



Interior of Cell no.117, photo: Andreas Spengler, 2013

# ART BEHIND BARS

## A sensational discovery in a German cell

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There are still sensational discoveries being made in the field of Outsider Art. One of them is the Klingebiel Cell in Göttingen, Lower Saxony, Germany. The hallway leads through barred gates to cell number 117, a dark dungeon that is two and a half metres wide by four metres long (about eight by 13 feet). Until 2013, the sun shone from the south through a high, barred window (today it is darkened for conservational purposes).

The viewer goes through phases of astonishment and irritation. All the walls are densely painted up to a height of three metres. The connoisseur is reminded of the *Sixtina* in the Haus der Künstler (House of the Artists) in Gugging, Germany. Indeed, August Walla's (1936–2001) murals are in many ways similar.

The prison-like Verwahrungshaus (safe-keeping house), a high-security hospital founded in 1906, was used until 2016 to detain mentally ill offenders. Here,

one of the darkest chapters of psychiatric history was enacted. Most of the 72 patients who were interned here in 1940 were deported and gassed as part of the Nazi euthanasia operation, T4. Gustav Sievers (1865–1941) painted here, too, and Paul Goesch (1885–1940) created a mural in a neighbouring building in 1922. Both of these artists, who are represented in the Prinzhorn Collection, were murdered.

The occupant of cell 117, Julius Klingebiel (1904–1965), created here between 1951 and 1961, constructing a complex artistic interior. He also created numerous works on paper, of which 18 are extant. Klingebiel came from Hanover. He was a mechanic with the German army and a member of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, meaning "Assault Division" but also known as the Nazi Storm Troopers). If, and how strongly, he identified with the Nazi ideology is not



Julius Klingebile, wearing a convict uniform, in his cell, c. 1955, photo: Asklepios Fachklinikum Göttingen

overleaf: left wall of cell 117, 13 ft 1 in. x 10 ft 2 ins. / 400 x 310 cm, photo and graphics: Hans Starosta, 2013 (subsequent built-ins are retouched, and replaced by historic photo segments, in cooperation with the authors)

recognisable in his work or biography: he married in 1935; in 1939 he suffered from delusions, reacted violently, and, according to the law at the time, was interned with a diagnosis of schizophrenia in a mental institution. There was no criminal trial. As a “dangerous madman”, he was sent to Wunstorf mental institution.

Here, in 1940, he was compulsorily sterilised according to the Nazi’s genetic-health laws, and so became a victim of Nazi psychiatry. He was also registered for the T4 operation. He was transferred, due to rebelliousness, to the Verwahrungshaus in Göttingen. The transports to the gas chambers were rolling at the time, but Klingebiel’s name never appeared on the transport lists. Under the directorship of Gottfried Ewald, who spoke out against the Nazi operation in 1940, he was spared in now-unknown circumstances.

He also survived the war years, but in the post-war period he remained incarcerated and in 1951 was transferred to cell 117 of the Verwahrungshaus. His internment was never approved by a judicial proceeding. Formally, this approval was legally required after 1951. His wife had legally divorced him in the year 1941, and contact with his family had

ended in 1940. In permanent detention without a future, he was further deprived of his rights.

His longtime, chronic (and, at that time, hardly treatable) psychic problems led to excitable states, when he became angry, cried tormentedly and felt himself threatened, impaired and influenced by radiation. He also occupied himself with expansive systems. He imagined himself to be an inventor and a sportsman. He often seemed sad and withdrawn. Finally, in 1961 he was treated with new medication and became calmer and more orderly. But he stopped painting and in 1963 was transferred to another ward. He died in 1965.

In everyday life, his carers experienced another Klingebiel. Contemporaries describe him as headstrong, assertive, quick-witted and imaginative. Around 1951, he began sketchily drawing on the white walls of the cell with a stone and pieces of coal, but he was forced to wash off the “smearing” immediately. When the doctors realised that drawing calmed him, and that he produced strange original pictures, they soon gave him paints and brushes. The psychiatrist Hemmo Müller-Suur who was very interested in patient’s art came round from time to time. Through



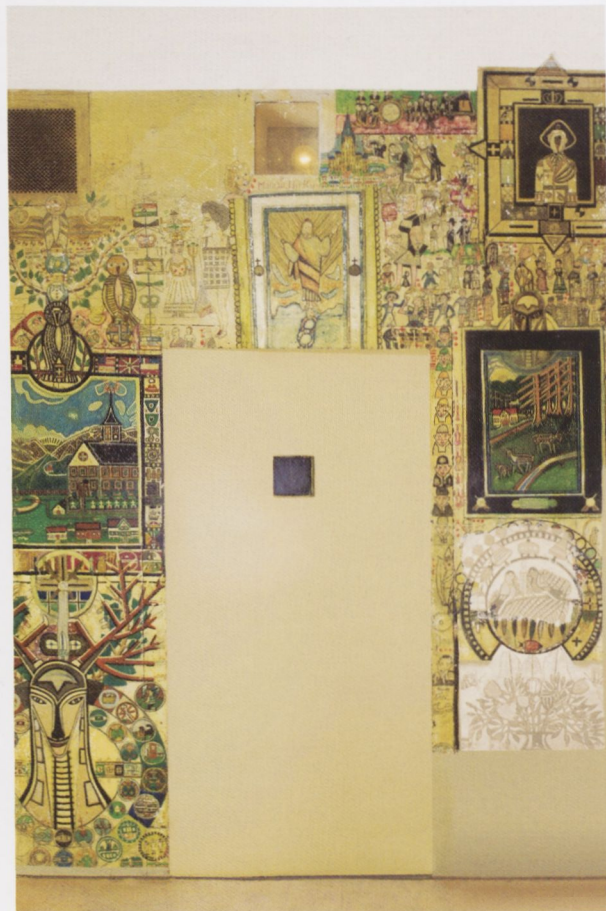




*Untitled (bridal couple)*, c.1959, watercolour and papercut, 10.5 x 8 ins. / 27 x 20 cm, private collection  
photo: Stefan Neuenhausen, 2016

