

By Donation – By Trade – By Purchase. How Works from the Prinzhorn Collection Made Their Way into the Dammann Collection

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In 2012, Karin and Gerhard Dammann were able to expand their collection by acquiring five pieces by artists represented almost exclusively in the Prinzhorn Collection.¹ This relationship with the world-renowned historic fund of “pathological art” made the addition particularly valuable to the collectors. All the more so because Gerhard Dammann’s early encounter with the Heidelberg institution was the starting point for his own collecting.² Oscar Voll’s (1876–?) piece (Fig. p. 64/65) was once part of a sketchbook currently in the Prinzhorn Collection.³ Along with two other works and two sketchbooks by the former tailor, it recently went from private ownership to the art market. The work was evidently removed before the book was sent from the Werneck Asylum to Heidelberg in 1919. However, the other four works (Fig. p. 58/59 and 101–103) were originally part of the Prinzhorn Collection.⁴ How, when and under what circumstances did these inherently unmarketable works from the university clinic end up on the art market?

Heidelberg’s collection of artistic works by residential institutional patients was founded in 1919, following an appeal by the Psychiatric Clinic at the University of Heidelberg. The call, by Director Dr. Karl Wilmanns (1873–1945) and his assistant Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933), was sent out to all institutions, clinics, and sanatoriums in German-speaking Europe.⁵ Prinzhorn, an art historian and physician, inventoried and archived the donated works as the assets of a future “Museum of Pathological Art.” He returned, and removed from the inventory list, very few of the early contributions; in these cases, exceptionally, loaned pieces were not converted into donations. By the time Prinzhorn left the clinic in June 1921, the collection included over 5,000 works by 485 men and women.

Prinzhorn was also tasked with evaluating the collection. As well as several articles, he published the comprehensive study “Bildneri der Geisteskranken” (Artistry of the Mentally Ill) in 1922. Contrary to his colleagues’ expectations, Prinzhorn’s book challenged the diagnostic value of the works, emphasizing their exceptional aesthetics instead. Prinzhorn also travelled domestically and internationally to lecture on the subject. Starting in 1921, he organized the first exhibitions. In 1929, following a series of presentations in Germany, 36 loans from the collection were even exhibited at the Galerie Max Bine in Paris.⁶ All this contributed to the works by institutionalized patients gaining increasing aesthetic recognition, even if this was not yet measured monetarily. Until then, interest in them had been, at most, from a purely diagnostic perspective.

The process by which a few inventoried works left the collection during this period is significant. In September 1920, the artist Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) visited the Psychiatric Clinic. Enthusiastic about the “art of the insane”,⁷ he gave one of his own gouaches, as well as four other works from his collection to Heidelberg, in return for four colourful drawings by Franz Karl Bühler (named “Franz Pohl” by Prinzhorn, 1864–1940) and a watercolour by August Klett (“August Klotz”, 1866–1928).⁸ Kubin’s deal was a sign of high esteem, comparable to an exchange between art colleagues. He did not consider selling. Today, these works are in the Kubin Archive at the Lenbachhaus in Munich.

The next two documented transactions of works leaving the collection did not involve money either. However, for the first time, financial value came into play. Ladislav Szécsi (later Segy, 1904–1988), a Hungarian artist and designer who became an important collector and dealer of African art in Paris,⁹ visited the Heidelberg Collection in 1929 or 1930. Hans Gruhle (1880–1958), the psychiatrist responsible for the collection at the time, showed him many of the works. In October 1931, Szécsi approached Gruhle, offering him two African statues he owned as “comparable objects” for purchase. In fact, Prinzhorn had referenced the relationship between sculptures in the Heidelberg Collection “and those by primitive people” in his book.¹⁰ Gruhle declined with regret, as there was no purchasing budget.¹¹ The art dealer immediately suggested sending the two sculptures on loan, confident that a potential donor could be identified within three months, as this acquisition “could yet be useful to the entire university.”¹² In a reminder, he tried to underscore his trustworthiness,

¹ I thank Doris Noell-Rumpeltes for help and guidance with this text.

² See “Careful, Walla! or: Is Collecting a Male Thing? Karin und Gerhard Dammann in Conversation with Thomas Röske”, in: *wahnsinn sammeln. Outsider Art aus der Sammlung Dammann*, ed. by Bettina Brand-Claussen, Gerhard Dammann and Thomas Röske, Exhibition Catalogue Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg 2006, p. 23-35, here p. 23.

