



# Presenting Leading Art Therapists: Mercedes Ballbé ter Maat, Ph.D., ATR-BC, LPC, HLM

## An Art Therapist's Life Path and One of the First President of the Croatian Art Therapy Association

It is our great honor, far greater than what this stereotypical expression may indicate, that the small group that will become the core of HART (Croatian Art Therapy Association) had a chance to meet a person of such distinctive experience, superb professionalism as a clinician, mentor, and teacher, and – now it's starting to be really incredible – truly remarkable personality, Mercedes Ballbé ter Maat.

With this interview, we will try to present Dr. ter Maat through the challenges and successes of her life path, her choices and career moves throughout the years of experience as an art therapist. We were lucky that the same challenges brought Dr. ter Maat to Croatia in 2018 when six pioneers of art therapy in Croatia professionally and personally got forever

connected with the pioneer of art therapy in the USA, where from they continue the interesting path to the future of art therapy in Croatia.

Everything started with multiculturalism and research, and continued with the establishment of HART. As the first president of the Croatian Art Therapy Association, Mercedes set up high levels of quality of policy, regulations, and ethics, helped set up the base of the operational framework of the Association and after two years of presidential mandate, stayed the honorary President of the Association, always ready to advise, mentor, support, or celebrate with us. After all, we are talking about the South American warmth.

Dr. ter Maat participates in local, state, national, and international leadership un-



dertakings in the fields of mental health counseling, school counseling, and art therapy, and has presented and published several articles and book chapters on topics related to multicultural counseling, ethics, motivational interviewing, art therapy, and the use of art in counseling and therapy. Mercedes has been recognized for her work with many awards, including the Distinguished Service Award by the Potomac Art Therapy Association in Washington, DC, in 1998, Faculty of the

Year Award by the George Washington University Counseling Department, in 2003), the President's Award for Excellence in Teaching by Capella University in 2016), Outstanding Service Award by the European Branch of the American Counseling Association in 2018), and she was featured and recognized in the documentary, *Wheels of Diversity in Art Therapy: Pioneers of Color* as a pioneer among art therapists of color (2010). Mercedes received the highest honor from

the American Art Therapy Association in 2021, nominating her Honorary Life Member.

Q: For the beginning, I would like to know a bit about your beginning in art therapy. How did you two meet?

A: I had no idea that there was something called “art therapy.” I graduated in 1984 from the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill with a double bachelor’s in Psychology and Studio Art. My art concentration was in painting.

Psychology was always my love, my priority, I wanted to be a psychologist; I did not want to work as an artist. Art to me was a hobby, a pastime, a way to relax, something I did for fun, not as a career. In my last year at UNC, one of my art professors, knowing that I was also studying psychology, asked me if I knew about art therapy. He told me about it, and during my last year in college, I applied to a few universities in the United States. I chose George Washington University’s Art Therapy Program, which I joined right after completing my bachelor’s degree, in 1984.

Q: What were your teachers like, were any of the teachers especially influential art therapists at that time?

A.: Art therapy was well established as a profession in 1984 when I joined George

Washington University. We also had the privilege of having guest professors join us from New York University. I was fortunate to have been taught by influential art therapists such as Elinor Ulman, Edith Kramer, Linda Gantt, Paula Howie, Audrey Di Maria, and Catherine Williams.

I loved my time at George Washington University and with the Washington DC community of art therapists. The professors were very supportive. The comradery among students, professors, and graduates is what inspired me to service. When I became involved with the American Art Therapy Association, I had the opportunity to meet other leaders in our profession. Working together and joining forces to better the profession was incredible. I was working side-by-side with those that I had admired in my training at George Washington University, those who had authored my books, like Dr. Judith Rubin... It’s just incredible.

Last year, Dr. Judith Rubin, Lynn Kapi-tan, and Gussie Klorer nominated me for the Honorary Life Member Award of the American Art Therapy Association, the Association that Dr. Rubin founded. This was the greatest honor I received, recognizing my 35+ years of service to the Association and the art therapy profession of art therapy.

This is one of the reasons I feel compelled to continue to be involved, so that I can give back to the younger generations as my professors and leaders gave me.



