

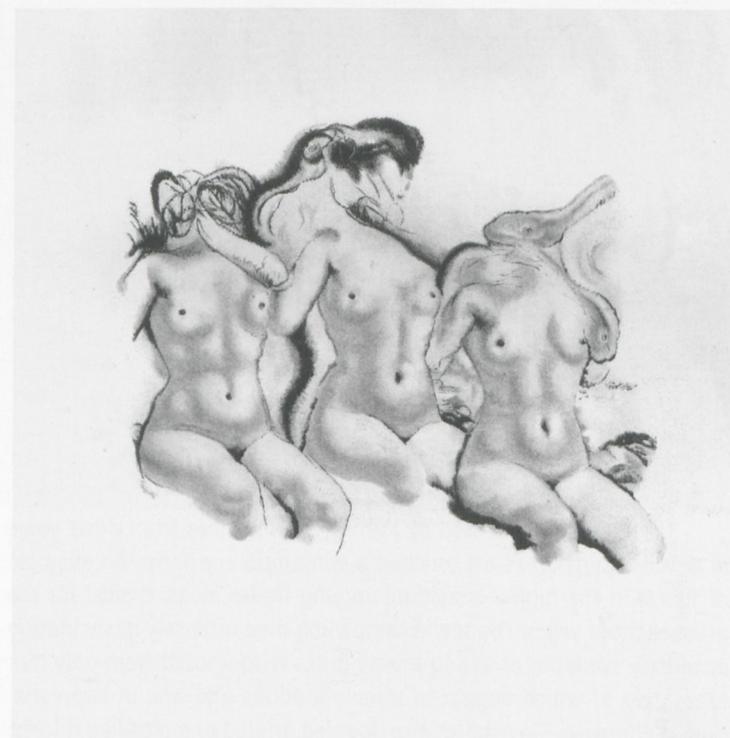
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## Max Mayrshofer – A Visit to the Lunatic Asylum

The graphic artist and painter Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) visited the psychiatric clinic in Heidelberg in September 1920, curious about its collection of “pathological art”.<sup>1</sup> Hans Prinzhorn, who built up the collection, was on leave, so the clinic Director Karl Wilmanns showed Kubin around. The enthusiastic Kubin was particularly drawn to the works of the former art locksmith Franz Karl Bühler (1864–1940). He expressed this not only in his report “Die Kunst der Irren” (the art of the lunatics) which appeared in the magazine “Das Kunstblatt” in 1922<sup>2</sup> but also by exchanging five pictures with the Collection. In exchange for four coloured pencil drawings by Bühler and a watercolour by August Klett (1866–1928), Kubin gave one of his own tempera paintings (“Drohender Zusammenstoß” [Threatening Collision], 1905) and four pictures by others from his collection. Three of these are gouaches by an anonymous inmate of the Eglfing asylum and produced around 1860; the fifth work is an undated chalk drawing by Max Mayrshofer (1875–1950) (cat. 1). On the back of it Prinzhorn noted: “Original by Mayershofer [sic], done in the asylum where he was because of a ‘complex of fixed ideas’, donated by A. Kubin”. We know neither when the exchange took place, nor when and how the works by other artists came into Kubin’s possession. It is also unclear how Prinzhorn obtained the information in his note, which partly appears as a quotation. Until now, it hasn’t been confirmed by other documents.

Probably Kubin knew the Munich artist, who was almost his age, personally, and acquired the drawing himself. Mayrshofer’s diminutive muscular appearance, with an almost coarse type of head, was well known in artist’s circles in the city, especially since the meteoric rise of the graphic artist after 1907.<sup>3</sup> First his drawings and prints were reproduced in “Jugend” and “Hyperion”, then he had his first individual exhibitions with his graphic works.<sup>4</sup> The “Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst” and “Die Kunst für Alle” wrote long articles.<sup>5</sup> Mayrshofer’s nudes were compared with Renoir and Bonnard, his landscapes with Liebermann; at the same time he was accredited with a character completely his own, particularly in the representation of groups of people, violent scenes and grotesque fantasies, such as mythical creatures and monsters.

