

THE BEWAHREN
BESONDERER
KULTURGUETER PROJECT:
Context and Inspiration

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Thomas Röske

Katrin Luchsinger's project *Bewahren besonderer Kulturgüter* (Conservation of unusual cultural treasures) deserves attention beyond Swiss borders. She was the first to obtain details of the extant works of inmates at historical psychiatric hospitals in a single country and to store them in a database. These several thousand drawings, objects, and textile works are undoubtedly a mere fraction of what Swiss men and women have created in similar living circumstances since the late nineteenth century. But this is already quite a rich finding that provides diverse insights into life on the margins of Swiss society—and thus into that society itself, as Luchsinger has shown in both her dissertation and in several exhibition catalogues.¹

This point of view only began to develop with the rise of the critique of psychiatry that began in the late 1960s. Until then, a diagnostic interest dominated, which since the early twentieth century had been accompanied by an increasing aesthetic value being placed on these works.² We owe both to the fact that the historical Swiss institutions preserved these works in the first place, although their long-term preservation was often just an accident. The drawings and objects were often just forgotten in cabinets, home archives, or (often without commentary) added to the patient files and only rediscovered recently. The preservation of the originals for the future would require conservational measures that simply surpass the means of those responsible for the works, and this is further compounded by the fact that many see no need to take action. And yet, there are already examples of museums preserving and working with art from a psychiatric context, a Swiss example being the Adolf Wölfli Stiftung, at the Kunstmuseum Bern.

1 Luchsinger, Katrin, ed., *Pläne: Werke aus psychiatrischen Kliniken in der Schweiz 1850-1920*, Zurich, 2008; Luchsinger, Katrin, Blum, Iris, Fahrni, Jacqueline and Jagfeld, Monika, eds., *Rosenstrumpf und dornencknie. Werke aus der Psychiatrischen Pflegeanstalt Rheinau 1867-1930*, Zurich, 2010; Luchsinger, Katrin, ed., *Anna Z., Schneiderin: Lebensbeschreibungen einer (Unglücklichen!) sowie die Schilderung der Erlebnisse während zehn Jahren im Irrenhaus* (1916), Zurich, 2010; Luchsinger, Katrin, Salathé, André, Dammann, Gerhard and Jagfeld, Monika, eds., *Auf der Seeseite der Kunst: Werke aus der Psychiatrischen Klinik Münsterlingen 1894-1960*, Zurich, 2015; Luchsinger, Katrin, *Die Vergessenskurve: Werke aus psychiatrischen Kliniken in der Schweiz um 1900: Eine kulturalanalytische Studie*, Zurich, 2016.

2 Röske, Thomas, "Diagnostik versus Ästhetik - Die Entwicklung der Sicht auf künstlerische Werke aus psychiatrischem Kontext," in *KunstTherapie: Wirkung - Handwerk - Praxis*, von Sprei, Florà, Martius, Philipp and Steger, Florian, eds., Stuttgart, 2017, 269-280.

THE SAMMLUNG PRINZHORN AS A MODEL

The outstanding example here, however, is Heidelberg's Sammlung Prinzhorn, which has been a university museum with an independent status since 2001. The collection's famous initial stock of around 5,000 drawings, paintings, sculptures, and textile works was assembled primarily by the art historian and doctor Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933) in the years from 1919–1921. In the commission of the Heidelberg psychiatric university hospital, he asked psychiatric wards, hospitals, and sanatoriums across the German-speaking world for submissions to assemble a “museum for pathological art.” Around 360 works in the collection come from Switzerland, including large portfolios of works by Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920) from Karlsruhe and Karl Maximilian Würtenberger (1872–1933), from a place near Constance, and smaller collections of work by Johanna (Jeanne) Natalie Wintsch (1871–1944), Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930), and Heinrich Anton Müller (1869–1930). But the museum that was planned did not materialize for many years. Therefore the collection was made famous above all by the extensive, richly illustrated study Prinzhorn published in 1922, *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken*, published under the English title *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*.³ The director of the psychiatric hospital, Karl Willmanns (1873–1945), surely hoped for new diagnostic uses. But Prinzhorn was the first to question such a possible use, and instead focused on the particular aesthetic of the works. For this reason, and due to its wealth of illustrations, the book thrilled artists and those interested more in art than the psychiatrists. A classic, it is still in print today and has been translated into five languages.