Q: Your first teachers were closer to the psychoanalytic thought, you mentioned. Did that direct you to a Ph.D. in counseling and supervision and counselor educator and supervision, is your direction of thought closer to psychoanalytic thought or to integrative psychotherapy?

A: Psychoanalytic thought did not lead my theoretical orientation as a counselor or counselor educator. Counselors split from psychologists a long time ago because they did not want their work to have a great emphasis on pathology. Psychoanalysis is part of the medical model, which is all about pathology; there has to be a diagnosis, a pathology in order to start treatment. Counseling is a profession that focuses on well-being, on developmental issues, not on pathology. Counselors assume that the individual is not broken, just dealing with “normal” developmental issues, such as divorces,

bereavement, fears, traumas, life transitions, immigration... counselors will help you tap on your strengths as they help you grow, develop, and ultimately change.

I got a master’s degree in Counseling because I was working as an art therapist for the primary schools of the State of Virginia – yet they required me to have a master’s in Counseling, not in art therapy. Prior to working for the school system, I worked as an art therapist for the government of Washington, D.C. (in hospitals and clinics). I was hired to work in primary schools as an art therapist to work with immigrant students and families using art. I loved it, I loved the philosophy of counseling, I loved my professors, and I loved research. I didn’t have to get a doctoral degree. but since I love doing research, I stayed in the Ph.D. program and earned a Doctor in Philosophy in Counselor Education and Supervision. That was in 2000. Ever sin-

ce I have worked as a counselor educator, school counselor, art therapist, and clinical mental health counselor.

Q: Obviously, there are some differences between the approach to supervision and counseling in Croatia and the US. In general, the Supervisor will need to be a group analyst and the counselor comes from social work or psychology. So, they are two completely different branches that are embedded in your education already. As you say, it's not the pathology you're focused on but well-being, which is something rather opposite, right?

A: Correct. In practice, if we are watching a psychologist, a counselor, or a clinical social worker, we may not be able to tell the difference in what the therapist is doing. I am knowledgeable about psychoanalysis as a theoretical approach and orientation, but in practice, I use theoretical approaches and interventions that are short-term and based on solution-focused, reality therapy, motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and trauma-based cognitive behavioral therapy.

Q: Did you choose your education or did it choose you? It seems like it didn't influence you that much in the end.

A: On one side I am very organized and goal-oriented, but on the other side,

things happen to me that bring me in one direction that I may not have expected. For instance, during my doctoral studies, I had to do a teaching internship. It was not one of my preferred internships, but I ended up loving it. That experience took me onto a path as a professor that was unexpected: I've been a counselor educator for the past 23 years!

In 2013, I started doing humanitarian work outside of the US. That also took me in an unexpected direction, although I never stopped teaching. I've been so lucky about the paths that art therapy opened for me.

Q: Could you explain a bit about how your personal as well as professional challenges affected your practice? You worked in clinics, schools, did humanitarian work... did any of your personal stories make a difference when working with any population?

A: My biggest challenge was at age 15 - moving from Argentina to the United States. I hated being in the United States, I hated everything and everybody. That seemed to have changed my life experiences between those that happened before 15 and after 15, something typical of having gone through immigration experiences. Two very different worlds. Ever since I became an art therapist, I've been conducting art therapy workshops and providing art therapy services



throughout the US and the world. As an immigrant, my personal experiences influenced my professional focus, which is on immigration issues, multicultural counseling, multicultural art therapy, and in enhancing the quality of life of immigrants, minority families, and refugees in crisis situations by identifying risk and promoting protective factors.

Q: Is there a remarkable difference between accepting art therapy then and now?

A: Yes, there is a huge difference in how art therapy was accepted in 1986 when I graduated and now. In the US, many states recognize art therapy as a profession and grant practice licenses for art therapists. Other states allow art

therapists to obtain practice licenses as mental health counselors. We have made huge strides in the US to have insurance companies pay for art therapy services. Yet today, there are still many places in the US, many countries, and many communities that don't know about art therapy. Art therapy in the US started as art therapy is developing in Croatia. To be an art therapist, then or now, you have to network with people, educate people about art therapy, advocate for the profession, do volunteer work to show that art therapy is truly a mental health profession and that it works! The way I show people that art therapy works is to invite them to experience art therapy... to come into a group or an art therapy workshop. Art speaks for itself.

