



# Ron Hampshire and the Adamson Collection Myth, Metaphor or Metamorphosis?

Adapted from 'Picturing Mental Health', originally published by [wellcomecollection.org](http://wellcomecollection.org).



David O'Flynn and Chloe Trainor

**Very little is known about Ron Hampshire, other than that he was a patient at Netherne psychiatric hospital in the 1950s and 1960s, where he attended the art studio set up by Edward Adamson. Ron left behind a series of drawings and paintings, which are now part of the Adamson Collection of artworks by Netherne patients. In 1978, the Adamson Collection Trust (ACT) was founded to preserve and promote the rich history of this work. The paintings and drawings that are now held at Wellcome as the Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library and continue to generate valuable dialogue between artists, patients, practitioners and researchers, who bring new insight to the collection from the vantage of their own experiences and expertise.**

Hampshire's work came into existence because of an 'experiment' initiated during the 1940s by Dr. Eric Cunningham Dax, Medical Superintendent and Research Director at Netherne. Dax wanted to establish if art produced by patients could be a useful diagnostic tool for psychiatrists, and whether the process of creating art had any therapeutic value for patients. He recruited Edward Adamson, a trained artist, to help him in his research.

When Adamson arrived at Netherne in 1946, the prevailing view among psychiatrists was that the aetiology of mental illness was biological, and, thus, was best managed through physical treatments such as insulin coma therapy, electroconvulsive therapy, lobotomy and leucotomy. The introduction of an art programme to the hospital was, therefore, a significant departure from these established forms of treatment. Adamson held regular sessions in a newly established art studio, and would then pass patient artwork to the psychiatrists to aid their diagnosis. However, he was more than a 'passive facilitator': he would strike up conversations and lead patients into the creative process by initially drawing the

things they talked about.

It was Adamson's belief that the act of making and expressing held the power to heal. After Dax left in 1951, he used the opportunity to turn the studio into a less clinical space in which the therapeutic dimensions of the creative process were prioritised over diagnosis. The vast majority of the artwork in the Adamson Collection is from this later period (1951–1980s).

### **Adamson's view**

Adamson believed in the healing capacity of art, and understood that a patient's work could sit simultaneously in the worlds of art and medicine. His notebooks, written between the 1950s and the 1980s, are filled with unpublished commentary on patient artworks. As well as recording the patients' insights into their own works, Adamson made his own interpretations.

In a series Adamson called 'Metamorphosis', he discussed eleven works created by Ron Hampshire, which he believed demonstrated his clinical progress during his stay at Netherne.

The 'Metamorphosis' series of works begins with a small fragment of card with some sketches and doodles. Adamson provides a commentary on the series in his book *Art As Healing*. According to Adamson, when Hampshire first came to the studio he was unable to speak. He notes that, prior to completing this drawing, Ron "had come for many weeks [to the studio], and just stared at the blank sheet in front of him." (see *Art As Healing*, p56-59, free access link within references)

He gradually moved on to sketches across a whole sheet of paper. Adamson records that sometime later he took up painting, at first simply flooding the paper with colour before gradually producing more representational images.

Adamson notes that at the same time, Ron slowly began to use one or two words. Adamson called the last painting in the 'Metamorphosis' series 'The Apple Harvest'. In this work, the apple harvest has been gathered and a discarded smock hangs from the tree. Adamson reports that Ron "now spoke without difficulty" and after this final work "he lost all interest in painting" (Adamson, *Art As Healing*, 1984).

### **An artist's view**

For Adamson, it was possible to read the improvement in Ron's mental health in his artistic development. However,

Matthew Williams, Artist in Residence at Bethlem Gallery & artist with lived experience of using arts for health (twitter @FrogMw) has a different view: "I can understand why Adamson and hospital staff might have looked at this work and seen it as representing progress; a transition from darkness and silence to light."

"It's tempting to read diagnostic clues in works of art," he continues. "Most people would think that dark colours are sad and troubling, and light colours are bright and happy, but I actually find bright colours unsettling."