The collection survived the Nazi period not least because it was misappropriated by the Nazis as comparable material for the defamatory touring exhibition *Degenerate Art* (1937–1941). It was then largely forgotten: We have little information on its reception in the years directly after 1945. It was French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985), who after the Second World War collected asylum art (especially from Swiss institutions) and other works by non-artists and propagated their value under the new term art brut, who began to look for the exhibition in 1950.⁴ In 1963, the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann presented a selection of works from the collection for the

3 Prinzhorn, Hans, *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken: Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung*, Berlin, 1922.

4 Beyme, Ingrid von and Röske, Thomas, eds., *Dubuffets Liste: Ein Kommentar zur Sammlung Prinzhorn von 1950*, (catalogue Sammlung Prinzhorn) Heidelberg, 2015.

first time in an exhibition at Bern's Kunsthalle. Interest in the collection was then once again awakened in Heidelberg. In 1973, the university hospital hired a curator for the collection, Inge Jarchov (later Jádi, born in 1936). Under Jádi, the conservational work and museum storage of the holdings began alongside increased exhibition activity that once again made the Sammlung Prinzhorn internationally famous.

The most important of these exhibitions was the extensive touring exhibition, which was on view in 1980–81 in Basel and in various German cities, with a catalogue to accompany it.⁵ By then Jean Dubuffet and other art brut enthusiasts (called “outsider art” since 1972) had already published biographies of artists from this art realm and the Adorno student Peter Gorsen (1933–2017) had shown how aesthetic and sociological aspects of the works intersect in his writings.⁶ The Prinzhorn exhibition project began an engagement with the historical context of the works that received a great deal of public attention, especially in light of the reality of the historic institutions within society at the time. Jarchov's decision to publish the names of the women and men behind the works, with the explanation that they were figures of public interest, was quite controversial. A legal backlash against this practice, as it is still feared by archivists in Austria and Switzerland in particular, did not take place, nor was there a public outcry in the media. Clearly, every visitor to the Sammlung Prinzhorn understands that rendering asylum artists anonymous entails a continuation of the historical stigmatization of their creators by illness and stays in psychiatric hospitals, while naming them returns them their identity posthumously and grants them the respect they deserve as artists.⁷

Subsequent exhibitions of the collection, especially since the opening of the museum in 2001, have advanced the contextualization of the works in terms of art history, on the basis of holdings that have grown significantly since 1980, today including more than 26,000 works. Many of the biographies have been researched, the reality of life in the asylums and the embedding of the works in everyday life has been reconstructed. In addition, psychoanalytic

5 *Die Prinzhorn-Sammlung. Bilder, Skulpturen, Texte aus Psychiatrischen Anstalten (ca. 1880–1920)*, (catalogue, Heidelberger Kunstverein u.a.), Königstein i. Ts., 1980.

6 The most important early writings are collected in the volume Gorsen, Peter, *Kunst und Krankheit: Metamorphosen ästhetischer Einbildungskraft*, Frankfurt am Main, 1980.

7 Röske, Thomas, “Sollten historische Patienten-Künstler namentlich genannt werden?“, in *Identität und Ich-Störung*, Schwitzer, Josef, Pycha, Roger, Stompe, Thomas and Boehlke, Erik, eds., Berlin, 2012, 242–250.

and phenomenological approaches have been explored in exhibition catalogues and other publications issued by the institution. In future, the perspectives of visual studies and disability studies will be brought to the foreground.

