

Psychiatric patients often produce art in austere conditions, in hostels, supported housing, in a community that is often abusive and prejudiced against the mentally ill. With the closure of the old hospitals they are often left isolated in the community under the influence of medication that they neither require nor want, yet they usually endure the distressing side effects without complaint. Some are left to sleep on the streets. When hospitalised they are either separated from their work, have to keep it in the art room or guard it on the ward. Sometimes patients lose their work while they are caught in the mental health system. The imminent closure of two art centres for the mentally ill in South London at Crayford and Lee Green will put a further burden on patients, their families, carers, and mental health workers. The mentally ill have seldom been given the credit they deserve, their influence on contemporary art is rarely acknowledged, their work is still undervalued.

The 19th century, the forerunners of expressionism, Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch experienced mental trouble. Van Gogh's illness has been well documented with varying degrees of accuracy. Self-harm, self neglect, alcohol abuse, hospitalisation and eventually suicide accompanied his gift for painting. Munch's psychological problems were a result of his reaction to the appalling suffering and fatal illness his family was subjected to. Munch would become hysterical but learned to channel his hysteria into his painting scratching and scribbling at his canvases to record his frustration and grief. At the time he was thought insane to do this but besides introducing the basic expressionist style, he was using his art as therapy, to confront and deal with the grim world he saw around him. Though it is possible that Egon Schiele's work was informed by that of Jean-Martin Charcot, who illustrated medical journals of the day with pictures of female patients suffering with various mental illnesses, we do know that Schiele gained access to a hospital to draw the women there. Expressionist painter Ernst Kirchner achieved popularity and success in the early 1900's. When the First World War broke out Kirchner joined the army but became too mentally unfit to serve because of his alcohol and barbiturate abuse. He found a sympathetic doctor who referred him to a sanatorium for the duration of the war. Erich Heckel, also an Expressionist, took madness as a major theme.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century artists have been inspired by artwork of the mentally ill. Bethlem Royal was the first hospital to show the art of the mentally ill in 1901 and again in 1913 and soon after similar exhibitions took place in France at Germany. Artists understandably did not wish to suffer the torment of psychiatric illness but recognised that the vivid dreams and hallucinations that many psychiatric patients experience could provide a direct insight into the subconscious. In 1909 Max Ernst visited asylums and was fascinated by the art of the mentally ill. It was the year he started painting. He joined the DaDa artists in Zurich who were inspired by so-called primitive art; Oceanic and African art, the art of the mentally ill and the art of children.

The Surrealists took inspiration from the mentally ill. Andre Breton and Max Ernst (now a Surrealist), encouraged other Surrealists to study the work of mentally ill artists. Andre Breton, the leader of the Surrealists worked in the psychiatric wards during World War 1. Breton and other surrealists were impressed by Dr Hans Prinzhorn's book 'The Artistry of the Mentally Ill', which was brought to their attention by Max Ernst, in 1922. Prinzhorn's book is illustrated, with pictures by patients from the collection at Heidelberg psychiatric hospital, now renamed the Prinzhorn Collection. Breton acknowledged the imagination of the mentally ill as an inspiration to surrealism. In his 'First Manifesto of Surrealism', Breton said he could spend a lifetime 'prying loose the secrets of the insane'. He goes on to describe the insane, 'These people are honest to a fault and their naiveté has no peer but my own'.

In October 1926 Andre Breton befriended a female psychiatric patient. In the short time that he spent with Leona D, (her full name is not known), Breton gathered enough information to write a book. He called this book Nadja at Leona's suggestion. Despite his sympathy with the mentally ill, the reality became too demanding, Breton could not cope with Leona and work, and after a few months, Andre Breton stopped seeing Leona D. Her pleading letters failed to change his mind and Leona D broke down. Hysterical, hallucinating and unable to look after herself, on 21st March 1927 Leona was dragged screaming to the Perray-Vaucluse Hospital in Paris. By the time Breton's book was published in 1928 Leona D had been transferred to a hospital near Lille probably unaware of the book that was written about her. Much later Andre Breton would express remorse for his actions.

In 1929 Andre Breton and Max Ernst attended an exhibition of work by mentally ill artists in Paris and bought work. In 1930 art from Prinzhorn's collection was shown in an exhibition that toured nine German cities until 1933. But in that year, in Dresden, an exhibition called Degenerate Art was organised by Nazi propagandists. Though the exhibition only contained work by modern artists the exhibition was repeated in 1937, this time expanded to contain works from the Prinzhorn collection, which were ridiculed alongside the art of the expressionists. The exhibition included work by Nolde, Heckel, and Kirchner. This exhibition also toured German cities until 1941. It is common knowledge that the Nazis murdered Jews and Gypsies in the holocaust. It is a lesser known fact that the Nazis started their programme of genocide by killing psychiatric patients. Artists labelled degenerate by the Nazis were forced into exile, those who stayed were sent to concentration camps or at best, forbidden to paint. Kirchner took his own life in 1938. Emil Nolde another Expressionist, stayed in Germany, and though he suffered hallucinations and was persecuted by the Nazis, he painted watercolours in secret while caring for his mentally ill wife.

After the war Jean Dubuffet and Andre Breton decided to reinstate the art of the mentally ill as part of the Art Brut movement though this was accepted in France where the art of the mentally ill was sold at auction, it was the Abstract Expressionists and Pop Artists that captured the imagination of the art world.

The work of mentally ill artists seldom follows trends but to this day contemporary artists are inspired by the art movements of the 20th century, not least the Surrealists the DaDa artists and the Expressionists, who in turn were inspired by the art of the mentally ill. It could be argued that the art of the mentally ill helped free the canvas for the contemporary artist. Sadly the mentally ill remain stigmatised by a society that conveniently prefers to believe the myths of mental illness rather than the reality. If the public were aware of the contribution that the mentally ill have made to the art world they might start to overcome their prejudices.

David Beales