In 2012, Karin and Gerhard Dammann were able to expand their collection by acquiring five pieces by artists represented almost exclusively in the Prinzhorn Collection. This relationship with the world-renowned historic fund of “pathological art” made the addition particularly valuable to the collectors. All the more so because Gerhard Dammann’s early encounter with the Heidelberg institution was the starting point for his own collecting. Oscar Voll’s (1876–?) piece (Fig. p. 64/65) was once part of a sketchbook currently in the Prinzhorn Collection. Along with two other works and two sketchbooks by the former tailor, it recently went from private ownership to the art market. The work was evidently removed before the book was sent from the Werneck Asylum to Heidelberg in 1919. However, the other four works (Fig. p. 58/59 and 101–103) were originally part of the Prinzhorn Collection. How, when and under what circumstances did these inherently unmarketable works from the university clinic end up on the art market?

Heidelberg’s collection of artistic works by residential institutional patients was founded in 1919, following an appeal by the Psychiatric Clinic at the University of Heidelberg. The call, by Director Dr. Karl Wilmanns (1873–1945) and his assistant Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933), was sent out to all institutions, clinics, and sanatoriums in German-speaking Europe. Prinzhorn, an artist historian and physician, inventoried and archived the donated works as the assets of a future “Museum of Pathological Art.” He returned, and removed from the inventory list, very few of the early contributions; in these cases, exceptionally, loaned pieces were not converted into donations. By the time Prinzhorn left the clinic in June 1921, the collection included over 5,000 works by 485 men and women.

Prinzhorn was also tasked with evaluating the collection. As well as several articles, he published the comprehensive study “Bildnerei der Geisteskranken” (Arts of the Mentally Ill) in 1922. Contrary to his colleagues’ expectations, Prinzhorn’s book challenged the diagnostic value of the works, emphasizing their exceptional aesthetics instead. Prinzhorn also travelled domestically and internationally to lecture on the subject. Starting in 1921, he organized the first exhibitions. In 1929, following a series of presentations in Germany, 36 loans from the collection were even exhibited at the Galerie Max Bine in Paris. All this contributed to the works by institutionalized patients gaining increasing aesthetic recognition, even if this was not yet measured monetarily. Until then, interest in them had been, at most, from a purely diagnostic perspective.

The process by which a few inventoried works left the collection during this period is significant. In September 1920, the artist Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) visited the Psychiatric Clinic. Enthusiastic about the “art of the insane,” he gave one of his own gouaches, as well as four other works from his collection to Heidelberg, in return for four colourful drawings by Franz Karl Bühler (named “Franz Pohl” by Prinzhorn, 1864–1940) and a watercolour by August Klett (“August Klotz,” 1866–1928). Kubin’s deal was a sign of high esteem, comparable to an exchange between art colleagues. He did not consider selling. Today, these works are in the Kubin Archive at the Lenbachhaus in Munich.

The next two documented transactions of works leaving the collection did not involve money either. However, for the first time, financial value came into play. Ladislas Szécsői (later Szegy, 1904–1988), a Hungarian artist and designer who became an important collector and dealer of African art in Paris, visited the Heidelberg Collection in 1929 or 1930. Hans Gruhle (1880–1958), the psychiatrist responsible for the collection at the time, showed him many of the works. In October 1931, Szécsői approached Gruhle, offering him two African statues he owned as “comparable objects” for purchase. In fact, Prinzhorn had referenced the relationship between sculptures in the Heidelberg Collection “and those by primitive people” in his book. Gruhle declined with regret, as there was no purchasing budget. The art dealer immediately suggested sending the two sculptures on loan, confident that a potential donor could be identified within months, as this acquisition “could yet be useful to the entire university.” In a reminder, he tried to underscore his trustworthiness,
August Klett („August Klotz“, 1866–1928)
„Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe“ (recto), undatiert/undated
Bleistift, Farbstift und Aquarell auf Papier/pencil, crayon and watercolour on paper
22,5 x 32,5 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg / Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg
August Klett (1866–1928)
Text (verso), undatiert/undated
Bleistift auf Papier/pencil on paper
22,5 x 32,5 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg
citing his affiliations with the “Intnl. Institute for African Languages and Cultures, London; Trocadero Museum, Paris; Brooklyn Museum, New York, etc. etc.”

