtual world technologies have become so popular and pervasive that we now

utilize them to create and experience digital visual culture. The gaming community has been

defending the benefits of gaming for decades now. The ability to make social connections for

those who may be physically and emotionally isolated and increased hand-eye coordination are

popular arguments for why gaming can better one's life. Gaming is an additional artistic mode of

escape. They also immerse us in another world where we can find ourselves. Many gamers find

gaming to be therapeutic and a detachment from the cares of the real world. Christina Rosen in

"Playgrounds of the Self" tells us that:

> Video games are, in effect, our modern Vauxhall. Like those old pleasure gardens of
> eighteenth-century London, they are a masterpiece of faux reality. They are the result of
> much careful and creative planning. They invite us to assume different identities, at least

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[39]Arthur Lubow. "Up to My Eyeballs in Art at Superblue." The New York Times, March 18, 2021.
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/arts/design/superblue-miami-immersive-art.html.

for the time we stroll through their imaginary worlds. And they exist to give us pleasure by tricking our senses. Among the attractions of Vauxhall's elm-lined Grand Walk were three arches meant to mimic the Ruins of Palmyra and pavilions meant to resemble ancient temples.[40]

Many gamers find identity and self in the gaming community that they immerse themselves in. Many researchers believe that gaming results in self-expansion, the process of believing that we are competent and equipped to achieve personal goals. Researchers claim that gaming equips gamers with more tools to handle the rigors of the actual world by reducing stress, and increasing life satisfaction. We can also improve mental health and well-being by connecting with other people while gaming. Neurologist Mark Baxter tells us that "Socialization with friends and family can increase engagement and strengthen motivation-and it is also good for the brain".[41]

A significant amount of empirical research has also been conducted in the area of escapism in relationships to media, immersive art experiences and gaming. A two-dimensional model of escapism examining a dualistic approach to escapism about both gaming and media streaming reveals that escapism may work to encourage "positive psychological outcomes."[42] Research conducted by educational behaviorists, Bobby Hoffman and Louis Nadelson, tells us that "Players indicated that gaming was socially captivating, fun, challenging but relaxing, and precipitated positive affect and cognition even when unsuccessful results were achieved."[43] Positive results of gaming include social bonding when gaming in a team setting. Additionally, gamers experience an escapism that promotes self-expansion. Self-expansion supports an

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[40] Rosen, Christine. "Playgrounds of the Self." *The New Atlantis*, no. 9 (2005): 3–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152875.

[41] Mark Baxter. "Brain Health and Online Gaming." *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 35, no. 2 (2011): 107–9. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26555782.

[42] Stenseng Frode, Jonas Falch-Madsen, and Beate Wold Hygen. "Are There Two Types of Escapism? Exploring a Dualistic Model of Escapism in Digital Gaming and Online Streaming." *Psychology of Popular Media* 10, no. 3 (2021): 319–29. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000339.

[43] Hoffman, Bobby, and Louis Nadelson. "Motivational Engagement and Video Gaming: A Mixed Methods Study." *Educational Technology Research and Development* 58, no. 3 (2010): 245–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40603176.

individual's sense of self by building resources, acquiring skills, and growing perspectives so that wellbeing can be optimized.[44]

Elden Ring is the award winning 2022 brainchild of Japanese creative director and designer, Hidetaka Miyazaki and English fantasy novelist, George R.R. Martin (Fig. 10). This open world immersive gaming experience takes place within an expansive fantasy world. Players are able to choose a character and assume personal attributes of that individual. Additionally, this character's class will equip them with a host of weapons and spells. These weapons and enchantments are used in combat against armies of intruders or solo enemies. Strategy and skill are honed during play resulting in feelings of accomplishment and stress reduction.

The game's dark fantasy realm of graphics (Fig. 11) are otherworldly and mesmerizing for the player. Several key elements of Elden Ring enhance the Escapist art experience. The game drops the player into an open world where nothing is off limits for the player to explore. This feeling of endless possibility enhances the immersive experience. Gamers are rewarded for exploring this open world of the Lands Between. Limgrave, a mystical land of both green plains and early ruins, and Caelid, home to a wasteland of monsters, are examples of the fantasy settings that players can travel amongst. Players are challenged towards levels of accomplishment by battling demigods and beasts in a labyrinth of caves, catacombs and dungeons. Players not only escape into a magnificent fantasy world, but they gain a sense of accomplishment on these personal quests that they create.