Q: The American Art Therapy Association was in your life from the point you started off as a student until you became the President and beyond. You contributed to the field of art therapy so much through AATA. Could you tell us a bit about this time of your life?

A: The best time of my professional life was being part of the association. I have been a member of AATA since 1985, when I joined as a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year graduate student of art therapy at GWU. I went to every conference; I met people from all over the United States and from all over the United States and other countries. I became energized by meeting leaders in the profession, friends and people who I would only see once a year at a conference but who had become life-long colleagues. They became my collaborators in research and in practice. They also became colleagues in committees and boards. They became those who accompanied me in this wonderful profession.

I was president-elect of AATA's Board in 2009, and in 2011 I had the greatest honor of being voted president of the Board of AATA. In those 4 years, I was involved in all aspects of the association, leading the board and the national association through difficult financial and organizational struggles.

Prior to that, in 1995, I joined AATA's Publications Committee, where I also worked as the associate editor of AATA's Newsletter (2001-2007).

In 1999 I was voted secretary to the AATA Board. In that role, I was liaison to the Publications Committee and to four AATA Affiliate Chapters. I chaired the Bylaws, Policy; Procedures Committee, the Journal Editor Search Committee, the Ad Hoc Committee on Leadership Training, and the Committee on Multicultural Affairs.

I was elected to serve on AATA's Nominating Committee from 2003 to 2005 and then again from 2008 to 2010.

I became a program reviewer for the Annual Conference in 1990 and today I am happy to still be doing it! I joined AATA's Conference Committee in 2005 as chair of the Conference Program Committee (until 2007), in 2008 I became Chair of the entire Conference Committee, and in 2009 I served as Chair of Conference Art Events.

I am currently a member of the Editorial Board of the Art Therapy Journal of the American Art Therapy Association (2005-present), and I have been the chair of AATA's Education Program Approval Board (EPAB) since 2017.

Q: All these challenges... And as a humanitarian, you surely get a different perspective of things. How do you approach the crisis situation?

A: In crisis situations, I use very much of reality therapy, cognitive behavioral approach, and trauma-focused CBT. Being prepared is key to success.



From a place of wellness and resiliency, I meet with individuals using a humanistic approach to build rapport and show love, compassion, and understanding. Using art to tap into their life experiences helps me understand their struggle but also their strengths. I advocate for a better quality of life, for enhancing their skills, culture, and what has worked for them in the past, in their home countries, or in times prior to the trauma. Art therapy provides that... healing space. I work on instilling hope.

The cultural similarities and differences in the various populations with which I work are truly important. Culture cannot be ignored, so even though I may be working with refugees, the refugee

status and migration experiences between cultural groups can be extremely different depending on the socio-political circumstances being faced. An example of this the current situation happening in the Ukraine and in Syria. Working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon would be a very different experience than working with Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

It sounds cheesy or silly when I say that I always felt that my life calling was to help others. But it is! I could have been a nurse, a doctor, a teacher... I could have been any of those professionals, as they all help others. But art therapy was my calling... it has been good to me, both personally and professionally. It gave me opportunities and opened paths that I had not expected.



Q: Talking about opportunities, could you say a few words about the cooperation with the former Second Lady of the US, Mrs. Pence? It's interesting that in this way art therapy got a spotlight.

HART: Thank you so much for everything, dear Mercedes! We wish you continuous growth and many more quality cooperations!

A: That is another example of an opportunity that I had not expected. I like how those opportunities fall on my plate! I think this goes back to what I said earlier, I don't realize the impact that my work is having on the profession or on others, on this world, even if it is at a micro level. Yes, I worked closely with the former Second Lady of the US, Mrs. Pence, because she believed in art therapy and took art therapy as an advocacy initiative during her term as Second Lady. As she traveled with her husband (Mr. Pence, the Vice President of the US), she would speak on behalf of art therapy. Her secretary contacted me to seek art therapy contacts in places that she visited, including South Africa, Colombia, Argentina, and Europe. Mrs. Pence's program was called Art Therapy: Healing with the Heart initiative (2017-2020).

Circling back to the beginning of my art therapy career, I am overwhelmed with gratitude towards everyone who believed in me, walked with me alongside my life path, crossed my path, and contributed to the internal wealth I embrace.