Gruhle ultimately accepted the offer, and Szécsi immediately sent three sculptures. He cited “very conspicuous parallels”, which he had noted during his visit to Heidelberg, in justifying his selections. Gruhle wrote, (“Karl Brendel”, 1871–1925) wood sculptures, these were:

1. Bakota fetish, similar to your “Kopffüssler” [tadpole figure]
2. Cameroon fetish, your one statue has similar facial features, and
3. Totem animal, similar to another sculpture in your collection.”

The commission invoice provided materials, a description, and prices:

1. Wood figure covered with copper RM 185,-
2. Wood figure RM 85,-
3. Wood bird RM 65,-

Ten days later, Gruhle reported the works’ arrival. He also reported damage to the “little carved bird”, due to improper packing: “on its head, the tip of a small horn broke off completely.” Negotiations during the following months are not documented. Therefore, it is a surprise to see a confirmation dated May 11, 1933, recording that, instead of payment, Szécsi received 15 pictures from the Heidelberg Collection. The similarities between “tribal art” and “artistry of the mentally ill” led not only to an initial expansion of the Heidelberg Collection, but also to growing a private collection. Of the sculptures sent from Paris, only two are still in Heidelberg. Unfortunately, which works were sent to Szécsi was not documented. Prominent artists in the collection, from whom there were larger numbers of works available.

After this first transaction, Szécsi turned to Hans Gruhle with renewed efforts in June 1933. This time, he came as an agent of the psychiatrist Dr. Auguste Marie (1865–1934), head physician at the Asile de Villejuif, and later for 30 years at the Hôpital Sainte Anne in Paris, who had begun his own collection of 250 works. The art dealer wrote that Marie admired Szécsi’s Heidelberg works and wanted to exchange several of his own pieces.

Gruhle gladly accepted this suggestion too. But as a careful curator of the collection, he emphasized that he was only interested in works “in which a genuine artistic pursuit is called forth, underpinned by, or modified by pathologically emotional moments.” He asked Marie to “especially favor his selections toward abnormal, artistically interesting objects.” In return, he was willing to “put together a quite diverse lot that I assume will interest him,” in so far as he wouldn’t have other special requests.

In July, Szécsi sent Marie’s selection, a “small collection of 37 drawings,” and requested the agreed “small counter-shipment” from Heidelberg. How many and which works Gruhle sent, and what happened to them, was not documented. Today, a large part of the Marie Collection belongs to the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne. However, it does not include any works with Heidelberg inventory numbers. Marie’s gift itself is not well documented. But all works, including those by Emile Hodinos (Joseph Ernest Ménétrier) and the Voyager Français, are evidently still in the Prinzhorn Collection today.

In 1935, Szécsi presented works from his collections of “Old African Sculpture” and “Works of the Insane” in a sale exhibition at the Midtown Galleries in New York. An August Klett piece, which is now unaccounted for, graced the catalogue title page. In this way, the exchanged works became available on the art market for the first time. How many of the exhibited pieces were sold then, or at a later New York show in 1939, was not documented. We also do not know whether Szécsi, who immigrated to the USA in 1940 and operated his own New York gallery from 1950, continued to offer this portion of his possessions for sale. Nonetheless, the New York industrial designer and businessman Sam Farber (1924–2013), the most important patron of the American Folk Art Museum and himself a passionate outsider art collector, was able to obtain five outstanding works formerly in the Heidelberg collection from the gallery owner: four small Blankenhorn pictures, and one

