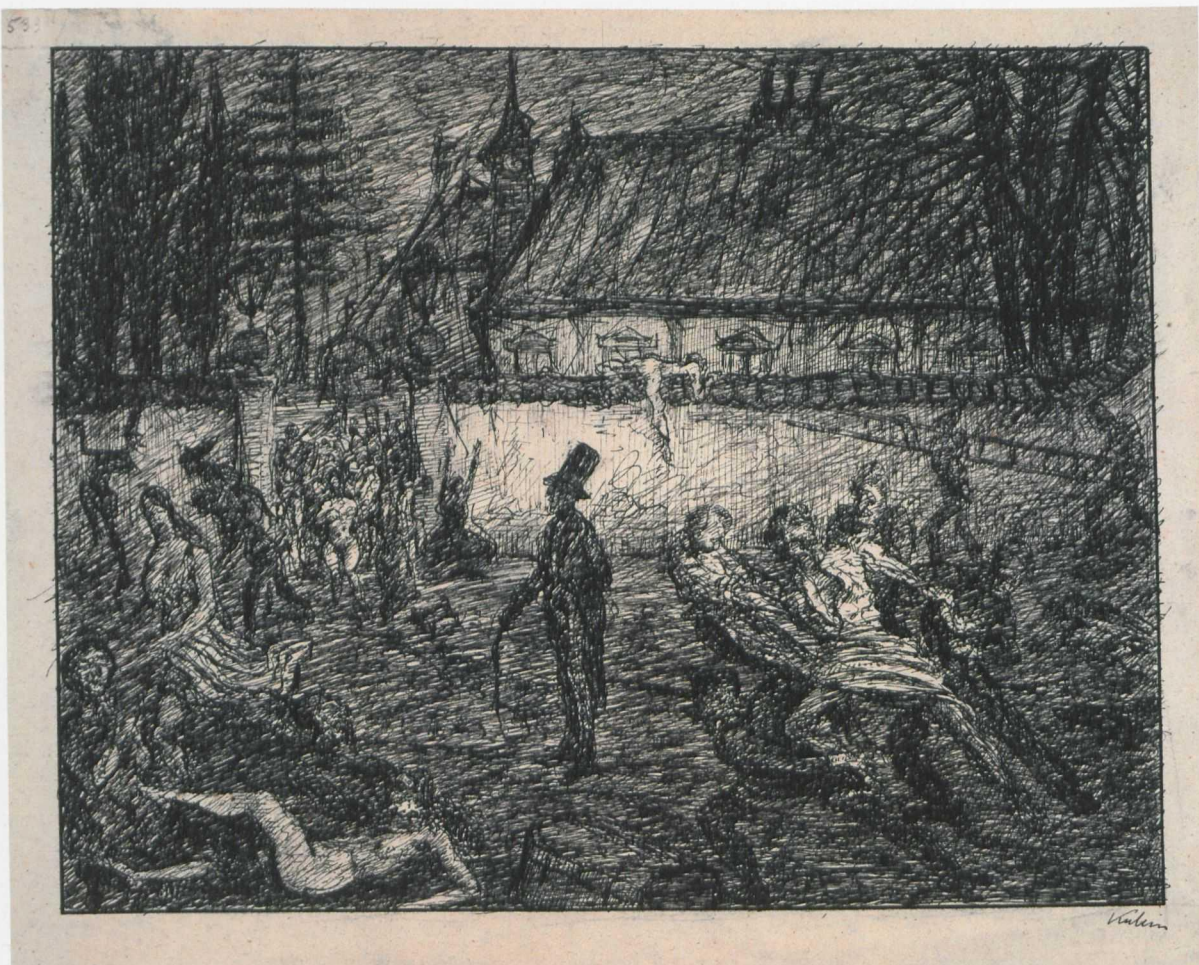


Expressionism and Insanity

As Thomas Röske explains, a recent exhibition in Germany shows the impact of the idea of insanity on Expressionist art.



Alfred Kubin, *The Madhouse*, 1910-12, 31.2 x 39.3 cm, ink on paper, Linz, Oberösterreiches Landesmuseum.

