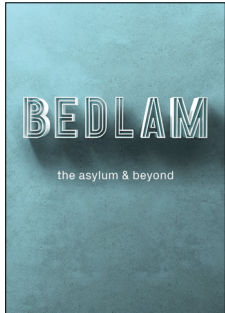


Exhibition Art amid the Bedlam



Bedlam: the Asylum and Beyond
Wellcome Collection, London, UK,
until Jan 15, 2017
<https://wellcomecollection.org/bedlam>

Everyone is into mental health at the moment. Prime Ministers give speeches on it. There are awards ceremonies devoted to it. Students increasingly talk about it, and sadly also seem to increasingly suffer from it as well. And the Wellcome Collection, one of London's most exciting gallery spaces, seems a little obsessed with it. Previous exhibitions have been about the brain, madness and modernity, sleeping and dreaming, and historian Mike Jay's *High Society*, the story of mind altering drugs.

Jay, paired with Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, is now back at the Wellcome, with *Bedlam: the Asylum and Beyond*. It tells the story of one institution, the Bethlem Royal Hospital, founded in 1247 and still going strong. When I first saw the exhibition, it was that narrative, together with the documents, artifacts, and drawings that illustrated some of the other roads that psychiatry has and continues to travel, that held my attention. But I returned for a second visit, to look more closely at its other theme—art and mental illness. Much is written about the links between mental disorders and creativity. Are artists more susceptible to mental disorders? Does the experience of mental illness help or hinder creativity?

Historically, the idea that such links might exist is fairly new. So it is almost 500 years from the founding of *Bethlem* until the first artist appears in the *Bedlam* narrative, and it is inevitably William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*—showing Tom Rakewell in *Bedlam*. But Hogarth was no muse in torment, more a social satirist and a canny businessman. The series was completed in 1733 but he delayed publication until 1735 when the new Engraver's Copyright Act became law, permitting him to charge two guineas per set, a substantial sum. As we shall

see, there have always been ways of making money out of madness.

It is not until the 19th century that artists, art, and mental illness become intertwined. Some artists started to see mental illness as a conduit for freeing their creativity, just as others would turn to drugs. Karl Jaspers, one of the most important psychiatric thinkers and philosophers of the last century, distinguished between such artists, for example the Expressionists and the Swedish playwright August Strindberg "desiring and deliberately cultivating the appearance of mental illness in their work" to make the difference between what he considered an ersatz madness and those artists who really did have serious mental illness and wished they didn't—Vincent Van Gogh being his exemplar.

"Are artists more susceptible to mental disorders? Does the experience of mental illness help or hinder creativity?"

Artists were also turning to mental illness as a subject for their gaze. Théodore Géricault's haunting portraits of the insane were unavailable to loan, but *Bedlam* does show Eugene Grasset's *Morphinomane*, a lithograph of a Parisian prostitute injecting herself with morphine. This is not only a troubling portrait, but also a comment on the threat to society and sanity posed by "la vie moderne". Charles Baudelaire, who coined the term, was no stranger to morphine, and would die like many other artists of addiction plus general paresis.

By the mid-19th century, many other artists were reacting against the conservatory and "official art", classically inspired in style and subject. Many became fascinated with unofficial art, free from the strictures and rules of academe, the demands of form, tradition, and taste. Pablo Picasso

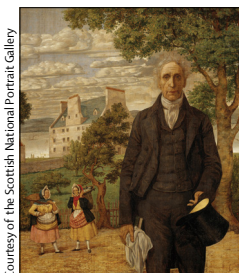
collected African art, Paul Gauguin moved to Tahiti in search of so-called "primitive cultures", and Paul Klee was inspired by children's drawings. And then there was the art of people with mental illness. So *Bedlam* gives us a glimpse of the work of Adolf Wölfli, and it can only be a glimpse since he produced about 25 000 pieces of art, some of which are now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Bern. Both Jean Dubuffet of "Art Brut" and surrealist André Breton acknowledged his influence. *Bedlam* traces many more examples of what we now call "outsider art" from both living and dead artists.

It was Heidelberg psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn who, starting in 1919, put together the world's largest collection of art by people with mental health problems. Parts of his collection were exhibited in the UK at the Hayward Gallery in 1997. What I remember was less the quality of the art, which was variable at best—art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon being not the only one to question Prinzhorn's belief that people with mental disorders were more fully "in touch with the deep primal wellsprings of creativity than the rest of us"—but that so many of the biographies of the artists concluded with the words "murdered during the T4 programme", part of the Nazis' campaign that killed about 200 000 people with mental illness or learning disabilities between 1938 and 1945.

