The Journey from Repugnance to Empathy

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This paper was for Dr. Lindner's European Arts and Ideas. It analyzes the marriage of art and science in their co-examination of the insane.

Medicine and art rarely are happy bedfellows in modern society. The practitioners of both disciplines seek to elevate their sect above all others. However, for some brief moments in history the two amalgamate beyond their base composites. During the nineteenth century art and science joined together to reexamine the nature of the insane. This period of joint enlightenment led to great strides in the treatment and care of the mentally ill. The artwork produced not only detailed the clinical observation but also the changing mindset of the public toward the treatment of those forgotten souls cast away to the insane asylums. The progress made by doctors and artists deserves recognition.

Mental illness from ancient times to the early eighteenth century was accepted to be the fault of two things. The person was possessed by an evil spirit and/or demon or lacking a strong character that led them to their poor happenstance. The idea of physical “abnormality prevalent in the Greco-Roman culture” (Karp 2) was lacking in European society before the seventeenth century. This lack of understanding led to the treatment and absence of oversight given to the deranged. It was generally accepted that family were responsible for their own unless there was a danger to the community. The majority of the insane were left to their own devices prior the seventeenth century. The Industrial Revolution would prove to be a boon and curse to the town fools. The advent of big industry introduced the dangers of idleness. This would lead to confinement or a hospital such as Hotel de Dieu in Paris or Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem in London. The latter would be forever remembered by its moniker Bedlam.

In hospitals like Bedlam patients were forced to undergo exorcisms, isolation, and sense deprivation. Rooms were little more than stone cells with moldy straw to sleep on. Those lucky enough to have a bed could expect to be chained in position for days at a time. A common method for pacifying unruly residents was the 'box' or tranquilizer chair. The person was placed in restraints in a chair that had a wooden box to place over the head of the individual. The method cut the person off from their sense of touch, sight, and hearing (boxes could be insulated or cotton placed in ears of patient) (Penn Medicine). This common medical practice is still in use (sense deprivation tanks) today as a method of intelligence gathering.

Figure 1 William Hogarth, Rake's Progress, eighth plate, 1735
It is with this societal view that paintings like William Hogarth’s “Rake Progress” must be examined. The eighth engraving in the set was done in 1735 with retouching in 1763. The scene presents viewers with a variety of stages of the deranged. One man prays in his cell to the church for his salvation. The idea of healing through faith was a commonly held belief at the time. Others such as the protagonist in the front center are chained by his caregivers. He twists his body in odd contortions against their assistance. The chaining is not seen as torture but as a welcome relief from his manic self-harm. The restraints were a preventive measure to protect the mad from their self. The reckless manner of these human beings prevented them being welcome in proper society. His loss of mind and values is displayed by his disregard to his state of dress. “By the seventeenth century the idea of nakedness had become a symbolic reference for the nature of madness” (Gilman 54).

Perhaps the most striking detail in this engraving and Francisco Goya’s “Corral de locos” are the sane. Hogarth’s features two ladies sight-seeing, two hospital workers and a female visiting the protagonist. The workers are easy to overlook with their quiet dedication to their tasks.

Each one is engaged in accommodating the newest member of their community. What role do the ladies serve? They are the representatives of moral society. There is no tittering in this place. One woman holds her fan up to block her view of the nudity of the man lost in delusions of grandeur. The other turns her head away from the bare chest of the madman. Each lady is a model example of genteel modesty and courtesy. The lone female visitor too reminds the viewer of their Christian duties to the mad.

This is a great contrast against a lone sane man in Goya’s “Corral de locos” done in oils on canvas in 1794. Goya’s aim was not to highlight the goals and benefits of the madhouse but its faults. Goya even acknowledges drawing from his own memories to paint the landscape of the insane. “It represents a yard with lunatics.... which I saw in Saragossa” (MacGregor 71). The warder beats two men as they wrestle stark-naked in the yard surrounded by other inmates. His face is a mixture of a grimace and smile. The pain and suffering of those around him matter little to his enjoyment. Those fortunate enough to be dressed and watching are clothed in little better than sack cloths. Their bodies twist in the small space as if searching for an escape. The only light available filters through the bars of their prison but does not quite reach them. They are locked in a prison of shadow and hopelessness.

These two views of the mental health profession at the time were both accepted practices. With a focus on the confinement of the unstable and protection of healthy society little was done in regards to the treatment. Hogarth displays the view of common society. He is known to have been a visitor of Bedlam where he would have been able to sketch images similar to the scenes he illustrates (MacGregor 16). Goya’s depiction may be better understood

Figure 2 Francisco Goya, Corral de locos, 1794
when his own medical history is presented. Throughout his life he suffered with illness. Indeed, some of those bouts with illness were mental. It is therefore not surprising that Goya sought to broadcast the failings in the system. Indeed, it would take a revolution of social reform to change the lack of consideration given to the unbalanced.