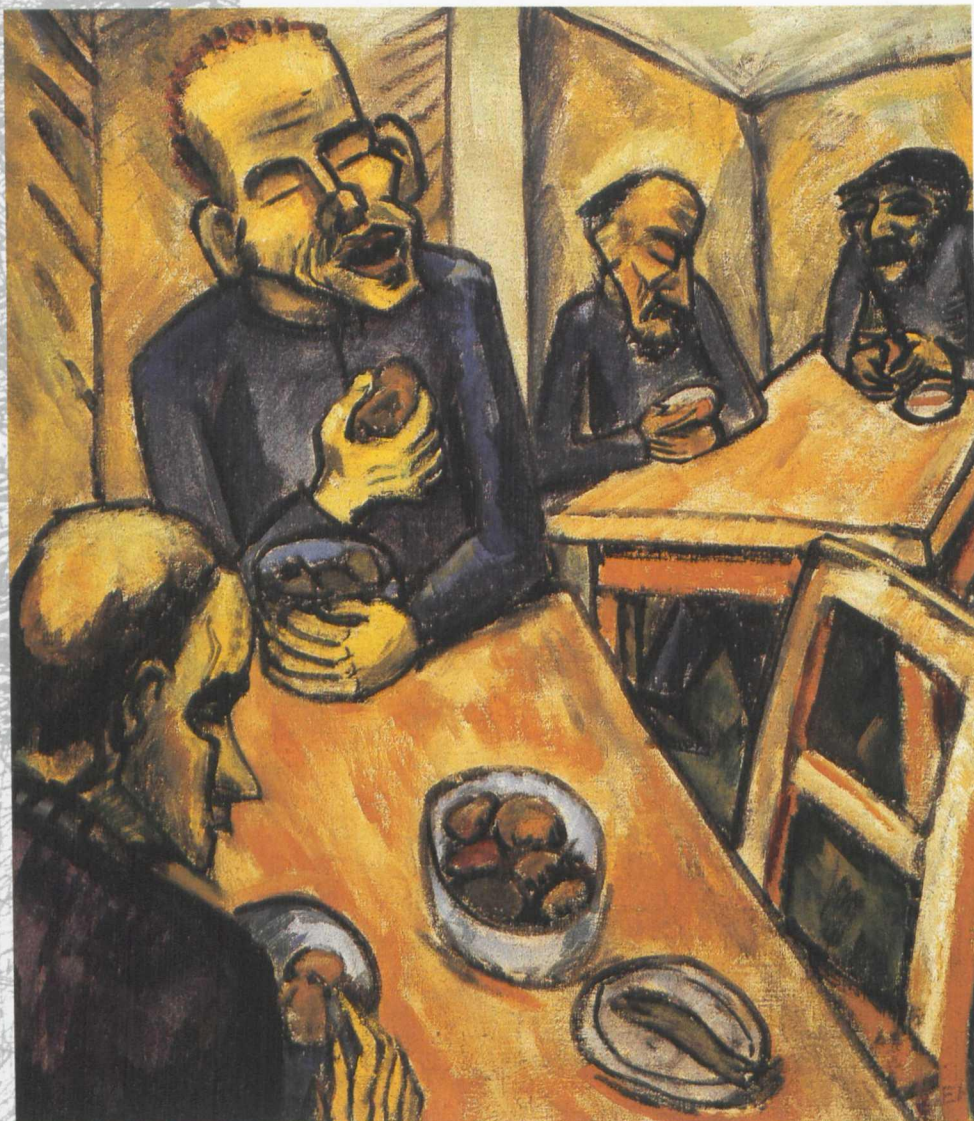
The 'madman' is an important figure in the German Expressionism of the early twentieth century. Expressionist artists depicted the 'madman' (and 'madwomen') in the paintings and drawings of the period, and were fascinated by the artwork of asylum patients. And some interned artists can be seen as creating art in an 'Expressionist' style.

Artistic interest in asylum patients was partly a response to the rise in the numbers of patients from the end of the 19th century. Families could no longer afford to care for their ill relatives. Asylums were used as a solution to the growing problem of poverty: more people on the borders of society were becoming subject to mental care. Whereas Alfred Kubin (1877-1959) in his drawing *The Asylum* (1910) illustrates the fantasy of the 'madman's garden', a theme popular since the early 19th century, in a 1914 painting Erich Heckel (1883-1970) reflects the reality of the institutions of his time. His *Blind Madmen Eating* (1914), wear the blue uniform of poor patients of the Maison de Santé in Berlin-Schoeneberg. Obsessively concentrating on their meal in an empty, cold space, they are far from the picturesque lunatics that Kubin depicted.