COLLECTIONS IN OTHER MUSEUMS

Around the world, there are only two other museums that preserve, research, and exhibit artworks from the psychiatric context, the *Museo de Imagens do Inconsciente* at the *Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional* in Engenho de Dentro in Rio de Janeiro, founded in 1952 by the psychiatrist Nise da Siveira (1905-1999), and the *Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de l'Hôpital Sainte-Anne (MAHSA)* in Paris, founded in 2016, with a collection that was already formed at the hospital's *Centre d'Etude de l'Expression* in 1950, where it was sometimes also shown. Even the museum with works from the *Psychiatrische Klinik Waldau*, near Bern, which has existed since 1993 and includes an extensive collection that has already been extensively studied, considers itself more generally as the *Schweizerisches Psychiatrie-Museum* (but the most valuable holdings, the books and drawings by Adolf Wölfli, have been moved to a their own foundation). In other cases as well, collections of artistic works by asylum patients are frequently kept in psychiatry museums whose orientation is primarily focused on cultural history. Here, we could mention the *Museum of the Mind* at *Royal Bethlem Hospital* in Beckenham, England (opened in 2015) or the *Museo della Mente* at *Ospedale Santa Maria della Pietà* in Rome (opened in 2000). Other large collections of art from the context of psychiatry can be found at museums that specialize in art brut or outsider art, like the *Collection de l'Art Brut* in Lausanne, Switzerland (opened in 1976) or the *Visionary Art Museum* in Baltimore, which opened in 1995, or collections included in art museums like the *Collection L'Aracine* at *LaM (Lille Métropole Musée d'art modern d'art contemporain et d'art brut)* in Villeneuve d'Ascq, France (since 1999) and the *Musgrave-Kinley Collection* at the *Whitworth Art Gallery* in Manchester (since 2002). Only once has a collection of works by psychiatric patients been made part of an art museum without its being embedded in this way: The collection of 102 sheets that the psychiatrist Osório César (1895-1979) donated in 1974 to the *Museo de Arte de São Paulo*. But today, museums for modern and contemporary art are collecting examples of outsider art, and often this means art from a psychiatric context.

COLLECTIONS IN ARCHIVES

Larger collections of this kind are occasionally kept in archives, like the holdings of the Scottish Crichton Royal Institution (opened in 1839), today accessible via the Dumfries and Galloway Archives, or the large art collection from various sources of the London Wellcome Collection. But beyond that, there are thousands of artworks from a psychiatric context contained in parts of old psychiatric patient files and sitting largely unnoticed in state and federal archives, as the *Bewahren besonderer Kulturgüter* project has shown for Switzerland. Drawings, texts, sometimes photographs of objects were included by the doctors keeping these files because they either saw them as evidence of the psychological illness of the affected women and men or because they wanted to document intact abilities. Rarely did the files go into more detail about the idiosyncratic documents. And medical historians, who over recent decades have evaluated psychiatric files for various reasons, have neglected them due to their complexity.

In Austria, the recent project of the Salzburg art historian Elisabeth Telsnig has brought the artistic works in the files of the psychiatric hospital in Salzburg to light.⁸ As with the works of the Swiss project, here technical plans are placed alongside depictions of visions, allegoric ego documents and ironic illustrated stories. The entire spectrum of motivations that can also be deduced behind the works of the Sammlung Prinzhorn, from the structuring of time to proof of intelligence, skillfulness, and social usefulness, to being remembered, can be seen here. The works, however, remain the property of the Landesarchiv Salzburg, and were only brought together for the purposes of the publication. The low number of finds in Salzburg is rather surprising, and seems to indicate a later “purging” of the files. The Swiss research revealed that artistic works could be found in around one percent of all patient files. And I obtained similar findings in 2013 and 2014 when with colleagues I examined several years of files dating from the early twentieth century in the holdings of the psychiatric clinic at Berlin’s Charité, where there were no long-term patients. If we accept Prinzhorn’s estimation that around two percent of all inmates of psychiatric hospitals were active as artists (this corresponded in his

8 Dohle, Oskar, Feistmantl, Ulrike and Telsnig, Elisabeth, eds., “‘Trotl bin ich nicht’: Kreatives Schaffen in der Landesheilanstalt Salzburg 1850-1969,” in *Schriftenreihe des Salzburger Landesarchivs* Nr. 28, Salzburg, 2018.

