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# ***FEMALE ART BRUT: FROM ITS HISTORICAL BEGINNINGS TO CONTEMPORARY MAKERS***

by Monika Auch

## **Outsider Art or Art Brut**

The Outsider Art movement began in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe with an interest by psychiatrists in art work made by institutionalized psychiatric patients. The works were originally collected for teaching purposes. In 1922, psychiatrist and Art-historian **Hans Prinzhorn** (1886–1933) published his influential book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (*Bildnerei der Geisteskranken*). The book became a touchstone for the art scene, especially Surrealist **Max Ernst** and Modernist **Jean Dubuffet**. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychiatrists and artists, led by French artist Dubuffet, acknowledged the works as “art.” It was also during this period that Dubuffet coined the term, “Art Brut.” In 1949 he stated: “Art Brut encompasses all artworks produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture. These artists derive everything from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness

here to the completely pure artistic operation, raw, brute, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artists’ own impulses.”

## **Female Textile Art in Psychiatry**

Looking back throughout history, the precarious position of non-conforming women becomes clear. If women did not bend to society’s rules, perhaps because of a strong, independent character or mental illness, they could be and were easily locked up. Commitment to an asylum could be a punishment or, in cases of mental illness, a last resort since there were no cures available for the mentally ill. How did these women endure the extreme and often violent living conditions of an asylum? Locked up both physically and mentally, within a turmoil of anxiety and hallucinations, the touching of material and the making of objects or images could potentially offer relief. Textile





techniques were employed in psychiatric institutions as menial work for female patients. The repetitive actions of stitching, knitting, crochet or weaving (with an inherent obsessive quality) can have a soothing effect or adversely lead to a non-stoppable frenzy: opposing qualities which may induce mindfulness, calm or stress. When considering textile works within this context, multiple questions arise—are different states of mind reflected in the objects? Can crafting help to heal?

#### Stories from the Prinzhorn collection in Heidelberg

The **Sammlung Prinzhorn** in Heidelberg, Germany is named after its founder and hosts thematic exhibitions of international Outsider Art. In 2004 the exhibition *To Err is Female (Irre ist Weiblich)* showed works by female psychiatric patients which revealed dramatic life stories.

#### Johanna Natalie Wintsch

"An exalted beauty with mystical, satanic traces, which would have delivered her to the stake not so long ago." In 1917, **Johanna Natalie Wintsch** (1871–1944) was described as such by one of her doctors at the Psychiatric Institute Cery in Lausanne, Switzerland. The reasons behind her hospitalization were given as religious delusions and persecution mania: the diagnosis—incurable. Yet after eight years, at the age of 55 she was released into freedom as a patient spontaneously cured.

Left page: Outside View of Sammlung Prinzhorn in Heidelberg, Germany.

**Johanna Natalie Wintsch** *Eternal Love (In ewiger Liebe)* 1923, handkerchief, embroidered, 13½" x 13". © Sammlung Prinzhorn, Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg.





Wintsch came from a respected merchant's family which had fallen upon hard times. She cared for her widowed, tyrannical mother and contributed as a piano teacher to the education of her younger brothers. By the time she was thirty years old, all hopes for a life of her own including marriage were dashed. Women's frustrations in early 20<sup>th</sup> century society could not be easily voiced, and in Wintsch's case could not be easily suppressed. Her unseemly behavior characterized by screaming, sleeplessness and hallucinations led to her committal at an asylum by her brother and legal guardian.

Wintsch transformed her feelings and visions into embroidery while living for eight years between various institutions, creating a multitude of finely and carefully worked cloths. She dedicated her designs on paper and her textile works to the psychiatrists. Obeying a strict hierarchy within the medical system, lower ranked doctors would only get drawings while higher ranked "Oberärzte" received textile works with stitched, personal dedications. The brightly colored works contained a wealth of personalized symbols and stylized elements in the contemporary "Jugendstil" style, the German version of Art Nouveau. The more enlightened psychiatrists encouraged

Wintsch's associations rather than trying to control the "madness" and also attempted to guide her back into the real world. As a result, one of the doctors declared her state as a temporary crisis. "Return into life," he said, and she did. She was attracting attention, appealing for help, and succeeded in stitching her way out.

#### **Hedwig Wilms' Tray**

Until the introduction of psychopharmaca in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, unruly, anxious and aggressive patients were quietened by physical restriction. In that context, the delicately crocheted sculptural work of **Hedwig Wilms** (1874–1915) is not a textile still life or invitation to a tea party but a referral to force feeding with a tube and a jug. Her story is largely undocumented, but what we do know points in the direction of a psychosis ending in complete withdrawal from the world. Typical treatments included morphine-induced sleep or grueling bath cures. She died at age 41, weighing only 63 pounds.

*Hedwig Wilms Crocheted Tray with Can and Jug* ca. 1913–1915, cotton thread. © Sammlung Prinzhorn, Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg.



Her legacy of embroidered clothes can be interpreted as an attempt to assert her personality in an institution where each inhabitant was stripped of individuality.

