

# The art of those with lived experience: excavating the Adamson Collection

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## Abstract

*We describe the journey of a British mid-20th century collection of asylum art from the objects' creation, through decades of obscurity, to an influential place among the international collections. Key aspects include the development of a contemporary narrative and ongoing work on the ethics of viewing these collections. We describe how the Wellcome Library is working to understand and catalogue this large collection.*

**Key words:** mental health; psychiatry; asylum art; Art Brut; outsider art.

## Edward Adamson and Adamson Collection

By 2009, the work and collection of the British artist and pioneer of art therapy Edward Adamson (1911-1996) was forgotten. A decade later, Adamson's place in mental health and art history is re-established. 100,000 art objects were created by patient-inmates in Adamson's studios at the British asylum Netherne between 1946 and 1981, of which about 5,500 survive as the Adamson Collection. Adamson left Netherne and most of the Collection behind in 1981. His friend, the entomologist Miriam Rothschild, offered him a cottage and a barn at her estate at Ashton. In 1997 the Collection was moved to Lambeth Hospital in South London. During 2012, the Adamson Collection Trust (ACT) – the charity founded in 1978 – entered into partnership with the Wellcome Library, and Adamson's papers were moved from the basement of his London studio to become the "Edward Adamson Archive". The Collection is now in four parts. Between 2013 and 2016, 2,500 paintings and drawings were transferred to Wellcome as "Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library". ACT still holds both 500 pieces in the "Adamson Collection: Sculptural Objects" including 300 painted flints by Gwyneth Rowlands (c1915-c2005); and the "Adamson Collection: Rolanda Polansky" of over 2,250 drawings and 150 sculptures by the sculptor Polansky (1923-1996) who spent over 30 years at Netherne. Adamson gave 50 paintings and

some key sculptures to the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore in 1995: "Adamson Collection/American Visionary Art Museum".

## Asylum art and outsider art

The history of the "discovery" of art from the asylums during the 20th century is told through the names of the psychiatrists and artists who mapped it – and not by those who created the works. In 1921 and 1922 the psychiatrists Walter Morgenthaler and Hans Prinzhorn published books recognising that spontaneous works by patients in European asylums should be considered as art. Prinzhorn's "The artistry of the mentally ill" had an impact on modernism, albeit through the problematic notion of "the primitive", positioning this art along with the work of children and pre-modern non-European creators.

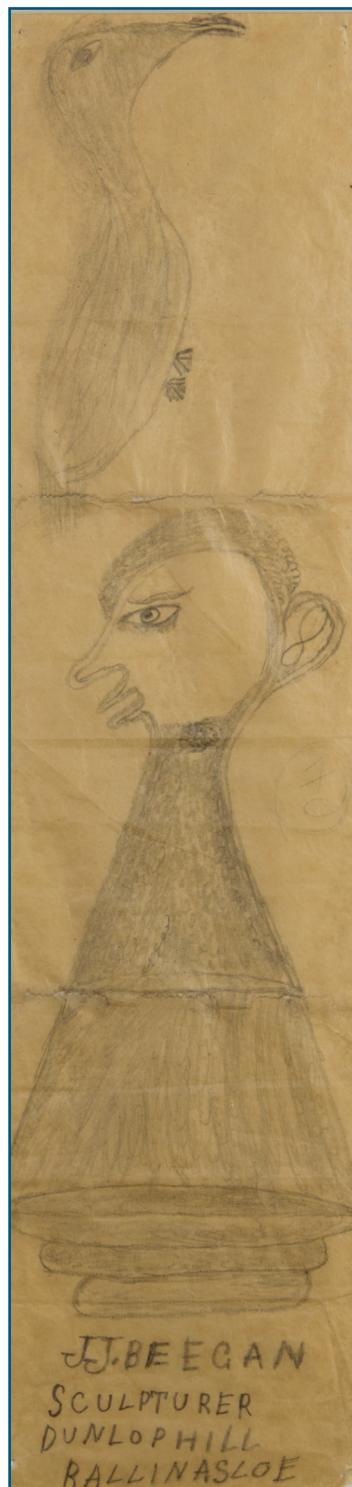
During the 1930s – and again in 1950s – there emerged the psychopathological perspective: what could art tell psychiatrists about the "schizophrenic brain". Adamson started working at Netherne in 1946 in an art research studio opened by the psychiatrists Eric Dax Cunningham and Francis Reitman, which was a continuation of research into mescaline, psychosis and art at the Maudsley Hospital in the 1930s (1). From 1951, when Dax went to Melbourne, Adamson started a 30-year career of innovation in art studios on the hospital site, working single-handedly with hundreds of people.

