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Drug Addiction and Painting

Mystic Symbolism in the Pictures of a Young Drug Addict

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Mystic Symbolism in the Paintings of a Young Drug Addict

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In recent years pictorial works produced spontaneously by artists painting and drawing under the influence of drugs have been collected and analysed in increasing numbers. Drawing tests have also been carried out with both healthy subjects and mental patients during LSD and psilocybin trials.

According to Masters and Houston¹ the psychedelic experience reflected in such paintings exhibits the following main characteristics: easier access to unconscious material, relaxation of the borders of self, liberation and enhanced flexibility of thought, greater vigilance or concentration, hypersensitivity to visual impressions – particularly of a symbolic and mythological kind – and regressive ego functions, sometimes associated with a capacity for profound religious and mystic experiences.

Additional light may be shed on this state of mind by our observations of a highly gifted patient, V.M., a schizoid drug addict who, in his paintings and drawings, interprets his problems in terms of transcendental philosophy. When he is unable to verbalize the components of his rich inner experience, he expresses them in peculiarly original pictures which, in style and content, have a certain resemblance to surrealist and psychedelic works of art. Ideas, images and emotions are blended in a process which is felt to have an inner logic of its own and releases feelings of a new autognosis, a transformation of the self through religious enlightenment culminating in ‘mystic union’.

* * *

V.M., who is now 20 years of age, is an only child. His maternal grandmother and his mother are academically trained painters. He was an excellent pupil with a gift for foreign languages and read a great many books on philosophy and religion. However, in his relations with other people, he was always egocentric and reserved. As a child his favourite subjects for drawing and painting were landscapes and flowers. On completing his secondary schooling he attended the Academy of Art and Graphic Design. At this time his mother obtained a divorce; the boy remained with her without paternal supervision.

In 1968, following the example of others, he began to take drugs occasionally, sometimes smoking hashish, and also started to drink. For this reason he was unable to continue at the academy and was admitted to hospital. In hospital he married another patient, who was older than he was. She was of a manic disposition and had also been hospitalized for drug addiction. His mother refused to recognize the marriage, and his protests left her un moved. In 1970 he lapsed into a state of depression and was tormented by thoughts of suicide during abstinence from morphine. It was during this period that he produced the first three pictures in this series (Pictures 1–3). He began to read widely about Christianity, Buddhism and yoga; he took food irregularly and in insufficient quantities, dreamed of a state of nirvana, and imagined he was Christ, the Messiah upon earth, ordained to serve men and redeem them from mortal sin. In his pictures he always identified himself with Jesus Christ.

The patient twice appeared before a court, charged with the repeated theft of morphia, and in 1971 he was admitted to the Psychiatric Hospital of Bela, where he spent more than a year. Diagnosis: schizoid psychopathy and drug addiction. On admission he was quiet, reserved and shut-in, but complied with none of the regulations of the clinical department. Sometimes he also refused to eat food or to take the drugs prescribed. Psychological tests revealed a high intelligence and an excellent education. In hospital he continually read his favourite literature and painted of his own accord in order to compensate for his ‘personal diffidence and insecurity’ in his relations with other patients and the staff.

¹ Psychedelic Art, Masters and Houston
During treatment with Melleril® a clinical improvement was noted in his mental state and in his relations and contact with the other patients. He persisted in his refusal to join in the general rehabilitation programme and occupational therapy but continued to draw and paint. He explained that he was giving visual expression to 'unconscious experience' in order to resolve suppressed conflicts.

The subjects of his paintings are strongly influenced by his philosophical notions. In the summer of 1971, for example, he produced a series of more than 50 pictures of a symbolic character, some of them in a surrealist style.²

Many pictures in this series show the patient's critical confrontation with the mischief done by morphomania (Pictures 4–9); other pictures are representations of his philosophical conceptions and religious experiences (Pictures 10–17). The repeated abuse of opiates smuggled into hospital by visiting friends caused him to alternate between a euphoric frame of mind and the depressive mood following abstinence. During these episodes he sometimes had visions like those experienced in Zen and Yoga exercises; death is a pervasive presence in many of his pictures. Intellectually he could find no escape from his life situation, his path was 'marked out by the Devil' in spite of his faith in the deliverance from sin and death promised by the Crucifixion of Christ.

