PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND PICTORIAL EXPRESSION

An International Iconographical Collection

Series 14

Between Eros and Thanatos

1. Leo Navratil, Klosterneuburg
   Mother Idols of an Imbecile

2. Alfred Bader, Lausanne
   The Phallic Mothers of Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern

3. Marisba Burckhardt, Basle
   The Moralist Giovanni Battista

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Foreword

Three artists of widely disparate personality and origin are presented here. We use the term "artist" quite deliberately in an evaluative sense. The pictorial work of these three is not only of psychopathological interest but also replete with striking and unusual features. If the affinities between imbecile Hans and primitive art and between Giovanni Battista and folk art are immediately apparent, Schröder-Sonnenstern's work is much more difficult to pinpoint. The Surrealists claim him for themselves, but it is certain that he set out from quite different mental premises. Be that as it may, all three artists are creative and original. All three are self-taught in the fullest sense of the word and never attended an art school. They found a distinctive technique and evolved a highly personal style. Common to all three artists, we believe, is the fact that their creative power was released by a psychosis. In saying this, we do not mean to suggest that the artistic quality of their works is due merely to a mental disorder; other personal factors and environmental influences are certainly involved here but it is difficult to identify them.

For a long time the notion was current that only schizophrenia could release creative power whereas other mental disorders could not. Undoubtedly schizophrenic art accounts for the major part of psychopathological art and may be regarded as its prototype, and perhaps even the prototype of authentic art of whatever kind. As experience broadened, however, it was found that schizophrenic mechanisms (and schizophrenic creativity) were also to be encountered in other psychoses and even among healthy subjects.

In none of our three artists can the diagnosis of schizophrenia be made with the same assurance as, say, in a man like Adolf Wölfl. In the case of Hans the influence of repeated psychotic phases on his work was directly observed; his work is certainly psychotic art even if it is not definitely schizophrenic. Some doubt has been thrown on the original psychiatric diagnosis of Schröder-Sonnenstern but his works look markedly schizophrenic. As for Giovanni Battista we can only conjecture a mental illness since there is no psychiatric assessment whatever of his personality. All the same, the numerous schizophrenic features of his art together with the sparse biographical data do give a certain warrant for assuming that a psychosis was present.

The authors responsible for the selection of pictures and texts established contact with the artists and their work in various ways. Perhaps it is this that lends a particular charm to their juxtaposition. What we want to do is to show the reader and viewer that there are on the margins of traditional art phenomena which suddenly throw unexpected flashes of light on our passage between Eros and Thanatos. This form of pictorial expression must not be referred to merely as "morbid", explained in terms of psychopathology, and dismissed. There are various springs, sometimes obscure, from which the human mind has evolved. Art is certainly one of them. Perhaps even the art of the mentally aberrant and, indeed, mentally ill.

A.B. / L.N.
1. Mother Idols of an Imbecile

Leo Navehill, Klosterneuburg

Plates 1–4

When Hans was born in 1926, he had two half-sisters aged twelve and thirteen; his mother was thirty-seven and a widow, her husband having been killed in World War I. Hans never knew his own father either. He was a coachman and died while Hans was still small; his mother was not married to him. Hans grew up in a town not very far from Vienna. He can recall his childhood well.

As a small child Hans was difficult; it was soon noticed that he was mentally retarded. The cause of his oligophrenia is unknown. Hans attended the school for educationally subnormal children but did not get beyond the second class. He never learnt to read, write or do arithmetic; he did not show any particular talent for drawing at school and did not draw at home. While still a child, however, he often had a mouth organ, which he liked playing.

During World War II Hans was with his mother in a resettlement camp in Lower Austria. When he was seventeen, he was sent to a mental home. Since Hans was 30, he has suffered from psychotic episodes: for some months he is often in an exalted mood, his self-confidence is enhanced, he is compulsively loquacious and very enterprising; intermittently he is prone to outbursts of passionate anger, averts he is disgusted with life and becomes ill-humoured and cantankerous. Insomnia at night and loss of weight mark these manifast phases; when they subside, Hans is usually quiet, low-spirited and sub-depressive; there is no severe depression. A conspicuous feature of his condition, however, is a curious aconative quality accompanying an apathetic and sometimes slightly euphoric mood. Hans may possibly be suffering from a ppropf schizophrenia; this is a question that must be left open.

Clinical observation has not been able to proceed beyond suspicion in this respect: for example, Hans has sometimes stopped his ears and felt disturbed by the voices of the other patients who—as he thought—had squeezed through the gap between the door and the floor and were walking about in dark spectacles, even at night. Hans also indulges in magic thinking: he believes that his sister will visit him if he is really angry and complains vociferously that she does not care about him; once he heard a bird call and thought this meant he would soon be back home; another time he suddenly confronted a fellow patient and said in an excited voice: “It’s your fault the weather is so bad!” Afterwards he smiled and could give no explanation for this statement. Hans is also slightly inclined to grinning.