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In 1945 the surrealist artist Jean Dubuffet named this art “Art Brut” – raw art – in an opposition to “Cultural Art”: “Raw art is creation in process and cultural art is creation already done, creation of the past”. He travelled Europe with the Swiss brutalist architect Le Corbusier collecting art by asylum inmates, prisoners, and the homeless, searching for “an art outside of the known languages of art” (Thomas Roeske, Prinzhorn Collection, personal communication). Outsider art was a phrase coined by the art historian Roger Cardinal in the 1970s when, with Victor Musgrave, he brought art brut to UK. “Outsider” has come also to refer to the creators’ social exclusion as mental patient, prisoner, street homeless, with the risk of fetishisation of marginalisation. Such a binary distinction of fine/cultural art and outsider/raw art is under contemporary critique in the field.

The viewer’s experience is of the strangeness of this art created from the extraordinary private world of each artist, working from their personal experience and psychotic signification. Dubuffet’s art brut and Cardinal’s outsider art have extended the territory of what is art. Brut/raw is the descendant of the primitive, with madness romanticised as flight and freedom but with celebration of the creator as artist. Outside/outsider is in a dynamic and fluctuating relationship with an inside. The asylum artist is outside culture and society through their detention in the asylum. Yet the asylum becomes a new interior/inside: Adamson’s studios becoming a new outside within the interior of the asylum, where this strange art is created (2).

Take the drawings on toilet paper with the char of burnt matches by J J Beegan (*Figure 1*). Known to have been mute, incontinent and living in a locked ward in Netherne, working with his found materials, he was driven by the compulsion to express to survive. He was as marginalised as a human being can be, confined on the outside of the interior of the asylum, in a locked ward in a locked institution, itself on the outside/exterior of the community. His surviving drawings – 17 on 11 pieces of paper – are of lions, people, birds and strange imaginary creatures. They are archetypally art brut – but not as yet on the inside of the recognised art brut canon, only shown twice since 1980s: as a group in 2013/14 at “Raw Vision”, Halle St Pierre, Paris, and a single drawing at “Bedlam” at the Wellcome Collection in 2016/17. Created in the asylum, and after a journey through a medieval barn and a London mental health hospital, they are now in



**Fig. 1.** JJ Beegan. Graffiti on Lavatory Paper, Paper 6. JJ Beegan, c1946, match char on Izal Medicated Toilet Tissue, 4.5 x 18 ins., 11.5 x 45 cm. Adamson Collection/American Visionary Art Museum. Image source: AVAM. Copyright holder unknown.

the Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library. They are inside a major cultural institution – however in their strangeness, they remain outside cultural norms (3).

### Commentaries on Adamson's work

There are four key narratives on Adamson and the Collection. Adamson's ideas about art as therapy emerged from early discussions in 1940's with artists and Jungian analysts, and evolved over four decades. Adamson's 1984 book *Art as healing* – written with his collaborator John Timlin – in its discussion of about 150 objects, is his cypher to the collection (4). In a 1987 interview, Adamson succinctly describes his therapeutic process thus: it is the act of "trying to paint" which is healing, and the only interpretation should be the creators' (5). Ostrowska disputes this anti-interpretation stance and demonstrates the multiple layers of interpretation, including biographical and Jungian, in *Art as healing* (6).

Two British professors of art therapy, Diane Waller and Susan Hogan, provide narratives that bookend Adamson's years in the wilderness. Waller, with colleagues at Goldsmiths London, was instrumental moving art therapy towards psychoanalysis and object relations from the mid 1980's, a direction Adamson disagreed with. In her 1991 institutional history of art therapy as an emerging profession she dismisses Adamson repeatedly (7). Hogan (2000) reports on her primary research on the Adamson and the Netherne research studio (1946-51), and gives Adamson back a central place in art therapy history (8).