The Enlightenment set forth the “erosion of barriers between the creative artist and the world of science and technology” (MacGregor 7). The theory of Enlightenment has its roots in Romanticism. Supporters like Denis Diderot sought not to reject intellect and reason as previous Romantics but to combine them with their passion to seek the truth. The cornerstone of the movement was the search for answers to unanswered questions whatever they may be. It is from this fount of curiosity the study of physiognomy and phrenology sprang. Phrenology was the study of the shape of the skull and its underlying brain.

Although regarded as a pseudo-science today it was cutting edge at the time. And it does in fact demonstrate at least one accepted modern fact. “[Franz Joseph] Gall concluded that the brain was composed of separate faculties, or organs, each executing its task in relative isolation from its neighbors” (Colbert 282). This is backed by our understanding of modern anatomy. Through careful study of facial features one could identify distinctive ailments.

Physiognomy “placed their emphasis on fixed facial structures, seeing the permanent lines of the forehead and face the reflection of mental or intellectual states” (Gilman 58). These facial features and muscular structures allowed those in the arts to represent the body as it was in nature. Unlike previous artists confined by the Academy, the nineteenth century allowed a new representation of the human body as God made them. The focus was no longer on finding the perfect model or hiding the flaws of nature. Instead artists like Théodore Géricault sought “souci du detail clinique” (attention to clinical detail)” (Athanassoglou-Kallmyer 196).

“The Monomania of Envy (The Hyena)” by Gericault in oil on canvas is a leading example of the changing depictions of the insane. Painted around 1821-3, psychiatrist Etienne-Jean Georget commissioned the work for himself. The work portrays an old woman from the chest up in a state of contemplation. She is clothed in a simple dress and bonnet. The focus is not on her manner of dress or body as in previous works like Hogarth’s “Rake’s Progress”. Her surroundings have also been removed from the equation.

It suggests that the madness lurking in this woman is not a product of her environment but a state of nature. Nor is she possessed by any demon. By eliminating the misshaped bodies of the past it forces the focus away from superstition and to science. Géricault’s illumination of each line and ridge on her face for examination further supports this claim. It is meant to allow the skilled practitioner of phrenology and physiognomy to practice their skills on this example. Attention is also drawn to the mouth and eyes. The eyes glint in malice at an unknown object or person. The viewer and painter do not exist to “The Hyena”.

Now that the Enlightenment had opened the world of the insane to the public through
the artwork of the nineteenth century, activists wanted to enact change in the hospitals and asylums of the past. A powerful illustration of the reforming nature of mental healthcare is shown in Wilhelm von Kaulbach’s Das Narrenhaus done in 1830.

![Figure 4 Wilhelm von Kaulbach, Das Narrenhaus, 1830](image)

This sketch has liberated the imprisoned patients from their dark cells into the light of the public. Any allusion to demons or poor character flaws leading to mental illness is hereby removed. Instead the artist takes time to show varying degrees of mental illness on display. Kaulbach also demonstrates his growing awareness of the irregular nature of mental conditions. The conditions are also shown as chronic, acute, and fleeting states. This idea of treatment and curing an ailment is a radical departure from the previous doctrine of confinement.

The final painting of reform is by Tony Robert-Fleury. It depicts a scene of the revolutionary alienist (today known as a psychiatrist), Dr. Philippe Pinel, commanding the release of the women of Salpêtrière in Paris. “The new ‘moral therapy’ developed by Pinel and his contemporaries in the reformed asylums was fundamentally based on the idea of freeing mental patients’ trapped humanity” (Fee). This humanizing therapy is portrayed in the concern showed by the watching public.

![Figure 5 Tony Robert-Fleury, Pinel Unchaining the Insane at the Hospital of Salpêtrière, 1876](image)

The stupor of the listless female being unchained is not ignored but instead the man freeing her supports her uneven balance and weight. The women are also not demonized for their disease. The faces are no longer hidden in shadows as previous artists used to represent the mentally ill. The raw, animal nature of the deranged is removed from the facial features. Another woman kneels next to Pinel in appreciation and gratitude. The suggestion being that the public too feels the horrors that were committed against the patients. The freedom of the patients is only part of the release being experienced. Fleury is also using a style of history painting to showcase the previously undesirable subject of the deranged.

The painting was moved beyond the handbook of doctors into the light of day. Instead of being a clinical examination used for anatomy and physiology it invites the reader to scrutinize the painting as a work of art.

However subtle the changes were over time, they could not have been accomplished without the support of the public. Treatment in Salpêtrière and Bedlam was able to continue for over a hundred
years not because of the lack of options but of the lack of interest in the people locked behind those closed doors.

It is easy to lock people away as monsters when there is no one facing the victims of the mistreatment. The humane treatment and medicating of the mentally ill came largely due to the public’s outcry after viewing pieces like Goya’s “Corral de locos” and Théodore Géricault’s “Envy”. Artists were able to reform the practices of psychiatry with delicate pen and brush strokes. Few revolutions are as dramatic and quiet as the introduction of modern medicine of the mind.

Works Cited


