One of Scotland’s most remarkable art collections was formed by Dr William Alexander Francis Browne, the first Physician Superintendent of Crichton Royal Institution in Dumfries. It is the earliest collection of asylum art by a group of patients known to have survived from the nineteenth Century. This lecture introduced the collection, explaining the background to art activity at Crichton, and placing it within the regime of ‘moral treatment’ introduced by Dr Browne who promoted art for its therapeutic and educational qualities.

Some of history’s most famous nineteenth-century artists were asylum patients – Vincent van Gogh spent a year as a voluntary patient in France near the end of his life, and criminally-insane British artist Richard Dadd was committed to Bethlem psychiatric hospital for over twenty years, and indeed died in Broadmoor Hospital in 1886 having painted constantly during his incarceration.

Dr W A F Browne (1805–1885) was born in Stirling and, as a medical student, developed a particular interest in phrenology and psychiatry. With no real desire to become a general medical practitioner, he preferred instead to accept the position of resident Physician Superintendent of the Montrose Royal Lunatic Asylum in 1834. This in itself was innovative, as previous Scottish asylums had never had a resident doctor or physician. Some earlier asylums, such as York Asylum, were grim, menacing places where patients were treated as inmates and where little attention was paid to their medical and psychiatric needs. The Quakers were responsible for establishing one of the first of a new style of asylum, ‘The York Retreat’ in 1796, offering moral treatment, whereby patients were well fed, looked after and attempts were made to repair their minds and prepare them for life outside the asylum. Browne was a passionate advocate of the moral treatment of the insane, believing that patients should be treated humanely within the asylum and encouraged to become involved in activities they would have participated in when well. He defined moral treatment as “every mode by which the mind is influenced through the mind itself, in contradistinction to medical treatment, in which the mind is acted upon remotely by material agents, and through the body”.

Whilst at Montrose, Browne wrote the book *What Asylums Were, Are and Ought to Be*, based on his experience, and within it outlining an idyllic picture of the asylum of the future. In 1838 Browne was offered the opportunity to create his ideal asylum, when wealthy philanthropist Elizabeth Crichton of Dumfries persuaded him to accept the position of Physician Superintendent at the newly-constructed Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries. Her original intention to develop a university in the south of Scotland had been blocked by the powerful existing Scottish universities and, after reading Browne’s book, her thoughts turned to creating a modern asylum. In 1839, the Crichton Royal Institution opened its doors to its first patients and, in a pleasing twist of fate, both of Elizabeth Crichton’s visions were eventually realised when, more than 150 years later, the Crichton University Campus took up residence on the site. Dr Park noted with some pleasure that, today, Elizabeth’s statue sits in the Crichton grounds looking towards both of her admirable achievements.
Browne’s time as Superintendent at the Crichton Royal Institution (1838–1857) allowed him to continue and develop his ‘moral treatment’ of the patients. Here he encouraged his patients in writing, art and drama and a host of other activities, long anticipating the ideas of occupational and art therapy. However, Dr Park made the distinction between the current ideas of ‘art therapy’, in which art is created in a controlled environment with the supervision of a trained therapist to achieve therapeutic objectives, and ‘art as therapy’ which more accurately describes Browne’s nineteenth-century approach. Art at Crichton was undertaken as a leisure activity and offered to any patient whom Dr Browne considered would benefit from participation, whether they displayed a talent for it or not. Browne considered these educational activities and amusements on offer to be core to their treatment and just as important as medical drug therapy.

Browne initiated one of the first collections of art by mental patients in institutions, gathering a large amount of work which he had bound into three volumes. He made reference to this collection in a paper entitled Mad Artists published anonymously in 1880 in the Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology, “There are before me three gigantic volumes containing specimens of the pseudo art of lunatics in different forms and phases of derangement. This collection was formed by the medical superintendent of an asylum which received patients almost exclusively belonging to the educated classes. These attempts were made in pencil, ink, water colours, chalk, sepia and oil during a period of twenty years.”

One of these volumes was found, by now-retired Crichton archivist Morag Williams, at the Crichton Royal Hospital in the late 20th Century. The volume was embossed with the title Art in Madness, and is an unique archive of artwork created by nineteenth-century asylum patients. It is also the primary source document painstakingly researched by Dr Maureen Park who, having described the historical context and importance of the artwork, enlightened the audience with regard to the background of the artwork itself and the history of some of the artist patients who created it. The stories behind the artists help to bring to life the images within the archive and add an interesting aspect to the artwork, which predominantly does not display evidence of ‘madness’ or insanity.

The Art in Madness archive includes many flower and bird studies produced by Mrs Joanna Hutton. Mrs Hutton was declared ill for thirty years following the death of her daughter. She was known to give her artwork to people she liked, which reflects well on Dr Browne who owned at least fifteen! Mrs Hutton, however, was also a kleptomaniac, who at one point of her confinement hid 1,182 items in her skirts, along with 13 parcels. When questioned she said that they were all items useful for her daily life. Browne’s art collection contains artwork from at least 36 men and 10 ladies. The ladies were usually quite restricted in their subject matter; however, the artwork produced by Marianne Rigby, a former governess from Liverpool and described as morbidly shy, was particularly admired by Browne. Primarily, Rigby’s own creations were floral studies; however, as demonstrated in her ‘Hotel de Ville, Bourges’ after Thomas Allom, she was also particularly adept at copying other artists’ work. Browne also allowed her to do drawings of other asylums.

