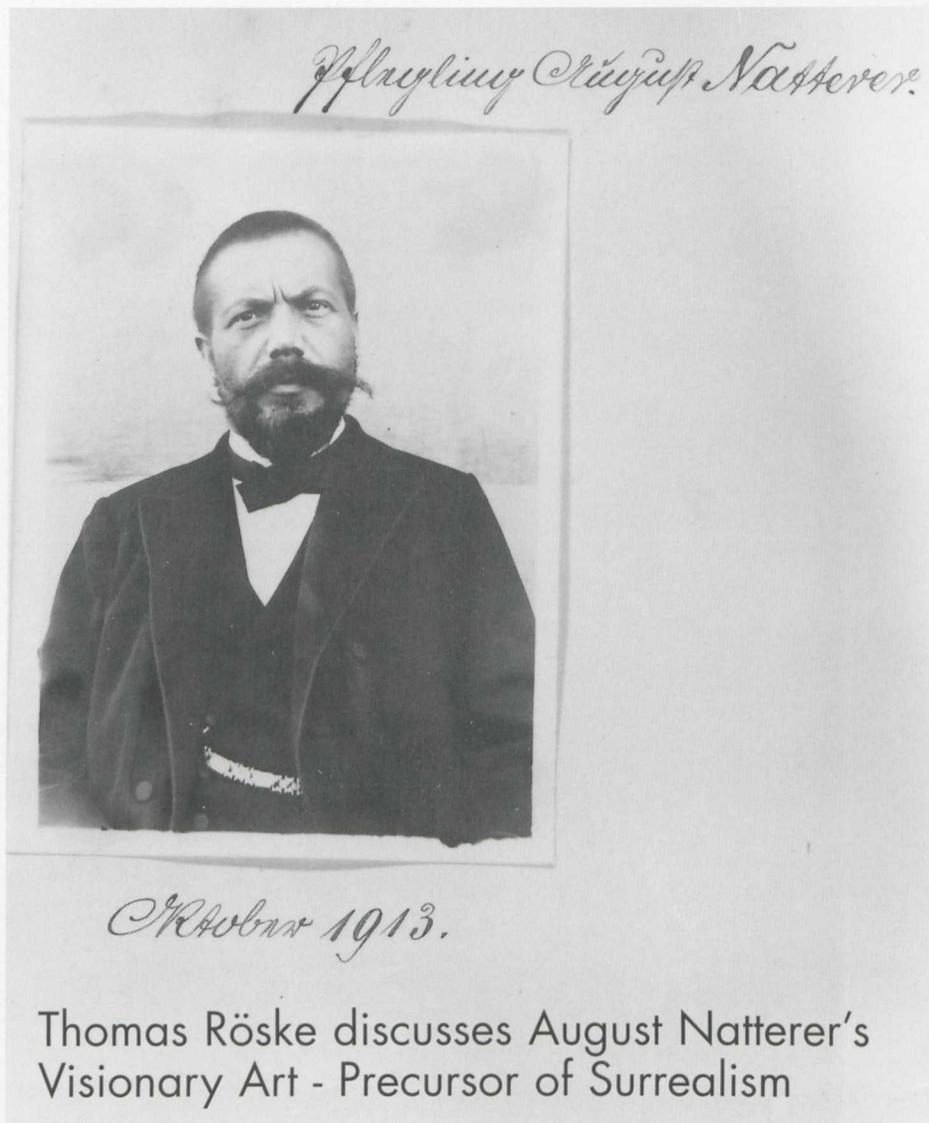


August Natterer



Thomas Röske discusses August Natterer's Visionary Art - Precursor of Surrealism

In his pioneering book *Bildneri der Geisteskranken (Artistry of the Mentally Ill)* (1922) the art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933) introduced ten 'schizophrenic masters' at length. One of these discoveries was the electrician August Natterer (1858-1933) whose pictorial records of a vision especially fascinated Prinzhorn. For him Natterer's drawings were the outstanding example of what could be called 'insane' in an art work. Especially about *The Miracle Shepherd*, he wrote: 'Perhaps in no other picture do we confront the specifically schizophrenic emotion as helplessly...' He explains this with the 'quality of strangeness and the uncanny' which he experienced and which 'agitates and fascinates us so much'. And he rationalises: 'Both means ... which offered us the possibility of entering into schizophrenic conceptual complexes are blocked, the rational as well as the aesthetic.'⁽¹⁾

Prinzhorn's book made August Natterer famous (if under the pseudonym 'August Neter'). His works have been reproduced more often than those of any other artist in the Heidelberg Prinzhorn Collection, for many they even stand for the collection. We share Prinzhorn's appreciation of Natterer's pictures, but perhaps for different reasons. We do not share the author's experience of the uncanny and aesthetic inaccessibility. It is worth asking why - what

has changed in the attitude towards the works of this outsider artist?