The pictures reproduced not only afford an insight into the patient's inner world but are also amenable in every instance to an interpretation of his sexual, religious and philosophical problems in terms of depth psychology.

²The pictures in the present series were displayed at the 5th World Congress of Psychiatry at Mexico City, Mexico, in 1971; a report on the case was presented to the 7th International Congress for Psychopathology of Expression in Boston in 1973.

Picture 1: 'My Death' (1970)

During a morphine-free period in which he was tormented by depressive moods and thoughts of suicide, the patient sought refuge in a pictorial representation of his own death. In a particularly vivid image he sees his own spirit, symbolized by three yellow patches, separated from the body and rising aloft. In this work he seeks to differentiate visually between three different areas: his conscious mind (below the diagonal) symbolized by a devitalized and expressionless mask; his unconscious mind (left of the dividing line) resembling an abstract spiral nebula, and what he referred to as his present 'nirvana state' (to the right above the diagonal).


In all the pictures (as in picture 1 above) yellow denotes the patient himself, his conscious mind, his soul. By painting Christ's body yellow, he identifies himself with him. The place of the cross is taken by 'nirvana'. The crucifixion here is an allegorical wish-fulfilment in the sense that, after death, he will, by uniting the crucifixion and nirvana, serve men on earth and redeem them from their sin. In his philosophical thinking the patient is obviously endeavouring to unite Christianity and Buddhism.

Picture 3: 'I myself, paralysed on the path to the empty world' (1970)

In this picture the patient sees his own hopeless life confronting an empty world devoid of meaning for him. The human figure is misshapen and paralysed. He has no legs and his left hand is a 'bird's foot'. The eviscerated belly and the exhausted expression of the face testify to the patient's incapacity for life. The vacuous and lifeless world appears in the form of a strange surrealist figure, a petrified and hollowed remnant of living nature.

Picture 4: 'Never again morphia' (1971)

Five or six watercolours were produced in a euphoric state one afternoon under the influence of opiates. This series reveals a change of style (pastel colours). The colour scheme and character of this series of works are strongly reminiscent of the paintings of manic patients. With reference to the picture reproduced here, the patient explained that «stop» meant he would never take morphia again.

Picture 5: 'My path through life' (1971)

The patient's path through life leads to a cave with no exit. The colours are symbolic; yellow is the colour of his fate, red the colour of the poppy.
In the course of clinical improvement the patient gained closer contact with the other inmates, both in the department and in the studio, where he led a small group in drawing and painting. It was during this period that he produced a series of pictures which take the patient’s critical confrontation with his morphine addiction as their subject (Plates 6–9).

**Picture 6: 'The dying morphine addict' (1971)**

Symbolic self-portrait. A poppy is twined round his hand, in the background a black cross can be seen. The yellow skin identifies the patient and his red hair is a reference to the colour of the poppy.

**Picture 7: 'At the end of the world before the goddess of morphia' (1971)**

An apocalyptic vision of the morphine addict: the destruction of man (the green hands of a man perishing) against a background in which lightning forms a vivid aura round the poppy and the faintly sketched features of the ‘goddess of morphia’ can be discerned.

**Picture 8: 'The death of my friends' (1971)**

The patient is mourning the loss of three friends who died during an opium orgy shortly before the picture was painted. The contents and the subdued shades lend it a depressive character. A green hand is raised forlornly in the background. The red path is the last to have been trodden by his dead friends.

**Picture 9: 'Surrealist composition' (1971)**

The figure on the left with one eye represents the ruin of humanity; to its right appears Nature, which has already ceased to exist. Both these figures are placed on the horizon where the sun is setting. A self-portrait (the red-yellow figure to the right in the foreground) resembles a dog’s head. The face is expressionless and devoid of any sign of life; the eyes are missing, as if they had been enucleated. The destructive effects of morphia lead to the denaturalization of the world and the dehumanization of the patient.

