

The graffiti murals at the Murcia psychiatric hospital. Román Alberca Lorente and Gonzalo Rodríguez Lafora

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ABSTRACT

Artworks by patients with mental disorders have been a subject of interest for psychiatrists since the 19th century due to their diagnostic value; for avant-garde artists, they support the recognition of the irrational as a source of inspiration. The exhibition “Pinacoteca psiquiátrica en España, 1917-1990” (Psychiatric art gallery in Spain, 1917-1990) included photographs of works by a “graffiti artist” in the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital of Murcia, dating to the 1930s, discovered among the papers of Dr Lafora. The exhibition raises questions about the importance of the drawings, their origin, and the involvement of Dr Alberca Lorente, whose name appears in one of the pieces. There was no precedent for photographs of this type of murals that were frequently made by patients at psychiatric hospitals, which were typically dismissed as the impulsive creations of “fools” and, therefore, were short-lived. These drawings are made in a *naïf* style and may be classified as *art brut*, a term coined by Dubuffet in 1945.

KEYWORDS

Art and mental illness, psychiatric art in Spain, Murcia psychiatric hospital, psychiatric graffiti, Román Alberca Lorente, Gonzalo Rodríguez Lafora

Introduction

The turn of the 20th century saw growing interest in the artistic output of patients with mental illness, particularly those institutionalised in the large psychiatric hospitals of the time, who for years made their walls the limits of their forced studio. These art works sparked interest both in the field of psychiatry, which considered what came to be known as “psychopathological art” as a source and subject matter, and from a strictly artistic perspective, with these works serving as a source of inspiration.¹

To cite just a few of the pioneers interested in the art of psychiatric patients, we may mention Luigi Frigerio,

Auguste Marie, and Marcel Reja,^{2,3} and particularly the work of Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933), the German psychiatrist and art historian who undertook to maintain and expand the collection of drawings and paintings started by Emil Kraepelin at the Heidelberg hospital. By 1921, when he left the post, the collection included over 5000 works by approximately 450 patients, which formed the basis of Prinzhorn's book *Artistry of the mentally ill: a contribution to the psychology and psychopathology of configuration*.⁴ The book, which is replete with illustrations and draws lines between artistic, psychiatric, and expressive considerations, was an inspiration to the French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985).



Figure 1. Photographs of the murals in Murcia stuck to a poster board, possibly for display, as conserved in the collection of Dr Rodríguez Lafora.

Years later, after visiting various psychiatric institutions in Switzerland, Dubuffet began an extensive collection of works, which finally became the *art brut* collection (a term coined by Dubuffet himself in the mid-1940s), currently on display in Lausanne.

By the mid-20th century, many psychiatrists encouraged their patients to draw and paint as part of the occupational and expressive activities with which they could spend their time, leading to exhibitions of their work in a range of venues.⁵ In Spain, in December 1935, the Cajal Institute hosted an exhibition of the art and crafts of psychiatric patients as part of the Sixth Assembly of the Spanish League for Mental Hygiene and the Seventh Meeting of the Spanish Association of Neuropsychiatrists. With contributions from the collections of such psychiatrists as Rodríguez Lafora, Vallejo Nájera, and Camino Galicia, as well as several private institutions, the exhibition included a large number of paintings, drawings, sculptures, craftworks, and poems. The exhibition was met with surprise in

the press, which described “the strange and unsettling artistic activities of the insane,” and also reproduced several of the exhibited works.⁶ Gonzalo Rodríguez Lafora (1886-1971),⁷ in addition to his interest in a wide range of artistic and cultural manifestations,⁸ must also have had a long-standing interest in photography,⁹ and was one of the pioneers of documentary photography, using it to denounce the situation of healthcare in Spain.⁹ For that exhibition in 1935, he contributed both a series of drawings from his collection and a number of surprising snapshots by a patient diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, one of which was printed on the front page of the magazine *Mundo Gráfico*, bringing notoriety to the association between “art and madness”

⁴The photographs by Dr Rodríguez Lafora cited in this article can be consulted at: <http://www.psiquifotos.com/2009/10/89-los-manicomios-espanoles-de-lafora.html> (photographs of Spanish psychiatric hospitals from 1916); <http://www.psiquifotos.com/2010/01/114-los-600-retratos-mas-extranos-del.html> (photographs by Constantino Casanova from the 1935 exhibition), and <http://www.psiquifotos.com/2010/04/133-el-grafitero-del-manicomio-de.html> (photographs of the graffiti murals in Murcia).