The First World War, a madness in itself, produced much psychological illness, and artists took up the topic to formulate their own protest against the war. For his *War Portfolio* of 1924 Otto Dix (1891-1969) used material he had collected while at



Otto Dix, *Encounter with a Madman at Night* (from the War Collection) (III/2), 1924, 25.5 x 19.3 cm, etching and aquatint, Altenburg, Lindenau-Museum.



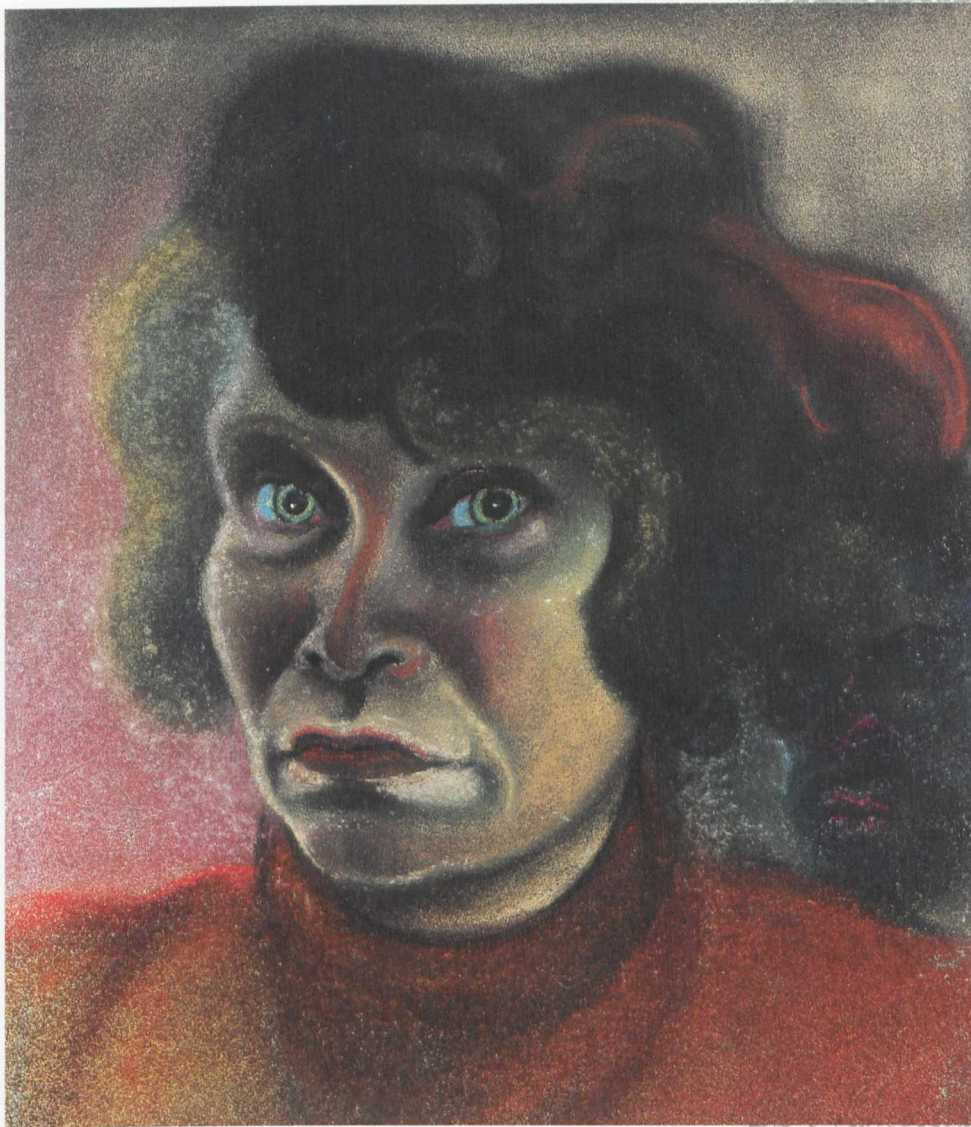
Erich Heckel, *Blind Madmen Eating*, 1914, 80.5 x 70.5 cm, oil on canvas Mönchengladbach, Städtisches Museum Abteiberg.

the front himself. The etching *Encounter with a Lunatic at Night* sets a shadowy figure with a big head against moonlit ruins. Only wide-open eyes and a broad grin are visible – typical features in the iconography of insanity.