Matthew thinks that Ron's earlier paintings ('The Lake', 'Christmas Decorations' and 'The Shipwreck') have "real honesty, real emotion and depth". But for him "the later paintings seem hollow and meaningless. There's something false about them." Was Ron giving Adamson and the doctors what he thought they needed to see? Matthew thinks so: "For me, this is a perfect example of the hospital experience. You come in, you paint, you learn what you have to do to get discharged and you paint bright, happy pictures of houses and apple trees to get out the door."

Adamson, however, was well aware of the risk of influencing students/patients in the studio: "It is not unknown for an astute patient to 'catch on', as it were, to what he feels the instructor is looking for and to supply it for an indefinite period," he observed. For Adamson, the diagnostic and therapeutic value of the artworks was a matter of careful interpretation alongside the personal interactions and the process of creation.

### **An art therapists' views**

Art therapy's complex identity is rooted in art, art education, psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Along with other artists such as Adrian Hill, Adamson was instrumental in the founding of art therapy as a profession in Britain.

When Adamson began practicing at Netherne, many of the people he worked with had schizophrenia and other forms of psychosis. However, art therapy has changed considerably since then, according to Val Huet (Chief Executive Officer of BAAT), and today's art therapist works with a variety of children and adults who have experienced emotional distress and may be too traumatised to communicate with words alone.

So, what do contemporary art therapists make of Ron Hampshire's

paintings? A group of practising art therapists came to Wellcome Collection to view and discuss works from the Adamson Collection.

Some agreed with Adamson's assessment that the works were evidence of a progression in Ron's condition. Donna Goodman thought that "Ron's artwork can be experienced as his journey through psychosis and hospitalisation" with the turning point "symbolically represented in 'The Storm'".

Jill Davies accepted that, "We can never know exactly how Hampshire felt or whether the true nature of his recovery was reflected in the bright, idealised scenes of his later work." Although she did observe "the growth from basic mark-making to the 'flooding' of emotion, which seems to embody the opening of an emotional dam and corresponds to him regaining his voice".

Helping people through art is itself as much an art as a science. As art psychotherapist, Katherine Heritage says, "Holding uncomfortable, vulnerable or incomplete expressions is integral to the work of an art therapist." We may not know much about Ron Hampshire, but we know that his mental health did improve at Netherne, and in his works, he has left traces of himself as vivid as any photograph.

### The researchers' views

The varying interpretations of 'Metamorphosis' invite many more questions than they resolve, not only in terms of the nature of Adamson's practice, but about how, and through whom, we understand the experiences of patients. For Dr David O'Flynn, Chair of the Adamson Collection Trust, and historian, Chloe Trainor, it is questions such as these which have inspired further research into Hampshire's work.

David and Chloe were introduced to one another by Solomon Szekir-Papasavva, Wellcome Collection's Arts and Health Engagement Officer, when all three collaborated to write 'Art, power, and the asylum: Adamson, healing and the Collection' in response to a series of events held at Wellcome. 'Metamorphosis' was a series both were familiar with, particularly David, as it had been displayed for a number of years in a corridor of Lambeth hospital where he worked. However, their knowledge was limited to the account given by Adamson in *Art As Healing*, and the collaboration with Wellcome facilitated a more in-depth, critical

engagement with this fascinating sequence. Earlier this year, Chloe noted certain inconsistencies, and asked David: "Why does Adamson state that 'Metamorphosis' was created over six years when all 37 of Hampshire's work are dated between 1960-1961, according to the Wellcome catalogue?"

In October 2018, David, Chloe and Solomon conducted a survey of all of Hampshire's known work and were astonished by what they found, knowing only the story told in *Art As Healing*.

The earliest example of Hampshire's work ❶ is dated 29th September 1960, and is clearly the work of a trained artist. It includes a number of smaller compositions, suggesting he may have been planning a series of his own.

Over the next few months, the drawings he made were technical exercises which included heads, figures and nudes ❷. By November 1960, more intricate technical drawings of, for example, engines started to emerge, all of which pre-date the earliest image Adamson includes in the 'Metamorphosis' sequence.

