

CURRENT OPINION

July, 1921: p. 82

MODERN ART AS A FORM OF DEMENTIA PRAECOX



UNUSUAL interest was shown by the German public in that exhibition of the art of the insane which took place recently at Frankfort under the auspices of the psychiatric department of Heidelberg University. The affair has revived among European psychologists a discussion of the esthetic gifts of maniacs which began several years ago without leading to any definite conclusion. Now we find Doctor Hans Prinzhorn, whose lecture is reported in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, affirming that the masterpieces on view owed their merit to the circumstance that the creators of most of them were victims of dementia praecox.

This term is of somewhat general application and denotes to some experts a mild epileptic propensity, to others a disassociation of the personality in an elementary form. It is psychic. It may be defined as an incipient insanity. Its victims are in a more or less advanced form of lunacy, not necessarily dangerous or permanent when they are mature. In the young it may signify little or nothing more than the result of a mental strain. The men whose works in painting and sculpture were placed on exhibition did not in any case happen to be artists before they fell under the spell of their psychic malady. A few of them were confirmed cases, dangerous to themselves and to others. Some were obsessed by "mild" afflictions. All were, as the phrase goes, out of their minds. Victims of dementia praecox are often gifted.

The specimens of their work shown to the German public revealed an uncanny, sometimes an incredible, likeness to those of the artists of the so-called "expressionist" school of our own day. Others were indistinguishable from the work of mere children. An important class of these exhibits might have been dug up from the ruins of ancient and extinct civilizations. Those who are familiar with the reproductions of extinct art in archeological works on old Yucatan, ancient Mexico, Egypt and Babylon will be able to conjure up in the mind's eye a very good idea of what this section of the exhibits looked like. While not a few specimens in the large collection had little artistic impor-

The Art of the Mad

tance, there were a few here and there which revealed undeniable genius. Professor Prinzhorn exhibited during his lectures several paintings by victims of dementia praecox which could without challenge have taken a conspicuous place in contemporary collections of the "new" art. In fact, collectors have already been drawn to these works and a few of them have fetched smart prices.

It would be erroneous to infer from such facts, according to Professor Prinzhorn, that because some victims of dementia praecox paint like artists of the new schools, therefore these latter are also victims of that or some other form of lunacy. In all ages the insane have produced well or badly the symbolic forms of art which find their way into exhibitions. Tho the art of the insane has not always resembled the art of the period in which they chanced to live, in our own day this resemblance is striking. The lunatic in art spins his conception from within himself. He makes pictures which are the emanations of his own disordered fancy. The sane artists gets his impressions from the external world. He tries to disclose hidden qualities in that outer world so apparent to his vision as an external reality. He would impart an impression of beauty or bring forth an idea of it not obvious to the inartistic eye. The same artist would also be inspired and spontaneous while disclosing the unseen realities of the world around us.

Why should the work of the madman in art be at the present time so like that of the sane, the masterpieces of the maniac at times indistinguishable from those of the normal? The only answer can be that the hidden aspects of the world in which we now live are as distorted and as weird as they seem to the lunatic to be. The lunatic in art is reflecting in his work what he sees. The sane artist does nothing else. Both visions have this weird resemblance. The world, a great poet has said, is a mad world and just now the evidence agrees that it is madder for the time being than it ever was in all its long and tragical history. The new art is but a reflection of the subconsciousness of the age, a subconsciousness in which forms of grief, impressions of anguish, memories of disillusion, struggle for expression and find their safest exposition in masterpieces indistinguishable from those of maniacs. A few of these manifest that haunting touch of beauty which genius can always impart to its slightest effort, but of the great majority it can be said that the psychologist of sensibility will see that they are kept under lock and key when a generation of truer taste realizes their importance as objects of scientific contemplation merely.