After the war artists were not as interested in this cliché of insanity, but wanted to give critical reports of what they had seen. Or, in the tradition of Théodore Géricault, they produced genuine portraits of asylum inmates. Heinrich Ehmsen (1886-1964) shows the madmen he observed in the Emmendingen asylum in 1923, composing the figures in a frighteningly empty space.

Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler (1899-1940), unsuccessful as an artist and betrayed by her husband in a humiliating way, herself experienced a nervous breakdown in 1929 and spent some weeks in the Hamburg psychiatric hospital in Friedrichsberg. After she left the hospital, she continued her struggle with life on minimal resources, sinking into ever-lower social circles. Her work in this period shows her ever-present fear of a relapse, especially the uncanny pastel *Self portrait and a Shadow* of 1931, in which the skull-like features of a male face appear in the dark mass of her hair. A year later, her parents again put her into an asylum near Dresden. This time she could not escape. In 1940, she, along with more than 200,000 mentally handicapped and psychiatric patients, was gassed by the Nazis.

Other victims of this so called 'euthanasia programme' were Paul Goesch and Franz Karl Bühler, also long-term psychiatric patients. Goesch (1885-1940) had already started a career as an Expressionist painter and architect when he went to an



Elfriede Lohse-Wächter, *Self portrait and a Shadow*, 1931, 43 x 34 cm, pastel on paper, private collection.

asylum for the first time in 1917. Later, in Berlin, he worked at the centre of the modernist movement. In 1921 he started to hear voices and developed megalomania. He went to the Goettingen asylum, and he didn't leave until his death in the gas chambers, as 'a life not worth living'.

As an asylum inmate, Goesch was very productive. During his first illness from 1917 to 1919, he produced more than a thousand drawings. His connections to the art world helped him to exhibit and participate in group projects even after 1921. His style did not change during his periods of mental illness. Although obsessive themes became prominent – like Princess Victoria von Bentheim, with whom he thought he had fathered a child – they were embedded seamlessly within a continuous creation of 'coloured fairy tales' and dream worlds. When the exhibits for the infamous 'degenerate art' exhibition were assembled, his paintings and drawings came from museums, and also from the Heidelberg collection of works by psychiatric patients.

Franz Karl Buehler (1864-1940), Prinzhorn's favourite artist in the Heidelberg collection (he introduces him under the pseudonym 'Pohl'), had been a well-regarded artisan before he fell ill. He was a blacksmith who worked at the school for arts and crafts in Strasbourg from 1893. His ambition to become a proper artist failed, instead he lost his job and developed paranoid ideas and began a wandering existence. When in the winter of 1898 he jumped into a canal in Hamburg in a sudden fit of anxious rapture, he was interned in a hospital. In 1900 he was moved to the Emmendingen asylum, where he stayed until shortly before his death.