So those who saw the art produced by people with mental disorders as exhibiting real authenticity and depth of feeling, were less interested in the output of formally trained artists such as Richard Dadd, a member of the Royal Academy who spent more than 40 years in the *Bethlem* after he murdered his father in 1843. *Bedlam* shows his splendid portrait of a melancholic Alexander Morison, Superintendent of the *Bethlem*, pictured outside his Scottish country



Adolf Wölfli, *Mental Asylum Band-Copse* (1910)



Detail from Richard Dadd, *Sir Alexander Morison, 1779-1866, Alienist*

house (Dadd could paint Morison from life but had to imagine the Scottish countryside). Morison had encouraged Dadd to paint, which leads us on to another theme of asylum art—art as therapy.

The Victorian asylums were created in hope—hope that moral therapy, the forefather or modern social psychiatry, would restore reason to the unreasoned, especially in the calm, clean, healthy surroundings that the asylums were intended to create. Art in various forms could be part of this therapy. *Bedlam* shows us the impeccably bourgeois surroundings of the Music Room at Ticehurst in 1900, and the poetry produced for *Under the Dome*, the house magazine of the Bethlem itself. Carl Jung had spoken about the healing power of art in 1910, but it was not until the interwar years that art therapy flourished.

Art studios started to appear in tuberculosis hospitals, and even military hospitals. One of its greatest exponents was Edward Adamson, who arrived at Netherne psychiatric hospital in 1946, where he created a vibrant art studio, well illustrated in *Bedlam*. The collection, stored for many years at Lambeth Hospital, has been preserved with assistance from the Wellcome, and can be seen in the new *Reclaiming Asylum* exhibition running at the Bethlem Gallery—situated in the fourth incarnation of the old Bethlem Priory. We have travelled a long way from Tom Rakewell being gawped at by 18th-century society ladies.

The asylums did not live up to their promise. Moral therapy did little for general paresis—that would have to wait for penicillin. Now when we think of asylums, it is hard not to recall their dominant visual image: the corridor. Friern Barnet, once Colney Hatch Asylum and now converted into luxury flats, possessed the longest corridor in Europe. Paul Digby is one of many contemporary artists who have responded to the asylum. *A Corridor* (2003–04) depicts High Royds Hospital, and captures the



Paul Digby, *High Royds Hospital, Menston, Ilkley, Yorkshire: A Corridor* (2003–04)

Courtesy of Wellcome Library, London

disillusion that replaced the initial optimism. Unfortunately just as opening the asylums did not end the scourge of severe mental illness, closing them didn't either. The radical alternatives proposed by the anti-psychiatry gurus of the 1960s were also a failure. Modern community care is more humane, but severe mental illness remains as common as ever.

So where are we now? The curators give us one perspective, although deciphering it at times resembles Victoria Coren Mitchell's fiendish television quiz show *Only Connect*, as one is constantly challenged to link puzzling juxtapositions. Erica Scourti's *Empathy Deck*, commissioned for the exhibition, is a live Twitter bot that uses mental self-help books and the artist's own diaries to create personalised Tarot cards. But why place it next to Richard Napier's 16th-century case books, mixing medicine, astrology, herbs, purges, prayers, and dietary advice, and alongside posters satirising "Listening to Prozac" and montages of blister packs of the green and yellow tablets themselves? By placing all these together with Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, with its lists of

the hundreds of different "psychiatric" remedies available in the 17th century (one of them being tobacco), we are reminded that consumerism has never gone away. Add to that the shelf of self-help books outside the exhibition in the Wellcome Collection bookshop, and the endless festivals given over to spirituality, mindfulness, and alternative medicine, the choices facing the modern patient are as baffling as those faced by Napier and Burton.

Bedlam gives us one final perspective on art and mental illness—that of the polemic. John Gilmour's works were protests at what he considered to be the system that had unfairly confined him to the Gartnavel asylum in Glasgow. The exhibition doesn't tell us whether his protests had any impact—one suspects not. Power in the asylum system tended to go in one direction. As an earlier inhabitant of Bethlem, the dramatist Nathaniel Lee, said in 1684, "They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me". This exceptional exhibition reminds us that many think they still do.

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For the *Reclaiming Asylum* exhibition see <http://bethlemgallery.com/event/reclaiming-asylum/>

Further reading
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Scull A. *Madness in civilization: a cultural history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015