9 Prinzhorn (1922), 340, cf. fn. 3. In this volume 83-91.

view to the number of artistically talented individuals in society as a whole),⁹ then in fact most examples seem to have been kept if someone drew in an institution. We can extrapolate from this that research in Germany and many other countries would reveal large amounts of exciting research material.

PSYCHIATRISTS' COLLECTIONS

Beyond this, as in Switzerland, there are still forgotten collections of artistic patient works at former asylums or hospitals or in private hands. As a rule, these collections usually consist of whatever an individual psychiatrist with an interest in art collected during their years of professional activity. Here, we could follow Luchsinger's example and first do fundamental research in all psychiatric institutions in a country, the successor institutions to former asylums. To accompany this, we could follow clues on collections whose location is now unknown, and engage in research into the location of missing legacies. For example, we know that in Germany two of Prinzhorn's colleagues, Wilhelm Weygandt (1870-1939) in Hamburg and Richard Arwed Pfeifer (1877-1957) in Leipzig felt challenged by the Heidelberg project to found their own collections under a decidedly diagnostic aspect. Pfeifer actually published works from his collection.¹⁰ We have no trace of either collection today.

For the search for collections in other countries, Robert Volmat's book *L'Art Psychopathologique* (1956) could serve as an initial guide.¹¹ In the first part of the book, organized by country, there is a list of those psychiatrists responsible for loans to the first exhibition at the first World Congress of Psychiatry, which was held in Paris in 1950. The appendix of the book includes 169 of the works shown. These works come from collections in North America (USA and Canada), South America (Brazil and Peru), and India, but of course most of the works came from Europe. Beside Finland, France, the UK, Italy, Yugoslavia, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Spain, Switzerland is also listed as country of origin. There were no loans from Germany, only from "the Saar," today the German state Saarland, which was independent from 1946 to 1956: Thirteen sheets by the artist Eugène G. that were provided by the

10 Weygandt, Wilhelm, *Atlas und Grundriß der Psychiatrie*, Munich, 1902; Pfeifer, Richard Arwed, *Der Geisteskranke und sein Werk: Eine Studie über schizophrene Kunst*, Leipzig, 1926.

11 Volmat, Robert, *L'Art Psychopathologique*, Paris, 1956.

12 *Ibid.*, 77-79.

psychiatrist Klaus Conrad (1905–1961).¹² For the Swiss works, four sources are provided: The psychiatrist Arnold Weber (1894–1976), at the Bernische kantonale Irrenanstalt Waldau, submitted works by Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930) (then stored in the small Waldau museum) and Heinrich Anton M[üller] (1869–1930), and sheets by two other asylum inmates; Director Hans Steck (1891–1980) at the Asile de Cery, Lausanne, submitted works by Aloïse C[orbaz] (1886–1964); the collection of Charles Ladame (1871–1949), who had once directed the Asile de Bel-Air in Geneva, was represented by a loan from the Paris-based *Compagnie de l'art brut*, Jean Dubuffet, with eighteen drawings by five inmates; and finally the psychiatrist Charles Durand (1910–2001) submitted a decorated screen from the private sanatorium Les Rives in Prangins which he directed on the shores of Lake Geneva.¹³ Even for Switzerland, the list with the last exhibit offers a starting point for future research.¹⁴

There is also documentation available on other exhibitions that were held at international and national psychiatry conferences. Articles on patient drawings in psychiatric journals could also be examined, and much more.

CONCLUSION

If we consider the collections mentioned here and possible sources of other works by asylum inmates, the prospects of what still remains hidden are dizzying indeed. There is a great deal to be done for those interested in expanding the historical research material. We should remember that even the thousands of widely distributed materials are just a fragment of the documents of expression that inmates around the world have created in psychiatric wards. Usually, as we can state with confidence today, they were attempts at communication, but were almost never taken seriously as such by those around them. Most of them were destroyed and forgotten. This is why the research that our exhibition project would like to inspire should serve primarily to make the still extant, long suppressed messages of individuals once again available and to place them up for consideration in society.

13 Ibid., 84–91.

14 The *Bewahren besonderer Kulturgüter* project did not include private clinics.