

Surrealism und Wahsinn [Surrealism and Madness]. Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg, 26 November 2009 - 14 February 2010

Gegen jede Vernunft: Surrealismus Paris-Prag [Against All Reason: Surrealism Paris-Prague]. Wilhelm-Hack-Museum and the Kunstverein, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, November 2009 - 14 February 2010

In 1922 Dr Hans Prinzhorn of the Heidelberg University psychiatric clinic published a groundbreaking book, *Bildnerie des Geisteskranken: ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung* (translated in 1972 as *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*), in which he discussed and reproduced selected artistic creations of patients from his and other clinics. The same year, Max Ernst brought the book with him to Paris, creating a stir among the surrealists. Although few members of the original Parisian group could read German, the 187 reproductions in *Bildnerie* were a testament to art created outside of regular (bourgeois) institutions and conventions, and the book's illustrations in particular are considered to have influenced many surrealists. The exhibition *Surrealism and Madness* at the Prinzhorn Collection, at the historical premises of the Heidelberg mental ward, focused on that influence. Further attention was paid to an important (re)discovery of an inventory list in the clinic's archives.

In 1929 works from the Prinzhorn Collection were shown in Paris at the commercial *Exposition des artistes malades*. Buyers included Paul Éluard and André Breton, who stressed the importance of asylum art and states of mental illness as sources of inspiration for surrealist aesthetics. The original catalogue mentioned only five exhibits from the Prinzhorn Collection, but as the discovered inventory list shows, a total of 36 Prinzhorn items were on display. The curators of *Surrealism and Madness* took the opportunity to bring those 36 items, as far as possible, into the limelight once more. Some listed works proved to be untraceable due to the anonymity of the artists; but nine different patients (or 'cases,' as they were called) and their works could be traced. These included August Klett, August Natterer, Else Blankenhorn and Adolf Wölfli.

The exhibition showed that the works lent to the *Exposition des artistes malades* were deliberately selected on the basis of size and style. All are relatively small (perhaps also to facilitate travelling) and – apart from two objects later characterized as 'reliquaries' – all items are on paper or cardboard.¹ The majority of works, originally classified as 'schizophrenic compositions,' are colourful, figurative and evocative or even entertaining in character. In other words, despite being created by so-called *aliénés*, they were still recognized and enjoyed as art works. Similar selection criteria might have been applied to the art represented



in *Bildneri*, and as such the presentation of the 1929 works in *Surrealism and Madness* merged well with the exhibition's other focus, the possible influence of Prinzhorn's asylum art upon surrealism. Although the interest of the latter in the former is known and exemplified by the continuing popularity *Bildneri* and similar books enjoyed within the surrealist group, direct lines of influence have been difficult to trace. The curators chose to present this possible influence thematically, in small groups of eight or nine works by patients and surrealists combined. One theme was automatism (in writing and drawing), a method introduced by psychiatrists in the nineteenth century and nominated by Breton as a central tenet of surrealism in the *First Manifesto*. Thus, automatic drawings by Masson were combined with automatic drawings by a number of patients. Another theme, body amalgamations, was explored through the drawings of Hans Bellmer, in combination with August Klett's *Fantastic Drawings Based on Clouds*, constructed of an amalgam of stacked up heads and body-parts. Bellmer's motif of the *céphalopode* (or head with feet), probably finds its origin in the *Kopffüßer* ('head-footer') described and depicted in *Bildneri*. One of the most convincing arguments of visual kinship between asylum and surrealist art is displayed in the exhibition poster: *Wunder-Hirthe II* by August Natterer (Fig. 1), which has obviously inspired Max Ernst's *Œdipe* of 1937.



Fig. 1: August Natterer (Neter), *Wunderhirthe II*, 1911-1915, pencil and water-colour on cardboard, 24.5 x 19.5 cm. Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg.



Surrealism and Madness was a small-scale yet interesting exhibition, created with much insight and fascinating material. Through careful presentation, it did right by the exhibited material and invited careful study, demonstrating the undeniable influence of Prinzhorn's asylum art on surrealism.

Surrealism and Madness served as a companion exhibition to *Against all Reason: Surrealism Paris - Prague*, a double exhibition on a much larger scale (over 350 entries) in nearby Ludwisghafen. The Kunstverein showed surrealist photography, while the Wilhelm-Hack Museum displayed a wide diversity of other surrealist media; and both locations showed French and Czech works side by side. Foregrounded was the fact that both French and Czech surrealism explored an extremely diverse range of media, including painting, drawing, sculpture, film, photography, mixed media, and even exhibition practices. Thus the show featured a reconstruction of part of the (in)famous 1938 *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*. The actual point of the combined exhibition, however, was to show the importance of Czech surrealism and its (independent) development vis-à-vis the French group.²

The curators thought to show the Paris - Prague dynamics by presenting the surrealist production from the two cities in dialogue, grouped together thematically (in the Kunstverein) and chronologically (in the Wilhelm-Hack Museum), but not divided by nationality. This brought similarities to the fore, to the detriment of certain important differences which highlight the independent development of Czech surrealism. The chronological presentation covering the period between the early 1920s and World War II obscured the more than ten-year gap dividing the development of Paris and Prague surrealism (respectively in the early 1920s and after 1934), presenting the two movements as if they had progressed synchronically. The same can be said for the international success of the respective movements: while the grand heroes of French surrealism are usually located in the pre-War period, the well-known Czech surrealist Jan Švenkmaier – whose films were shown in the exhibition – joined the movement only after the War and is still active. The movements did not develop synchronically, a difference only deepened by the War, which drove many French surrealists to the U.S. while the majority of the Czech surrealist group went underground or joined the resistance. French surrealism became international; Czech surrealism flourished more or less secretly and under repressive regimes, and has only relatively recently come under public scrutiny. Furthermore other differences – in politics, group dynamics, or literary milieu – were glossed over in the *Paris - Prague* exhibition.

Of course, the many close parallels that were shown are also important. As historically documented, there was a considerable exchange of ideas, persons and art between Paris and Prague, which may well have contributed to the remarkable coherence between the



showcased French and Czech surrealist art. The transnational character of surrealism was best illustrated in the photography exhibition at the Kunstverein, where French-Czech differences – either in technique or subject – were hardly noticeable. Thus, perhaps in contrast to the intent to emphasize Prague's independence, *Against all Reason* emphasized similarities. This strategy conveyed rather well the fact that many existing differences were overcome by responses to surrealism that transcended national divisions.

However, Czech surrealism deserves a larger audience: the works are fascinating and of high quality and diversity. Much Czech surrealist art has been shut away, first behind an iron curtain and now in private collections, and the Wilhelm-Hack Museum and Kunstverein did an excellent job of making it available to a wider audience.

Tessel M. Bauduin
University of Amsterdam

¹ These two *objets d'aliénés* ('objects by alienated people') – little boxes in which an assortment of found objects such as buttons, string, nails, etc., are meticulously arranged – were purchased by Breton. Ingrid von Beyme, 'Asylum Art as the "True Avant-Garde?" The Surrealist Reception of "Mad Art,"' in *Surrealismus und Wahnsinn/Surrealism and Madness*, eds. von Beyme and Thomas Röske, exh. cat., Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg, 2009, 154-168 (bi-lingual catalogue).

² Reinhard Spieler, 'Gegen jede Vernunft: Surrealismus Paris – Prag; eine Einführung,' in *Gegen jede Vernunft: Surrealismus Paris – Prag*, eds. Spieler and Barbara Auer, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum and Kunstverein, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 2009, 12-15. Inexplicably, the showcased French surrealists included the Belgian artist René Magritte.

