Dubuffet’s list

Jean Dubuffet’s commentary on masterpieces of the Prinzhorn Collection

6 December 2016 – 12 March 2017

Press release

Five years after he had coined the term "Art Brut" for a raw, unpolished, not academic form of art, the French painter Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) visited the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg on 11 and 12 September 1950. In a list, he reported on and evaluated the works he saw – usually in a few words like “extremely interesting”, “pretty good” or “mediocre”. The exhibition reconstructs Dubuffet's view of the collection as comprehensively as possible.

Prinzhorn's book Artistry of the Mentally Ill (1922, German: Bildnerei der Geisteskranken) was an important guide to the possibilities in the works of art – for Dubuffet, as well as for many other artists. With his assessment of the collection, Dubuffet tried to distance himself from his great idol, but his impression was not nearly as negative as art historians have suggested it for a long time. That his view of Prinzhorn "masters" was sometimes critical, but his assessment of the collection as a whole was very positive, is a surprising finding of the exhibition. On display are 100 works, including Prinzhorn’s masterpieces, famous classics like Bühler’s Fantasy Animal (for Dubuffet only "mediocre") and Natterer’s World Axis with Hare ("no big deal"). But, also works of artist disregarded by Prinzhorn have now been brought to view for the first time because of Dubuffet's review, e.g. an anonymous artist (case 419), who developed a fascinating figurative cosmos on tobacco paper (“extremely interesting”).

In cooperation with the Prinzhorn Collection, curator: Ingrid von Beyme.


About the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg

The Prinzhorn Collection museum is dedicated to art created by men and women with mental disorders. The unique body of the original collection known worldwide is made up of approximately 6,000 works, all created by inmates of psychiatric institutions between 1840 and 1940. It ranges from water-colours, drawings, paintings and sculptures to textile works and texts. The major part of it was collected while art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933) worked as assistant physician at the Psychiatric Hospital of Heidelberg University. Among the most famous artists and authors whose works are held include count Else Blankenhorn, Franz Karl Bühler, Karl Genzel, Paul Goesch, Emma Hauck, August Klett, August Natterer, Agnes Richter, Joseph Schneller, Barbara Suckfüll and Adolf Wölffli.
Between 1919 and 1921, circulars were sent to psychiatric institutions in German speaking countries by Hans Prinzhorn and Karl Willmanns, then Head of the Psychiatric University Hospital. The artistic works of patients they asked for were destined for the creation of a museum of psychopathological art.

In 1922, Prinzhorn published his richly illustrated publication “Artistry of the Mentally Ill” based on the collection. Received enthusiastically by the art scene of his time, it immediately became “the Bible of the Surrealists”. The book was edited many times and translated into various languages. To this day, it remains a classic.

In 1938, Carl Schneider, Head of the Psychiatric University Hospital, ordered that works of the collection be sent to the Nazi touring exhibition “Entartete Kunst” (“Degenerate Art”). The works by the mentally ill were exploited as references to imply the pathological nature of Modern art.

Fallen into oblivion after World War II, the Prinzhorn Collection was rediscovered by Harald Szeemann in 1963 and a selection was exhibited in Kunsthalle Bern. Since then, national and international exhibitions continue to highlight the collection.

Since 1980, the collection has been grown considerably. About 16,000 works account for its modern stock. In 2001, in a former lecture hall of the Neurological Department within the Centre for Psychosocial Medicine, the museum for the Prinzhorn Collection was inaugurated.

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Else Blankenhorn, ‹Fall 160› (1873–1920)
Geldschein/ «- 300 000 - / MILLION / NEN x / MIL= / LIAR/
DEN.», undatiert
Feder, Pinsel in Deckfarben auf Papier
Inv. Nr. 4313b

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Franz Karl Bühler (Pseudonym Pohl), ‹Fall 244› (1864–1940)
Ohne Titel, um 1909 – 1916
Fettkreide, gewischte und lavierte Kreide auf Zeichenpapier
Inv. Nr. 2941

© Sammlung Prinzhorn, Universitätssklinikum Heidelberg
Johann Karl Genzel (Brendel), ‹Fall 17› (1871–1925)
Militarismus, um 1914/15
Holz, braun lasiert
Inv. Nr. 132

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August Klett (Pseudonym Klotz), ‹Fall 36” (1866–1928)
«<La caprice> ad Republik» (Blatt VIII.), 4. Nov 1923
Bleistift, Kopierstift, Wasserfarben mit Deckweiß, Kreide auf Zeichenpapier
Inv. Nr. 575

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Johann Knopf (Pseudonym Knüpfer), ‹Fall 90› (1866–1910)
«Bitte Nº 2345 die geheimnisvolle Affären der Mordanschlägen», undatiert
Bleistift, Feder auf Papier
Inv. Nr. 1494/4 recto

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Jakob Mohr, ‹Fall 41› (1884 – letztmals erwähnt 1935)
Ohne Titel, undatiert
Feder, Farbstifte auf Karton
Inv. Nr. 627c verso

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August Natterer (Pseudonym Neter),
‹Fall 18› (1868–1933)
«Weltachse mit Hase» [II], um 1911, 1917
Bleistift, Wasserfarben auf Aquarellkarton, auf Holzpappe aufgezogen
Inv. Nr. 174

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Oskar Voll, ‹Fall 33› (1876 – letztmals erwähnt 1935)
Ohne Titel, undatiert
Bleistift auf Papier
Inv. Nr. 280 verso

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