

Prison as a Setting for Art Production: A Study on Prison and its Artifacts

R. Bavyaa

*Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore*

Dr. P. Nagaraj

*Professor and Head, Department of English and Foreign Languages
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Bavyaa, R., and P. Nagaraj. "Prison as a Setting for Art Production: A Study on Prison and its Artifacts." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2025, pp. 40–43

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS1-Apr.8933>

Abstract

Prisons can be unexpected settings for art and cultural production, but they also offer unique opportunities for creativity and self-expression. Prisons are institutions designed to confine individuals convicted of crimes. They are considered places of pessimism and terrorism. Prisons can also be seen as places that hold cultural and historical heritage. They share different kinds of disciplines, cultures, values, and discourses. They form various cultures and subcultures. The prison holds its own set of religion, practices, community, educational practices, etc. The paper focuses on bringing the view that the prisons can also be a landscape or community that produces great art, values, practices, and cultures like other landscapes. Cultural and art production in prisons can offer valuable benefits for incarcerated individuals and society as a whole. It promotes humanization, rehabilitation, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the justice system. Creative expressions in prisons can aid in self-discovery, communication skills, and also in addressing trauma. This paper investigates the diverse forms of artistic expression that emerge within correctional facilities, including painting, music, writing, and performance. It also challenges the conventional understanding of prisons as sole spaces of punishment by focusing on the vibrant cultural production within these institutions.

Keywords: Prisons, Culture and Subcultures, Practices, Values, Art and Significance.

Introduction

Where liberty is restricted and individuality is frequently repressed, a thriving and often disregarded realm of artistic output flourishes. This study explores the artistic expressions within the prison environment, examining the paintings, songs, poems, and performances created by incarcerated individuals. Artifacts produced within prison settings, explore the reflections of the unique social and cultural milieu of incarceration. These artistic expressions offer important insights into the feelings, and viewpoints of those who are incarnated, ranging from elaborate carvings made from leftover materials to rap songs that depict prison life. By analyzing these diverse forms of cultural and art production, the paper aims to dispel myths about prison life and promote a better comprehension of the human experience in the disregarded setting by examining these many types of artistic expression.

Objectives

The paper aims

- To identify the various forms of artistic expression that emerge within the prison environment.
- To analyze the benefits of art production for incarcerated individuals, including its impact on mental and emotional well-being, rehabilitation, and skill development.
- To understand the culture, subcultures, and social norms in the prison community
- To explore the potential of art and cultural production in promoting humanization within the prison system.

Statement

Prisons, while institutions of confinement, may also be unanticipated locations for the creation of art, providing inmates with chances for self-expression, creativity, and rehabilitation. The study focuses on acknowledging and encouraging these artistic pursuits that are essential for promoting a greater comprehension of the intricacies of justice as well as for humanizing the jail system.

Problem

The dominant narrative surrounding prisons often overshadows the vibrant cultural life that exists within their walls. The recognition and focus on artistic expression within prisons can change the negative stereotypes about incarcerated individuals. There is a need to further explore the diverse forms of cultural production in prisons and their impact on the lives of incarcerated individuals and society.

Question

- Why can't prisons and prisoners be seen in different notions as creators of new communities, artifacts producers, and cultural practices within the space they hold?
- What forms of artistic expression emerge from prison communities, and how do they reflect the experiences and perspectives of incarcerated individuals?

Hypothesis

Prisons can also be a space for the production of culture, history, and art. They can serve great historical and cultural significance and express great art forms such as literature, poetry, music, and so on. They can form cultures and subcultures within it. They can also be the places that produce a profuse number of artifacts.

Review of Literature

Art in Prison

A project called Art in Prison chronicles the development of prison art as a genre and examines its value as a therapeutic and restorative tool that provides a medium of communication that goes beyond limited perspectives. The Art in Prison Report aims to spark conversations about Prison Art by featuring works by inmates and comments from the justice community.

Music and Well-Being in Carceral Settings: A Scoping Review

This scoping review investigates by concentrating on the connection between music and power in prison environments and by elaborating on the ways that musical practices both promote and impede experiences of well-being.

Culture in prison, culture on the street: the convergence between the convict code and code of the street

The author states that inmates are guided by the convict code, which encourages them to stay to themselves, never back down, mind their own business, and avoid becoming too close to correctional authorities. There is a comparable subculture inside communities known as the “code of the street,” which emphasizes toughness, respect, independence, and anti-police views. These cultures have been conceptualized and examined separately, even though their motifs overlap. However, given that 600,000 individuals enter and exit prisons each year, it’s plausible that these different cultures converge as a result of inmate and out-of-prison movements, which raises both theoretical and practical concerns regarding their autonomy.