The fourth iteration by O'Flynn emphasises the context of the post war asylum, and the emergence of medical and psychosocial innovations in the 1940's and 1950's. O'Flynn attributes political intent to Adamson and Timlin's project:

*Adamson was an educator, who saw the sociocultural intervention of showing these people's works to the public who had excluded them – and showing it as an important contribution to their culture – as a way to change public opinion* (9).

Written at a time when the future of the Collection was at considerable risk of loss, strategically he positions the Collection as one of outsider art. O'Flynn draws on work from the Dax Centre in Melbourne published in *Framing marginalised art* arguing that these objects need a multi-dimensional understanding, and are simultaneously documents of therapeutic experience,

historical artefacts and art. He uses the creators' names for the first time (10).

### ACT ethical position

O'Flynn, drawing on his training as a psychiatrist, developed an ethical framework, outlined in 2011 article and revealed in 2013 at the first presentation on the Collection since the 1980's at *Outsider art under analysis* at Wellcome during *Souzou: outsider art from Japan*. His decision to use the creators names, not pseudonyms, emerged from the intersection between ideas about ownership, capacity and confidentiality, copyright and exhibition. ACT obtained a legal opinion in the 1980's that the objects were "abandoned chattels/goods". The Trustees regard themselves as caretakers and not owners, and ACT is therefore committed to ensuring that no works enter the art market. We have no information on the mental capacity and consent of the creators. Given the inaccessibility of medical records, there is no way to trace potential copyright holders so the objects are "copyright orphans".

ACT considered it important to carry on the tradition of exhibiting the collection rather than letting these issues bury it out of sight. Primarily naming was about acknowledging people's identity: this was denied in their lifetimes, and to continue to anonymise them is to repeat the insult. Naming at exhibition would allow potential copyright holders to come forward. ACT was of the view that it would return work to families if requested. In the era under discussion, people were in asylums for many reasons which would be seen not now as mental disorder (being an unmarried mother could attract the diagnosis of "moral imbecility") – the ACT uses "compelled to live at Netherne" and avoids diagnoses. Adamson was an artist not a clinician, the studios were art-making, not a treatment location. Naming allows a celebration of the individual artists. This ethical position was interrogated at Wellcome during a series of public engagements events in 2018 and published in *Lancet Psychiatry* which are informing ethical discussions within Wellcome and across international asylum art collections (11).

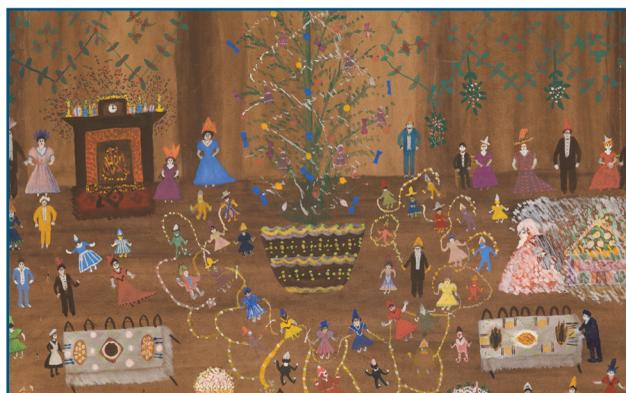
### The Netherne artists

As reflections of life in the asylum, one can point to paintings of the buildings of the asylum itself. The thirteen paintings produced in 1968 by Hugh Campbell are so proficient that one might guess that

he was a professional draughtsman. A depiction of a Volkswagen Beetle about to drive over the top of a cliff is an allegorical painting by Martin Birch ca. 1972 representing the possible demise of Edward Adamson's studio at Netherne (catalogue no. 2848128i). In August 1967 Mary Lorraine painted a watercolour of the art studio at Netherne with her fellow-participants painting at easels and Edward Adamson himself standing and observing (catalogue no. 3001760i). Several artists painted portraits of Adamson, the one person who was always in the studio during their art sessions.

Memories of life outside the asylum are often happy ones, enabling the artists to escape, at least mentally, from the confines of the hospital. A painting from 1968 by Elizabeth Beatty shows a park in England with notices saying "Please be happy" and "Walk on the grass. Swing on the swings. Pick the flowers. This park is for you." (catalogue no. 2846785i). A watercolour by E. Candy from 1966 shows Litlington White Horse at Hindover Hill in East Sussex, with the river Cuckmere in the foreground, possibly copied from a photograph taken on a walk in happier days (catalogue no. 2921341i). In May 1967 Mary Lorraine painted two lovers embracing under a tree, by the light of a full moon (catalogue no. 3001875i).