Undoubtedly the drawings Hans first did in his 34th year during a psychotic episode are of a schizophrenic character. Hans had never done any drawing before. Most of the drawings were executed in response to an invitation—not within the group, however, and quite without extraneous influence—but some were spontaneous work. The patient’s artistic ability promptly appeared as a distinct drawing technique and remained with him after the acute psychosis had subsided.

![Image of drawings]
Psychological examination (I am indebted to Dr. Johanna Dachler for making over the results to me) revealed the following at the time:

In the Rorschach test Hans offered numerous anatomical interpretations although entirely ignorant of the correct nomenclature of the various parts of the body. He coined words like "shoulder tip", "side skin", "closing end"; he saw "talons" and "paws", and gave a white space response and a pure colour response. The Hamburg-Wechsler test for adults gave him an overall IQ of 51. Hans’s performance was worst in the digit-span test, arithmetic and block design test, where he scored no points at all. He had no numerical concepts and was unable to repeat two digits after the examiner without practice; general knowledge, general comprehension and his grasp of concrete forms were also very poor. In object assembly it was noticeable that Hans had a tendency to make ornamental patterns out of the parts without taking the concrete form into account. Hans was rather better at finding the classes of objects, at picture completion, at picture arrangement and at the digit-symbol test. His comprehension appeared to be superior to his powers of reasoning. (The test was repeated six years later with almost the same result.)

The female portraits reproduced below show how Hans would draw during a remission (b, c) and during his maniform states (a, e). The abundance of head hair is a precise indication of mood and condition. When he was in an elated mood, Hans also showed the teeth; (figure d was executed in a transitional stage).

Plate 1 (1966): Hans draws slowly; his stroke is powerful and is often intensified by going over the same place several times. This stroke is the basic element of his technique and in his own way he is highly original.

Hans likes to draw women's hair in scribbled coils. By dint of habit and practice this method has become a technique of his, a characteristic of his style, a mannerism. He can, of course, also draw straightforward hair. Hans draws abundant hair, as seen in this picture, only when in his manic mood.

This extravagant depiction of hair seems to be countered by the straight lines in the region of the body. Symmetry, parallelism, rectangularity, and simple geometrical figures are the results of an ordering tendency. These formal categories provide a counterbalance to the affective and expressive elements.

The diamond shape in the middle of the woman's body is a symbol of the female genitals which Hans likes to place at different levels in his figures of women (sometimes even in the throat). In later drawings Hans interpreted the curved parallel lines in the lower part of the picture either as decoration or as buttocks. The circular patterns on either side of the head are also said to be a "decoration".

Plate 2 (1968): Hans drew this lively picture representing a woman ice-skater fairly quickly. On several occasions he had watched women skaters on television performing compulsory and free figures and had been very impressed. The smaller figure represents a judge with a number card in his hand. Characteristically the man's ears are showing. The navel can also be seen in both figures in spite of the many layers of clothing. The ice-skater herself has the most luxuriant hair (again represented by whorls), bosoms and a bell-skirt, which probably took shape through contamination with the legs. It might be that the movement, i.e. the dancing on the ice, is reproduced by the many folds of the skirt and/or by many legs. This picture also recalls something Ferenczi wrote: "I saw a woman with a fan in the place of her genitals; she walked on this fan, her legs were cut off". At all events the plate radiates a pronounced eroticism; it contains a very marked
genital symbolism but the geometrisation and the impression created of masking and disguise suggest that approach is impossible.

Plate 3 (1966): Hans drew this hearse from memory. The hospital has a hearse which is not unlike this drawing in appearance. The female figures on the roof of the carriage are “angels”; Hans may possibly have seen such ornamentation on another vehicle of a similar kind; only the excessive size of these angels is at variance with objective experience. The combination of the carriage with the cross on the left side of the picture is due to contamination; it recalls the cross which is borne in front of the funeral procession. When Hans was drawing the hearse, he often spoke of dying; he was discontented with his protracted detention in the hospital and was weary of life; it was a depressive trait in his manifest mood. The manifest element is expressed in the expansiveness of details, in the richness of details, in the pressure exerted on the pencil and crayon and, last but not least, in the decorative red hubs on the wheels; the depressive element comes out in the subject itself and in the predominance of black. The exclusive or nearly exclusive use of black and red is indicative of a manic-depressive mixed state. (Such mixed states are associated with the schizophrenic and the artistic.) With its box-like shape this motor car is comparable to the womb. In the drawing it also represents the outside lapse of the two angels whose female sex is recognizable by their luxuriant hair. Hans does not draw just human figures and predominantly maternal women; more frequently still he takes technological objects, aircraft, rockets, motor cars and warships as his subjects. From examination of his work as a whole it is clearly apparent that the technical details correspond to the organs of the human body. Headlamps—as for instance on the hearse—are meant to be eyes; the windows are eyes too; but eyes can also symbolize the male or female genitalia at the same time. The cross—including the window crosses in our drawing—mean a barrier, a prohibition (the cross is also a castration symbol). What was said of the windows also holds for the wheels and all forms consisting of concentric circles, which are a common formal element in our patient’s drawings. Every activity and every work can be more or less sexualized or desexualized. All objects in artistic representations are in general more strongly sexualized than the same objects when scientifically treated or illustrated for objective purposes. The drawings of our patient Hans display many childish features but are distinguishable from children’s drawings by, among other characteristics, their more marked sexuality.