Only rarely present during the war years, in 1919 he once again amazed his audiences with a portfolio of 20 masterly lithographs.<sup>6</sup> But audience interest didn’t keep in step with his academic career, which



III. 1 / Max Mayrshofer  
Untitled, undated  
Lithograph  
from: Hyperion 1910  
vol. 3

started in the same year. Mayrshofer also knew how to handle oil-paint excellently, but galleries only showed the results occasionally in group exhibitions. Reporting on a solo exhibition in a Berlin gallery on the occasion of his 50th birthday in 1925, “Cicerone” wrote of a “person who has almost disappeared”.<sup>7</sup> The author called the paintings “various quite bright and kind but rather impersonal impressions painted according to Munich studio recipes”. He was more interested in the eccentric “peculiarity” of the artist, “which only breaks through in grotesque decoys of the pen and amusing improvisations in a tiny format, in nightmarish self persiflages and haunted scribbles”. But even this seemed no longer revolutionary at the time: Mayrshofer was “an amusing local case” for the reviewer – a judgement from which the artist couldn’t escape until his death, and which stays with the almost forgotten artist until today.

**Abb. 2** / Max Mayrshofer  
Madman (study paper)  
Charcoal on paper  
from: Hyperion, 1908



The drawing presented by Kubin (cat. 1) comes from those years in which Mayrshofer's art touched a contemporary nerve. An example of this is in the highly individual varying figure ideas, typical for the artist in those years. The scene comprising nine intensely gesticulating or tensely standing or sitting male figures is composed from only four types, two of which appear in three variations and one in two variations. Otherwise, Mayrshofer also doubled, tripled or multiplied figures, especially nudes, and thereby occasionally achieved original inventions which seem to anticipate the surrealism of a Max Ernst (ill. 1). However, the Heidelberg drawing can be positioned even more precisely. It is part of a series of representations of lunatics, three of which were already published before the First World War (ill. 2, 3 and 4). One of them, which is very similar to the Heidelberg drawing in composition and figure type (ill. 4), is dated 2.8.1907.

Mayrshofer's diaries, which are preserved in a private collection in Munich, do not reveal whether he ever went to a psychiatric clinic. They only record that he suffered heavily from kidney disease and was tormented by intense neuralgias from six years of age.<sup>8</sup> Did he therefore get close to asylum inmates? Or do his drawings belong to the tradition of artist's visits to asylums that were particularly common during the expressionist period?<sup>9</sup> In 1912, Wilhelm Michel explained Mayrshofer's drawings of mythical creatures in "Die Kunst für Alle" by referring to his "hypochondria, melancholy and grumpy mood". About the small group of asylum pictures he wrote: "A visit to the lunatic asylum has also

**Abb. 3** / Max Mayrshofer  
Max Mayrshofer  
The Madhouse, undated  
Lithograph  
from: Hyperion, 1910



provided suggestions and motifs for pictures of horror. An army of lunatics, with the wrathful vernacular of their uninhibited and dislocated movements, is passing. What rich provision these drawings offer! The triumphant laughter of fools, furious, monkey-like malice, stabbing fear, expressed throughout in a masterly, baroque exuberance of movement. One feels that something must be in the artist's soul which somehow makes these unbridled and deranged figures personally interesting for him. Perhaps he himself has already heard the shackles being shaken in there, in unguarded moments." But then he relativizes this speculation immediately: "They are seen so palliatively, from such an external viewpoint, the poor fools. They are seen from a distance, with strong, charitable feelings, by someone who is quite certain of his intellect."<sup>10</sup>

But is it conceivable that Kubin, against his better judgement, implied "fixed ideas" to an artist colleague who he knew personally, and thus pathologized him? Prinzhorn also wouldn't have simply articulated a suspicion in his ascription, particularly since he himself warned against the thoughtless diagnosis of modern art as "sick": "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."<sup>11</sup> There is no medical file for Mayrshofer in the archives of public asylums and clinics in and around Munich. But the artist could



III. 4 / Max Mayrshofer,  
Untitled, 1907  
Charcoal on paper  
from: Die Kunst für Alle  
27, 1912, p. 213



III. 5 / Joos van  
Craesbeek  
The temptation of  
St. Anthony, 1624  
Oil on canvas  
Gent, Gemeente-  
museum



have been treated in a private sanatorium (e.g. Neufriedenheim) whose archives have not survived. That he doesn't mention a stay in a psychiatric institution in his diaries doesn't disprove it either. Artist's diaries are often written with a view to later publication, and are therefore appropriately stylized and censored.