this, Klingebiel received recognition, and a meaningful opportunity to express himself. He saw himself as a working artist. In a historic photo, he is seen looking self-confidently into the camera. Once he gave himself a "holiday" from painting. He often explained his pictures and their meaning to staff and visitors.

The legacy of Müller-Suur contains photos from 1954. They show that the walls were extensively painted within a few years. Klingebiel lay down the overall composition at the beginning. The long, right-hand wall is dominated by big "framed" picture panels with landscapes. They are populated by wild animals, especially Klingebiel's stags. Their hypertrophic antlers merge – in Klingebiel's peculiar hand – with the pine trees of the forests. They are Indian chital (*Axis axis*), which he saw at an early age in Hanover Deer Park. At a later stage of the painting, he allowed a whole family of deer to enter the space on the right, next to the window. The long, left-hand wall seems, at first glance, to be chaotically filled with symbols, but it is dominated by a large circular figure and rigorous verticals. Symbols from politics, handicraft, flags, crests and line portraits are pictured. Big, stylised eagle's wings are evocative of Native American totem poles or the emblems of Nazi police parades. Ships and futuristic aircraft, buildings and temples are inserted. Like an oriental carpet or a church window, this pattern



frontside wall of cell 117 (later built-ins retouched and replaced by historic photos), photo and graphics: Hans Starosta, 2013

profits from the broad configuration of the whole.

Around the window small groups of symbols dominate. But one also sees a detailed pictorial quotation: *Lady Standing at a Virginal* (1670) by Jan Vermeer (1632–1675). Near the door, in the darker part of the cell, figures emerge. Loose women, Valkyries, uniformed dignitaries, and also Jesus in a wind-blown robe, peer over the door towards the window. Symbolic combinations of antlers with laurel wreaths and swords, which evoke the hunt and local rural fairs, are found opposing each other on the central axis. In later years, space became scarce. Klingebiel introduced little graffiti-like line drawings. He had replaced some large, still-framed landscapes long before. In this way a windjammer on the high sea appeared in place of a forest landscape with stags. Older parts of the pictures are preserved on photos. They show scenes, for example, with girls, dog, cat and flowers, and one where a young hunter shows his adoration.

Klingebiel sometimes destroyed parts of the painting when in an agitated state. He later repaired them. The painting is scratched in some places, and in others marked with little red dots. His big tiger over the deer family has fine surveillance antenna.

The wealth of details again and again rouses the interpretive imagination. Here and there plausible clues emerge in the details, whether they are wild or



*Untitled (pair of deer, framed with symbols), c.1959 (watercolour and papercut, 60 x 85 cm), courtesy of Wiechern family, photo: Aline Gwose, Michael Herling, Benedikt Werner, Sprengelmuseum Hannover, 2016*

zoo animals, contemporary figures, swastikas (mostly anti-clockwise life-crosses, but also the Nazi swastika), coats of arms, medals or small portraits. Adolf Hitler, the Queen and Charlie Chaplin make appearances. So a level of interpretation appears, one that leads to an archive of Klingebiel's life – of things that seemed to him worth reporting, and that he wanted to cherish.

The artist achieves the big picture, which reveals a superordinated spatial configuration. The dark, long, right-hand wall, with the forest landscapes and animals resembling an old, perfect world, contrasts with the visionary left-hand wall, where a world wheel is created, as known at the time from popular almanacs and pictorial broadsheets.

Another line of interpretation is opened by the question of how animals can become the alter ego of humans. They all have similar strange rows of teeth and eyes, as in ancient Egyptian paintings. The antlers mushroom out and merge with the trees. So the paintings symbolise potency, greatness, meaning and harmony with nature. Their content does not indicate that Klingebiel is recording trauma or dread. Rather he creates his life archive and creates his own ideal but also lively world.

The cell has been protected by dedicated psychiatrists since 1965 and has been intensively researched since 2010. Old photos allow a glimpse into

the past. The painting near the door was partly destroyed in the 1980s, when sanitary units were installed. A transparent varnish was applied to protect the paint but this was surely a conservational mistake.

The state-owned building has been vacant since March 2016 and the cell is officially listed to be conserved as an historic monument. It is expected that it will be necessary to translocate the cell. The Sprengel Museum in Hanover, one of the most important museums for modern art in Germany, has offered to take the room-painting into its collection. We are convinced that the discourse concerning the artistic position of so-called Art Brut/outsider art will be enriched by this encounter. Klingebiel's fate is touching. His art also leads to a historical and socially inclusive political level. But above all, the solitary room artwork is an invitation to become acquainted with a new chapter about art in a psychiatric context and to experience a great, authentic work.

Further Information: [www.julius-klingebiel.de](http://www.julius-klingebiel.de)  
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