This is the first image ❸ included in 'Metamorphosis', described in *Art As Healing* as 'this man's first attempt to make images', even though it was not created until 31st January 1961.

Amongst the 37 paintings and drawings, there are four studies of 'The Lake', which is the fourth image selected for the 'Metamorphosis' sequence. This initial study ❹ is dated 21 April 1961, several months before the final painting of 'The Lake' in August 1961.

Unfortunately, the last image included in the series was lost during the years at Lambeth Hospital. However, the latest surviving painting, known as 'The Tree', is also dated August 1961.

So, what initial conclusions can be drawn from this more in-depth study of Hampshire's work?

Firstly, contrary to the six years recorded by Adamson, archival research confirms that the sequence was created over a much shorter period between January-August 1961. Hampshire's sketches indicate that he was working on a series, and that his approach was far more considered than Adamson's analysis conveyed. Rather than the 'mute casual labourer' who first put pen to paper in Adamson's studio, it is evident that Hampshire was technically trained in painting and drawing.

Furthermore, whilst it remains impossible to confirm whether or not Hampshire could speak, he writes a lot on a number of his paintings and drawings, and thus may have used the written word as an alternative means through which to communicate with those around him, including his doctors.

David says he was always puzzled by the first two paintings in the series: "How could a man stare at a blank sheet of paper for six months then do those two drawings, particularly the second mechanical drawing of trains?" These images, viewed in conjunction with the entirety of Hampshire's surviving works, now make much more sense.

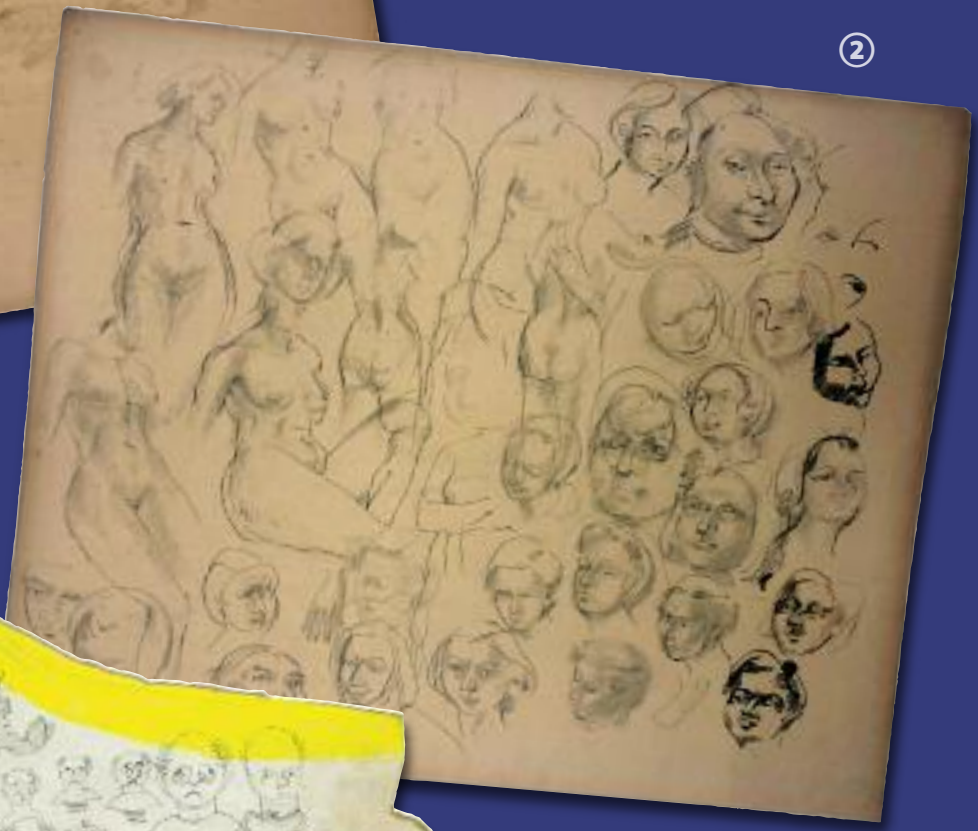
Perhaps most significantly, this case study serves as a reminder of how our understanding of patient experience is often mediated through healthcare professionals. It confirms that Adamson constructed a sequence, omitting a number of significant examples of Hampshire's work in favour of those he perhaps felt better represented the narrative of his recovery. This is not unlike the example of psychiatrist, Walter MacClay, who assembled a series of undated Louis Wain paintings to demonstrate his theories of psychotic disintegration, which David explored in an earlier film project, 'Two Men & Eight Cats'.