Plate 4 (1966): Hans did this drawing shortly before the subsidence of a manic phase. It was followed by a depressive afterwave. In this drawing there are some intimations of inhibition even though the mood is still far from depressive. Organizational categories are very conspicuous here. Multi-contours such as are seen round the upper body of the figure (there is a quintuple contour which is ribbon-like in parts) are a schizophrenic symptom. The thin arms with the constriction at the wrists and the finger tips pressed together are a sign of motor inhibition. The curious dish-like framing of the face and the clarity of the features are striking. Most schizophrenic of all in the impression created by the face is the mask-like rigidity, the expressiveness, the heavy charge of sexual symbolism and the paranoid gaze. The monochromatic flatness of the upper body contrasts with the full bosoms and the distortions of the figure which are suggestive of movement. The face and the middle of the body with the belt buckle are seen from the front, but the upper body from the side. This distortion is another feature of schizophrenic creative work. The way the space between the right arm and the body is filled seems to be completely unreal; what appears here may be a particular view of the skirt reproduced in the style of analytical cubism and associated with the curious twisting motions. It is noteworthy that the necklace is shown in a manner appropriate to the two views, each of which is projected in a single plane. The blue flower decorating the lady’s bosom is doubly contoured and also transparent, thereby revealing the stamens. The manner in which the hair is drawn here is quite uncharacteristic of Hans; each hair is drawn singly and a large number of tiny spirals are made up into a broad surface which is, however, strictly organized and sharply demarcated. Besides its formalism, deformation and symbolism, the drawing is also remarkable for its expressive power. The body appears in motion, the arms are poised and graceful, and the dress with its various accessories radiates elegance; the female allure lies in the abundance of hair whereas the face is rather masculine, impertinent and even frightening.

Visual art can be sexually symbolic in three ways. The artistic activity, the creative act, can be charged with infantile libido; anal, sadomasochistic, urethral, phallic-aggressive and exhibitionist-voyeuristic connotations can be observed. Further, certain formal elements recurring in a variety of contexts can be interpreted as sexual symbols. Thus the diamond-shaped motif is found not only in the female figures but also in the aeroplanes Hans draws; his rockets often have “teeth”, and the vanes of his helicopters are decorated with a “snake line”. Finally the objects drawn and their parts have a sexually symbolic value. The house and the car have a predominantly female character for Hans whereas warships, aircraft, rockets, gun barrels, and lightning conductors are masculine symbols.

If drawing permits a certain abreaction of partial sexual impulses, it also exercises at the same time a certain control over these impulses; it is a confrontation with a You; and it is an act of self-discovery. These tendencies to inhibit the instinctual also find symbolic expression in the act of drawing and the drawings themselves. A single stroke and its production are for Hans not just the satisfaction of an impulse but also an act of self-control, the establishment of order, and the expression of power and ability. The formal element of the circle with an internal pattern (concentric internal circles, points, crosses) is not merely a genital symbol but also, and to a greater extent, a symbol of the eye as the organ of control and supervision. The cross and the straight lines intersecting at right angles not only intimate taboos but also create a uniform and organized
structure and portray objects of the external world. The motifs represented are in the last analysis depictions of the self and—to a dominant extent in the present series—representations of a female-maternal, dominating partner.

Hans has developed an original technique. To what does he owe his ability? Has he an inborn talent for drawing? If talent for drawing is interpreted as the ability to copy complicated figures from an original, then Hans has very little gift. In copying he gives evidence of optical or constructive apraxia (Kleist); moreover, he often reports the number of the objects he sees (e.g., the fingers of one hand) incorrectly. Hans is partly indebted to this defect for his artistic achievements. He is also indebted to it for the fact that he sets himself disproportionately large tasks, thereby (a) transcending his "mistakes" and (b) not even noticing them; thus the manifest enhancement of his self-assurance and drive and his diminished critical faculty also enter as factors in the artistic character of this artist. On the other hand it is observable that Hans is greatly impressed by visual experiences and that his drawings sometimes reflect these experiences. Thus visually perceived structures are reproduced in part or with alterations and often with significant details of objects he has seen and found particularly attractive. Thus there may be in him a talent for recording visual experiences which, even though disturbed, is nonetheless pronounced.

Hans may also have an inborn talent for composition, a gift for rhythmic-decorative arrangement.

Creative works done by schizophrenics are characterized by four main features from which the almost infinite number of single features can be derived: formalism, deformation, symbolism and physiognomisation. All these phenomena are conspicuous in the drawings done by our patient. It is unlikely that Hans would ever have developed his particular artistic technique without his psychotic abnormality, even though the type of psychosis—as often happens in oligophrenics—is very difficult to classify. "Schizophrenic creative tendencies" occur, as we now know, not only in schizophrenics in the narrow sense but also in other psychoses.