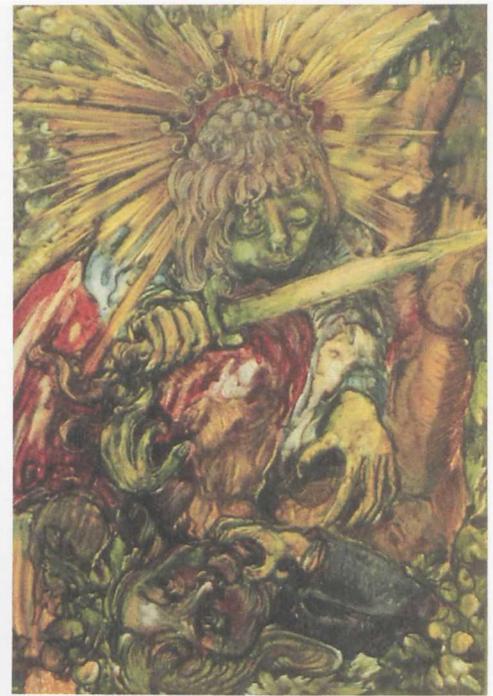
We should begin by looking at the man and his work more closely. August Natterer, born near Ravensburg in 1868, grew up in Stuttgart and became an electrician there.⁽²⁾ After serving in the army for a year he continued his training in mechanics in and around his hometown, then worked in different places abroad for a while, in Switzerland, France and the USA. Returning to Germany in 1893, he moved around until in 1896 he finally settled in Wuerzburg, when he married and started his own business. He acquired a high professional standing and established an important relationship to the University of the city, producing special instruments and machines for professors like Wilhelm Roentgen, the discoverer of the X-Rays. When in 1902 the University employed their own technician, Natterer suffered, not only financially. His search for professional alternatives in the following years all failed and he became slowly desperate. In 1907 he started working obsessively at his own inventions and patents. He became agitated, couldn't sleep any more and felt increasingly exhausted. Unable to pursue his business he went to Stuttgart for a change and visited his family. But his restlessness persisted, combined with hypochondriac tendencies and apocalyptic fears. In October, after an

Notes and references

I would like to thank Peter Cross for helping me with the translation of this text.

1. Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill. A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, transl. by Eric von Brockdorff (1972), Reprint, Vienna, New York: Springer, 1995, p. 171. I have not fully followed the wording of this not very well translated edition.

2. The biographical information follows: Inge Jádi, 'Die zwei Leben des August Natterer', in: Inge Jádi, Bettina Brand-Claussen (Eds.), *August Natterer. Die Beweiskraft der Bilder. Leben und Werk. Deutungen*, Heidelberg: Wunderhorn, 2001, p. 15-50.



opposite page
Photoportrait from Natterer's medical file.

left
The Miracle Shepherd,
1911/17, pencil and
watercolour,
24.5 x 19.6 cm, Prinzhorn
Collection, Heidelberg.

above
Franz Karl Bühler, *The
Strangling Angel*,
between 1909 and 1916,
oil crayon on paper,
41.3 x 30.7 cm, Prinzhorn
Collection, Heidelberg.

attempt to open his arteries, he was sectioned to the psychiatric hospital in Rottenmünster. In 1909, for financial reasons, he was moved to the Weissenau asylum. On his insistence he was transferred back to Rottenmünster in 1917 where he stayed until his death in 1933.