The Redeeming Value of Art in Prison

The author says that art is often a form of atonement for prisoners. They are resource-constrained and find beauty in the ugly things around them. Art serves as a symbol of atonement inside the prison environment. Art helps prisoners on their path to recovery. Art has many positive aspects. The jail artist puts his soul on the canvas because prison is a raw place. The jail artists always express themselves profoundly, and heartfully, whether writing, performing music, painting, or sketching. They seem to be atoning for their previous transgressions.

News & Chaos: An Illustrated Opinion

This paper by O. Smith gives an overall illustrated visual opinion about prison art and culture. The author expresses his view on very comprised as well as in an artistic manner.

A Place for Art in Prison: Art as A Tool for Rehabilitation and Management

Even if sponsorship for prison art programs is on the wane, a review of recent research shows that art may be a useful tool in prisons. According to academics with a variety of backgrounds in research, education, art, therapy, and administration, engaging in artistic endeavors has various advantages for both institutional management and prisoner rehabilitation. These benefits fall under four broad categories: educational, therapeutic, social (community involvement), and prison quality-of-life management. To show the creative potential that lies behind bars, photographs of sketches created on the inside of a county jail are displayed.

Meet painter convicts from Bengal, whose art is showcased in exhibitions and sold online

The article by Hindu talks about the artworks produced by the prisoners. It says that the hand that once committed heinous crimes now holds the paint and brush. This article gives a detailed overview of the artworks produced by the prisoners and how they were accepted and viewed by others in the exhibition.

GAP

There is vast research done about prisons. Prison research mainly focuses on prisoners’ well-being, therapy, treatments for prisoners, their sufferings, their lifestyles inside the prison, and so on. This paper sheds light upon considering the prisons as a well-centered place that showcases a variety of art, masterpieces, literature, and cultural and historical significance, which forms a gap for this research paper.

Analysis

Prison art refers to the artworks created by prisoners during their incarceration. Prison art encompasses various creations such as painting, drawing, sculpture making, producing literature, performing art, music, and so on. The art in the prison shows a variety of themes and elements.

Prison arts can depict their own life, prison setting, suffering, dreams, freedom, or any general outcomes of the expression. The artworks produced in prison undergo various limitations and challenges. Producing art inside prison can sometimes be an artistic expression or an entertainment purpose. But, most of the time it is a therapeutic process. Inmates use art as a platform to pour their hearts out. These arts created by the inmates can be considered masterpieces sometimes. Various art classes and exhibitions were also conducted for prisoners to showcase their works to the people. Earlier inmates found it difficult to showcase their work as there were challenges and limitations. Later, the prison setting itself provides an opportunity to exhibit their thoughts and talents. These opportunities were created because they can help incarcerated individuals in rehabilitation, reshaping thought processes and minds. This plays an important role in maintaining and improving the overall well-being of the inmates. Art provides a healthy outlet for emotions and can help alleviate the stress and anxiety associated with incarceration. Art can also help in engaging individuals to explore their identity, values, and aspirations. Art allows incarcerated individuals to share their experiences, perspectives, and stories with the world challenge negative stereotypes about prisoners, and foster empathy and understanding.

Like art, the prison setting also holds a culture and subculture within it. The prison setting follows different kinds of cultural practices and values. Every prison and the prisoners hold various kinds of cultures among them. They can form a new society and community. It is also important to give attention to exploring the culture of the prisoners. Every culture consists of unique perspectives, characteristics, discourse, and practices. In the same way, the prison culture also has its unique aspects. For example, a subculture called “The Con” emphasizes toughness and self-reliance.

Findings

Prisons serve as a space for the production of culture, and art. They can serve great cultural significance and express great art forms such as literature, poetry, music, and so on. They form cultures and subcultures within it according to their convenience and situation. Prison settings produce a profuse number of artifacts that help in rehabilitation, therapy, and maintaining the well-being of incarcerated inmates.

References

1. <https://justiceaction.org.au/art-in-prison/>
2. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0735648X.2020.1772851>
3. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657874ee254aaa000d050b52/understanding-cultural-change-case-study-english-prison.pdf>
4. <https://prisonjournalismproject.org/2023/06/01/how-people-make-art-in-prison/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20Redeeming%20Value%20of%20Art,of%20prison%2C%20art%20represents%20redemption.>
5. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238602084_A_Place_for_Art_in_Prison_Art_as_A_Tool_for_Rehabilitation_and_Management
6. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/meet-painter-convicts-from-bengal-whose-art-is-showcased-in-exhibitions-and-sold-online/story-POOi0kUr27xTo0Zw6jTyaO.html>