Drawing on mythology and legend from Celtic, Norse, Greek and Japanese cultures, Elden Ring has won over 330 awards for its artistry and Lord of the Rings style epic storyline. In

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[44] Jinjun Nie, Xiaoyi Wang, and Chan Yang. "The Influence of Self-Expansion and Consumer Engagement on Consumers' Continuous Participation in Virtual Corporate Social Responsibility Co-Creation." *Behavioral Sciences* 13, no. 7 (2023): 545. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13070545.

addition to the surreal fantasy landscapes, the player experiences a high level of freedom within the game that allows them to feel fully present and submerged within the game. The graphics are very realistic and alive. Gaming experts review *Elden Ring* stating that "In Elden Ring, this grim atmosphere complements perfectly the highly developed, mythically inspired lore, creating a cohesive and immersive experience that absorbs players completely."[45]

Conclusion: Escapist Art as A New Genre

At historical milestones in U.S. history we have seen the unique relationship flourish between art and social unrest. Art has been a major contributor to improved well-being during these times of crisis. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic we also see the need for additional resources that can halt and heal the increasing incidences of mental illness.. Art therapy has been a powerful resource to combat the rise in mental health needs. Art, specifically escapist art, holds the key to allowing viewers to detach from reality and to heal from trauma. Contemporary art forms such as immersive digital art installations and gaming provide the element of escapism that provides a coping mechanism from the stress of reality. Improved mental health, healing and well-being are the positive outcomes in favor of escapist art as a new art genre.

This background of art by those during this time frame provides a historical context for the resurgence of what is now known as "escapist art" - in particular immersive art installations and high tech gaming. Just as people needed art as a resource to weather the crisis of WWI, we need it today in the wake of COVID-19. Mental health issues are more prevalent than ever and regular means of therapy do not always help everyone. Using the power of our imagination to temporarily detach from reality with the intention of a therapeutic response. We see these

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[45] G2A.COM. "Elden Ring's Radiance: The Game That Redefined RPG Boundaries." G2A News, April 11, 2024. https://www.g2a.com/news/features/why-is-elden-ring-so-popular-and-good/.

contemporary modes of escape as beneficial to those who do need to heal from trauma, are

coping with mental illness or those searching for identity.

The words of self-proclaimed "visual escape artist" Greta Brat embodies the

contemporary importance of a new escapist art.

> Visual escapism in digital art is like being whisked away to a dreamlike world, where reality becomes a distant memory, and the imagination takes over. I believe that visual escapism is a way for people to step away from their busy lives and enter into a world of imagination. It's an invitation to escape reality and enter into a realm where anything is possible. Whether through the use of color, form, or composition, I strive to create works that transport viewers to another place where they can forget their worries and simply enjoy the beauty of the art. Through my art, I aim to provide a moment of respite and a chance to experience something new and magical.[46]

Brat further explains the importance for her art to heal and improve her sense of well-being,

> "Life can be tough, but my art helps me to heal and find my way. Art has been my constant companion, helping me to heal from past hurts and embrace the present moment. It brings me peace, solace, and a sense of understanding about myself and the world around me. I wish I had started creating earlier in life, but even now, I am grateful for the opportunity to express myself and find healing through my art."[47]

As the world continues to need art to provide solace, comfort and healing, a new art genre is necessary.

This sentiment is echoed in the words of artist and author, Danielle Childs, in "In Defense

of Escapist Art":

> We need, perhaps now more than ever, art that apprehends our present situation. But we also need art that suspends reality, granting us a mental haven in which to recharge our exhausted levels of empathy and intellectual fortitude. When we take pleasure seriously art becomes therapy, leisure becomes rest, and rest begets new energy with which to tackle the problems of our time. As readers, observers, and audience members, we should be careful and unashamed that our art consumptive practices oscillate between ethical challenge and therapeutic respite, not only because great art is being made in both realist

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[46]Alyssa Travis. "Interview with Greta Brat, Lithuanian Digital 3D Artist." *Hi*, 5 May 2021, www.hi-arts.com/post/interview-with-greta-brat-lithuanian-digital-3d-artist.

