

## Resistance to Degeneration Discourse in Hans Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how the 1922 publication of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* by Hans Prinzhorn, a German psychiatrist, attempts to resist the prevalent degeneration discourse that transformed the concepts of mental illness from a source of inspiration into a symptom of degeneration. *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* contains the works of ten “schizophrenic masters” from the inmates of psychiatric institutions from the German speaking countries. This phobic association between genius and mental illness led to the stigmatization of every avant-garde artist (such as Max Leibermann, Kandinsky among others) as morally degenerative or insane. This 1922 intervention of the book in the cultural arena with its catalogue and analysis of the configurations of the images made the argument that mental illness does not add new components to the artist. Prinzhorn argues that pictorial creative power is present in every person and there is no essential connection between degeneration and creative impulse as propagated by Cesare Lombroso, Max Nordau and Emil Kraepelin. My article will primarily focus on the cultural context of this conflict between politicization of aesthetics and the critical responses emanating from the body of this text.

**Keywords:** Insane, Degeneration, Genius, Configurations, Aesthetics, Avant-garde



Spontaneous visual products of the psychotic patients caught the attention of the artists, psychotherapists as well as the general public of the whole Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Art of the inmates of the asylum engendered attraction as well as repulsion, secured positive approval as well as damaging derision. Artist-psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn from Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic in Germany published *Bildneri der Geisteskranken (Artistry of the Mentally Ill)* in 1922 that established the artistic legitimacy of the psychotic products by countering the ideological defamation that was attempting to invisibilize and ostracize the insane artists as well their arts. Insane artists were condemned as degenerate deviants as their art embodied the chaotic emotional intensity and dizzying irrationality. Prinzhorn's book attempted to dispel the degeneration discourse. Unfortunately, this issue has not drawn considerable critical attention. My paper aims to explore the critical intersection of art and pathology in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries in European culture. To be more specific, my paper would like to focus on the turbulent period of German culture from 1880s to 1940s in order to address the permeation of degeneration concept and its resistance by Hans Prinzhorn.

Looking at the development of degeneration concept I find the inherent existence of the controversy between the mad and the genius. The concept of genius before the advent of Romanticism was associated with the human intellect. It was the Romantics whose deliberate cultivation of outcast persona as an embodiment of intense emotionality and irrationality, alienated from rationally driven mechanistic society, transformed the concept and loaded it with a sense of deviance from the established order of society. But this is not to show the Romantic Movement in a negative light because social concept of deviance should be "conceived not so much as rule breaking conduct, but as consequence of rule-making and the selective application of such rules" (Becker 16-17). The development of mind sciences towards the end of the nineteenth century facilitated an array of theorems that solidified the connection of genius with mental aberration and pathological condition. So, the redefinition of the concept of genius to "a symptom of degeneration from a model of inspiration" (Foster 3) came to operate at the critical convergence of art, science and culture. The notion of degeneracy implies "a morbid deviation from an original type" (Nordau 16). It is the steady decline or retrogression from generation to generation to a psychosomatic stage where disorder, deviance and disruption develop in the manner of entropy. B. A. Morel and Cesare Lombroso are some of the early psychopathologists who provided the basic precepts that underlie degeneration theory. However, Max Nordau in his book *Degeneration* diversified the application of the concept as he diagnosed the maladies of modern culture and cultural artefacts. This transfer of the concept of degeneracy from the arena of pathology to the fabrics of society is best amplified in the apotheosis of Lombroso by Nordau, his disciple:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part, the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with the pen and pencil. (v)

Certainly, this conception forcefully brackets the lunatics and modern artists in the same pathological category on the basis of some manifested similarities between their artistic



productions; both arts exemplified visionary, spontaneous and transgressive qualities that posed radical threat to the conventional aesthetic representation. But this parallelism does not constitute the sufficient determinant to downgrade every artist as mad and hence to be ostracized, vilified and condemned. Inevitably, such a stance could be expected to provoke resistance and I think, Hans Prinzhorn's 1922 production *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* convincingly rejected such a pseudoscientific demand based on degeneration concept.