The "schizophrenic creative tendencies" (tendency to formalism, deformation, symbolism and physiognomisation) are the basic creative functions of man. They enable him to work independently on the traditional schemata.

Our patient Hans has not had his sensibilities spoiled by the process of civilization. His cerebral impairment prevents him from reproducing complicated figures correctly but he is capable of extracting simple forms from his environment and depicting them; their creative transformation is due to the psychosis*.

*It would seem that similar conditions were responsible for the extraordinary artistic achievements of the patient Jean described by Bader (Though this be madness, Thames & Hudson, London 1961, published by A. Bader in collaboration with J. Cocteau, G. Schmidt and H. Stock). There are striking similarities between the work of this patient and the drawings by our patient Hans. There may be a particular species of psychopathological art which arises from the combination of oligophrenia and psychosis (Bader, however, did not think his patient Jean was oligophrenic but rather a culturally unspoiled "personnalité ruste" of low intelligence).
"My mother was a singer and when she was traveling in the north express from Paris to Petersburg—all blue and golden coaches—her time came and I was born at the very moment the sleeper was exactly between the German and Russian boundary posts. And now the Germans don't want me, and the Russians don't want me either!" Friedrich Schröder is fond of starting the story of his adventurous life in these words. He loves anecdotal pictures and knows how to compose them. But in reality things were very different! We have very few exact details about him, however, and the reconstruction of his biography is like a jigsaw puzzle from which a number of pieces are missing. Out of this barren ground a legend with only too many trimmings has arisen.

Friedrich was born on September 11, 1892 at Kueckenese, in the Tilsit district, the second of thirteen children. His father, a postman, said to be a drunkard; all we know of his mother was that she was "nervously excitable". One of his brothers was mentally ill and died in the Allenberg asylum in 1916.

According to welfare office records Friedrich's parents did little about his education. They always took him back under their wing again after his many escapades and accustomed him to drink when he was only ten. During his eight years at school in the village of Kuckelmen his knowledge was judged to be adequate but his laziness and bad behavior gave constant cause for complaint. Mr. S., his teacher, described him as "morally a very depraved boy, defiant, deceitful, malicious and mendacious, on whom all the discipline of the school has been lost."

Because of vagrancy, theft and acts of violence Friedrich was committed to a school for delinquents when he was fourteen. After two years in this institution he was sent to serve an apprenticeship as a gardener but failed to make good and had to be sent back to the institution for a further eighteen months. In March 1910 he started an apprenticeship on a dairy farm but ran away shortly afterwards and became a vagrant. In 1912 we find him on another dairy farm where, after four weeks, he suddenly expressed the preposterous idea that he would himself take the place of the dairyman and run the farm. Shortly afterwards he suffered bouts of excitement which resulted in his first admission on May 17, 1912 to the Allenberg asylum, where he remained for seven months. During his detention he was excited and violent for some time and gave voice to megalomaniac and delusion ideas: "he was the cleverest man on earth and in heaven, he was ordained to convert mankind, he had designed a car which could travel at 3600 kilometers per hour, driven by steam or electricity."

"Dementia praecox" was the diagnosis reached by the asylum. The few documents still extant suggest that the doctors had no doubt at the time that he was suffering from an acute schizophrenic episode.

After his release Friedrich led a vagrant life, interrupted by arrests for begging and homosexual practices, until in 1917 he was called up for military service. After a short period of observation in the psychiatric clinic of Königsberg he had to be discharged as unfit for service because of a mental disorder. He then travelled around the country as a sutler and finally opened a shop of his own which had to close when he was summoned on a charge of fraud. As in the other criminal proceedings taken against him he was found unfit to plead.

Following an "audacious theft of a horse" he was once more kept under observation and in 1918 placed under care in the Allenberg asylum. The medical report confirmed the original diagnosis and came to the conclusion that "he is not responsible for his offenses... he is regarded as a queer-minded, eccentric dreamer... he is morbidly changed in all his thoughts, actions, erratic and unstable, weak in judgment, taking his cue not from specific aims and objects but from fantastic delusional ideas and haphazard impulses."

After this observation Friedrich was sent to the town mental hospital of Tilsit and from there to the Tapiau mental asylum, where, after a total of eighteen months, he was set free again on April 12, 1919 and returned to his parents. Six months later, on October 10, 1919, he disappeared to Berlin.

