

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by David Edwards

For

***The Gallery of Miracles and Madness: Insanity,
Modernism, and Hitler's War on Art***

By

Charlie English (2021)

William Collins. ISBN: 978-0-00-829962-0

ISSN: 2044-7221

Date of Publication: 22 April 2024

Citation: Edwards, D. (2024) *Book Review: The Gallery of Miracles and Madness: Insanity, Modernism, and Hitler's War on Art*. ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine 14(1)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International License

<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All books are written, published and read in a context, be this historical, cultural, political and/or personal. This being so, I begin my review of Charlie English's important book with a personal preface.

In 2004 I published an introductory text on art therapy in which I discussed the historical background of the profession (Edwards, 2004, 2013). Amongst the topics explored in relation to this – including developments in the visual arts and the influence of psychiatry and psychoanalysis – was the 'discovery' of outsider art and the art that was created by people institutionalised for treatment of mental illness. Of particular importance in re-evaluating the significance of the art created by people within 'asylums' as they were known, was the German psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933) whose work and ideas are discussed in the opening chapters of *The Gallery of Miracles and Madness* (footnote 1). Unlike the majority of those who had preceded him, Prinzhorn's interest in the work produced by people held within asylums was aesthetic and philosophical, rather than diagnostic. Prinzhorn was particularly interested in the origins of the creative impulse and he hoped to further his understanding of this through the study of art works produced by patients within psychiatric institutions; the majority of whom had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalised for years on end.

Between 1880 and 1921, with the support of Karl Wilmanns (1873–1945), the head of the Psychiatric Department at the University Heidelberg, Prinzhorn assembled a unique collection of artworks created entirely in institutions and asylums throughout the German speaking world. Based on his research, in 1922 Prinzhorn published his lavishly illustrated book *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*) (Prinzhorn, 1995). What was ground-breaking about Prinzhorn's book was that the artworks included in it were discussed in terms of their having recognisable artistic quality, rather than for what they might reveal about the psychopathology of their creator. Through choosing to study and write about the art of people with a mental illness from an artistic, rather than a medical perspective, Prinzhorn gave this marginalized form of art, and the individuals who made it, a positive re-evaluation. The publication of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* was enthusiastically received, especially by many of the leading artists of the period, including Andre Breton, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.

Were the story to end there, this might be an uplifting one. A tale in which the work of talented but alienated artists working at the very margins of society was recognised and placed at the leading edge of developments in the visual arts. Unfortunately, as English's book recounts, often in harrowing detail, the story of many of the artists represented in the Prinzhorn Collection did not end in public acclaim. On the contrary, it ended in neglect, persecution and tragedy. As the democratic Weimar Republic crumbled, avant-garde art in Germany came under serious and sustained attack. What my brief discussion of Prinzhorn's influence on art history and art therapy failed to engage with – as, indeed, do most of the commentaries on Prinzhorn's work with which I am familiar - was the fate of these artist patients following the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party. The manner and means by which these artist patients found themselves on a collision course with the Nazi Government is the story *The Gallery of Miracles and Madness* seeks to tell.

As Charlie English acknowledges in the introduction to his book, *Exploring art in the context of National Socialism may seem counter-intuitive, even distasteful. What relevance can painting or sculpture have when measured against so many deaths? Aren't Hitler's ideas about culture a distraction from his far more pressing crimes?* (English, 2022: xviii)

In fact, as Charlie English's book forcefully argues, the very opposite is true. *Hitler's mass murder programmes and his views on art were intimately connected through a network of pseudoscientific theories about race, modernism, the concept of "degeneracy," and the people deemed to be lebensunwertes leben, (life unworthy of life)* (English, 2022: xix).

