Madness and Modernity: Mental illness and the visual arts in Vienna 1900


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Abstract

Book synopsis: Madness and Modernity sets out to chart the theme of madness across a variety of territories in Vienna 1900, including art and design, society and architecture, literature and psychiatry. This journey into what madness meant in the Austro-Hungarian capital at the turn of the twentieth century covers new ground and is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of modern European culture. The book plots the nexus between the study of mental illness and the modernist ideals of groups such as the Secessionists (including Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann and Otto Wagner). Designs by Wagner for the Steinhof mental hospital are juxtaposed with portraits by Oskar Kokoschka of patients interned there; self-portraits by Egon Schiele are shown alongside photographs of neurological disorder; artworks by patients are explored in the context of the spaces they inhabited and the treatments they received. Over 100 arresting images give voice to these dialogues that existed between psychiatrists, writers, visual art practitioners and patients. Madness and Modernity alternates between long, thematic chapters and short, focused chapters on specific works of particular significance. Taken in parts or as a whole, it is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand how psychiatry influenced early modernism in the visual arts, and how modernism has since influenced our attitudes to the mentally ill.

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Madness and Modernity is an exceptionally well-conceived group effort that succeeds in avoiding the more speculative generalities often found in studies of "madness and art" in the twentieth century. By tracing the effects of specific contacts and commissions, Madness and Modernity originated as a research project begun by Lesley Topp and Gemma Blackshaw about "the impact of psychiatry on Austrian architecture and art practice" (8), and ended up involving a post-graduate participant (Sabine Wieber) as well as two doctoral candidates (Nicola Imrie and Luke Heighton). Their collaborative effort culminated in a linked monograph and exhibition. In the visual arts, the claim is made that Schiele, Kokoschka, Klimt, Oppenheimer etc. opportunistically derived their contorted figurative imagery ("imaging" in artspeak) from the medical images of the diseased bodies of the asylums' inmates, in order to reinforce the artists' own image, as well as that of their intellectual patrons, as avant-garde outsiders in a bourgeois society. Prior to that, although often linked to 'genius', madness was not seen as an illness to be cured. This raises another problem - cutting Vienna off from the rest of European culture and society excludes so much important material. Surely, in fin-de-siecle literature, the most significant writer on this theme is Thomas Mann (from Lubeck in north Germany).