At the beginning of his time in the asylum Natterer was preoccupied with crippling guilt feelings. He believed he had committed a 'deadly sin' with a prostitute in 1906 (Natterer was married since 1896 but 'spared' his fragile wife sexually). Because of this, 'a flash of lightning struck his head, he was cast into hell.' He felt responsible for earthquakes and floods, supposed harbingers of the end of the world, and suffered terribly from painful sensations. Later, from 1912, Natterer developed delusions of grandeur. He believed he had discovered that he was the great-grandson of Napoleon I and he claimed the throne of France, as emperor Août I., IV Napoleon. He believed that contemporary political events were happening because of him; he saw the First World War as a campaign to free him from his imprisonment. Only later in his life did his old delusions about being chosen to suffer for the world return for a few years.

Beside his delusional identity Natterer lived the quite normal life of an industrious and skillful asylum inmate. He worked in the locksmith's

workshop, became a specialist in repairing clocks, sometimes even with replacement parts he made himself, and he invented helpful tools, for example a special wood plane. From 1911 he worked on drawings. Some show beloved women whom he declared to be his wives, some butterflies which he collected. In some he developed his own coat of arms, some are designs for inventions, for example weapons which should be used against the Germans in the war. The most original of his drawings are the ones devoted to the images he had seen in a vision. He repeatedly reported that this 'apparition' happened on the 1st of April 1907 at noon above the military barracks in Stuttgart: 'At first I saw a spot in the cloud, very near by – the clouds all stood still – then the white spot withdrew and remained in the sky the whole time, like a board. On this board, screen or stage, pictures followed one another like lightning, maybe 10,000 in half an hour, so that I could absorb the most important only with the greatest attention. The Lord himself appeared, the witch who created the world – in between there were worldly scenes: war pictures, parts of the earth, monuments, battle scenes from the Wars of Liberation, palaces, marvellous palaces, in short the beauties of the whole world – but all of these in supernatural pictures. They were at least 20 meters high, could be seen clearly and were almost colourless,



above
Witch's Head - Landscape, before 1920, pencil, watercolour and pen,
 25.9 x 34.2 cm, Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg.

3. Natterer cited after Prinzhorn 1995 (see Fn.1), p.159-160.

4. Natterer cited after Jádi 2001 (see Fn.2), p.50.

5. For this see Bettina Brand-Claussen, 'The Witch's Head Landscape: A Pictorial Illusion from the Prinzhorn Collection', in: *American Imago*, vol. 58 No. 1, Spring 2001, p. 407-443.

6. Natterer cited after Prinzhorn 1995 (see Fn.1), p.169-170.

7. Prinzhorn 1995 (see Fn.1), p.170-171.

8. Translated after: Comte de Lauréamont, *Die Gesänge des Maldoror*, transl. from the French by Ré Soupault, Munic: Heyne, 1976, p. 173.

like photographs; some were slightly coloured. They were living figures which moved. At first I thought that they were not really alive; then they were transcended with ecstasy, the ecstasy was breathed into them. Finally it was like a movie. The meaning became immediately clear on first sight, even if one became conscious of the details only later while drawing them. The whole thing was very exciting and eerie.'

Typically for a vision, not only the meaning of the images was clear to Natterer but also the special meaning for him: 'The pictures were manifestations of the last judgement. Christ could not complete the redemption because the Jews crucified him too soon. Christ said at the Mount of Olives that he had shivered under the pictures which appeared there. These are pictures, in other words, like those of which Christ spoke. They are revealed to me by God for the completion of the redemption.'⁽³⁾

Undoubtedly, in depicting these images, Natterer, God's elected, was carrying out a mission. At the same time they served him as reconstructions of parts of the 'apparition' and allowed him 'to explore their meaning in a logical way'.⁽⁴⁾ This is especially clear in the *Skirt Transformations* drawing. Here with the skill and patience of a technical draughtsman Natterer copied the different phases in the movement of the skirt of the aforementioned 'witch who created the world'. These lines, depicting the movement of the

fabric, are more precise and fine than any of his technical drawings. Probably Natterer wanted to prove his position as a 'World-University-Mechanic' in depicting transcendental events with an almost 'supernatural' diligence. In the case of the *Witch's Head*, the witnessed changing of the sky images is imitated with the effect of a transparency, a forerunner of the cinema which was popular at the beginning of the century. The picture is painted on both sides in translucent paint so that if lit from behind the head-meadow opens into a lake with water plants and fish.⁽⁵⁾