Many of the artist patients copied both existing well known artworks and lesser known illustrations in books and magazines. Indeed, the extensive library at the Crichton was a source of inspiration for many, such as John Harvie Oliver who produced credible copies of Sir Edward Landseer’s iconic works and John Fenn Russell, a former doctor suffering from ‘mental disease’, who produced many versions of Raphael’s painting. Indeed, Dr Park suggests that former sea captain, John McTaggart Davidson’s copy of, and slight change of composition to, Thomas Allom’s ‘New Palace of the Sultan Mahmoud the 2nd on the Bosphorus’ could be considered to be an improvement on the original. Many patients were confined to the Crichton for a large part of their lives; indeed some, even when fully recovered, were reluctant to leave. Joseph Askew of Whitehaven, Cumbria was confined to the Crichton for 51 years. He had spent some of his earlier life in Peru, where he believed
he had been influenced by mesmeric powers, having frequent hallucinations. Askew’s artwork archive includes both his own creations and copies.

Crichton received both pauper and paying patients, some of whom were well educated and often of noble or ‘well-to-do’ birth. David Cathcart, son of Lord Alloway, was considered a furious maniac when originally confined in a Glasgow asylum. He never showed furious tendencies whilst in Dumfries and was considered a very popular patient. Upon arriving at the Crichton, he drew endlessly in school notebooks, with his sketches accompanied by lengthy annotations. Dr Park suggested that his artwork reflects his described personality; full of imaginings, hating Russians and believing he was the victor of great battles. William James Blacklock is a particular example of an extremely talented Crichton artist. He described his artwork as Pre-Raphaelitic in style and even exhibited at the Royal Academy before his confinement. Dr Park described his watercolour of ‘Craigmichael Castle from the South’ as exceptional. However, his later works show that his talent started to disintegrate as his mind began to shut down and deteriorate.

Dr Park described William Bartholomew’s contribution to the archive as particularly unique and interesting. In addition to his pen and ink drawings of musical scores and some very bizarre, confusing and incomprehensible pictures, he also, at Dr Browne’s behest, produced a series of drawings describing mental diseases and how those afflicted by these looked. These included, amongst others, images of imbecility, fatuity and idiocy. These were images of specific, rather than imagined, pauper patients at the Crichton who were suffering from these afflictions.

Dr W A F Browne died in 1885, having served as Scotland’s first Commissioner in Lunacy from 1857 to 1870. Moral treatment continued at asylums throughout the United Kingdom, but became diluted, due in part to the increasing number of patients admitted. Eventually the ‘care in the community’ ideal wiped out many of the traditional aspects and examples of moral treatment. The ‘Art in Madness’ archive of patient art, however, remains as a testimony to Browne’s ideals and foresight with regard to the moral treatment and care of his patients.

Questions

Dr Park was asked to give the audience an idea of the financial status and standing of patients in Browne’s time. What finances would they need to carry out art? The majority were paying patients and well educated. Crichton was, however, a charitable institution and those patients who couldn’t pay were subsidised by their parish. Patients paid between £30 and £350 per year, and their accommodation conditions varied according to payment. Browne was proud of the food and facilities he gave to his patients. £350 gave you ensuite accommodation and an apartment for your attendant. Most patients paid between £30 and £100, but all had their own space. Activities, including art, were open to all, no matter what they paid.

An audience member referred to Joseph Askew’s paintings and suggested they had an oriental influence. Dr Park said that at first, when trying to ascertain the original prints that Askew had copied, based on his history with Peru, she had trawled through South American print archives, but with no success. Eventually she found that the originals were actually prints of the Alps. However, his background in Peru may well have influenced his very simplistic style. Other explanations for his technique may derive from the fact that his father was a woodcarver – and this could be reflected in the very linear and simplified style of his drawings.
In response to a question asking if the patients were tutored, Dr Park stated that some patients were tutored, but many were not and had natural talent. Browne on occasion also brought in professional artists to train them. Patients were also encouraged to teach each other. Patients did not necessarily have to pay for their tuition. They also visited local artists’ studios to look at other art and sometimes exhibited their own work in the asylum. The Crichton patient library contained thousands of books, many with illustrations for the patients to copy.

A member of the audience noted that most of the art looks very rational and shows no semblance of insanity. Dr Park suggested that putting the label ‘mad artist’ underneath the images gives a preconception. Nothing in many of the pictures really tells you that their creators are insane – however, it must also be remembered that ideas of insanity at that time were very different to today. It is also likely that Browne removed images that were either rude or showed insanity. He wished to demonstrate that the insane could often be lucid and produce examples of ‘sane’ art.

Noting that a number of drawings also have the name of the artist and the type of illness they were afflicted by, did Browne have the intention of connecting different types of art to different types of illness? Dr Park thought that this was probably one of Browne’s original intentions; however, this notion seems to have been abandoned quite early on. Browne is the only Scottish Physician Superintendent known to have collected art produced by patients at this time.

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