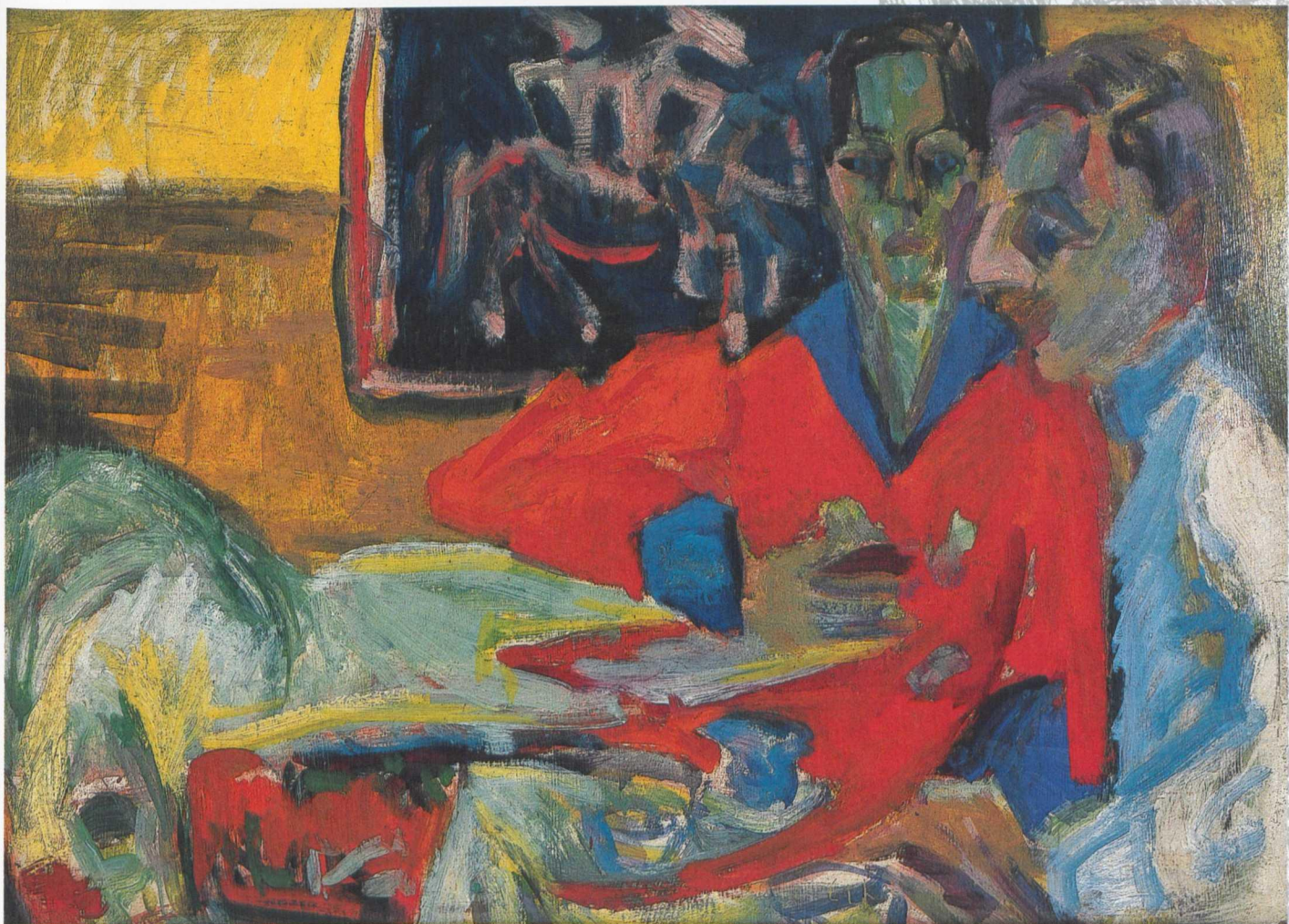


Else Blankenhorn, Untitled (Red Rider), n.d., 42 x 46.5 cm, oil on canvas, Heidelberg, Prinzhorn Collection.

During his time in the asylum he became more and more what he had always longed to be: a proper artist. And he developed a clearly expressionistic language from elements of the art nouveau style. Although his illness might have helped with this development, Buehler certainly also profited from the journals that were available at Emmendingen.

In his book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922), Prinzhorn mentions that some artists had visited the Heidelberg collection. Up to now we have only a few names. The most prominent is Alfred Kubin (1877-1959) who came to Heidelberg in September 1920 and published an article about his impressions in 1922. (1) In this text he mentions more than 12 artists and shows examples of their work. Paul Goesch is too trained and not insane enough for his taste. His favourite is Franz Karl Buehler, not surprisingly as the blacksmith's fantasies about monsters and ghosts have some similarities to the often cruel night thoughts of Kubin.

We know that after his visit the artist gave five works to the Heidelberg collection, one by himself, one by a lesser-known Munich artist and three by a patient of a Bavarian asylum dated 1860. Only during the preparation for the current exhibition in Schleswig did we discover that Kubin was given five works from the



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Morning Coffee (Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Ludwig Binswanger)*, 1917/1920, 50 x 70 cm, oil on cardboard, private collection.

Heidelberg collection in exchange. The Lenbachhaus in Munich owns four drawings by Buehler and one by August Klett, which carry on their back the stamp and the inventory number of the Heidelberg collection as well as the hand written remark 'present to Mr. Alfred Kubin'.

Kubin does not mention works by Else Blankenhorn (1873-1920) who is now recognised as one of the most original artists in the Heidelberg collection. The fact that she is also missing from Prinzhorn's book does not mean that the psychiatrist did not appreciate her work. On the contrary. As he indicates in an article published in 1922, (2) he intended to dedicate a monograph to her, probably inspired by Walter Morgenthaler's famous book on Adolf Wölfli that appeared in 1921.