The Miracle Shepherd was obviously of special importance for Natterer. Prinzhorn reports the explanation of the picture the patient had given to him in 1919 which reveals that it was meant as a kind of self portrait built out of symbols, including the traumatising encounter with the prostitute: 'At first a cobra was in the air, iridescent green and blue. And then came the foot (along the snake). Then the other foot came. It was made from a turnip... On this second foot appeared the face of my father-in-law in W.: the world miracle. The forehead was creased – and the seasons of the year came from it. Then it became a tree. The bark of the tree was broken off in front so that the gap formed the mouth of the face. The branches of the tree formed the hair. Then female genitals appeared between the leg and the foot, these



above
Witch's Head - Landscape (verso, lit from behind).

sever the man's foot, i.e. sin comes from woman and causes the fall of man. One foot is propped against the sky, that means the fall into hell... Then came a Jew, a shepherd who had a sheepskin wrapped around him... I am the shepherd - the Good Shepherd - God!'(6)

It is clear to us now what Prinzhorn meant when he stated that the rational way of entering into this drawing was 'blocked'. Without Natterer's explanation, the meaning of parts of the drawing is hard to understand as it does not follow the common cultural tradition. But even with Natterer's explanation, the meaning of the whole, of the reason for the parts coming together, remains obscure. What Prinzhorn meant with his 'aesthetic failure' is explained when he describes the drawing thus: 'Unless we are mistaken, the characteristic quality lies in the organic forms resulting from the partial drawings of organs, which however are not centred anywhere. The fake organisms are neatly drawn to completion and closed on all sides', but with a 'pointless logic which leads a rational man into an endless maze.'(7) Prinzhorn's aesthetic failure is a failure of empathy. In an image he is obviously looking for an identifying encounter with a dominating (organic) shape. As this is denied, here he experiences a hardly tolerable frustration. The reflex to repulse is balanced by a fascination, the result is an experience of the uncanny.

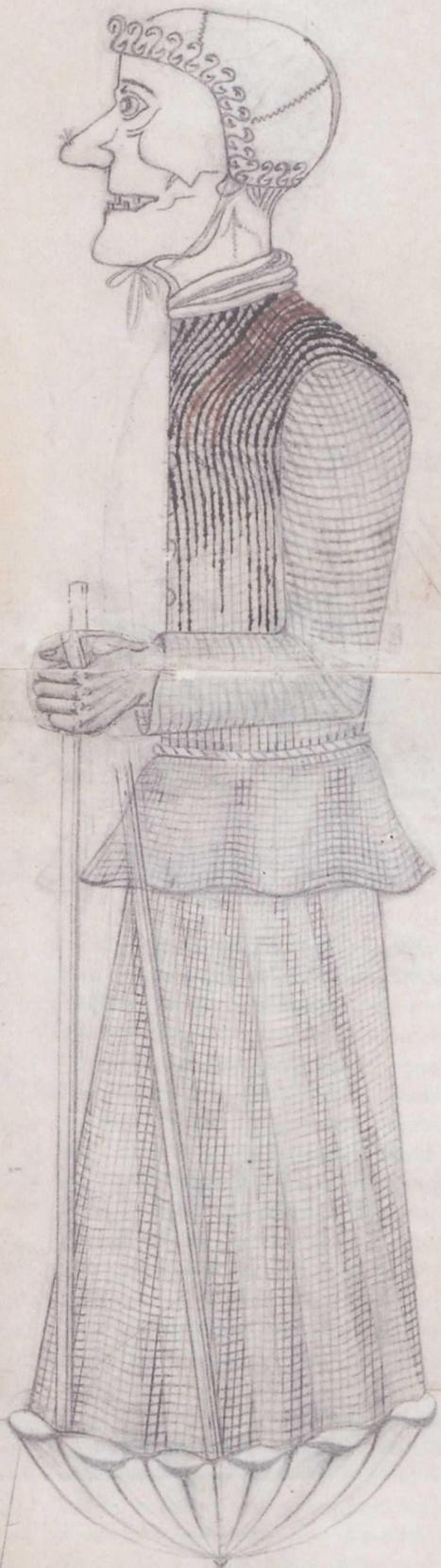
Why don't we share Prinzhorn's experience of the uncanny here? Because since Dada and Surrealism, we are used to making sense of this kind of senselessness in works of art. In fact, Prinzhorn's description parallels the famous phrase from the *Songs of Maldoror* (1869) by the Comte de Lautréamont (Isidor Ducasse), in which the poet compares the beauty of a young man to 'the unexpected encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'.(8) The Surrealists used this as a model for their artistic practice.(9) It fits remarkably well with paintings by Max Ernst, like *Der Sturz der Engel* ('The Fall of the Angels') of 1923, today in the Sprengel Museum in Hannover.(10) Here we also find, diligently outlined but incomplete, bodies and body parts and we miss - in the case of the female body at least - an integration into a consistent figure. Actually Ernst was the one who took Prinzhorn's book to Paris in 1922, bringing it to the attention of his French artist friends there. Over all he was obviously himself influenced by Natterer's drawings.(11) But more importantly, Ernst could choose the works of this psychiatric patient as a model only on the basis of a new idea of art, which was embodied in Surrealism (with the Italian *Pittura Metafisica* as a kind of precursor). His paintings were a pictorial equivalent of the automatic poems which André Breton and his friends had developed from