In this section I intend to focus on the development of degeneration concept and its pervasive presence across German cultural scene during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. The second half of the nineteenth century in Germany was marked by "political unity, economic power, military success, imperial acquisitions (Chamberlin, Gilman 11), and transition from feudal agrarian to capitalistic mode of existence. But this sense of optimism and ideal of progress is soon undermined by a sense of deep despair and profound pessimism as the Germans confronted a crisis-ridden turbulent reality during Wilhelmine Empire (1890-1918) and Weimar Republic (1918-1933). The death, defeat and psychological depression during and after World War I deepened the sense of crisis to an unprecedented level. In addition, there were other social problems – increase of criminal activities, rise of prostitution, alcohol consumption, and presence of a large number of insane, feeble-minded and revolutionary people that led to the complete reorientation of society based on racial eugenics, social hygiene and productivity that replicated the positivistic logic of degeneration. The unified vision of national body dominated the political discourse during the Weimar period. Prostitutes, homosexuals, revolutionaries and insane persons were seen through degenerate lens. State sponsored regenerative and correctional measures were implemented in order to protect the hygiene of the individual and social body. Euthanasia, forced sterilisation, incarceration were some of the therapeutic measures adopted to curtail the excesses of degenerate men and women. Medical professionals, psychiatrists, biologists and self-styled sociologists played a significant part in theorising regenerative antidote to counter the predominant sense of decay and decline. Some of the eugenicists like Alfred Ploetz, Wilhelm Schallmayer virulently attacked the degenerate individuals and criminalized them to protect the purity of Germanic race. Emil Kraepelin shared the arguments of Cesare Lombroso and he prescribed retributive punishment with rehabilitative treatment to rectify and reintegrate the feeble-minded and unproductive individuals into healthy social body. He held the belief that organic or hereditary etiological factors are responsible for the generation of degenerate body and mind. Karl Binding's and Alfred Hoche's 1920 *Permission for the Destruction of life Unworthy of Life* gave voice to the exterminationist argument through forced sterilization and euthanasia projects that echoed Nazi eugenics law. Transcending political ideology, the Right and the Left, both embraced the eugenics ideas. In this connection it would be pertinent to quote the words of social-democrat doctor G. F. Nicolai who argued that "those physically or psychologically disabled by war were little different from the hereditary unfit" (Heynen 331). What is important at this point to remember is the instrumentality of Max Nordau in propagating the centrality of aesthetic judgement in the diagnosis of degeneration that prompted the defamation of the avant-garde experimental artists and their art objects. So, the pervasive ideologies of hygiene, production and progress are intrinsically connected with the dread of degeneration which was completely entangled with politics, society, medicine, anthropology, art and aesthetics.



Prinzhorn's unique position as one who was conversant with philosophy and history of art and trained in psychopathology and medicine, convinced Karl Wilmanns, the director of Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic from 1918 to 1933, to depute him as the fittest individual in charge of the ongoing project of collecting and studying the drawings, paintings, and sculptures of the asylum-inmates from different German speaking countries like Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and so on and so forth. Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* housed 187 artefacts of ten "Schizophrenic Masters" (96), though he collected almost 5000 artefacts made by 450 insane artists who lacked artistic indoctrination. Prinzhorn dismissed the diagnostic approach and attempted to analyse the spontaneous compositions and forms from the perspective of a value-free, non-judgemental phenomenologist with the primary attention centred on "expressive impulse itself" (xiii). The tendencies that he found include "an urge to play, an ornamental urge, a tendency to order and copy, and the need to elaborate meaningful symbols" (xiii). Prinzhorn revealed through his discussion of the configurations that there existed a close relationship among artistic products of the insane, the children, the primitives and the contemporary Expressionistic painters. But he forbade us to formulate any overarching theory regarding the affinity of the mad and the insane. The propagation of Lombroso to attribute the atavistic tendency of modern experimental artists to moral degeneracy is rejected on the ground that the method of judging inner pathological condition by reflecting on the surface materials is erroneous as Prinzhorn opposed the diagnostic method of examining any individual and labelling him sick on the basis of some previously fixed standards. Prinzhorn professed to seek meaning within the configuration of the created object itself. This return to the thing-in-itself would then liberate us from the cultural baggage that we usually carry during an evaluation of art. The tangential relationship of this evaluative process dictated by conventional methods of measurement to this unreflective, untrained art is best expressed by Prinzhorn as he says:

Any other value scale must draw on divergent and culturally supplementary perspectives, which have made the word "art" completely colourless and hardly usable for basic discussions because of its affected and overemphasized connotations. (11)

Here, it should be possible to point out that the artistic aspect of his personality comes to the foreground suppressing the diagnostic impulse. "Such an attitude effectively removed psychotic art from the conceptual realm of psychiatry" (MacGregor 197).