English's book begins with the tragic story of Franz Karl Buhler (1868–1940), one of the "Schizophrenic Masters" (English, 2022: 49) whose work is included in Prinzhorn's book under the pseudonym, Franz Pohl. Having been institutionalised for most of his adult life, in 1940 Buhler was murdered during the first Nazi 'euthanasia' programme (footnote 2). Through introducing the reader to Buhler at the beginning of the book, and by informing us about his life and art, this otherwise anonymised artist is

humanised; his subsequent murder made all the more shocking and real. In fact, dozens of the artists included in the Prinzhorn collection met a similar fate.

Hitler's reshaping of German society was, English argues, 'a cultural undertaking as much as a political one' (English, 2022: 104). Art was central to this. For Hitler and the Nazi's, modern art and the art of people held in psychiatric institutions / asylums were both viewed as 'degenerate'. That is to say, seen as a disturbing and corrupting influence characteristic of an inferior race. As such they were considered to be an obstacle to building a heroic, racially 'pure' society. To correct this, laws were introduced to restrict the type of art that could be produced, displayed, and sold. Work that did not conform was confiscated or destroyed. In addition, many previously influential gallery and museum directors and German artists lost their jobs. As English records,

The litany of artists targeted at this time is a roll call of the great German names from the early century. Otto Dix was sacked from the Dresden academy, and Max Beckmann from Frankfurt's. (English, 2022: 110) Also dismissed from his post during this period was Karl Wilmanns, one of the first of many academics sacked for political reasons. Wilmanns was replaced by Carl Schneider who later became a leading figure in the *Aktion T4* involuntary euthanasia programme.

This attack on 'degenerate' art and artists culminated July 1937 with the opening of two major exhibitions in Munich; the Great German Art Exhibition (*Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*), to be housed in the purpose-built House of Art (*Haus der Deutschen Kunst*) and the huge Degenerate Art exhibition (*Entartete Kunst*) held nearby. The Great German Art Exhibition included work that Hitler approved of; mostly statuesque blonde nudes together with idealized "Aryan" workers, heroes, families and landscapes. According to English,

The opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst represented a new beginning for Hitler,, From now on, the nation would be home to a "new and true German art" that had nothing to do with "so-called modern art." (English, 2022: 144)

English continues.

In particular, he [Hitler] scorned the modernists' interest in children's drawings, "primitive" art" and the work of people with an intellectual disability (English, 2022: 144)

The Degenerate Art exhibition, was designed and promoted in such a way as to mock and denigrate the art on display. The exhibition included 650 paintings, sculptures and prints by 112 primarily German artists; including, Georg Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, Otto Dix and Kurt Schwitters. The exhibition proved hugely popular and lasted until 30 November 1937 having attracted over two million visitors. A few months later another Degenerate Art Exhibition was held in Berlin. In the Munich exhibition slogans such as *Madness becomes method* and *Nature as seen by sick minds* had been employed to promote the idea that the avant-garde were responsible for German cultural degradation by polluting art with mental illness, or insanity as it was commonly referred to.

To reinforce the alleged link between biological and artistic degeneracy, the Berlin exhibition included works from the Prinzhorn collection alongside those by "degenerate" professional artists. Spectators were invited to 'judge which appeared more insane' (English, 2022:161). It is certainly regrettable that Prinzhorn himself remained silent on the relationship between modern art and mental health. 'At a minimum', English suggests 'he might have reiterated his 1922 conclusion that all configuration was a legitimate expression of the human psyche, no matter what the state of the intellect behind it' (English, 2022: 99).

By this time, the artist patients themselves were in a remarkably vulnerable and friendless position. In the autumn of 1939, Hitler signed the order for the systematic killing of patients (both child and adult) with mental and physical disabilities living in institutional settings in Germany and German-annexed territories. The intention being to cleanse the "Aryan" race of people considered genetically defective and who were viewed as a financial burden to society. By the winter of 1941, an estimated 70,000 psychiatric patients and disabled children had been murdered. Even when the state

sanctioned killing stopped, a further 130,000 plus patients died from starvation, neglect or from medically administered overdoses.

