
Edward Adamson and the history of art therapy

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Over the last decade, the work of Edward Adamson (1911-1996) and the Adamson Collection have been re-discovered, after years of obscurity and the near loss of the art work.

Altogether it is an incredible story. The British asylums were grim after World War 2 and, though there are optimistic developments such as the Open Door Movement and occupational therapy, they were restrictive environments, with people hospitalised for most of their lives, and with a predominance of 'medical' interventions that now horrify us, such as insulin coma therapy, cold baths and lobotomies.

Adamson was a young artist and conscientious objector during World War 2, who started work in a research art studio in a long-term asylum, Netherne in Surrey, in 1946. He then entered the terrifying world of the asylum.

Adamson describes his first visit in his 1984 book 'Art as Healing'. Most of the people he met had bandaged heads and bruised eyes from brain surgery. He stayed for 35 years, running art studios single-handed, and provided materials for those who wanted to come to create.

He had little recourse to funds so used the cheapest materials, such as poster paint and wallpaper lining paper, and found materials such as bags of cement 'acquired' from the hospital. He described himself as "somewhere in-between" the clinical staff and the patient inmates.

By the time of his retirement in 1981, there were an estimated 100,000 works, of which around 5,500 survive.

Adamson saw painting or "trying to paint" as enabling psychological recovery. He developed a "non-interventionist

approach" in which he neither praised nor criticised anyone's work in the studios.

He became a central figure in the post-war reiteration of art and mental health. From the mid-1940s he collaborated with others in the work that led to the founding of British Association of Art Therapy in 1964. He was then a central figure in British art therapy until the early 1980s, when psychoanalysis became a dominant force in the field.

More recently art therapy is again celebrating him as a pioneer. Cognitive psychology now evidences the power of the image to enable restructuring and processing, and lends support to his therapeutic position. The art studio, the provision of space and materials to enable creativity, is so widespread now, it is hard to remember that these studios, which Adamson pioneered, only appeared globally during the 1940s.

The Adamson Collection included paintings, drawings and sculptural works, including creations by Rolanda Polonsky and Gwyneth Rowlands. Around 2,500 of the 5,500 items are now with the Wellcome Library, while the Adamson Collection Trust houses the other pieces.

Alongside the securing of the work, I developed a new view on the collection. I borrowed the 'multi-dimensional gaze'

from our friends at the Dax Centre in Melbourne: the objects are simultaneously documents of therapeutic experiences, historical artefacts of mental health and other histories, and works of art.

The re-framing of the work as art and the naming of creators has been particularly controversial: given they are 'mental patients'. I suggest to deny people their names is to repeat the injustice of their detention, and does not allow family members, who might have a copyright claim, to claim the work.

There should be no shame in having a family member who is a victim of the asylum system. The Adamson Collection should remind us not only of lives lost in the British asylums, but also that outside Europe, the asylum remains the preferred location for the exclusion of those living with complex mental health issues.

Some examples of art from the collection are shown on the following page. There is the power of the Adamson objects, an intensity of expression, that is profoundly humanising of these people so excluded. ■

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Further reading

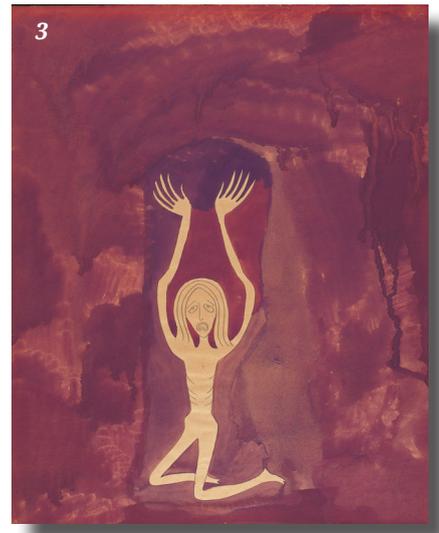
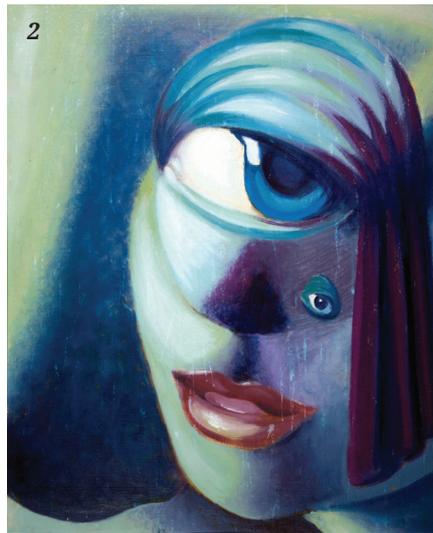
www.adamsoncollectiontrust.org/resources/

'Art as Healing': free access at [https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/](https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b30448098#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&z=-0.1336%2C-0.1665%2C1.0831%2C0.9664)

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Adamson resources at Wellcome:

<http://catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/search/a?searchtype=t&searcharg=adamson&searchscope=5&SORT=D>



Clockwise from top left: 1 ‘...but all he does is dig my heart out’. Mary Bishop, late 1950s/early 1960s. Poster paint on paper. Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library. 2 ‘The Tear’. Artist and date unknown. Acrylic on canvas. Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library. 3 Title unknown. Mary Bishop, mid-1960s. Poster paint on paper. Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library. 4 ‘The Foetus’. Flora Grieg. Date unknown. Poster paint on paper. Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library. 5 ‘Recovery’. Artist and date unknown. Apple wood Adamson Collection/American Visionary Art Museum. 6 Untitled. Gwyneth Rowlands, date unknown. India ink, watercolour and varnish on flint. Adamson Collection Trust. 7 ‘You are getting in my hair!’ Artist and date unknown. Poster paint on paper. Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library. 8 Portrait of Edward Adamson. Artist and date unknown. Poster paint on paper. Adamson Collection/Wellcome Library