Figure 2. The figure shown is probably the author of the works, shown alongside two of his creations. To the right, Luis Candelas.

in Spanish public opinion. Of over 600 self-portraits by the patient, only 17 of those displayed at the time are currently preserved.¹⁰

Development

The Murcia graffiti murals in the collection of Rodríguez Lafora

More recently, another exhibition of psychopathological art, curated by Ana Hernández under the title “Pinacoteca psiquiátrica en España, 1917-1990” (Psychiatric art gallery in Spain, 1917-1990), gathered a wonderful collection of art works made over nine decades by psychiatric patients at numerous Spanish institutions.¹¹ These include some fascinating photographs protectively kept by Víctor Rodríguez Lafora, as well as a vast number of drawings and paintings collected by his father at his clinic in Madrid. Eighteen of the small images were displayed symmetrically in a horizontal rhomboid shape, while an additional sepia photograph placed at

the bottom right, breaking the symmetry, is the only one to include a human figure (Figure 1).

Below the images appears the following typewritten caption: “Charcoal murals by a patient with chronic post-process schizophrenia (Murcia psychiatric hospital).” The small size of the photographs (6 × 8 cm) makes it very difficult to clearly discern the details, which are only fully apparent after enlargement. These details better enable us to reconstruct their meaning and history. The sepia photograph shows a figure we interpret to be a patient, posing with apparent pride in front of the door of the “deposit” of the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital of Murcia. The man stands between two of his murals: one of a royal carriage and one of the bandit Luis Candelas, at slightly larger than real size (Figure 2).

The rest of the photographs, in black and white and all showing the same artistic style, can only be a small catalogue of murals made by this patient. These simple drawings with bold strokes, in large sizes, constitute both



Figure 3. Institutional motifs: the rector (or director) of the hospital, a nun, Dr Alberca, a doctor.



Figure 4. Folkloric motifs: Romans, “la Niña de los Peines,” regional dress, a bullfighter.

a historical document and an account of his life. Thus, the elements portrayed would pertain to his life both prior to admission and within the walls of the asylum; real and imagined biographical notes showing soldiers and ambassadors at other latitudes, sketches in baroque strokes with his naif mark. The images also depict the rector (or director?) of the institution, a nun (for whom he expresses affection, decorating her with hearts), physicians (including Dr Alberca, among others) (Figure 3), bullfighters (Figure 4), generals decorated with medals (Figure 5), kings in their carriages, bandits, luxurious objects that are difficult to interpret (Figures 5 and 6), religious imagery (Figures 6 and 7), processions, and references to popular folklore, whose forms and symbolism will surely be recognised by those familiar with the customs and habits of the region (Figure 4).

The enigmatic initials “MP,” which possibly stand for Manicomio Provincial (Provincial Psychiatric Hospital), appear on the shoulder pads of the physicians and on the side of the dog Sultán (Figures 3 and 6). The phrase “novia mía” (my bride) is shown as an inscription on a religious object resembling a chalice with a crucifix (Figure 3). A sorrowful, compassionate Virgin Mary is a possible reference to one of the main Marian representations in Murcia (Figure 6).

Furthermore, various other apparently unconnected objects and motifs are interspersed across the different figures, such as the unsettling, cryptic parts of a dismembered body shown beside a particularly significant figure, identified as “Doctor Alberca” on the belt of his smock (Figure 3).

If we reflect on the depiction of the dismembered body, many 20th-century artists interested in the imprint of trauma, such as Robert Gober,¹² portrayed autobiographical reminiscences between the beautiful and the sinister through their sculptures of fragmented bodies. Perhaps our graffiti artist unconsciously depicted the fragmentation of the body in psychosis.¹³ The arms and legs beside the physician could also be interpreted as votive offerings, like those made at the sanctuary to Our Lady of Hope in Calasparra (Murcia), with which the patient may have been familiar. Some images recall the scenes of hell or martyrdom that are often depicted on cathedral altarpieces. In the absence of any additional information on the photographs, or how they came into the possession of Rodríguez Lafora, we can only speculate about these matters.

With respect to the date when they were taken, it is evident that they must be from later than 1928, the year Román Alberca Lorente (1903-1966) was selected to be chief physician at the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital of Murcia, also acting as the director of the institution. To further narrow down the time when the works were made, we may consider one of the figures portrayed, an elegant, hieratic woman covered with a lace shawl that falls nearly to her feet, ostentatiously made up, with a fan in one hand and a small handbag in the other (Figure 4). To her right is an inscription clarifying that the figure is Pastora María Pavón or “la Niña de los Peines,” a Gypsy flamenco singer considered one of the most important voices in the genre. After Alberca joined the hospital, the singer gave numerous performances in the city and the region of Murcia (1930 and 1932), and was lauded by the press in 1934 as “the greatest singer in the world” or “the much applauded ‘Niña de los Peines’”; she made additional visits in 1935 and in 1936, just days before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.¹⁴ The singer would unquestionably have been well known in Murcia at the time, with the drawings simply reflecting her fame. Considering the dates of her visits, we suspect that at least this mural was painted between mid-1934 and mid-1935, perhaps near the time of her performance in July 1935, and that the photographs would have been taken with the idea of displaying them that December in Madrid.