An examination of the Weimar culture can contribute to my basic argument that Prinzhorn in his book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* challenged the degeneration concept obsessed with mad genius equation. The historical context for Hans Prinzhorn's study of the art of the mentally ill spans a series of radical changes in political, social, and intellectual history of Germany. Rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, and technologization before the First World War generated fragmentation that resulted in a kind of anti-modernist attitude. Rampant death and destruction during the war, national humiliation, economic depression, class fragmentation and political polarisation deepened the crisis to its greater depth. Mechanistic principle of natural sciences that equated life and mind with machine and controlled and guided the same natural law during the 1850s and 1860s, had been regarded as the root cause of this anti-modernist and anti-scientific attitude. Anne Harrington reproduces Max Weber in order to encapsulate the crisis-ridden spirit of the machine society:



the effect of science was actually to undermine all transcendent, principles, systematically stripping the world of all spiritual mystery, emotional colour, and ethical significance and turning it into a mere “causal mechanism”. (xvi)

This Godless, soulless and emotionless state that gripped the pulse of the German Culture necessitated an alternative formulation that would transcend this overwhelming sense of fragmentation and alienation. A group of German speaking biologists, neurologists, and psychologists, at the beginning of the twentieth century, argued that “a continuing commitment to responsible science was compatible with an ethically and existentially meaningful picture of human existence” (Harrington xvi). The concept of ‘Holism’ was conceived to view phenomena less mechanistically and more holistically, less mechanistically and more intuitively. It becomes apparent that modern art and literature consciously incorporated in their bodies the elements of chaotic irrationality, intense emotionality, intuitive perceptive moments that provoked the virulent attacks from self-styled cultural protectors like Nordau, Lombroso. Here I am inclined to think that the fundamental conflict is between rationality and irrationality, order and disorder, chaos and cosmos. The schizophrenic patients, both in their act of creations and creative products, display a prominent lack of deliberation, decency, and decorum, and deviate from the tried and tested formulas of art. Prinzhorn seems to suggest that these insane artists compulsively created an alternative reality, different from our commonsensical reality which the mind of a healthy man dared not to venture or capture. So Prinzhorn achieved the sought-after goal of proving the presence of an innate artistic germ even in the mentally ill persons. However, this does not imply that artists are mad, degenerate and pathological as had been the cases of numerous psycho-biographers that were inclined to malign or downgrade established authors and artists on the basis of the manifestation of psychic disorders at some stages of their lives. Here I can cite Mobius who uncritically generalised pathological symptoms that appeared in the works of Nietzsche. Inevitably, such a stance could be expected to provoke resistance from Prinzhorn who identified it as an act of stupidity. With this caveat, he laid down certain criteria that the analyst must possess:

(1) A wide certain knowledge of man; (2) an ability to achieve an unhampered self-objectification; (3) ethical character, and intelligence traits free from neurotic distortion; (4) leadership with an instinctive vital conviction of direction; and (5) the self-confidence of a free manhood gained with the complete cooperation of the personality. (Prinzhorn x)

Inherent in this is the question of cementing productive and stimulating bond between the analyst and the analysand; a kind of empathetic bond is prerequisite to enter into the world of others. This kind of thinking is informed by a bio centric outlook on man viewed through a new kind of recognition of man’s intimate integration with his natural setting or *Umwelt*. The concept of *Umwelt*, put forward by Jakob Johan Von Uexkull, one of the disciples of Ludwig Klages, is “a holistic model of animal behaviour that envisioned the organism and its environment as a single integrated system” (Harrington 34). It is possible to point out that mechanistic, logocentric, atomistic, positivistic philosophies of polluted modernity detach man from this animalistic integration with his *Umwelt* that breeds discontent. This vitalistic humanistic conception was at odds with the reductionism rampant in the arena of psychoanalysis that was ever-ready to find degenerate traits among artists in order to marginalize and separate them.