9. See for example André Breton, *Entretiens 1913-1952* (1952), Paris: Gallimard, 1969, p. 49 - I thank Marielène Weber for having pointed out this reference to me.

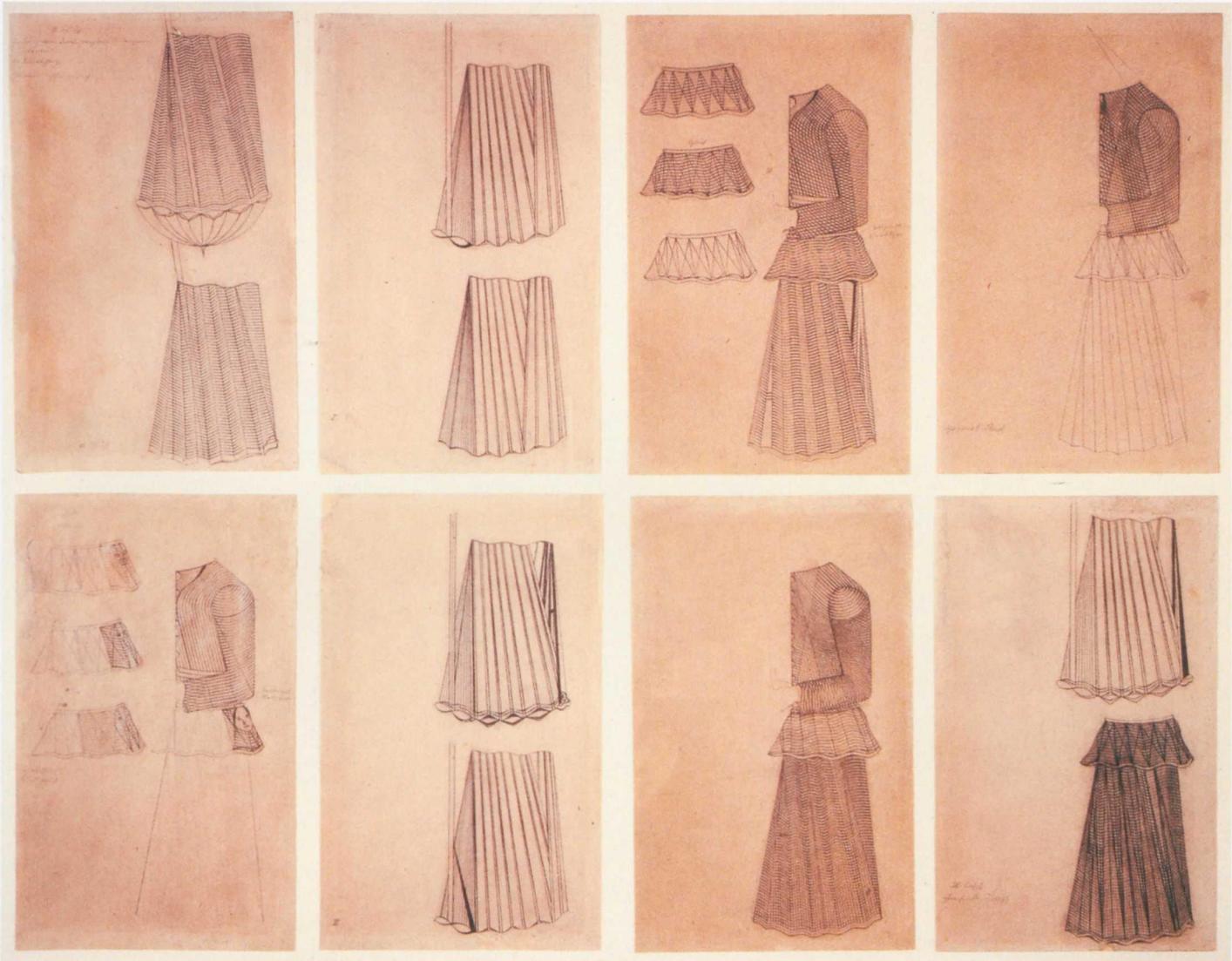
10. Oil on Canvas, 128 x 128 cm.