13 Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, November 9, 1932.
14 Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] November 25, 1932.
15 Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, December 6, 1932.
17 Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] December 16, 1932.
19 Though added by hand is that the “numbers of the delivered pieces [...] were noted”, see confirmation with signatures from Gruhle and Szécsi, [Heidelberg] May 11, 1933.
20 In addition to the works named below was also the one by Klett to which Prinzhorn dedicated a colored plate in his book. MacGregor suggests that Szécsi loaned it for the exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism”, shown in New York in 1936., s. John M. MacGregor, The Discovery of the Art of the Insane, Princeton 1989, p. 289.
22 Szécsi to Gruhle May 22, 1933
23 Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] June 19, 1933.
24 Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, July 15, 1933.
26 The New York Post from April 2, 1939 included a brief discussion of an exhibition of “Surrealist art, works by the insane and primitive African sculpture” from the Szécsi Collection in the Mercury Galleries in New York. The article is unclear about whether Heidelberg pieces were ever offered.
27 Personal communication, Doris Noell-Rumpeltes.
28 In 1988, Farber Diapositive sent these works to the Heidelberg Collection and inquired about the artists. See his letter from August 10, 1988 to Inge Jadi, then director of the Collection (Prinzhorn Collection Archive). The whereabouts of the fourth Blankenhorn picture is unknown.
Klett watercolour.²⁷ A few years ago, he made them available again through various dealers. Three Blankenhorn pictures (Fig. p. 101-103) and the Klett work (Fig. p. 64/65) eventually found a new home in the Dammann Collection.²⁸

One may wonder where, and under what circumstances, the other Prinzhorn works traded by Szécszi und Marie will surface again. Because they are presumably still in the hands of appreciative private collectors. Unfortunately, there is less hope for another Heidelberg Collection loss from around the same time. In 1938, Carl Schneider (1891-1946), then Director of the University Psychiatric Clinic, loaned numerous works that formed part of the collection's core assets to a traveling exhibition entitled "Degenerate Art". There, they were denigrated in a comparison to unpopular works of modernist art.²⁹ At the end of the year, 76 of the exhibited works were sent back to Heidelberg.³⁰ Others probably continued touring until the end of the exhibition in 1941; in particular four works reproduced in the exhibition guide.³¹ Because they did not return to the University Clinic afterwards, it is likely that they were destroyed along with other supposedly worthless exhibition works and material. Did the Nazis' changed attitude towards the "incurably mentally ill", reflected from 1940 on in the so-called "euthanasia" programme, also override the clinic's loan agreements and ownership rights? Or did it clarify the fact that institutional works were still often seen as worthless, even if a small group of connoisseurs were willing to spend money for them? Dealing in Outsider Art, through specialized galleries, did in fact not begin until the early 1970s. And it was only in the 1980s that doctors and nurses in psychiatric facilities finally stopped immediately destroying patients' freely-created artistic works. The history of art by institutionalized patients demonstrates that, in our society, it is particularly monetary value which manifests an item's significance.


²⁸ Written communication by the exhibition management for the "Degenerate Art" exhibition to the Psychiatric University Clinic, Berlin, June 6, 1938 (Prinzhorn Collection Archive). The returned works were shown for the first time as part of the Rotations installation (2012) by Javier Tellez (Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, October 25, 2012 - February 10, 2013).

³⁰ See Brand-Claussen 1990, like Note 29
Oskar Voll (1876–?)
Ohne Titel/untitled (recto), undatiert/undated
Bleistift auf Papier, aus einem Zeichenheft/pencil on paper from a drawing-book
20 x 26 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 328
Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920)
Ohne Titel/untitled, vor/before 1919
Öl auf Leinwand/oil on canvas
22.9 x 27.9 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 4275

Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920)
Ohne Titel/untitled, vor/before 1919
Öl auf Leinwand/oil on canvas
17.0 x 13.5 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 4269
Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920)
Ohne Titel/untitled, vor/before 1919
Öl auf Leinwand/oil on canvas
25 x 20 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/
Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 4250