It is legitimate to speak of his disappearance, for Friedrich lived for more than ten years in the capital under the false name of Gustav Gnass, during which time he notified seventeen different changes of address to the authorities. An old police report has the following to say: "At the end of the war Gnass, under the name 'Elott, the sun king' or 'Elott, the children's friend', founded a new Christian sect which had thousands of adherents particularly in the south of Berlin in the suburbs of Schöneberg and Steglitz. Gnass and his disciples collected contributions with which they would buy food for the destitute population. My investigations showed that, although donations came in very freely, he did not enrich himself... His followers also got him to tell their fortunes. When I pointed out to him that he was contravening the penal law, he immediately desisted from this part of his activities. As stated, his followers numbered thousands and particularly in his immediate entourage there were a number of people holding high positions—I did not, however, find any police officials amongst them. Although there was at the time no reason for police or court action, I nevertheless maintained a watch on the movement so as to be able to intervene when necessary. In time Gnass lost the majority of his Berlin followers but acquired new adherents in Northern Germany, who also generously supported his movement. When he lost his following there and was unable to find work because of his illness, he was so poor that he had to seek refuge in workhouses. He then turned to me and asked me to find him some kind of job. In the light of my detailed inquiries and observations I took Gnass to be a harmless, not quite normal person. I have not seen him for several years."

From other reports, however, it appears that Friedrich, under the name of Gustav Gnass, together with the fortune-teller and palmist Martha Möller and other accomplices, engaged in systematic fraud in the following period. Officially he described himself as a "psychographist" but his field of activities included, besides fortune-telling, animal magnetism and astrology, various frauds ranging from fraudulent offers of marriage for pecuniary gain to blackmail. For these purposes Gustav Gnass became "Prív Councillor Professor Eliot Gnass von Sonnenstern, Ph.D., Specialist Psychologist in University Studies" and "Director of the Sonnenstern Film Company", the latter existing only on pretentious notepaper.

In 1930 the career of the Privy Councillor came to an abrupt end because Baroness von X., who had willingly given him not only her money and credence but also her body, was convicted for blackmail to the tune of 150,000 marks. The Privy Councillor had to go to gaol for five months.
The medical report made at that time by the neurological department of the prison hospital of Stadelheim near Munich refused to accept that he was a mental case and spoke of his “pseudological tendencies, psychopathic degeneration and hysterical traits”. Friedrich spent two more years in Berlin and received two more sentences during this time. From the autumn of 1931 onwards he travelled through various small towns in North Germany on the pretext of selling health salves.

Two more convictions for infringement of the law concerning the practice of medicine show that he was still operating as a magnetotherapist. On November 28, 1933 he was committed after another offence to the psychiatric hospital in Neustadt (Holstein) where he was detained until February 26, 1934. The report made on him there described him as mentally responsible and dismissed mental disease in the narrow sense of the term.

From February 1934 onwards there are no records of any kind and all we know with any certainty is that at the beginning of the war he was working in a Luftwaffe depot as a storeman and was later found unfit for service. How he managed to escape the Nazi campaign for the “elimination of worthless lives” will no doubt remain a mystery for ever. After the war he made his way by selling old wood he had collected; often he had to wear all the clothes he possessed in order to keep warm.

In 1949 or 1950 Friedrich began to draw regularly under the name Schröder-Sonnenstern. The legend goes that his life companion “Aunt Martha” (the aforementioned palmist Martha Möller) said to him one day: “Don’t talk so much, sit down on your behind and paint!” Friedrich also maintains that he once saw a “lunatic painter” at work in the Neustadt asylum. Actually the case history there contains eighteen pencil drawings signed “Gnass von Sonnenstern”. There appear to have been no drawings done in the intervening period. At all events in 1950 Friedrich met the painter Juro Kubicek, who was interested in his works, and the gallery proprietor Rudolf Springer, who bought the first twenty of them. This was the start of a new chapter in Friedrich’s life.

It was not long before the self-taught Friedrich Schröder was earning a competence as an artist. Although at exhibitions in the sixties his pictures were repeatedly the cause of scandal and were sometimes confiscated as indecent, his artistic reputation was assured once the Surrealists had invited him to their international exhibition at the Galerie Cordier in Paris in 1959–1960. In 1962 Carl Laszlo in Basle and Dr. Peter Gorsen in Frankfurt each published a book about him; in 1963 we in collaboration with Ernst Ansorge made the first documentary film about him (“Friedrich der Einzige”, SANDOZ film distributors) and in 1967–68 the City Art Gallery of Düsseldorf became the first official institution to put on public show a comprehensive retrospective exhibition of his work which attracted large numbers of visitors without occasioning scandal. Today Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern is part of art history.

We have recounted Friedrich Schröder’s story in some detail because we feel that his pictures must be understood as reflecting his life in a manner congruent with his personality. This is also the view of Peter Gorsen when he writes that the schizophrenic work of art, functioning vicariously for the defensive powers of its creator’s mind, may assume an extra-aesthetic function, namely that of serving to preserve the ego. “This is also the position with Schröder-Sonnenstern who, with advancing years, abandons his compensatory roles as leader in the guise of magnetotherapist, fortune-teller, prophet, and denouncer, along with the self-created character of ‘Eliot von Sonnenstern’ and exchanges them for pictorial mythologems of his own invention.” With that we can safely leave aside the controversy that has arisen round the diagnosis of Sonnenstern’s malady; although doubts may be legitimately voiced as to whether the diagnosis of schizophrenia can be sustained today, no one will question that the painter’s works belong to the field of “schizophrenic art”. Within the compass of this introduction we can neither discuss these questions in greater detail and search his pictures for schizophrenic features nor analyse and interpret their incredibly rich symbolic content with any claim to exhaustiveness. This will be the purpose of a special monograph.

