Proposed Art Competition

A group of psychologists at Connecticut Valley Hospital have been discussing the possibility of a state and national art competition among the hospitalized mentally ill—similar in some respects to the High School Arts Competition sponsored by the Congressional Arts Caucus. In most considerations, the mentally ill are seen primarily as needy, and rarely do we hear of positive contributions that they may make. Nevertheless, we feel that they have much to offer in the area of artistic creativity that is unique and of interest to others.

Since 1920 the art of the mentally ill has been recognized in Europe as a significant cultural phenomenon. A museum associated with the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic houses a collection of art of the mentally ill gathered by Dr. Hanz Prinzhorn. His book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, Springer-Verlag, New York, 1972, originally published in 1922) remains an outstanding source volume. Some of the work from this museum is scheduled to travel to the U.S. in 1984, to be shown at the Krannert Art Museum in Illinois and other places. The Art Brut collection, Chateau de Beaulieu, Lausanne, Switzerland also contains the work of psychiatric patients, as does a collection of the Swiss Psychiatric Society housed in the Waldau Psychiatric Hospital, Bern, Switzerland.

In this country there is a growing interest in "outsider" art—the art of self-taught artists, and of the mentally handicapped who are outside the mainstream of art. We would like to capitalize on this interest and on the pioneering work done in Europe by throwing national attention on the art of our publicly institutionalized psychiatric patients. We believe this would enhance public interest in the welfare of such patients and add a needed positive note to their image.

Our plans are rudimentary as yet, and depend a good deal on response of those who work with the hospitalized mentally ill. In broad outline, we would like to see each state or regional group of states hold an art contest for its publicly hospitalized psychiatric patients, with the best pieces going into a national exhibition in Washington, D.C.

*Schizophrenia Bulletin* has for many years shown the art of psychiatric patients on its front cover, so its readers are aware of this potent source of expression for patients. The undersigned would welcome hearing from those in public psychiatric hospital work across the country who would like to participate in this project. Please write to let us know whether within your hospital and within your state, an “art of the mentally ill” contest would be feasible. We will share our thinking further with you and work toward consensual, practical guidelines to ensure an interesting successful, and repeatable effort.

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