Some of the artists look back to the happy days of childhood. A painting by H. Sennitt from 1949 is one of a dozen showing a child's memories of a Victorian or Edwardian Christmas (catalogue no. 2948664i) (Figure 2). Isobel Cronney, in nine paintings dating from between 1966 and 1968, chronicles a happy childhood



**Fig. 2.** H. Sennitt. *A Christmas celebration*. Gouache by H. Sennitt, 1949, on paper 45.1 x 55.4 cm. Wellcome Collection catalogue no. 2948664i. Copyright holder unknown.

in a secure middle-class home: children enjoy watching cows in a field, they fish or pretend to fish in a pond in a public garden while a double-decker bus goes by. Their mother sits on a sofa with a dog in her living room from which a picture window shows a view through to a garden, and the well-appointed furnishings include a television set (catalogue no. 2922231i). On 18 January 1968, Muriel Lewis painted children with their parents looking at the shop window of Constance's toy shop at Christmas (catalogue no. 2998137i)

For some of the people living at Netherne on the other hand, unhappy thoughts, suffering and private demons dominated the paintings that they produced in Adamson's studio. For Mary Bishop, the most prolific artist in the collection with at least 630 paintings, subjects include screaming heads, grave-markers of those who died in the battle of the Somme, and the indignities of examination by psychiatrists and students. In March 1976 she produced a painting of a person stranded on the peak of a mountain being attacked by snakes (catalogue no. 2858610i). Two drawings by Ronald Hampshire from 1961 show devils dragging a man to hellfire. The antics of the devil also appear in three paintings produced by David Thomas Meredith between November 1975 and January 1976. A watercolour by Hazel Edwards, dated 1961, shows a man flagellating his back under the threats of a clawed devil, while a gallows stands nearby (catalogue no. 2925123i).

The collection includes a painting which is a remarkable compendium of the horrors of life. In 1953-1954 the subsequently famous Canadian-Ukrainian artist William Kurelek (1927-1977) produced a gouache painting (catalogue no. 3025695i) showing incidents of human life in the cells of an underground grotto. They illustrate the reasons for the suicide shown in the lowest cell, labelled "I spit on life", including family disputes, the difficulty of making a living, lack of freedom and the demands of education. The examples given above show that a certain amount of information is now available about the Adamson collection of paintings and drawings: who produced what, how many works are available by each artist, when the artists were active, what subjects they depicted, which media they favoured, what sizes of paper they used, in what languages they wrote their inscriptions, and how many works are available in the catalogue (2,094 as of September 2019).

### The role of the Wellcome Library

When the collection was in Adamson's studio, or subsequently in Lambeth Hospital, it would not have been possible to obtain answers to these questions (a watercolour in the Wellcome Collection is shown in Figure 3). One of the reasons why the ACT transferred the Adamson Collection to the Wellcome Library (Wellcome Collection) in 2015 was that the library, being a curatorial institution, would be able to catalogue the collection to standards that would enable such information to be searchable. How and to what extent have the Trust's expectations been satisfied?



**Fig. 3.** *Thea E. Hart. Two sides of a ravine: left, a woman walks away towards the left; right, a man in a white laboratory coat. Watercolour by Thea E. Hart, 27 September 1967, on paper 45.8 x 55.6 cm. Wellcome Collection catalogue no. 2948663i. Copyright holder unknown.*

Clearly the cataloguing of the collection has been essential to this aim, but cataloguing is rarely the first task that can be carried out in respect of large historical collections; in fact, it is often the last. The collection must first be made catalogue-ready. Fortunately, much of the grouping and organizing had already been done by Edward Adamson and ACT; for instance, works by the same artist were for the most part physically together, and therefore required little sorting. To Wellcome fell two other preliminary jobs: identifying storage, and making it possible to handle the works securely in order to avoid damage to them in the course of cataloguing and research.