11. See Stefanie Poley, 'Das Vorbild des Verrückten. Kunst in Deutschland zwischen 1910 und 1945', in Otto Benkert, Peter Gorsen (Eds.), *Von Chaos und Ordnung der Seele. Ein interdisziplinärer Dialog über Psychiatrie und moderne Kunst*, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 1990, p. 55-90, here p. 76-80; see also Marielène Weber, 'August Natterer, ein schizophrener Künstler. Zur Rezeption', in: Jádi/Brand-Claussen 2001, op. cit., p. 341-366, here p. 362.

101



8 1/2 cm



1919 – the year in which Prinzhorn started to put together the Heidelberg collection and to work on his book.

The main artistic model for Prinzhorn, who had studied in Munich from 1906 to 1909 when the radiance of *Jugendstil* was beginning to fade, was German Expressionism.¹² The ‘schizophrenic master’ he favoured most among the ten he introduced in his book was Franz Karl Bühler (alias Franz Pohl) whose coloured pencil drawings he compared to Vincent van Gogh. And if he mentions contemporary artists in his book, they are mostly members of the Blue Rider or Bruecke group. But obviously he sensed the coming of something new. This shows in his reaction to August Natterer’s drawings. Fascinated by them, but unable to explain why, he thought it was the illness of the patient he could experience through these works. Looking back from today, it becomes clear that Prinzhorn in *The Miracle Shepherd* uncannily discovered the possibility of a new aesthetic that already concerned contemporary artists in France.

August Natterer – a Surrealist *avant la lettre*. How can this be explained? In his drawings the electrician tried to envisage an extraordinary experience which had overwhelmed him completely. He didn’t realise that the meaning he gave to his ‘apparition’ – if not the vision itself – was a reflection of deeply personal complexes. This externalisation of the inner was helped by the fact that Natterer was not

used to the expressive mode of the art of his time, but built up his drawings using the analytical model he had learned as a technical draughtsman, showing that he could ‘master’ his vision. Therefore, instead of aiming to express the thoughts that haunted him, he reconstructed the images of his vision as something foreign, ‘supernatural’, as accurately as any other optical phenomenon he drew professionally. Dissociation, fragmentation and incoherence in his pictures were unconscious strategies to hide the true meaning of the connected ideas to himself – to us they are the very moments that put us on the track of Natterer’s problematic relationship to the world. And this, a leading of spectator to a reality behind the image, was exactly the purpose of the Surrealist aesthetic. Breton and his friends no longer trusted the old idea of expression in art. Instead of relying on the aesthetic of expressionism, they consciously collided common ways of representing the world in their poems and pictures, to provoke the presentiment of meaning latent in the images. With his creative way of coping with a personal collapse of meaning Natterer had foreshadowed the way the Surrealists answered the general collapse of meaning in European society after the First World War.

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above
Skirt Transformations,
1911/1913, pencil,
each 16.1 x 10.1 cm,
Prinzhorn Collection,
Heidelberg.

opposite page
Witch (Test Sketch),
Witch with eagle,
crocodile, and
cornucopia, ca.
1911/13, pencil on
writing paper, paper
partly glued on,
19.9 x 16.5 cm,
Prinzhorn Collection,
Heidelberg.

12. See Bettina Brand-Claussen, Inge Jädi (Eds.), *Vision und Revision einer Entdeckung*, exhibition catalogue, Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg, 2001.