We have selected four coloured crayon works of Sonnenstern which are a testimony to the marked artistic qualities of his work and also throw a special light on the motivation of his work in terms of depth psychology. Significantly, one of the most striking features of Sonnenstern’s character is that he can be a great “show off” and is capable of really terrifying other people with his famous rages while, on the other hand, he very quickly knuckles under to quiet authority. His incredible boasting about his sexual achievements is in flagrant contrast to his actual abilities, which are reflected in his choice of a partner. His “worthy” companion, Aunt Martha, was truly able to “hold him in check” for forty years until her death, and although he abused her abominably, he very nearly broke down when he lost her. She was a solicitous mother to him although he was in constant opposition to her. The great Sonnenstern was like a child with Aunt Martha, even in her later years when she was weakened by old
age, and although he was no doubt obstreporous and stamp'd on the floor, he nevertheless toed the line in the end. The fact that he always called his life-long companion "Aunt" speaks volumes! Running through his life like a continuous thread is his wish to figure conspicuously as a leader figure while, behind this outward show, he is capable of a comically incongruent submissiveness when the situation warrants. Letters from prison bear eloquent testimony to this. One is forced to the conclusion that much the same situation prevails in the sexual field.

Gorsen has analysed the conflict of opposite principles as it constantly recurs in Schedros's mythology in the form of the antithesis between the moon world and moon morals and the resplendent sun star (Sonnenstern). This situation of conflict receives artistic expression "in the sexual context" in the "grotesque coupling" of male and female sexual characteristics. "In his notebooks which are crammed with wishful anal-sadistic imaginings and fantasies of defecation there is, characteristically enough, not a single description of heterosexual union whereas the unconscious representation of such a union is the very theme running through the actual symbolic pictures". "The fantastic pornograms of abnegation" (as Gorsen cogently expressed it) "must accordingly have a liberating function for the sexual infatuation of their author and it is this that provides the creative impulse of his art." We shall therefore attempt, by reference to our four illustrations, to shed light on the pathological relationship of the painter with his mother, although all objective information on the subject is lacking.

Plate 1: "The Bet Demon of all Spiritual Encompassments"

This picture is one of the strictly symmetrical compositions which are relatively common in Sonnenstern's work. In content they are always static, symbolic, with no plot. On a central mandala "is enthroned a winged and horned sphinx which may be interpreted as a hermaphroditic symbol of the great mother god". That Sonnenstern should have drawn his spirited signet round the navel as the "vital site of birth" and also on the centre of the mandala seems to us to be particularly significant in this late version of the picture (cf. a version made thirteen years earlier in which a number of details are missing). The "arch-like, enveloping sky which embraces almost invariably antagonistic happenings (female-male, fertile-sterile, good-evil, living-dead) like a dome" described by Gorsen is also present here along with two phallic cloud formations missing from the other version. "The threatened inner equilibrium of the painter seeks to preserve itself in the archetypal skeletons of the round, complete and perfect". On closer examination (and particularly on comparison with other pictures by Schedros) the "Bet Demon" is seen to be not only the great, all-embracing mother but also and unquestionably a phallos itself.

Plate 6: "The Hawk of Peace Carries the Angel of Peace to Elysium"

This dynamic composition is comparatively poor in the symbolic details so characteristic of Sonnenstern. One almost fails to notice that the angel of peace is wearing a phallic ring as an anchor over her heart form. The snake-like, or more precisely eel-like ears, displayed by both figures appear in almost every drawing by Sonnenstern since the fifties. The absence of eyes from these ears in earlier versions make their phallic aspect even more pronounced. There, as an example of the way in which an originally unmistakable symbol was subsequently disembled.

With reference to another picture Gorsen has convincingly shown the analogy between the bared teeth of the mouth and the "vagina dentata"—an event which is right in seeing in the "hawk of peace" not only an embodiment of evil from the moon world which fixes its teeth in the bright angel (the good mother) but also an entirely direct representation of the wicked mother holding the phallus prisoner—altogether a fascinating picture of the painter's fear of castration!

Plate 7: "The Moon-Moral Comic-Dramatic Tragedy of Jealousy"

The underlying theme here is very similar. Only when one has a knowledge of Schedros's mythology as a whole and of his constant tendency to fuse opposites does it become apparent that the figure which appears to be pronouncedly male at first sight—the dragon—and the other which immediately strikes the beholder as markedly female are in fact sexually indeterminate. The dragon-snake is not only has phallic significance but is also the wicked all-devouring mother. The female figure, however, with whom Friedrich attempts but invariably fails to identify himself, acquires through the phallic accentuation of her breasts the significance of an innocent because impotent victim. Furthermore, the destructive female dragon is like the archaic form of the immortal Ouroboros; the wicked mother will not only be victorious but will also survive!