**Picture 10: 'I and the stars' (1971)**

Prior to treatment it was impossible for the patient to wear himself from morphia and he thought he was eternally condemned to addiction (hence the sign for eternity in the upper part of the picture). He had always closed one eye and consequently the world was lifeless and meaningless for him (the spider’s web in front of the left eye). But now, in response to treatment, he holds up a hand that signals halt and he begins to seek an escape; ‘stars of hope’ light up.

**Picture 11: ‘The earthly eyes – symbol of the eternal crucifixion’ (1971)**

Sunset, two crosses (symbol of his dead friends) and the crucifixion of Christ, with whom the patient identified himself. On the horizon are the ‘earthly eyes’, the eyes of God on earth, where Christ, i.e. the patient, will keep an eternal watch on everything.

After a definite improvement in the patient’s condition, he suddenly changed to a new graphic-surrealist style, in which he repeatedly contrasted the world of the healthy individual and the addict by allegory. In this dichotomized universe fundamental antipathies are opposed to each other under a ‘red’ and a ‘green’ sun: conscious and unconscious, Adam and Eve, the sensuous and spiritual world, good and evil, Christ and the Devil.

**Picture 12: ‘Crucifixion’ (1971)**

The ‘red sun of the healthy’ is setting while the ‘green sun of the addicts’ shines perpetually in the sky. The sun of the healthy appears behind the cross and the sun of the addicts in front of it. Christ and the setting sun are drawn in red, as is the symbolic figure on the horizon with phallic protuberances. Christ’s hands are rudimentary and the feet terminate in large bleeding toes. This drawing gives expression to hidden sexual complexes.

**Picture 13: ‘The Devil on the path of Christ’ (1971)**

Surrealist composition. Christ (drawn in red), with whom the patient identifies himself, tries to walk the path of the ‘healthy’ as the Messiah upon earth. But his outside left foot is nailed fast and the Devil coming towards him bars his way. Under the red sun stand the columns of the ‘healthy’ world.

**Picture 14: ‘The conscious and the unconscious mind’ (1971)**

In this self portrait the patient is seated naked under the ‘green sun’. He is ringed round by the hands of his dead friends which point out to him the sensible ‘conscious’ way through life: The ‘conscious’ is above the area where he is seated; on the horizon the healthy world appears as a rudimentary tree coloured red, and the large red hand intimates that the patient wishes to abjure the ‘green sun’ of the addicts, which no longer shines.
Picture 15: 'Time, Sex and Death' (1971)

Under a 'red' sun appear three figures: on the left is Time, a human figure with a kind of lotus flower for a head in which 13 small circles can be discerned; this is said to mean that he has already been thirteen months in the hospital. In the centre is 'Sex', a thicket female figure with no head and a second female body growing out of her right arm. This multifold sexuality expresses the desire for love and marriage. On the right is Death, a male figure, again with no head. The eviscerated abdomen and the bleeding intestines suggest harakiri (thoughts of suicide?). All three figures are disproportioned and misshapen, with phallic elements.

Picture 16: 'Man and Woman' (1971)

The red male figure (self-portrait) is headless; he is an addict. He cannot think and turns from the red sun of the healthy towards the green sun of the addicts. Healthy civilization (red figure left) is threatened by a second green sun. The woman is accused of having tempted the man to become an addict. She is shown as a mythological creature (half human, half snake). According to Volmat the depiction of snakes and insects (red figure in front of the woman) has a symbolic sexual significance. The accentuated phallus and the phallic form of the male figure's head are consistent with this view.

Picture 17: 'Adam and Eve' (1971)

Once more the portrait is of the patient himself, this time with his new girl friend whom he wishes to marry. It is noteworthy that the head is once again missing from the female figure. There is a heavy stress on the sexual, and for the first time the symbols for the world of drug addicts (green sun and poppy) are not present.