As mentioned above, that exhibition coincided with the seventh Meeting of the Spanish Association of Neuropsychiatrists, whose executive board was chaired by Rodríguez Lafora, with J.J. López Ibor as vice-

president, Román Alberca Lorente as secretary, and Luis Valenciano as treasurer.¹⁵ A student of Lafora’s during his training as a neuropsychiatrist, we may assume that Alberca would have known Lafora well and that the pair would have maintained a close relationship; it was precisely the hospital in Murcia that, with the support of Alberca, received “demented” patients evacuated on Lafora’s orders from the Psychiatric Clinic at Hospital Provincial de Madrid due to the Spanish Civil War.¹⁶

We cannot precisely ascertain the date when the photographs were taken, or even whether they were taken (or at least developed) at the same time, given the differences in tone between the preserved images; it is also unclear how they came to be in the possession of Lafora. He may have taken them himself during a visit to Murcia, for one reason or another, or they may have been sent or even personally delivered to him by Alberca during the scientific meeting.¹⁷

Román Alberca Lorente’s interest in psychopathological art

In any case, we can imagine that this was not a simple collaboration between Alberca and Lafora; rather, the very existence of the graffiti suggests the importance in Alberca’s consideration of the spontaneous creations of psychiatric patients: it is surprising that he would otherwise allow such extensive, dedicated “defacing” of the institution. This interest was and continues to be common in a wide range of institutions, as shown in, for example, the engravings in William Hogarth’s work *The rake in Bedlam* (1734)¹⁸ or the naïf drawing on the plaster in Wilhelm von Kaulbach’s *Das Narrenhaus* (1835).² This practice led Giné i Partagás to include these artists in one of the 18 types of instinctive impulses, that of the “fool,” in his classification of the impulsive manifestations of the will in his analysis of the symptoms and pathogenesis of disease. His opinion of these individuals was that “with the slightest oversight of the wardens, they dedicate themselves to filling the asylum walls with grotesque or revolting figures with more or less extravagant inscriptions,” which he extends to those who in one way or another were interested in urban paintings: “this group must also include the monomaniac who, in nearly all the villages of the province of Barcelona, as well as in the city, has painted thousands of times the phrases ‘Fornell de la virgen de Llerona,’ ‘Santa María,’ ‘uni notha,’ etc.”¹⁹ Unlike other artistic production, precisely the fastness of the support used for this expressive pursuit has hindered



Figure 5. Various motifs: a soldier, an ambassador, a crown of bricks, an urn.



Figure 6. Various motifs: figure and objects, the Virgin Mary, and the dog Sultan.

the preservation of these works, except in cases in which somebody had the foresight to photograph them; as a result, these artists have largely been forgotten. Just a few of these “fools” have come to be seen as the leading figures of *art brut* worldwide, as was the case of Carlo Zinelli (1916-1974), an artist discovered by the psychiatrist Vittorio Andreoli. Zinelli was admitted at the age of 31 years to the hospital of San Giacomo in Verona, where he busied himself drawing on the walls with nails and bricks, and was subsequently invited to participate in a painting and sculpting workshop created at the hospital in 1957.²⁰ However, this was in the mid-20th century, years after the first World Congress of Psychiatry, held in Paris in 1950, where the International Exhibition of Psychopathological Art was organised (and attended by

Lafora, after returning to Spain in 1947 from his exile in Mexico), legitimising these creations in the eyes of the general public.²¹

In the case of Murcia, the images preserved include 24 portraits of persons, one of a dog, and at least a dozen different inanimate objects; however, the right border of one of the images (Figure 3, the image of the nun) appears to show that at least one figure was not photographed. Specifically, the photograph shows an arm in a white sleeve, trying to cover something with a long cloth or sheet of paper: an inscription? Perhaps something deemed too irreverent or inconvenient for exhibition? Or perhaps merely an artefact intended not to distract the viewer?

More detailed analysis of the images suggests that they were not considered something fleeting, but rather that attempts were made to preserve them for as long as possible. As the drawings were made with charcoal, we may easily imagine that, being outdoors, they would easily be erased by the elements, and may have needed to be retouched or redrawn, as appears to be the case in the photograph showing a figure holding a palm leaf (Figure 7). The regular whitewashing of the walls also seems to have respected the drawings, as shown at the edges of several of the figures (eg, bottom image in Figure 6).