³ Inv. Nr. 328.

⁴ Not all of the works have inventory numbers from the Heidelberg Collection. If numbers were not on the works themselves, they were recorded on stickers or mats, which were rarely preserved.

⁵ For the collection’s history, see Bettina Brand-Claussen, “The Collection of Works of Art in the Psychiatric Clinic, Heidelberg – from the Beginnings until 1945”, in: *Beyond Reason. Art and Psychosis. Works from the Prinzhorn Collection*, Hayward Gallery, London, Exhibition Catalogue, Manchester 1996, p. 7-23.

⁶ See also Ingrid von Beyme, “Asylum Art as the ‘True Avant-Garde’? The Surrealist Reception of ‘Mad Art’”, in: *Surrealism and Madness*, ed. by Ingrid von Beyme and Thomas Röske, Prinzhorn Collection Exhibition Catalogue 2009, p. 154-168, here p. 154-158.

⁷ See also Alfred Kubin, “Die Kunst der Irren”, in: *Das Kunstblatt*, Vol. 6, Issue 5, p. 185-188.

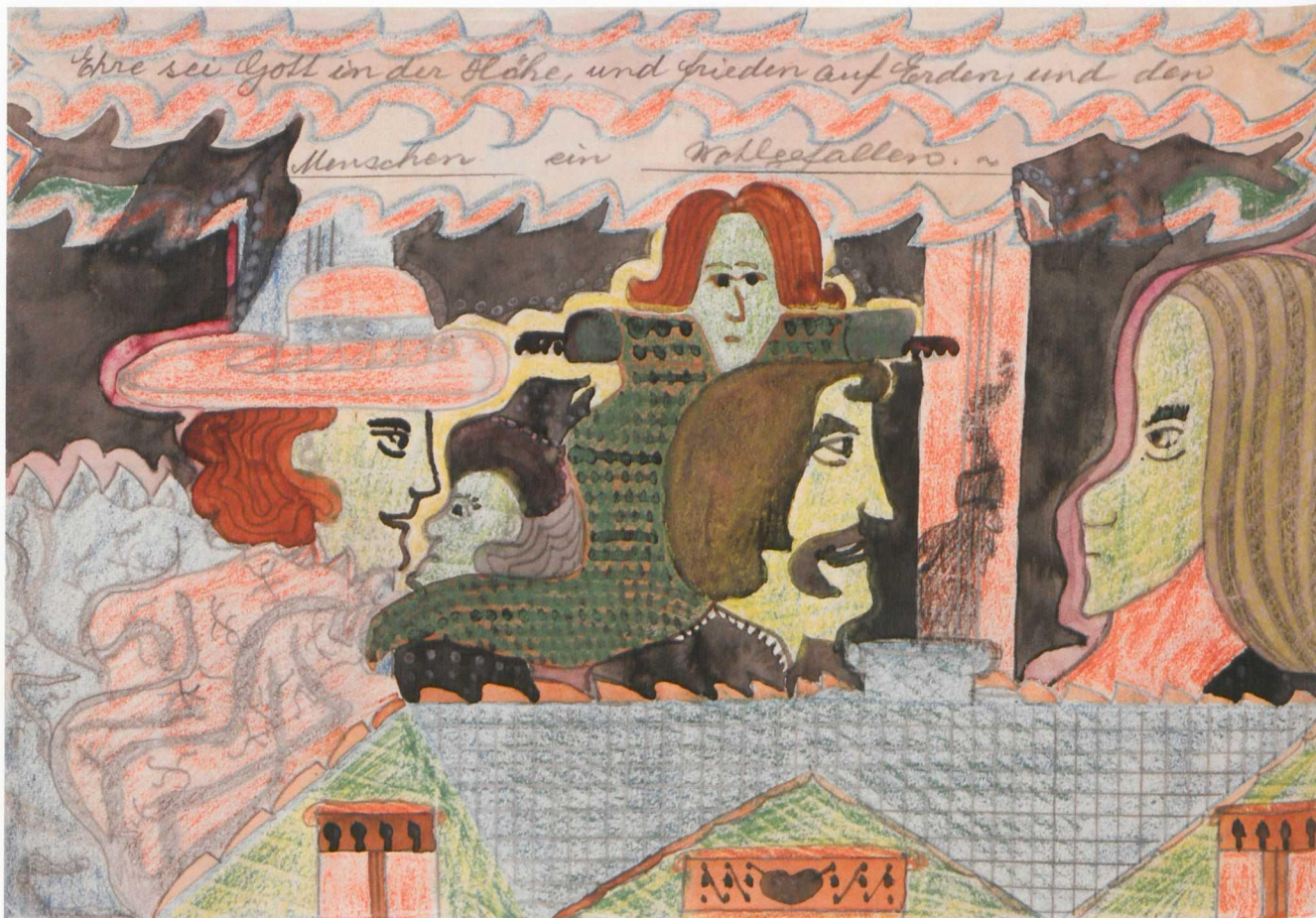
⁸ See most recently Bettina Brand-Claussen, “... lassen sich neben den besten Expressionisten sehen” – Alfred Kubin, *Wahnsinns-Blätter und die „Kunst der Irren“*, in: “Geistesfrische”. Alfred Kubin und die Sammlung Prinzhorn, Landesgalerie Linz Exhibition Catalogue, Weitra 2013, p. 17-42.