The methods employed to murder psychiatric and disabled patients would, in due course, be refined and used to murder Jewish people, Roma people and other so-called “undesirables”. However, before the Nazis starting introducing methods to ‘deal with’ people who were mentally ill or had a disability, forcible sterilisation was brought in and an estimated 400,000 patients underwent this procedure. It is important to note that none of this could have happened without the widespread promotion of ideas concerning “degeneracy” and the co-operation of those charged with the care and treatment of these vulnerable individuals (Dudley, M. and Gale, F., 2002). English documents each stage of this process in forensic, sometimes harrowing detail.

The Prinzhorn Collection itself was more fortunate than many of the artist patients represented in it (footnote 3). Neglected as the collection was, as Charlie English notes,

The surprise of the postwar years was that it survived at all. Carl Schneider, who had destroyed psychiatric art as mercilessly as he had destroyed patients, had not damaged the famous collection in his care, probably because it might have been required for another propaganda show of “degenerate material” (English, 2022: 219).

Due very largely to the influence of the French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) the collection and Prinzhorn’s book gradually re-asserted their influence in the post-war period (footnote 4).

It would be comforting to believe that attitudes to the most vulnerable members of our community, the outsiders, the ‘other’ (however defined), have changed significantly over time. That the events described in *The Gallery of Miracles and Madness* can never be repeated. Sadly, as a deliberate political strategy, turbo-charged by social media, the use of emotive or inflammatory language in relation to ‘minority’ groups remains an ever-present feature of the contemporary political and cultural landscape. As the Guardian columnist Frances Ryan recently observed, ‘In this climate, sick and disabled people are not so much human beings with needs and feelings as burdens

on the state' (Ryan, 2023). Charlie English provides powerful testimony on behalf of the millions of German and European citizens and artists who were deemed to be *Lebensunwertes Leben* (life unworthy of life) and mistreated, neglected or murdered. His book offers us a lesson from history we cannot afford to ignore. Borrow it. Buy it. But more importantly please read this rigorously researched, skilfully written, bleakly disturbing but vital book.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.metmuseum.org/research-centers/leonard-a-lauder-research-center/research-resources/modern-art-index-project/prinzhorn> and <https://www.sammlung-prinzhorn.de/en/museum/hans-prinzhorn> [Accessed 19/10/23]

2. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/euthanasia-program> [Accessed 19/10/23]

3. Based at the University Psychiatric Hospital in Heidelberg, Germany, in its present form the Prinzhorn collection consists of over five thousand pieces of art, mainly drawings, paintings, collages, textiles, sculptures and writing - <https://www.sammlung-prinzhorn.de/en/museum/geschichte> [Accessed 19/10/23]

4. <https://sites.barbican.org.uk/artbrut/> [Accessed 19/10/23]

References

Dudley, M. and Gale, F. (2002) Psychiatrists as a moral community? Psychiatry under the Nazis and its contemporary relevance. *The Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Oct;36(5):585-94

Edwards, D. (2004) *Art Therapy*, London: Sage;

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine 14(1)

Edwards, D. (2013) *Art Therapy*, Second Edition, London: Sage

English, C. (2022) *The Gallery of Miracles and Madness: Insanity, Modernism, and Hitler's War on Art*, London: William Collins

Prinzhorn, H. (1995) *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, (Translated by Eric von Brockdorff), New York: Springer-Verlag.

Ryan, F. (2023) *A decade after the Tories demonised disabled people on benefits, it's happening again*, The Guardian, May 30. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/30/tories-disabled-people-benefits> [Accessed 19/10/23]

About the Reviewer

David Edwards trained as an art therapist at Goldsmiths College, University of London, graduating in 1982. He subsequently worked in a range of clinical and academic settings; mainly with adults. His book, '*Art Therapy*' was first published by Sage in 2004. A second edition was published in 2013. David retired fully from clinical work at the end of 2020 and now divides his time between Sheffield and North Tyneside.

© David Edwards, 2023