

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London

Unit of Assessment: 34 History of Art and Design

Title of case study:

Madness and Modernity: mental illness, the visual arts and architecture in fin de siècle Vienna – popular exhibitions in London and Vienna

1. Summary of the impact

A popular, influential and highly acclaimed public exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, London, and Wien Museum, 'Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900' (2009), demonstrates the impacts of an interdisciplinary research cluster within Birkbeck's History of Art Department. Working with a number of academic and non-academic partners in Plymouth, London and Vienna, the AHRC-funded project contributed a new understanding of the development and role of the arts in turn-of-the-century Vienna. By engaging participants in new experiences and knowledge, it generated considerable media interest and public discourse that particularly benefited the non-academic partners.

2. Underpinning research

The underpinning research was undertaken at Birkbeck, University of London and Plymouth University, supported by a large research grant from the AHRC (2004-2008) for which Dr Leslie Topp (at Birkbeck since 2005) was principle investigator. The project developed out of Topp's research, ongoing since 2000, on the connections between psychiatry and architecture in Vienna and Central Europe in the years around 1900. In the first sustained comparative exploration of asylum buildings of this period and geography, she has developed a new understanding of the role of modernist architecture in the design of major psychiatric institutions in Vienna and the Habsburg empire in the first decade of the twentieth century (Refs 1-5). She is widely acknowledged by both historians of psychiatry and historians of architecture as the leading expert on these large quasi-urban asylum projects.

Three aspects of the research can be highlighted for the purposes of the impact case study:

1. The basis of the findings in meticulous archival and primary source research in multiple locations and languages, with an emphasis on visual and material culture (plans, drawings, therapeutic equipment, posters, medical and architectural models, etc.) The depth of the research has resulted in interpretations that are both nuanced and authoritative (in a field in which little similar work has been done), establishing Topp as the person to be consulted in this area (Refs 1, 3, 5). The previously unknown visual material and objects located and situated historically by Topp and her team formed the basis of a rich, original and multi-layered exhibition proposal to the Wellcome Trust.
2. The concrete, compelling and in some cases provocative connections made by Topp and her team between mental illness, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, architecture, fine art, and visual and material culture in Vienna around 1900 (Refs 1-5). These connections were at the centre of the exhibition.
3. The methodology developed for the research used the model of a dialogue between the two disciplines of psychiatry and architecture/the visual arts, privileging neither and positioning neither as 'background' (Ref 1). This methodology informed the originality of the exhibition in the way it was framed (it was about art without being about single artist or a movement) and in the way it sought in its display and interpretation methods a balance between artistic and

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medical objects, without the latter being downgraded to the status of 'contextual' material.

Topp's team consisting of a co-investigator (Dr Gemma Blackshaw), a post-doctoral research associate (Dr Sabine Wieber) and two PhD students. In addition to the outcomes listed below, dissemination has taken place via multiple conference papers and invited papers to art history, architectural history, medical history and museum studies research seminars in the UK, US and Austria. Outputs included:

- A two-day international conference 'Journeys into Madness: Representing Mental Illness in the Arts and Sciences 1850-1930', Wellcome Collection Conference Centre, 11 and 12 October 2007.
- The exhibition, 'Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900' (2009), funded by the Wellcome Trust and developed in collaboration with the Wellcome Collection, which is the main source of the impacts in this case study.

3. References to the research

1. Leslie Topp, '[Otto Wagner and the Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital](#): Architecture as Misunderstanding,' *Art Bulletin*, 87, no. 1 (2005): 130-156
2. Leslie Topp, 'The Modern Mental Hospital in late 19-Century Germany and Austria: Psychiatric Space and Images of Freedom and Control' in *Madness, Architecture and the Built Environment: Psychiatric Spaces in Historical Context*, eds. L. Topp, J. Moran and J. Andrews, Routledge, 2007.
3. Leslie Topp, '[Psychiatric Institutions](#), Their Architecture, and the Politics of Regional Autonomy in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, (2007) 38, pp. 733-755.
4. Leslie Topp and Sabine Wieber, '[Architecture, Psychiatry and Lebensreform](#) at an Agricultural Colony for the Insane – Lower Austria, 1903', *Central Europe*, 7 (2009): 125-49
5. Leslie Topp, '[Complexity and Coherence](#): The Challenge of the Asylum Mortuary in Central Europe, 1898-1908', *JSAH: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 71, no1, March 2012, pp. 9-41.

Grant

2004-2008 Arts and Humanities Research Council, Project Grant, (£335,706), for 'Madness and Modernity: Art, Architecture and Mental Illness in Vienna and the Habsburg Empire, 1890-1914.' Leslie Topp as PI, Gemma Bradshaw (Plymouth) as co-investigator. Final report submitted. Assessment: Good.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The main output of the research project was a successful public exhibition **Madness and Modernity** (April-June 2009). A major loan exhibition with about one hundred objects, it made a strong contribution to the Wellcome Collection's exhibition and public engagement programme in 2009, which 'takes medical history out of its niche and welds it to big ideas' (David Jays, *Arts Journal*, April 2009). The significance of the exhibition lay in its challenge to prevailing assumptions about attitudes to mental illness in Vienna in the 1900s, displacing Freud as the central figure of this period and extending public understanding of the influence and significance of innovations by modernist architects and designers in the treatment of neurosis. Integrating art, design, film and the material culture of psychiatric therapeutic equipment in innovative ways, the exhibition included a double-screen video immersive installation by award-winning filmmaker David Bickerstaff, of the 'Narrenturm', showing interiors of the 18th-century 'Tower of Fools', a cylindrical Viennese mental institution. Bickerstaff writes that the exhibition provided a number of further commissions and

opportunities for his work, at the Wellcome Collection and elsewhere. (Testimonial 1)