[47] Alyssa Travis. "Interview with Greta Brat, Lithuanian Digital 3D Artist." *Hi*, 5 May 2021, www.hi-arts.com/post/interview-with-greta-brat-lithuanian-digital-3d-artist.

and escapist traditions, but because our need to feel hope is as unrelenting as our duty to feel outrage. [48]

Just as Realism flourished until the late nineteenth century, Escapist art has found its footing in our contemporary, post-pandemic world. Escapist art has the ability to be a catalyst for change in a world heavy with mental health concerns. In this way, Escapist art and art in general continues to serve as a vehicle for encouraging empathy, well-being and healing in a broken world. Escapist art allows us to enter another world where we can contemplate "good and beautiful things (to) grant us a restorative distance from the particularities of our time."[49] We should be celebrating both the artists who create things of distracting beauty and the audience who enjoys them. We should then be supporting an Escapist art genre that embraces beauty, fantasy and surrealism as a means of escaping the darkness of our world.[50]

In my own experience, art is a saving, healing force that has given me solace in the darkness that is interwoven into life. From the art that I came to love as a child in the illustrations of fairy tales, to graphic novels that would captivate me for hours, to contemporary gaming that gives me a quiet respite from the reality of university life; art is escape. This escape is a relief from the stress of my reality. It provides me with a cathartic outlet when my therapist's office is closed for the day. It not only encourages my creative nature, but it supports my overall well-being. In the creation of escapist art, the artist not only forms a thing of beauty for the world to enjoy, but they also add a therapeutic, healing touch to the world that leaves its mark on the viewer for the betterment of their soul.

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[48] Danielle Rae Childs. 2019. "In Defense of Escapist Art." Cherwell. December 21, 2019. https://cherwell.org/2019/12/21/in-defense-of-escapist-art/.
[49] Danielle Rae Childs. 2019. "In Defense of Escapist Art." Cherwell. December 21, 2019. https://cherwell.org/2019/12/21/in-defense-of-escapist-art/.
[50] Danielle Rae Childs. 2019. "In Defense of Escapist Art." Cherwell. December 21, 2019. https://cherwell.org/2019/12/21/in-defense-of-escapist-art/.

We have seen escapist art emerge in history in times of social and emotional need. Escapist art has the ability to bridge the chasm of loneliness and social disconnectedness that the world felt during the pandemic. This art genre is a tool that can assist in art therapies. Whether used in conjunction with art therapy, or not, escapist art has the potential to be an important resource in improving our sense of well-being. As digital technology improves we should expect to see visual escapism grow as a contemporary art genre. Studios are creating digital worlds that offer comfort and refuge from reality. These fantasy worlds often contain aspects of surrealism and wonder that are hauntingly familiar to the dreams of Dali. We needed escape then, and we need it now.

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Figure 1. Hale Aspacio Woodruff, *The Repatriation of the Freed Captives,* Oil on canvas, 1939, Collection of Savery Library, Talladega, Alabama.

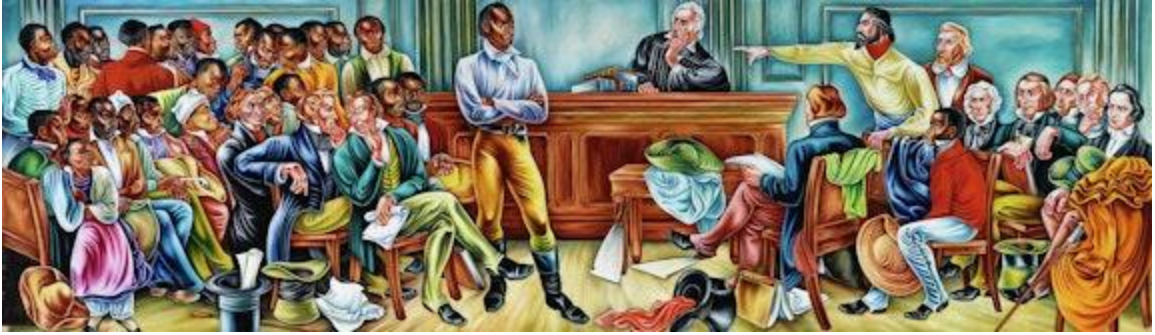Figure 2. Hale Aspacio Woodruff, *The Trial of the Amistad Captives*, Oil on canvas, 1939, Collection of Savery Library, Talladega, Alabama.