A self-portrait drawing of Mayrshofer, done around 1920 and purchased recently, isn't "ill" either, even if it seems to thematize the idea that he wasn't always "quite sure of his intellect" (cat. 2). His serious-looking head rises above more than eight little female nudes which seem to be asleep; most are lying down. Only one body is wrenched upward by a devil's head which grows from the woman's chest and stares

at Mayrshofer above a long hairy neck. A grotesque animal with a human head, firm rear legs but wretched arms, jumps over her. This "nightmarish self mockery" takes up a tradition which reaches back from Klinger's and Kubin's representations of nightmares, through illustrations of Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels", to depictions of the temptation of Saint Anthony in the world of Hieronymus Bosch (ill. 5). So the artist effectively invests the scene with exceptional emotional content, which nevertheless is safeguarded by its art historical references. This also applies to a picture of 1941 (ill. 6) in which Mayrshofer took up the "mad" topic once more. The coloured pencil drawing shows individual studies of men and women behaving unconventionally next



**III. 6 / Max Mayrshofer**  
 Insane people, 1941  
 Coloured pencil on  
 paper  
 Private collection

to and around each other, like Peter Brueghel the Elder in his Viennese paintings "Fight between Fasching and Fasting" (1559) or "Children's Games" (1560).

The comparison with the two later drawings makes clear how intensely especially the two drawings of "lunatics" from 1907 (cat. 1 and ill. 4) involve the viewer, in that they stage those who are represented as his counterpart and force the viewer into a confusing rhythm with the interplay of figure variations. In this they even play off the variations in other drawings by Mayrshofer, and achieve such an unusual depiction of the half ridiculous, half worryingly grotesque, that even today we cannot fail to be affected. This strong originality (what is comparable by a contemporary artist?) points to the fact that Mayrshofer was acutely challenged by the subject at that time – whether merely as an observer or because he was affected himself, however, cannot be decided exclusively through his work.

**1** For the following see: Bettina Brand-Claussen, "... lassen sich neben den besten Expressionisten sehen" – Alfred Kubin, Wahnsinns-Blätter und die 'Kunst der Irren', in: Expressionismus und Wahnsinn, exhibition catalogue, Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloß Gottorf, Munich 2003, pp. 136–155.

**2** Alfred Kubin, "Die Kunst der Irren", in: Das Kunstblatt 6, 1922 issue 5, pp. 185–188.

**3** For Mayrshofer's biography cf. the entry in Thieme-Becker, Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler, vol. 24, p. 298, as well as [http://home.arcor.de/kunst-Max mayrshofer/biograph.htm](http://home.arcor.de/kunst-Max%20mayrshofer/biograph.htm) (called on 10 May 2007).

**4** G.J.W., "München", in: Die Kunst für Alle XXV, 1910, p. 213 p. (issue 9); Anonymous, "Von Ausstellungen und Sammlungen", in: Die Kunst für Alle XXV, 1910, p. 354 (issue 15); A.F., "Köln", in: Die Kunst für Alle XXV, 1910, p. 473 (issue 20).

**5** Curt Glaser, "Max Mayrshofer", in: Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst N.F. XXI, 1910, pp. 234–238; Wilhelm Michel, "Max Mayrshofer", in: Die Kunst für Alle 27, 1911/12, pp. 210–219 (issue 9 of 2-1-1912).

**6** See G.J.W. "Zu den Lithographien Max Mayrshofers", in: Die Kunst für Alle XXXV, 1919/20, pp. 61–62 (issue 1/2).

**7** Willi Wolfardt, "Ausstellungen", in: Der Cicerone XVII, 1925, pp. 1005–1007, p. 1006.

**8** I thank Jürgen Lang/Munich for this information.

**9** See Susanne Augat, "Das Bild des 'Irren' im Expressionismus", in: Expressionismus und Wahnsinn 2003 (note 1), pp. 16–32.

**10** Michel 1912 (note 5), pp. 217 f.

**11** Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922), New York 1972, p. 271.