⁹ For Szécsi see Pascal James Imperato, “Ladislav Segy: 1904-1988”, in: *In: African arts*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, August 1988, p. 82.

¹⁰ Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill. A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, New York 1972, p. 250-252.

¹¹ Letter from Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] October 18, 1932. The letters cited here are all in the Prinzhorn Collection Archive, Heidelberg.

¹² Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, October 20, 1932.



August Klett („August Klotz“, 1866–1928)

„Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe“ (recto), undatiert/undated

Bleistift, Farbstift und Aquarell auf Papier/pencil, crayon and watercolour on paper

22,5 x 32,5 cm

Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg / Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg

citing his affiliations with the "Intl. Institute for African Languages and Cultures, London; Trocadero Museum, Paris; Brooklyn Museum, New York, etc. etc."¹³

Gruhle ultimately accepted the offer¹⁴, and Szécsi immediately sent three sculptures. He cited "very conspicuous parallels", which he had noted during his visit to Heidelberg, in justifying his selections. For Karl Genzel's („Karl Brendel", 1871–1925) wood sculptures, these were:

1. Bakota fetish, similar to your "Kopffüssler" [tadpole figure]
2. Cameroon fetish, your one statue has similar facial features, and
3. Totem animal, similar to another sculpture in your collection."¹⁵

The commission invoice provided materials, a description, and prices:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Wood figure covered with copper | RM 185,- |
| 2. Wood figure | RM 85,- |
| 3. Wood bird | RM 65,-" ¹⁶ |

Ten days later, Gruhle reported the works' arrival. He also reported damage to the "little carved bird", due to improper packing: "on its head, the tip of a small horn broke off completely."¹⁷ Negotiations during the following months are not documented. Therefore, it is a surprise to see a confirmation dated May 11, 1933, recording that, instead of payment, Szécsi received 15 pictures from the Heidelberg Collection. The similarities between "tribal art" and "artistry of the mentally ill" led not only to an initial expansion of the Heidelberg Collection, but also to growing a private collection. Of the sculptures sent from Paris, only two are still in Heidelberg.¹⁸ Unfortunately, which works were sent to Szécsi was not documented.¹⁹ They were most likely pictures by Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920) and August Klett, prominent artists in the collection, from whom there were larger numbers of works available.²⁰

After this first transaction, Szécsi turned to Hans Gruhle with renewed efforts in June 1933. This time, he came as an agent of the psychiatrist Dr. Auguste Marie (1865–1934),²¹ head physician at the Asile de Villejuif, and later for 30 years at the Hôpital Sainte Anne in Paris, who had begun his own collection of 250 works. The art dealer wrote that Marie admired Szécsi's Heidelberg works and wanted to exchange several of his own pieces.²²

Gruhle gladly accepted this suggestion too. But as a careful curator of the collection, he emphasized that he was only interested in works "in which a genuine artistic pursuit is called forth, underpinned by, or modified by pathologically emotional moments." He bade Marie to "especially favor his selections toward abnormal, artistically interesting objects." In return, he was willing to "put together a quite diverse lot that I assume will interest him," in so far as he wouldn't have other special requests.²³ In July, Szécsi sent Marie's selection, a "small collection of 37 drawings," and requested the agreed "small counter-shipment" from Heidelberg.²⁴ How many and which works Gruhle sent, and what happened to them, was not documented. Today, a large part of the Marie Collection belongs to the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne. However, it does not include any works with Heidelberg inventory numbers. Marie's gift itself is not well documented. But all works, including those by Émile Hodinos (Joseph Ernest Ménétrier) and the Voyageur Français, are evidently still in the Prinzhorn Collection today.