Figure 3. Hale Aspacio Woodruff, *The Trial of the Amistad Captives ,* Oil on canvas, 1939, Collection of Savery Library, Talladega, Alabama.
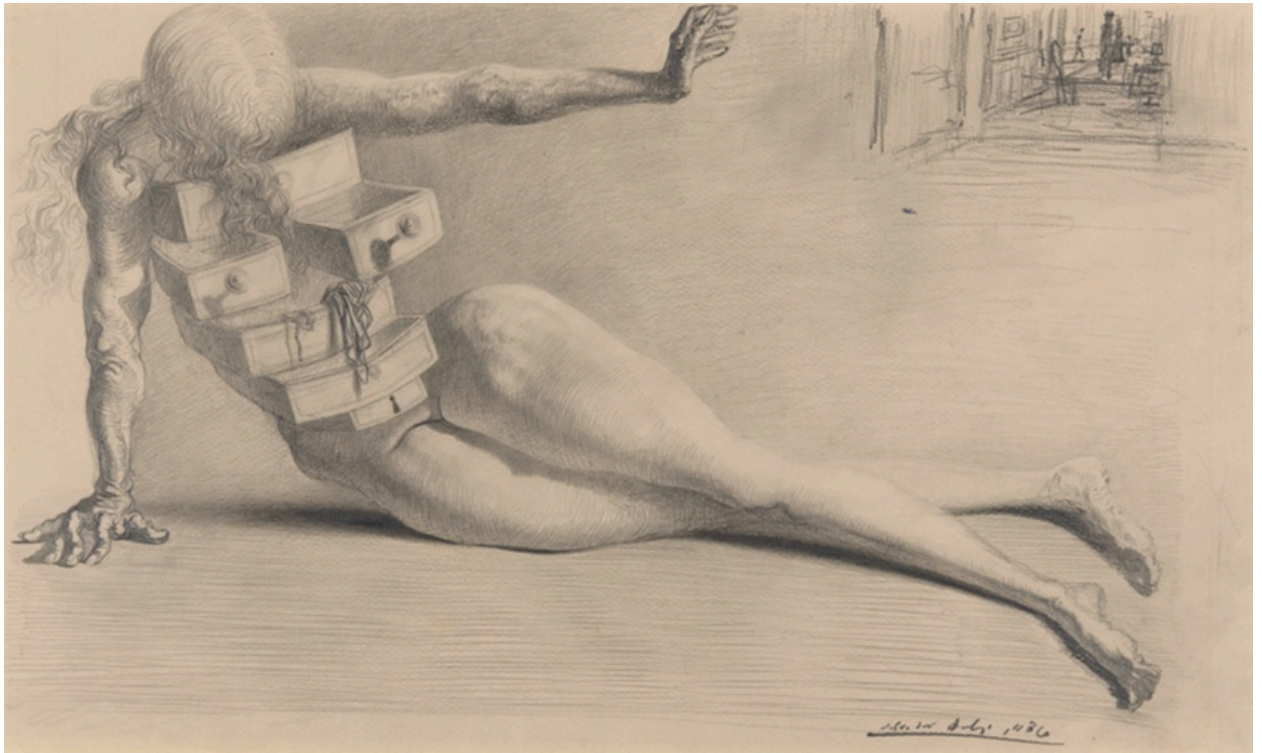
Figure 4. Salvador Dali, *The City of Drawers*, Graphite on Buff Wove Paper, 1936.

Figure 5. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.

Figure 6. *Van Gogh Experience,* 2017, Philadelphia.

Figure 7. Claude Monet Immersive Experience, 2021, Miami.

Figure 8. Es Devlin, *Forest of Us,* 2021, Superblue, Miami.

Figure 9. Es Devlin, *Forest of Us,* 2021, Superblue, Miami.

Figure 10. Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Elden Ring,* 2022.

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