It attracted 44,000 visitors, an average of 559 per day, which exceeded the Wellcome Collection's expectations. The Wellcome Collection has provided examples of visitor comments which include: 'Beautiful exhibition to understand that what is considered mad or not sane is actually more normal and natural than anything else'; 'A very interesting exhibition, many unexpected aspects, suggesting all kinds of links'; 'Sad but most interesting - beauty and talent and ignorance'; 'I was impressed by the articles preserved. Viewing the exhibition with a nurse gave the exhibition context and I felt attachment to the content'; 'There is a lot to learn from the care to detail in our current psychiatric environments'; 'Reminded me of Ellis island with its layers of history and personal stories and tragedies. Absolutely brilliant pieces of reconstruction/ presentation of a completely marginalised section of Viennese history/art history'; 'As someone with bi-polar and many members of family also I was interested in the attitudes of others.' (Source 6)

The accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900*, edited by the curators Gemma Blackshaw and Leslie Topp, was published with support from the Wellcome Trust and AHRC, in English and German. Published by Lund Humphries in 2009, the catalogue sold 1284 copies in the UK and internationally. The images and videos from the exhibition remain on the Wellcome Collection's website.

The exhibition received extensive media coverage, in both general and specialist (medical, health design architectural) publications, recorded in a substantial press book collated by the exhibition curator at the Wellcome Collection. It was highlighted in over 20 'critics' choice' lists and also featured on BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* (31/03/2009) and *Saturday Review* (01/04/2009), and BBC World Service (01/04/2009). It featured in the review of the week in the *British Medical Journal* (11/04/2009) and was described as 'a must-see' in *The Lancet* (23/05/2009) (Source 7). It was also well-reviewed in Austria (Source 7).

Summarising the Wellcome Trust's appreciation of the exhibition and its reception by visitors, the chief curator of the Wellcome Collection states, 'We know from the length of time visitors spent in the exhibition, from the volume of enquiries generated and from visitor comments collected, how engaging the exhibition proved to visitors. Addressing the relationship between mental illness, the visual arts and architecture, the exhibition attracted many with a particular interest in one or other of these areas. It is clear from the visitors' comments recorded that a common experience was delight both at the depth of research and also at the surprises the exhibition contained. Those with a particular interest in the visual arts enjoyed discovering about the architecture and psychiatry elements of the show. For those with an interest in mental health there were also many surprises.' (Testimonial 2)

Topp's research on architectural and design modernism and psychiatric institutions prompted much favourable and detailed comment from journalists and from professionals in these fields. The wider impact of this work was exemplified subsequently as follows:

- *Museums Journal* interviewed Topp and quoted her extensively for an article on innovative approaches in guest-curated exhibitions (Issue 109/2, Feb. 2009, pp. 28-33) (Source 9)
- The Wien Museum commissioned a revised version of the exhibition (curated by Dr Blackshaw and Sabine Wieber (Birkbeck between 2005-8 as post-doctoral Research Associate) from January-April 2010. In the preface to the German version of the exhibition book, the Director of Museums of the City of Vienna wrote 'The London exhibition is being shown in Vienna under the original English-language title 'Madness & Modernity', in order to emphasise that it offers, quite deliberately, a view from the outside on a Viennese cultural phenomenon. The concept developed by Leslie Topp and Gemma Blackshaw has been adopted, therefore, without changes. The exhibition, with its unfamiliar and sometimes also controversial approach to

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seemingly well known themes should inspire discussions and offer ways of transcending well-worn patterns of interpretation.' (Testimonial 3 and Source 10)

- The purchase of Karl-Josef Rädler's works (some shown *Madness & Modernity*), for his collection, 'Museum of Everything' (Testimonial 4)
- In November, 2012, Dr Topp was asked by the president of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) Austria to write a report supplying a comparative analysis of Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital (delivered 20/12/2012) for submission as part of a bid to have the hospital included in the UNESCO world heritage list and save it from radical changes due to private development. The report was submitted to the mayor and vice-mayor of the City of Vienna, and helped to inform discussions at a meeting on the future of the Steinhof area with stakeholders. (Testimonial 5)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Testimonials:

1. Filmmaker for Wellcome Trust exhibition (factual statement)
2. Chief Curator, Public Programmes, Wellcome Trust (factual statement)
3. Director of Museums of the City of Vienna who invited the exhibition to Vienna and wrote the preface to the Vienna Museum's version of exhibition book (*Madness and Modernity: Kunst und Wahn in Wien um 1900*, Vienna: Christian Brandstätter and Wien Museum, 2010) (factual statement)
4. Curator/owner of Museum of Everything (factual statement)
5. ICOMOS: email explaining the situation in Vienna and expressing gratitude for Dr Topp's input. (factual statement)

Additional sources of corroboration:

6. Documents collating visitor comments for the [Madness and Modernity exhibition](#) can be supplied on request.
7. Press book, available on request: compiled by Durrants clippings service for the Wellcome Collection, this consists 93 clips with a combined circulation of 55,975,642) showing the listings, reviews and commentary from a wide range of professional, national, regional and consumer publications, such as the *Arts Journal*, the *Museums Journal*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Times*, the *New Statesman*, the *Financial Times*, *Time Out*, the *Croydon Advertiser*, *Ham & High*, etc.
8. Press reviews for the Vienna exhibition include: *Die Press* (21/01/2010); *Wiener Zeitung* (21/01/2010); and *Der Standard* (21/01/2010). Translations can be provided.
9. Article commissioned for *Museums Journal*, Issue 109/2, Feb. 2009, pp. 28-33: can be supplied
10. Exhibition catalogues *Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900*, edited by the curators Gemma Blackshaw and Leslie Topp: English and German versions can be supplied