In 1935, Szécsi presented works from his collections of "Old African Sculpture" and "Works of the Insane" in a sale exhibition at the Midtown Galleries in New York.²⁵ An August Klett piece, which is now unaccounted for, graced the catalogue title page. In this way, the exchanged works became available on the art market for the first time. How many of the exhibited pieces were sold then, or at a later New York show in 1939²⁶ was not documented. We also do not know whether Szécsi, who immigrated to the USA in 1940 and operated his own New York gallery from 1950, continued to offer this portion of his possessions for sale. Nonetheless, the New York industrial designer and businessman Sam Farber (1924–2013), the most important patron of the American Folk Art Museum and himself a passionate outsider art collector, was able to obtain five outstanding works formerly in the Heidelberg collection from the gallery owner: four small Blankenhorn pictures, and one

¹³ Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, November 9, 1932.

¹⁴ Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] November 25, 1932.

¹⁵ Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, December 6, 1932.

¹⁶ Commission invoice, Paris, December 6, 1932.

¹⁷ Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] December 16, 1932.

¹⁸ Reliquary figure from Kota, Gabun. Wood, iron, copper plate, undated, height: 61 cm, Inv. Nr. 6064; Bird, presumably from South or Central America. Wood, height: 29 cm, Inv. Nr. 6065.

¹⁹ Though added by hand is that the "numbers of the delivered pieces [...] were noted", see confirmation with signatures from Gruhle and Szécsi, [Heidelberg] May 11, 1933.

²⁰ In addition to the works named below there was also the one by Klett to which Prinzhorn dedicated a colored plate in his book. MacGregor suggests that Szécsi loaned it for the exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism", shown in New York in 1936, s. John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, Princeton 1989, p. 289.

²¹ See Jean Dubuffet, including "Collection du Dr. A. Marie", in: *Publications de la Compagnie de l'Art brut*, Fascicule 9, Paris 1973, p. 79–140.

²² Szécsi to Gruhle May 22, 1933

²³ Gruhle to Szécsi, [Heidelberg] June 19, 1933.

²⁴ Szécsi to Gruhle, Paris, July 15, 1933

²⁵ See Collection Ladislas Szécsi, Paris: *Old African Sculpture/Works of the Insane*, Midtown Galleries Exhibition Catalogue, New York, which lists 45 items from "Works of the Insane". The exhibition was on view from March 17 to April 1.

²⁶ The New York Post from April 2, 1939 included a brief discussion of an exhibition of "Surrealist art, works by the insane and primitive African sculpture" from the Szécsi Collection in the Mercury Galleries in New York. The article is unclear about whether Heidelberg pieces were ever offered.

²⁷ Personal communication, Doris Noell-Rumpeltes.

²⁸ In 1988, Farber Diapositive sent these works to the Heidelberg Collection and inquired about the artists. See his letter from August 10, 1988 to Inge Jadi, then director of the Collection (Prinzhorn Collection Archive). The whereabouts of the fourth Blankenhorn picture is unknown.

Klett watercolour.²⁷ A few years ago, he made them available again through various dealers. Three Blankenhorn pictures (Fig. p. 101–103) and the Klett work (Fig. p. 64/65) eventually found a new home in the Dammann Collection.²⁸

One may wonder where, and under what circumstances, the other Prinzhorn works traded by Szécsi und Marie will surface again. Because they are presumably still in the hands of appreciative private collectors. Unfortunately, there is less hope for another Heidelberg Collection loss from around the same time. In 1938, Carl Schneider (1891–1946), then Director of the University Psychiatric Clinic, loaned numerous works that formed part of the collection's core assets to a traveling exhibition entitled "Degenerate Art". There, they were denigrated in a comparison to unpopular works of modernist art.²⁹ At the end of the year, 76 of the exhibited works were sent back to Heidelberg.³⁰ Others probably continued touring until the end of the exhibition in 1941; in particular four works reproduced in the exhibition guide.³¹ Because they did not return to the University Clinic afterwards, it is likely that they were destroyed along with other supposedly worthless exhibition works and material. Did the Nazis' changed attitude towards the "incurably mentally ill", reflected from 1940 on in the so-called "euthanasia" programme, also override the clinic's loan agreements and ownership rights? Or did it clarify the fact that institutional works were still often seen as worthless, even if a small group of connoisseurs were willing to spend money for them? Dealing in Outsider Art, through specialized galleries, did in fact not begin until the early 1970s. And it was only in the 1980s that doctors and nurses in psychiatric facilities finally stopped immediately destroying patients' freely-created artistic works. The history of art by institutionalized patients demonstrates that, in our society, it is particularly monetary value which manifests an item's significance.