Lacking any other documentary information on the drawings, we cannot know Alberca's opinions of them; thus, we are only able to venture an educated guess. To that end, we consulted his inaugural speech at the opening ceremony of the 1941-1942 session of the Academy of Fine Arts at the Murcia Royal Economic Society of Friends of the Country, in which he expressed his interest in and knowledge of the artistic creation of psychiatric patients.²²

After a dense introduction addressing the creative process in art, he continues with a discussion of the artistic production of these patients, which unfortunately also lacks any reference to the drawings at his hospital. In fact, he only makes passing comments on a few of his patients, citing eight sheets from his own consultation at the end of the speech.

In a discussion of the history of art, with psychoanalytic references showing an excess of sexual connotations and a certain Kretschmerian conception of the influence of genetics and race, he discusses the recent expressionist and cubist movements, on which he opines that:

The painter decidedly abandons that which is naturally human, outside himself, to express the intimately human, his own representations.^{22(p42)}

Thus, if we wish to highlight similarities between modern painting and schizophrenic art, we are obliged to consider the resemblance between their forms of expression: the tendency to stylisation, the habit of crossing lines and planes with an ornamental sense, furthermore the collision in space of subjects that occur in time, bringing to the visual arts that which belongs to the rhythmic arts; but above all, we must highlight the flight from the objectively human towards the intimacy of the painter.^{22(p44)}

The expressionist painter, without being schizophrenic, narrows his eyes and paints his own imagined world.^{22(p45)}



Figure 7. Religious motifs: *Salvator Mundi*, Palm Sunday, crucifixion, *Pietà*.

However, these similarities do not lead Alberca to assimilate the two forms of production: he asserts that if any feature was typical of schizophrenic art it was “specifically the inability to capture its meaning, to understand it according to a norm.”^{22(p46)}

With relation to these artistic movements, it is surprising that he does not refer to an important article that Lafora published years earlier in *Archivos de Neurobiología* (the text of a speech given at the Ateneo in Madrid and also reprinted in 1972 in *Don Juan, los milagros y otros ensayos* [“Don Juan, the miracles, and other essays”]),²³ which Alberca undoubtedly would have known. This apparent oversight is very possibly explained by a conscious attempt at self-protection, distancing himself from a figure who had recently had to take exile outside of Spain.

Returning to the images, to tentatively illustrate them with Alberca's thought, we may extract the following section of his lecture:

Drawings by schizophrenics are, in general, rigid, schematic, and geometrical, with a noteworthy tendency to symmetry and endless repetition of a subject; frequently flat, without depth or perspective (heads are larger or figures in the background are taller; rigorously identical figures or trees are ordered in linear procession, or there is a lack of perspective as seen in Egyptian paintings). Works are often unfinished or the background will be decorated with scribbles, letters, words, or allegorical figures until the entire space is filled. They generally lack movement: faces show grimaces rather than expressions, bodies move with the rigidity of machines, and clothing falls gracelessly in lifeless folds. There is an overall tendency to stylisation and a lack of motor coordination; movement is poor and decoration is enriched or made luxuriant because the subject is repeated a hundred times. Alongside this tendency to schematism, the drawings of schizophrenics present an abundance of nonsense mixtures, often of human and decorative elements and sometimes of disparate images [...].^{22(p36-7)}

Potentially referring to the image portraying himself alongside parts of a dismembered body, he continues:

Sometimes instead of whole men they draw absurd parts, such as a man with a head and legs but no chest or abdomen; or a head resting upon a tripod, the trunk of a tree, or a monolith. Some drawings and sculptures represent just part of a man or animal, bringing them together, without order, with diverse parts of other incomplete forms [...] Many of these traits simply translate into art the typical clinical symptoms of schizophrenia. Disintegration, which cleaves apart the inference of schizophrenic discourse, by which a word or short phrase has nothing to do with those which precede or follow it, shears through the subjects of the drawing [...] the unfinished figure does not need more because in the symbol, the magical root, each of its parts is portrayed and has life like the entire figure [...] due to displacement of the affective root.^{22(p37-8)}

Conclusions

To conclude, we would call attention to one of the objects portrayed: a top hat with a theatre scene shown over it (Figure 5, top left). Without venturing to comment on the associated symbolism, we cannot help but consider

it as a metaphorical representation of the illusionist's top hat, magically open for the audience to interpret everything concealed beneath it.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare and have received no funding for this article.

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