Blankenhorn was the daughter of a rich landowner in Karlsruhe whose family had close contact to the court in that city. After a traditional upper class education, Blankenhorn suffered in 1899 from 'nervous exhaustion' and went to the Bellevue private sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, on the Swiss side of the Bodensee. She left cured in 1902, but returned in 1906 to stay for good. She was soon productive in several art forms: she made embroidery, played, sang and composed music, wrote and translated poems (mostly Tennyson), and from 1908 she painted as well.

Most of her numerous watercolours are part of a particular project. Since Blankenhorn thought she was 'in spirit' the wife of the Emperor William II, and therefore responsible for financing the nourishment of all resurrected loving couples, she drew and painted fanciful banknotes for fantastically large sums. Her colourful oil paintings, which show the influence of modernism, perhaps even of the Munich 'Blue Rider' group, are more enigmatic, as Blankenhorn only rarely showed any of them to others or discussed their content. Her maid Berta, who sometimes even denied doctors access to her mistress, was an additional obstacle.



Hans Prinzhorn, 1922.




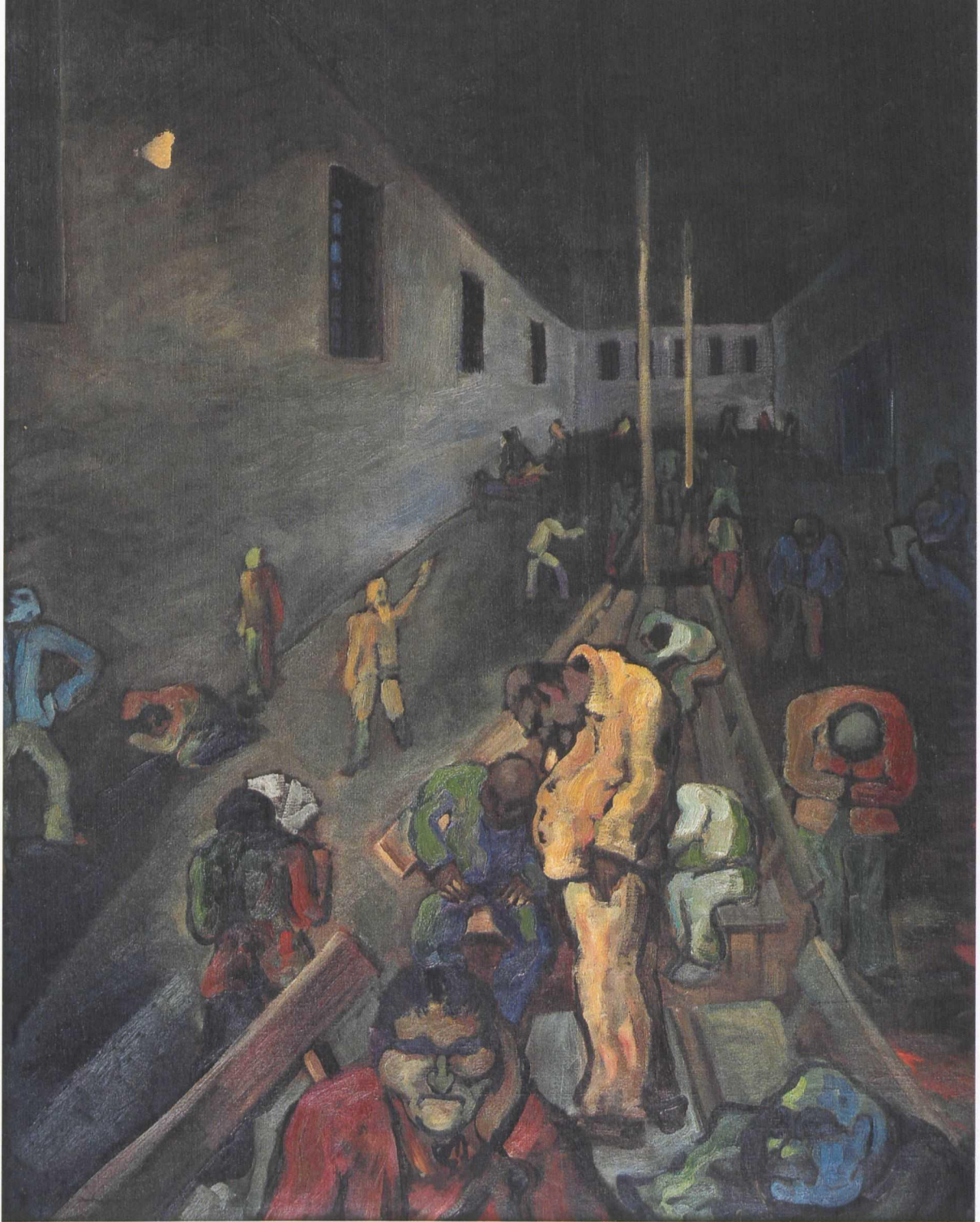
Else Blankenhorn, 1893.