Plate 8: "The Curse of the Plough"

Gorsen has found an astonishing parallel to this picture: "In a picture bearing the title 'The Curse of the Plough' the phallic significance of tilling the female ground is evident. Twelve 'moon women' in six pairs are harnessed to the plough and driven by a hermaphroditic monster, half man and half animal, who walks behind the plough. He wields a mighty whip with a lash trailing over the long team into the deep background (depicted without perspective and hence ravine-like in appearance) varying, as it were, the theme of the impregnating plough into the void and the libidinous. The trivial art of the Middle Ages affords a parallel of great interest in terms of the history of symbolism and makes the unconscious meaning of the picture completely clear. A woodcut dated 1332 shows the 'maidens without marriage prospects driving the plough'—an event which is said to have taken place regularly during the Shrove tide Carnival on the Rhine and in Franconia. The practice was for the single girls and old maids who had not married during the carnival to be bound together by the unmarried men on Ash Wednesday, harnessed to a plough and, with whips cracking or a piper playing on horseback, to be driven into a pool. In Swabia it is said that, instead of a plough, a harrow bound together with briars was used. A sower scattered seed so that men would grow for the unmarried girls."

In spite of this striking parallel we believe a different interpretation may be made of this picture in view of the psycho-
logical situation of the painter. In response to the question what the picture meant, Friedrich Schröder replied: “I don’t know yet, it is a moral-revolutionary idea—reformatory—I pictured to myself the way they harness a human being.” Since he had spent years in a reformatory, there is no doubt about the figures with which he can identify himself in the picture. Thus we are tempted to see once again in the hermaphroditic figure on the right the wicked mother who through the plough becomes a definite phallic mother whereas the good mothers in harness no doubt represent the identification the artist seeks. The fact that the rope on which the figures are hauling has an eye right at the front and the plough is dotted with eyes shows in a typically schizophrenic way that here there is and can be no escape.

Gorsen believes that “the function of the symbol in preserving sense against the schizophrenic disorder acquires an excessive fetishist significance.” In the case of Schröder-Sonnenstern we may legitimately speak of a true phallic fetishism, for there is scarcely a picture of his without phallic symbols. Boss wrote in this connection: “Hitherto we could show a fetish was truly of phallic importance only in men whose pattern of existence was such that they had been unable to incorporate enough of their masculinity into their own ego system. And precisely because of this they had to experience some of their masculinity imaginatively in fetish form just as one always yearns to obtain from elsewhere what one has not got oneself. For these degenerate types, who are hardly ever capable of introducing human existence into their world of their own accord, the phallic mother image must, in a way normally only found in early infancy, represent and replace everything that is missing—and indeed the whole of male-female existence.”

Thus Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern always remained his mother’s prisoner.

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3 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 130
4 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 131
5 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 135
6 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 129
7 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 133, Fig. 127
8 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 140
9 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 150
10 Gorsen: “Pygmalion” p. 127
Giovanni Battista was born in 1895, the son of poor peasants in Upper Italy. Today he is living with his wife and daughter in a 3-room flat on the outskirts of a small town, having been pensioned off from the ceramics factory where he worked. Giovanni is a frail old man with a beard and a hermit-like appearance. He is impatient by temperament, his facial expression is lively and changeable, his gait full of nervous energy. Usually he sits at home, engrossed in his handwork, rarely speaking for months, pressing on with his work from morning till evening like someone possessed. Only in the presence of the rare visitor interested in his work will he open the floodgates of his confused fluency of speech: “It is the gift of the creator who puts these whisperings into my brain; I obey like a tame bird”, he says, or again, “My head is a volcano, I see things which torment my soul!” The nature of this creative tempest has not yet been investigated, but his wife confirms that her husband is a prey to bouts of fear to which he is succumbing more and more: “At first he painted a lot of holy things but a short time ago he began to paint only ugly things, black thoughts; he sees a vile world. All the same now and then he makes something beautiful, but I don’t like all his many monsters and skeletons.”

These words reveal the real tragedy of Giovanni: the fact that he is torn between the ordered external world and the turmoil of his inner vision against which he contends with all the fervour of his creative temperament. His persistent attempt to abolish this conflict is manifested in his appearance and in his work. Artist, moralist and pagan saint, he shields himself from his environment when he goes forth by assuming the attributes of a missionary protest: his shoulder-length hair, the ring with the tiny skull, the painted tie with the grave-digger over the skeleton, the walking-stick carved and brightly painted to represent the stations of his long life from the hour of his conception to the time after his death. On Good Friday he carries another huge ornament: a heavy crucifix with a weird figure of Christ covered with spots which, in defiance of the priest’s veto, he drags “sulla montagna” in a spirit of sacrifice and defiance. One of the many inscriptions on this cross reads: “WHAT IS BETTER A HARMLESS MAD OLD MAN WITH AN UNEKEMP BEARD AND LONG UNTIDY HAIR—OR MANY PEOPLE WITH OUTWARDLY A FINE APPEARANCE BUT HIDDEN IN THEIR POCKET REVOLVERS, DAGGERS, SKELETON KEYS, STILETOS OR LONG KNIVES?”