Storage was provided in metal drawers (height 5cm x width 96cm x depth 68cm) in mobile shelving stacks:

the collection filled 210 such drawers. The handling provisions were made by placing each unframed painting or drawing in an acid-free folder either A2 size (59.4 x 42cm) or A1 (84.1 x 59.4cm). The folders were necessary because most of the works are on paper that was produced during post-war British paper-rationing (1945-1953) or (after 1953) low-cost acidic paper that can very easily be torn in handling. Only in the relatively few works produced after Adamson retired from hospital work and became a teacher in private practice did his artists use recognized art-papers. However even works on good quality paper need to be kept in individual folders in order to minimise handling of the paintings themselves.

Once the collection had been physically stabilised and stored, it was ready for cataloguing. There is no universally accepted standard for the cataloguing of paintings, prints, photographs and drawings. Institutions tend to use for this purpose the predominant standard already chosen for the materials and formats in their collections. Thus, library cataloguing standards are used for visual media in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the British Library in London and Yorkshire, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris: the predominant standard is currently MARC, though there have been for many years plans to replace it by a new standard. British and American libraries use the version of MARC called MARC21 (<http://www.loc.gov/marc/>), while the Bibliothèque Nationale de France makes its catalogues available in Unimarc (<https://www.ifla.org/unimarc>). Museums on the other hand use a wider range of formats, reflecting the character of their holdings. For example, the British Museum uses an in-house format that is suitable for drawings, coins, cuneiform tablets, and the colossal marbles of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.

The Wellcome Library used a version of MARC21 for the paintings and drawings in the Adamson Collection. This format has several advantages. Controlled indexes for artists' names, genres, media and subjects allow the catalogue user to navigate from one record to another with the aid of hotlinks embedded in the index terms. A virtually unlimited range of free text fields are available for contextual explanation. Clearly demarcated subfields for physical descriptions are invaluable for determining storage, conservation, and exhibition. Codes for countries and languages allow browsing and selection from dropdown menus. Finally,

it is easy to obtain a front-end for MARC records in which searches lead to numerically accurate retrievals: hence it is possible to discover that the Adamson Collection contains 134 works by Martin Birch (active 1968-1973), but only one work by Phyllis Overy Mayes (1894-1969).

The dry details of storage, conservation and cataloguing should not obscure the fact that the Adamson Collection tells stories of human triumphs over adversity. Let us end therefore with the inscription which Phyllis Overy Mayes left us on her single work in the collection (no. 3001132i: original spelling retained):

*"Dear readers, I hope you enjoy reading my life story. I am going to enjoy writing it to you. I was born on January 25th, 1894, in Bolingbrook Road, S. Kensington, London, on a very wintry day. My father was an actor, my mother a lady's companion. My childhood was a happy one. When I was 5 years of age we removed to Streatham, & stayed there 7 years. When I was twelve years of age, I went to live with an aunt & uncle in Chatham, Kent, for 1 year. They were Salvation Army members so I lived a riotous [i.e. righteous] & sober live. Uncle had an allotment at Walderslade, so we grew all our vegetables, & flowers. When I was fourteen years of age we moved to Epsom, in Surrey. There were four children, 2 boys & 2 girls. I left school when I was twelve years of age. Then we all went hop-picking in Kent for a few weeks. I remained at home 4 years, helping to keep house, then I went selling Hoovers for 3 years. At twenty-one years of age I met my sweetheart. I went to his people to live in Cecil Road, Hale, Cheshire. We were married on Easter Saturday, April 3rd 1916, & my husband joined the army for 2 years. When he returned we went on the stage together, in a revue called Rapid fire. My husband was stage manager, & I was in the chorus, doing the major towns of Wales for 2 years. Then we went to Leeds as clerks in the Anglo-American Oil Co. Ltd. for 4 years. We visited Roundhay Park at the week-ends. I went Hoover selling for 4 years in Leeds, Yorkshire. Then we went to Bexhill-on-Sea in Sussex to live. Then we went to live in Sale, Cheshire. Then we went to Epsom, Surrey. I had a nervous breakdown and I have been in hospital ever since. Yours truly. P. Mayes."*

The catalogue of the Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library is currently available at <http://catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Figure 1: © American Visionary Art Museum; Figures n 2 and 3: © The Wellcome Collection. They are available under a CC-BY licence (meaning that they can be used for any purpose provided due credit is given). The original paintings are of course "Orphan works" in copyright terms, hence the authors have put "Copyright holder unknown" in each caption.

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