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August Klett

THE WATERCOLOR by August Klett (1866–1928), with its cheerful colors of vermilion, light blue, black, and white (PLATE 46), probably once belonged to the famous Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Germany. Hans Prinzhorn, an art historian and psychiatrist, was hired by the Heidelberg Psychiatric University Hospital in 1919 to systematically expand a small “teaching collection” with art by patients. Through an appeal to hospitals, asylums, and sanatoriums in German-speaking countries, he soon gathered more than five thousand works by inmates, mostly on paper, for a “museum of pathological art.” The Weinsberg asylum near Heilbronn also sent works, including a large bundle of drawings and watercolors by a former wine and champagne salesman named August Klett, artwork which Prinzhorn particularly appreciated. In his book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922), he introduced Klett as one of ten “schizophrenic masters” in a separate section giving him the pseudonym “August Klotz.”¹

After Prinzhorn’s departure from the Heidelberg clinic in 1921, the psychiatrist Hans Gruhle looked after the collection. In 1933, he traded several works with the New York–based art dealer Ladislav Szecsi for African masks and sculptures, as well as works from the collection of the French psychiatrist Auguste Marie. How many and which works left Heidelberg to become part of the general art world is not clear. But works by Klett definitely were chosen, probably because of the larger number of works available. However, the watercolor in the Heckler collection is a particularly fine example.

At first, the dense conglomerate of male and female heads looks confusing, in line with Prinzhorn’s general characterization of Klett’s work, drawings that “represent most clearly and in a pure form one particular method: playful scribbling, which is developed line by line . . . What is important is that he has no complete conception when he begins a drawing, no matter how vague, but lets himself drift as if his eyes were closed.”² Some of the characters even share contours, or seem to

emerge out of others. Soon, however, one discovers that there are equally large upper and lower halves with rows of busts, edged on top by irregular arcs, at the bottom, by a piece of wall. Only three figures behind each other interrupt this structure in the middle. All of the heads, except for three, are in profile. Strikingly different, with extravagant hairstyles, hoods, and hats, they remind one of caricatures.

Several characters seem to be in medieval dress; a monk shows his tonsure, a knight with a swan helmet evokes Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, a snake jumps from the head of a drinker in uniform—an allusion to the asylum? Top left, a small head wears a cap of a foreign legionnaire, while on the bottom right, a strange large face looks like a clown mask. All of the figures are marked with small numbers, but the legend has been lost. The only inscription, “Dr. Pardel” (old German for leopard), refers to the spotted animal that sits above it, grinning, behind it a red pig with long ears. The leopard, perhaps alluding to a doctor at the institution, by its wry glance, draws attention to the central figure of the composition, which is looking towards us. A self-portrait? In front of it is a red bird, growing out of a woman's head or hair.

By nature of proximity, the suggestion of a heraldic eagle is made through the nearby colors of the wide hat of the central figure: black, white, red—the German national flag until 1919. However, the color tone of the whole image also includes blue and recalls therefore the flag of the German “arch-enemy” France, as well: blue, white, red. Klett's picture was not dated, but

would have been done during or shortly after World War I. In its own enigmatic way, it seems to deal with the conflicting relationship of two nations in history with the focus on the precarious position of the alter ego of the artist.

1 Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill. A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration* (1922) (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1972), 131–143.

2 *Ibid.*, 134.



PLATE 46 | August Klett | Untitled (Dr. Pardel) | n.d.
Watercolor and graphite on paper | 16 1/4 x 11 3/4 in.