

First-of-its-kind degree blends art, psychology to build a healing future

ASU's BFA in art therapy is trauma-informed and person-centered

By Mary Raha, ASU News
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From [Hurricane Katrina survivors](#) to [Alzheimer's patients](#), art therapy has proved a powerful form of healing. But because the practice blends both art and psychology, many undergraduate paths to a career in the field require students to pursue psychology first and art second (or vice versa).

Now, a pioneering program at Arizona State University is placing both disciplines at the core of a single degree: the [Bachelor of Fine Arts in art with a concentration in art therapy](#) — one of the only programs of its kind in the Southwest.

Housed in the [School of Art](#) in the [Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts](#), this innovative degree combines rigorous studio art practice with psychology, preparing students to begin exploring the healing power of creativity in various contexts, both professionally and personally.

“This program brings the connection between creativity and wellness into the classroom,” said [Ryan Kirkpatrick](#), assistant professor and practicing art therapist. “It’s about understanding how to utilize the creative process to help people heal and express the complicated experiences they’re going through.”

The School of Art long envisioned an art therapy pathway, and Kirkpatrick’s arrival in fall 2023 brought momentum. His graduate clinical experience — including work with U.S. veterans and adults with serious mental illnesses — helped shape the program's trauma-informed, person-centered foundation.

“It was already in motion,” Kirkpatrick said. “And I think my coming in aligned with ASU's growing focus on mental health and the opening of the medical school. That made it the right moment to launch.”

A first-of-its-kind approach

ASU’s BFA in art therapy requires students to complete more than 40 credit hours of studio art — including drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, digital media and interdisciplinary practices —

alongside 18 credit hours in psychology. These include a suite of psychology courses such as Abnormal Psychology, Human Development and the Psychology of Personality.

Layered into this coursework are both foundational and expanded art therapy classes designed to help students understand how to ethically and culturally apply these tools in real-life community settings.

In their final year, students participate in a structured internship (ATP 484), where they learn how to facilitate emotionally safe art-making experiences in schools, nonprofits or social service organizations.

While students won't provide therapy services — that requires a graduate degree — they will graduate with foundational experience in trauma-informed care, creative facilitation and visual storytelling.

"This program is grounded in a trauma-informed approach," Kirkpatrick said. "That means we focus on safety, choice, trust, empowerment, collaboration and cultural knowledge. It's about creating a classroom where students can engage honestly with themselves and each other — without feeling pressure to disclose more than they're ready for."

In practice, that can look like setting classroom agreements together at the start of the semester, using consent-based critiques, and exploring difficult material through metaphor and abstraction rather than direct self-disclosure.

"I tell my students all the time: In this space, I'm not practicing as an art therapist. But as a mental health professional and educator, I am devoted to creating a learning space where your story and experiences matter, and you feel empowered to embrace them in your art, and your education," Kirkpatrick said.

Art as healing, art as profession

For those students who do want to attend graduate school and become a board certified art therapist, this program offers them a pathway. The courses in this program meet the requirements for entry into credentialed American Art Therapy Association art therapy graduate programs, and students who are in pursuit of becoming licensed art therapists will graduate from ASU with the necessary prerequisites to apply to many of the nation's premiere graduate art therapy programs.

ASU's BFA in art therapy isn't just preparing students for graduate school, however — it's preparing them for meaningful, purpose-driven careers. Graduates will be equipped for a range of roles, including behavioral health support, nonprofit outreach, community-based art education and museum programming. The curriculum also positions students to apply to competitive master's programs in art therapy, counseling or social work.

"Anything you learn here, you can take out in any direction you want to go," Kirkpatrick said. "Whether that's grad school, a job in community health or even integrating this into your own creative practice."

As a professor who teaches courses in expanded arts, Kirkpatrick incorporates art therapy and socially engaged principles into his curriculum. This approach is already attracting students who

want to explore their own mental health journey through a structured, self-reflexive lens.

“I’ve had students tell me that incorporating these values into art-making has allowed them to see their arts practice as a form of self-care,” Kirkpatrick said. “Another student said it was the first time they saw art-making as a process that could actually help people. That shift in perception — that’s huge.”

Learning through doing

One of the program’s pilot courses — Words, Painting and Emotion — exemplifies how students engage theory and practice at once.

“My experience with Professor Ryan Kirkpatrick’s Words, Painting and Emotion class was nothing short of phenomenal,” said Nicole Reijonen, an art studies major who will graduate this December. “The class was structured around the trauma-informed practices of personal and environmental safety, self-care and grounding exercises, choice, collaboration, and empowerment by acknowledging the impact of trauma and learning how to process complex emotions through painting.”

As part of this course, students participated in the C.A.R.E. project during Herberger Institute Day, an annual celebration of arts and design across the campus. Kirkpatrick and his class facilitated the creation of a collaborative, 8-by-8-foot canvas painting that invited participation from passersby.

“We divided the finished canvas into 36 smaller paintings and will distribute them all over campus,” Kirkpatrick said. “This evolving project is about raising awareness of the power of collective expression on our sense of wellness and inclusivity. For some students, it may have been the first time they picked up a brush, loaded it with paint and allowed themselves to express their emotional state. That experience — the feeling of being part of something collaborative, of being seen — that can stay with someone. That can change them.”

Reflecting on the project, Reijonen added, “I’m so glad I was able to be a part of such a meaningful project that taught me that everyone has a story and any mark of self expression can be ‘good art.’”

A program that puts people first

ASU’s BFA in art therapy is currently welcoming its first cohort of students. As it grows, Kirkpatrick is focused on ensuring that the program remains strength-based, interdisciplinary, community-focused and centered on deep learning.

“What excites me most is building this program with care — making it a space where students feel seen, where they feel like their lived experience and its place in their work matters,” he said.

For prospective students and their families, Kirkpatrick offers a simple message: “This degree can change lives. Not just the lives of the people you’ll help — but also your own. If you want to make a difference through art, if you care about people and healing and justice — this is where you start.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU students collaborate on a large canvas during the C.A.R.E. project, exploring art's role in wellness and community. Photo by Sarah Brazeal/ASU

Text image(s)



Ryan Kirkpatrick, courtesy photo