The break of the rigid equation between genius and madness by Prinzhorn can be attributed to another radical cultural shift in Germany, namely the emergence of avant-garde Expressionistic painting that dominated the intellectual circle in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The expressionistic painters including Hugo Ball and Alfred Cubin located their source of inspiration in the insane arts. This discovery paralleled with another discovery of the African art by Carl Einstein. Prior to Karl Einstein the primitive arts were museumized. The credit of Karl Einstein rests on the fact that he reversed the prevalent mode of aesthetic thought by showing the superiority of primitive art to the traditional German art. The expressionistic artists painted pictures like the primitives had done; they were, therefore, branded as crazy and ill. But there is a basic difference between the artistic products of the expressionistic painters and the insane artists. One is genuinely mad and the other cultivates the pose of madness. The source of origination of their art is the unconscious, but where the mad man creates spontaneously out of compulsion, the expressionistic painters created liberately in order to adhere to their professed theory. I would like to put forward the comment made by Sander L. Gilman to buttress Prinzhorn's argument:

Unlike the patient, of course, artists must create for themselves the persona of the outsider, which they don like a helmet to do battle with society. (Gilman 230)

More significant is the material conditions of their act of creations. Mad persons are incarcerated; they are subjected to intolerable psychological and physical pain. The schizophrenic patient completely cocoons himself/herself in the autistic world of introspection, completely cut off from objective reality. As Prinzhorn has demonstrated, these patients paint out of compulsion to give shape to their altered sense of reality. The mentally ill are artistically gifted. Their works show a more or less unexplained but honest sense for the beautiful and the appropriate. But since their sensibility differs from ours, the forms, colours and relationships of their works appear to us as bizarre and grotesque. Prinzhorn promised to look for the value of a work of art within the work itself – even that art came from a schizophrenic artist. But I do not endorse this view of Prinzhorn as we could only equate the art of the insane and the artist if we remove the material condition out of the framework of this equation. Biographical information of the schizophrenic patients provided by Prinzhorn betrays his intention of phenomenological study. I want to attribute this ambivalent attitude on the part of Prinzhorn to the ongoing conflict between his artistic impulse and psychoanalytic aspect within the body of the narrative of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*.

The concept of degeneracy was invariably hovering on the background of German intellectual culture. He made a conscious attempt to counter the concept of degeneracy by comparing the insane art with that of uninitiated, untrained healthy mind. After surveying the artistic products of the insane persons, it is not hard to find that these artistic products resemble the spontaneous creations made by children also. Among the major traits of these artefacts, a playful tendency is predominant in the first stage of the configuration making among children, untrained adults and the great artists. Having stated that, Prinzhorn compares the drawings of the children and untrained healthy adults. The most glaring similarity that is perceived by the viewers is the presence of the separation of space and position. A closer view will show us that this separation of space and position is rampantly evident. Prinzhorn argues that this separation of space and position is “pathological symptom only if we can prove that a healthy adult without training would go about things





differently. The small amount of material so far available makes us doubt that he in fact does” (246). Moreover, when the power of consciousness is diminished involving lack of will or interest, exhaustion or weakness, a perfectly healthy adult man goes on producing rhythmic movement without formal configuration. I am inclined to believe that the field of psychology is more susceptible to ideology and discursive elements than any other field in the domain of science. Quite naturally, we attribute the product of diminished consciousness of the healthy man to lack of interest, whereas we locate the same in the pathological disorder. Prinzhorn countered the prevalent attitude that most of the writers harboured – that schizophrenia was purely destructive, that their pictures would show manifestations only, and that we could expect to find some psychotic content directly and impressively represented. Judging by the thoroughly researched materials, we find that most of the patients lacked artistic indoctrination and there was no record of artistic productions prior to their schizophrenic disorder; we can infer that schizophrenia had mobilized the creative capacity that remained dormant hitherto. In case of the patients who painted during their childhood, schizophrenia did not diminish their existing artistic potentiality; rather it facilitates free expression of that pre-existing capacity by inducing hallucinations and delusions more transparently as he is not disturbed by external reality. So, Prinzhorn said that the concept of decline would not apply.