This conflict is still more apparent in Giovanni’s work. On the one hand it evidences a commonplace naturalism immobilized in conventions; Giovanni paints to order pictures in the style of popular Baroque votive gifts for pilgrims. On the other hand his work reveals great creative power and originality particularly in semi-sculptural and sculptural works; it is obvious that Giovanni’s states of anxiety interact with his pictorial expression. These works he did for his own satisfaction—all our examples in the picture section of this folder—show clearly recognizable Manneristic elements of style in great variety: the predilection for hidden sagacity and mysterious symbolism; the urge towards the strange; the surprise element in the conception of the pictorial idea; the preference for the frontal, symmetrically ordered presentation; for the double face; for single parts of the body such as eyes, ears, tongues, and hands; for the use of the mirror, masks, and the death motif.

An astonishing feature of these creations, besides the technical skill they display, is the raw material hidden under plaster and paint. Giovanni uses every bit of domestic scrap that comes to hand: pieces of paper, cardboard and wood, metal foil from cigarette and chocolate packs, fragments of broken mirror, teeth from combs, nylon bristles, bits of thread, boot laces, scraps of leather, cloth leftovers, pieces of fur, rabbit’s feet, bird’s feathers, seed vessels and seeds, legumes, plastic flowers, felt hats, electric cable, chestnut shells, catskins, fish bones, branches of evergreens, cherry stones, olive stones, snail-shells, rubber balls, sea-shells, empty egg-shells, etc. etc. And to go with them plaster, glue from Bologna and sawdust.

Giovanni’s irrespressible urge for decoration, his pleasure in colour and the glitter of mirrors and metal foils is paraded throughout the flat. The effect is breath-taking: Not only do his idols and demons, crammed between worthy landscapes, coruscate from every wall but all the pieces of furniture—the angular chest, the curvaceous sofa, the castle-like buffet—are encrusted with colour and decorated with heavy symbolism. And in all this Giovanni must submit to a continuous process of purification: any lucky mementos he produces in the form of butterflies, keyboards and pictures are tolerated and sold, but if he presents monsters and skeletons they are first banned to the lavatory and later consigned to the cellar. In the hordes of this cellar, then, there accumulate, broken and dust-covered, whatever demonic ideas have possessed Giovanni’s imagination.
Giovanni is a borderline case both as a human being and as an artist, a dancer on the tightrope over a deep abyss between those opposed and indefinable shores of the mind called “allowed” and “not allowed”, “healthy” and “sick”, “human being” and “case”. But it is also this equivocal position that gives the borderline case of Giovanni Battista its attraction, its iridescent charm which eludes the fixed concepts of spheres where everything is tagged and docketed.

Plate 11a: Tongue heart
This anxious heart of 1968, decorated in folk style, takes as its theme the linked ideas of eye + ear + brain = wicked words. In the artist's far-fetched explanation of the shield the two masks are the eye and the ear, the faithful servants of the brain. The thorns along the glittering mica-overlaid tongues symbolize the pain caused by wicked words.

Plate 11b: Insects
These fantastic creatures are taken from Giovanni's huge and diversified range of insects. "The creeping things are our thoughts, for there is a creature hidden in every thought", is Giovanni's explanation. Almost invariably these fetishes are a fusion of man and insect. Man in respect of the constrained and cryptic faces emerging from the pattern; insect in respect of the insect-like mounting of the body on wire legs and the fanciful variety of the wings. The small female goblin with the mirror-like genitals and the brush-like ends on her antennae is about four inches in height; the leaf insect on the right is a particularly good example of the artist's partiality for metal foil; the gnome in the upper centre has a second insect sitting on its forehead, and the pattern scratched in the green-painted silver foil and the glass chips glued on for eyes, mouth and nose bring a glitter to the grotesque creature on the left.

Plate 12: La donna ambiziosa
The “donna ambiziosa” dates from 1968. Today Giovanni is concerned almost exclusively with death. Thus this figure of an inhuman woman, 80 cm high, is a symbol of the transitoriness of the flesh. The creeping things become the worms of death: "TO BE ELEGANT PEOPLE GO IN FOR SLIMMING. AND THEN ONE DAY UNDER THE ASPECT OF THESE WORMS OUR BONES WILL END WITHOUT FLESH". The mirror held up on the right is the eye, symbol of the directing conscience; on its reverse side is the family symbolizing creation and fertility. The naked man on the left probably represents life; the reverse side of the mirror shows death. —The side view reveals particularly well the extreme tension of the figure. The greenish-yellow insect on her back consists of a hare's foot from which the flesh has been picked, leaving the fur and claws—a leftover from the house kitchen.