Although this research is still in its infancy, it appears the 'Metamorphosis' narrative may have emerged as early as 1964, at a time when Adamson was working with collaborators to establish the British Association of Art Therapists. Was Adamson influenced by Dax and his experiments to see if art can be used as a diagnostic tool? How does this impact the story of *Art As Healing*? Does what he did with Hampshire's work matter? There is the joy of the collection being held at Wellcome, so that fundamental research into this unexplored collection remains possible.

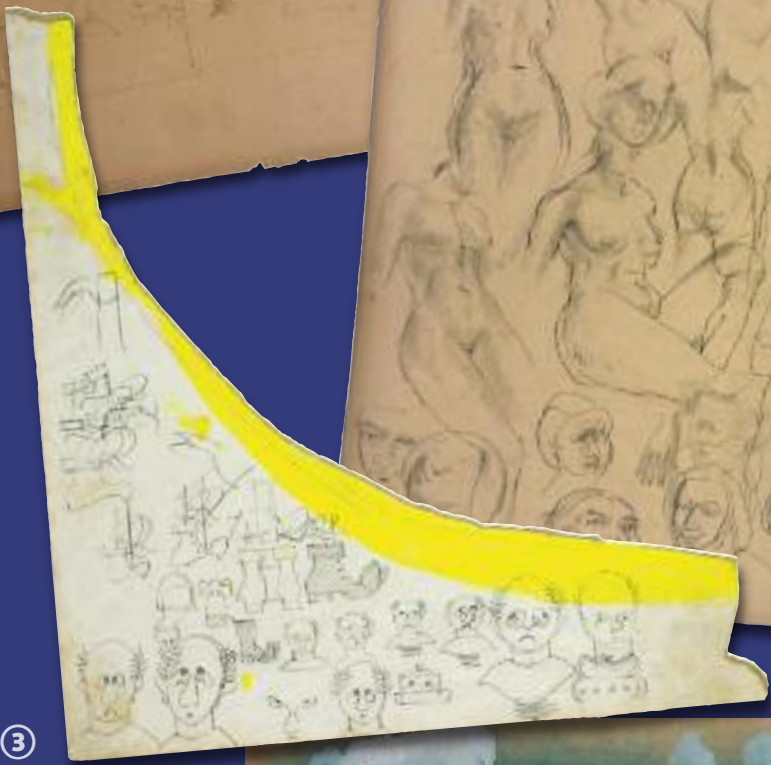
Lalita Kaplish and Solomon Szekir-Papasavva, 'Picturing Mental Health', [wellcomecollection.org/articles/Wurd2y1AAJP4100Q2](https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/Wurd2y1AAJP4100Q2) Edward Adamson and John Timlin, *Art As Healing*, (London: Coventure Ltd., 1984), [wellcomelibrary.org/item/b30448098#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&z=-0.1656%2C0.0364%2C1.3684%2C0.6924](https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b30448098#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&z=-0.1656%2C0.0364%2C1.3684%2C0.6924) David O'Flynn, Solomon Szekir-Papasavva and Chloe Trainor, 'Art, Power and the asylum: Adamson, healing and the Collection', *The Lancet Psychiatry*, Vol.5, Issue.5, pp.396-399, [doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(18\)30147-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(18)30147-0) David O'Flynn, 'Two Men and Eight Cats', [youtube.com/watch?v=KTwbTgX\\_imE](https://youtube.com/watch?v=KTwbTgX_imE)



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