In September 1917 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), who still suffered from the aftermath of a nervous breakdown he underwent as a soldier in 1915, also became a patient of the Bellevue. Soon after his arrival, the director Ludwig Binswanger showed him paintings by Else Blankenhorn, which was only possible because Berta was travelling. Kirchner was very impressed. In one of his sketchbooks he wrote a lengthy description and interpretation of some of the works – a remarkable early attempt by an artist. He doesn't mention Blankenhorn's name, but one of the paintings in his text can clearly be identified as her painting *Red Rider*. Perhaps Kirchner was even influenced by Blankenhorn. Especially relevant could be the spiritual or mystical air of his fellow patient's works, possibly reflected in Kirchner's mystic mountain landscapes of 1917 to 1920.

Not surprisingly, Kirchner bought Prinzhorn's book, probably soon after it was published. But his reaction to the artworks shown in it was no longer favourable. In 1924 he even warned others of their influence. What had happened? Kirchner's new response can be linked to his attempt to get hold of all his medical files and to destroy them. He was aware that it had become risky to be connected with insanity. Kubin reacted in a similar way. At the beginning of the thirties he successfully changed his image as an artist close to madness to that of a mere 'dreamer'.

From the time of the First World War, some psychiatrists began to criticise contemporary art works and their makers from a standpoint of the 'health of the people'. They found many features of 'degeneration' in modernism. This paved the way for the Nazi campaign of 1937, which aimed to destroy modernism completely – with a strategy the mad absurdity of which Prinzhorn had already identified in 1922: 'The conclusion that a painter is mentally ill because he paints like a given mental patient is no more intelligent or convincing than another; viz that Pechstein and Heckel are Africans from the Camerouns because they produce wooden figurines like those by Africans from the Camerouns.' (3)

During the preparation of the Schleswig exhibition some museum directors expressed concerns that the show might provide ammunition for those hostile to modernity. But the intention of the exhibition is precisely to demonstrate that the attitude of the Expressionists to insanity was ambivalent. On the one hand they were fascinated by the strangeness and originality of the 'madman', identified with this extreme outsider, and used his image mainly to frighten and criticise bourgeois society. On the other hand side, they were conscious of the danger of being identified by others with the lunatic. The liaison with mental illness was, to put it with a phrase Oskar Schlemmer used in 1920, 'a dangerous game of the moderns'. (4) 



Heinrich Ehmsen, *Asylum, Ward for the Agitated*, 1925, 128 x 100 cm, oil on canvas, Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, Halle, Landeskunstmuseum Sachsen-Anhalt.

1. Alfred Kubin, 'Die Kunst der Irren', in *Das Kunstblatt*, Nr. 5, 1922, 6. Vol., p.185-188.
2. Hans Prinzhorn, 'Gibt es schizophrene Gestaltungsmerkmale in der Bildnerie der Geisteskranken?', in *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, vol. 78, 1922, p.512-531.
3. Hans Prinzhorn, *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill, a Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, translated by Eric von Brockdorff (1972), Reprint Vienna, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1995, p.271.
4. Letter from Oskar Schlemmer to Helena Tutein, Cannstatt, 20th or 21st June, 1920, quoted in Andreas Hueneke (Ed.), *Oskar Schlemmer - Idealist der Form. Briefe - Tagebuecher - Schriften*, Leipzig 1989, p.63.

The exhibition 'Expressionismus und Wahnsinn' ('Expressionism and Insanity') is at the Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf, until 14 December 2003. A catalogue (in German) with several texts and illustrations is published by Prestel/Munich (ISBN: 3791330241).

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