As mentioned earlier, the conception and production of Prinzhorn’s book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* spans a series of radical changes in the political, cultural and intellectual history of Germany. So, the study must be read in the light of its context as well as its reception within this web. Anti-Semitism that was within the theoretical framework of the intellectuals was put into action during the Nazi era. Both left and right intellectuals were infatuated with the different concepts of ‘Wholeness’. This hunger for wholeness, according to Peter Gay, was due to transcend the overwhelming sense of fragmentation arising out of scientific, cultural, economic and political crisis. The French psychiatrist Benedict Augustin Morel, drawing on Darwin’s theory of evolution of species, labelled many somatic and psychic disorders as degenerate. The German literary scene at the closing of the nineteenth century was dominated by avant-garde artists most of whom were of Jewish origin. “When the Expressionists began to adopt their role as mad, the association of the Jew, the artist, and the mad was complete” (Gilman 233). What was initially a theory became a part of the political programme of German anti-Semitism. The most tragic result of this pseudoscientific theory of degeneracy came when in 1937 the Expressionistic paintings of Emil Nolde, Oscar Kokoscha, and Alfred Kubin along with artefacts from *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* were juxtaposed with the state-sponsored art by Arno Brecker and Adolf Wassil as a part of exhibition of the *Entartete Kunst*. Most of the expressionistic arts were destroyed; intellectuals and academicians were forced to resign their posts and thousands of asylum inmates were brutally murdered as a part of Euthanasia programme in order to insulate the pure German culture from the corrosive contacts of the degenerates. This seems to me a paradox because how the National Socialist Party, the staunch supporter of Biocentrism, could inflict inhuman torture on another strong believer of the same worldview, the Expressionists, goes beyond rational explanation. It seems that one irrational force was against another irrational force. The Nazi Party could not bear to see what they did. Perhaps the Expressionists, the mad men showed them their true face, their anxiety. Here, it is pertinent to quote Sander L. Gilman:



Society's power to define the Other was articulated through an explanatory model of human pathology. But all of this distancing reflected only the deep-seated anxiety stemming from the consciousness that power (including the power to stigmatize) can be lost, leaving its erstwhile possessor in danger of becoming the other. (215)

Question rises whether the publication of the book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* facilitated the *Entertete Kunst* project for radical elimination of mental illness. It is possible to point out that Prinzhorn could have sensed the danger beforehand. Therefore, he labelled the products of the insane artists *Bildnerer* or "artistry" which exactly means image-making. But he resisted the temptation of calling them *kunst* or "art". He was very much aware of the fallacious and uncritical generalisation and the danger inherent in it. Prinzhorn sees the danger here:

Such comparisons, not just by laymen but even by reputable psychiatrists, appear daily in the press and are vulgar and sensational. Aside from the fact that even if the reported parallels were probable they would serve only to arm the philistines with fresh platitudes, such comparisons are based on a great psychological and logical error. (271)

There was certain ideological narrowing of outlook of Prinzhorn in later years. But we cannot judge an earlier work on the basis of its later outcome in another age. That would be another uncritical fallacious interpretation of Prinzhorn who in his earlier years challenged the prevalent notion of identifying the creative productions of institutionalised persons as symptoms of pathology. Prinzhorn, on the contrary, stressed the aesthetic value of those creations and their broad humanistic relevance. *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* insists that mental illness neither does impregnate the mind of the lunatics with creative germs nor does it intensify the creative potentiality pre-existing within the lunatics. Prinzhorn argues that the art works of the mentally ill spring from the same deep-seated psychological roots as shared by all human beings. More significantly, he traces certain aspects of the nature of human creativity – like expression and play – both in the normal as well as in the insane persons. My contention in the paper is that the above exploration serves twofold purposes. First, Prinzhorn counters and rejects the prevalent tendency of the German cultural scene to detect pathological symptoms of derangement among modern artists by establishing certain resemblances between psychotic art and modern experimental art. Second, his exploration of the basic nature of human creativity validates the aesthetic relevance of psychotic creative productions that hitherto have been neglected as degenerate creations of diseased and dishevelled mind.

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