#### **Agnes Richter's Personalized Jacket**

Inside the institutions, female patients were assigned menial tasks including embroidering linen or other useful items with decorations. These working conditions reflect the dark side of the situation many healthy creatives yearn for—unrestricted time and concentration without the pressure to succeed. Because of a scarcity of material, **Agnes Richter** (1844–1918) used grey coarse institutional linen to make herself a jacket which she embroidered on both sides. The intertwined, densely stitched letters and words refuse reading but are undoubtedly her life story and a claim to identity. She was a formerly

independent woman, having worked in America to build up assets. Her hospitalization was due to recurring episodes of anxiety and ended with her death, 25 years later. Her legacy of embroidered clothes can be interpreted as an attempt to assert her personality in an institution where each inhabitant was stripped of individuality.

#### **Juliette Elisa Bataille's Horror Vacui**

Seven textile works by **Juliette Elisa Bataille** (1896–unknown) were displayed in an exhibition on Art Brut in Amsterdam until August 25, 2019. In this remake of the original show staged in Paris in 1949, the textile works highlight their special tactile and visual qualities. Juliette Bataille was admitted to an institution at the age of 40 where she began to embroider with woolen yarns. The dense, coarse stitching covering the canvas evokes *horror vacui*. In visual art, *horror vacui* (from Latin

**Agnes Richter No Title** 1895, selfmade jacket, yarn, linen, woolen cloth, embroidered, 15¼" x 16½". © Sammlung Prinzhorn, Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg.





**Juliette Élisabeth Bataille** *Untitled* 1949, wool, cotton, cardboard, embroidered, 7¼" x 16". Photo: Atelier de numérisation, Ville de Lausanne.



**Anonymous** *Untitled*, crochet raffia, 7¾" x 7¼" x 2". Photo: Atelier de numérisation, Ville de Lausanne.



**Aradne** *Witchdoctor 4*, threads, machine-embroidered, 1½" x 4". © Collection Het Dolhuys, Haarlem.



"fear of empty space") is the filling of the entire surface of a space or an artwork with detail. The multi-layered approach is dynamic and intuitive and includes a decorative aspect that hints at folk art. Juliette gave her work to artist and collector Jean Dubuffet, who visited her frequently. Dubuffet's criteria for collecting were the rawness and authenticity of a work.

#### Aradne

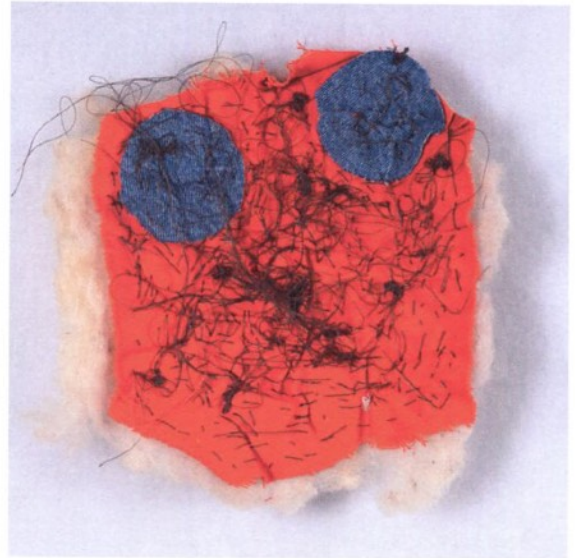
In 1949, Dubuffet shocked the Paris elite with his collecting practices. More recently, Art Brut is represented in commercial galleries and at Biennials, reflecting a fundamental change in society's perception of outsider art. In stark contrast with the 19<sup>th</sup> century hospitalized women discussed above, London-based artist **Aradne** communicates with the world via a blog. Aradne uses machine embroidery to create images that evoke the magic of her childhood spent in South Africa. There is also an underlying darkness: a sense of danger, excitement and fear. She stitches intuitively, straight onto the fabric, without drawing or acknowledging where the images come from.

#### Art Brut at Work

In 2018, I presented a lecture on "The Brain and Creativity" at the **Outsider Art Gallery** in Amsterdam. The gallery features work from talented artists with physical or developmental barriers. It is part of the **Hermitage Museum** and collaborates with the **Dutch Cordaan Institute**. At one of Cordaan's well-equipped facilities I visited Lavina Ngoesmin (1990), who has been working there since she was 17 years old. She started with painting and felting and then turned to making textile collages. She works intuitively, producing mainly stylized masks or abstract combinations of beaded strings and other materials. Her favorite themes are family and wildlife. Very focused and alert, she walks to and fro behind a long table covered with supplies, assembling her pieces. Her output is amazing!

The binding factor between 19<sup>th</sup> century female "Outsider" artists and contemporary nurtured talent is the urge to create, to communicate and to handle powerful emotions through material output. The healing effects of making through various craft practices are being acknowledged and researched by psychologists and neuroscientists, often in cooperation with artists. Institutions and schemes use crafting as a tool against stress and to strengthen mental balance. This is raw, instinctual art without pretense.

*—Artist and writer Monika Auch exchanged her career as a medical doctor in women's health for a focus in the arts. The Weeflab project promotes weaving as a combination of skills, networking and research. Auch developed and manages the international research project *stitch\_your\_brain*, an investigation into the hand-brain-axis and neurocognitive aspects of creativity. [weeflab.com](http://weeflab.com) | [stitchyourbrain.com](http://stitchyourbrain.com)*



Top: **Lavina Ngoesmin** *Untitled* 2018, collage, 7¾" x 8". Permission of parents of L.N.

Bottom: **Lavina Ngoesmin** portrait with hat. Photo: Efreem Stein. Permission of parents of L.N.