²⁹ See Bettina Brand-Claussen, "Die 'Irren' und die 'Entarteten'. Die Rolle der Prinzhorn-Sammlung im Nationalsozialismus", in: Von einer Welt zur andern. Kunst von Außenseitern im Dialog, Ed. by Roman Buxbaum and Pablo Stähli, DuMont-Kunsthalle Exhibition Catalogue, Köln 1990, p. 143-150.

³⁰ Written communication by the exhibition management for the "Degenerate Art" exhibition to the Psychiatric University Clinic, Berlin, June 6, 1938 (Prinzhorn Collection Archive). The returned works were shown for the first time as part of the Rotations installation (2012) by Javier Téllez (Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, October 25, 2012 - February 10, 2013).

³¹ See Brand-Claussen 1990, like Note 29





Oskar Voll (1876–?)

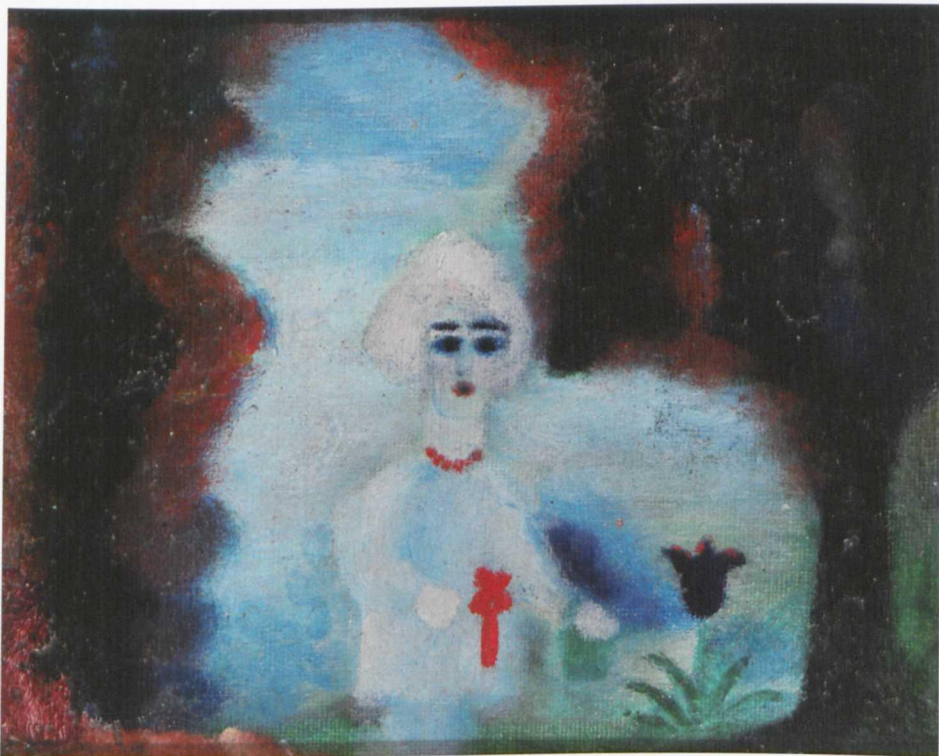
Ohne Titel/*untitled* (recto), undatiert/*undated*

Bleistift auf Papier, aus einem Zeichenheft/*pencil on paper from a drawing-book*
20 x 26 cm

Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/*Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 328*



Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920)
Ohne Titel/*untitled*, vor/before 1919
Öl auf Leinwand/*oil on canvas*
22,9 x 27,9 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/*Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 4275*



Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920)
Ohne Titel/*untitled*, vor/before 1919
Öl auf Leinwand/*oil on canvas*
17,0 x 13,5 cm
Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/*Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 4269*



Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920)

Ohne Titel/*untitled*, vor/*before* 1919

Öl auf Leinwand/*oil on canvas*

25 x 20 cm

Provenienz: Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg/

Provenance: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg, Inv. Nr. 4250

