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From identification to research – artists respond to works of the Prinzhorn Collection

The *Prinzhorn Collection* in Heidelberg with its more than 5,000 works by asylum patients has provoked artists' responses up to the present. This talk follows the changes in these responses since Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933) gathered the collection between 1919 and 1921. I will juxtapose the approaches of three classical modernists, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Schlemmer, and Max Ernst, with two recent artists, and an artist couple: Jörg Ahrnt, Lisa Niederreiter, and the Quay Brothers.

The expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), and the young Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943) were both fascinated by what they thought to be authentic expression in artworks by mentally ill people. As a result, they felt justified in their own striving to find a new style, and were even influenced. Kirchner encountered paintings by Else Blankenhorn (1873-1920) in 1917, when, after a nervous breakdown in 1915, he was a fellow patient in the luxurious sanatorium of Bellevue on Lake Constance.

Schlemmer saw some drawings by Hyacinth Freiherr von Wieser (1883-?) (whom Prinzhorn called 'Heinrich Wels'), who was a patient at a private sanatorium in Munich, in 1920, when Prinzhorn used them as illustrations for a lecture in Stuttgart. Like Kirchner in 1917, Schlemmer was in a situation of crisis at that time, being on the brink of leaving painting and to start working exclusively on ideas about an abstract form of ballet. For both artists, the artistic products of people diagnosed schizophrenic became an encouragement to dare something new and even to be worked on formally as inspirations.

More rational in his attitude, Max Ernst (1891-1976) was the first of the surrealists to use specific 'procedures' of 'mad art' strategically for his own paintings and collages. As early as 1910 he had been impressed by artworks of asylum patients. But the outcomes of these impressions can be only found after he encountered Prinzhorn's book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, published in 1922. In particular, the visionary drawings of August Natterer (1858-1933) (whom Prinzhorn called 'August Neter') became a model for his pictorial inventions, so much so that we nowadays cannot help but see the pictures of this asylum inmate themselves as examples of surrealism.

Different from these classical modernists, contemporary artists have approached works of the collection as researchers. As the examples of the Quay brothers (1947), Jörg Ahrnt (1965), or Lisa Niederreiter (1962) show, they want to understand and to reveal to the public the often astonishing creativity of the people behind the works: people who have been marginalised by society.

In their black and white film *Absentia* (2000) Timothy and Stephen Quay reconstructed how Emma Hauck (1878-1920), a patient at the Wiesloch Asylum, might have written her desperate letters addressed to her husband, repeating words like 'come' and 'darling' so often that fragile columns of lead appear on the paper. The haunting images of this film were developed in response to a musical composition by Karlheinz Stockhausen.

On a visit to the *Prinzhorn Collection* in 2002 Jörg Ahrnt became fascinated by a notebook which the inmate of the Landeck asylum, Ludwig Wilde (1865-?), had filled with texts and

ornamental drawings during World War I. Ahrnt saw immediately that these drawings were influenced by Persian patterns and started searching for their sources in Wilde's time. Parallel to this he imitated Wilde's drawing technique to find out about the direction and effort of his production. Out of this he developed a personal kind of drawing which, with similar cautiousness to Wilde's, tries to encounter Iranian culture.

In 2003, Lisa Niederreiter started a dialogue with the famous jacket by Agnes Richter (1883-?) in the collection. Finished by the inmate of the Leipzig asylum in 1895, it is decked out in a stitched text of private content that Richter could thus wear on her body. In response, Niederreiter produced a black underskirt on which she spontaneously stitched thoughts about Richter's fate and questions to her while she was wearing it. The body experience of writing close to her body is part of the work.

Through this kind of demonstration and exploration artists in their works come close to academic research. It is very welcome to the *Prinzhorn Collection*, which tries to encourage all kinds of approaches to the 'pain treasure of mankind' (Gottfried Boehm) that it houses.



Agnes Richter
1990
Linnen, wol, katoen, zijde
100%

Agnes Richter ontwerft en maakt haar kleding in haar atelier in Amsterdam. Ze is bekend voor haar gebruik van natuurlijke materialen en haar focus op duurzaamheid. Dit ontwerp is een voorbeeld van haar minimalistische en functionele stijl.



Lisa
1990
Wol, katoen, zijde, linnen
100%