

John Maizels **RAW** Outsider Art  
**CREATION**  
and beyond

with an introduction  
by Roger Cardinal



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PHAIDON



# RAW CREATION

Outsider Art  
and beyond

with an introduction  
by Roger Cardinal



Phaidon Press Limited  
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All Saints Street  
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Designed by Phil Baines

Printed in Hong Kong

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to Maggie and to Jennie and Lucy

# Preface

As children we are all artists, every one of us in the world. As we grow, the creative impetus within us often fades, yet Outsider Art proves the existence of the unending power of human creation. Within each one of us is that spark, that shared universality of human creativity. For some, thankfully, the spark never dies, never finds itself crushed by the norms of adult behaviour and cultural conditioning. It is to these natural and intuitive creators that Outsider Art owes its existence.

At a time when the offerings of the conventional art world meet increasing scorn and disinterest, the discovery that there is something else out there, something that really is art, comes at first as a refreshing revelation. When one delves a little deeper it is impossible not to be overcome by the force and wonder of the heroic expressions of those who are ever true to themselves.

The road to the acceptance of Outsider Art has been a long and hard one, almost spanning the years of this century. No one can know what great works, considered worthless, have been lost or destroyed. Outsider Art has endured years of ridicule and dismissal and yet now the time has surely come for it to take its place firmly in the world of art. In the last decade Outsider Art has ceased to be a clandestine interest of a few devoted followers, themselves visionary in their beliefs. It has become by far the most exciting development in contemporary art we have seen for many years, one which will have far-reaching repercussions. It holds in question our whole way of thinking about the development of art in our time and our concepts of the validity of art education.

This book is an introduction, a guidebook to a phenomenon as yet not fully explored, the very last frontier of discovery in art. The breadth of its scope inevitably results in gaps and I apologise for the unavoidable omissions. For clarity the text is divided into three sections. In the first part we look at the early discoveries of the art of the insane and the impact this had. We examine some of the works from Dr Hans Prinzhorn's studies and the awesome creative power of Adolf Wölfl. It was Jean Dubuffet who was able to crystallize the phenomenon of an art that previously had no name. In Art Brut he gave an identity and a rationale to an expression he felt to be superior to academic art, one that fought the smothering effects of Western culture. His great Collection de l'Art Brut eventually found a home in a purpose-built museum in Lausanne, Switzerland. We also look at other developments in Europe and in the USA which resulted from Dubuffet's theories and actions.

In the second section of the book we examine the nature of expressions which lie on the margins of Art Brut and Outsider Art. Contemporary American folk art, the 'artistes singuliers' of France and those in Dubuffet's 'Neuve Invention' category have all in their own way become an important entity in the growth of interest in non-academic art. So too have works by self-taught artists from the Third World, from the Caribbean, from Africa and India.

One unique feature of Outsider Art, and one found in no other sphere of art, are visionary environments. The final section of the book looks at some of the greatest of these extraordinary creations, from the Palais Idéal of the postman Ferdinand Cheval, in France, to the towers of Simon Rodia in

Watts, Los Angeles. In India we find the world's largest example of environmental creation with the work of Nek Chand in Chandigarh. We hope that in each of these three parts there are enough signposts and pointers for readers to continue to follow their own paths and to make their own further discoveries.

# Acknowledgements

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Pat Barylski and Juliet Brightmore of Phaidon Press for their patience, hard work and support through the whole of this project, and to Phil Baines for proving that innovative design can have dignity. To Roger Cardinal for his encouragement and wisdom. To Phyllis Kind, Monika Kinley, Ann Oppenheimer, Geneviève Roulin and Elka Spoerri for their invaluable comments. To the trailblazer Seymour Rosen for his help and knowledge. To Alf and Joan Maizels for their continuing belief. To Sam Farber and Bob Roth for their unstinting support. To Maggie and Lucy for putting up with all my moods and hours of work.

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And to my own hero, Nek Chand, and all the unsung heroes of Outsider Art.

John Maizels



# Introduction

The acceleration of cultural interchanges in the modern period—an acceleration brought about by the multiplication of global travel circuits, the growth of trans-national markets and above all the stimulus of media technologies which have consecrated our century as the Age of the Instant Image—has afforded us, among many varied legacies and lessons, the opportunity at last to bring up to date our perceptions of art and to recognize its true dimensions as a worldwide phenomenon. We now have access to a map of art so intensely colourful and so detailed that it is hard to appreciate just how pallid and perfunctory it once was in its representation of whole areas of visual expression lying beyond the well-surveyed territories of the Western tradition.

It can be a startling and exhilarating experience to look back at the revolution in taste which took place in Europe during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. These years saw a whole series of Western artists abandoning orthodox aesthetic models and finding inspiration in the marginal arts—by which I mean all those many forms of visual expression whose values and styles are alien to those of the establishment. Gauguin's fascination with the folk sculpture of Brittany and the native arts of Polynesia (not to mention those of Java and Egypt); Picasso's briefer passion for Iberian and West African carving; Kandinsky's taste for Russian folk prints and Bavarian popular religious imagery, as well as his openness toward European naïve art and non-European tribal art; Klee's envious wonderment when faced by pictures drawn by children or mental patients; Brancusi's twin enthusiasm for Romanian folk art and African woodcarving; the devoutness with which Schwitters rehabilitated the imagery of consumerism within his collages; the parallel efforts of such movements as French Surrealism and German Expressionism to radicalize the sites of art by suddenly giving prominence to the creations of tribal peoples from Africa, Oceania or North America—all such variants of an essential Primitivism are exemplary in so far as they grant pride of place to the strange, the provocative, the magical, even the barbaric. Their collective impact brought about a fundamental change in European aesthetics, a change which continues to challenge us to think about the boundaries of acceptable expression and the permissible range of our responses.

What happens when radically different forms of art are introduced to unprepared audiences is that the reflexes of orthodox appreciation seize up and become inoperative. Such art refutes received wisdom and insists that we expose ourselves to new visual stimuli. Our ways of seeing and interpreting what we see need immediately to be adjusted. Primitivism—in the sense of a conscious effort on the part of European artists to embrace a style and an attitude entirely at odds with their training—teaches that art in the fullest sense need not be eurocentric, nor the sole province of accredited specialists. If it is an expression of human desires and imaginings, art can manifest itself just as potently in the most obscure and remote regions of the world as it can amid the supportive amenities of our urban centres; and it can appeal, moreover, to a far wider audience than would seem the case in the context of our official culture of ordained commentators and selection committees.

Though the process is often painful, our century is managing to carry forward this revolution in awareness in so far as Western galleries and museums now seek to address the immense variety of styles and meanings which the human creative impulse initiates across the world. To put it simply, there are always more kinds of art at the fringes of our knowledge than we could possibly imagine. The precept of suppressing all geographical, social and cultural priorities has brought about more and more adventurous recognitions of unsuspected modes of artistic expression, and especially those which, despite their relative proximity to official centres, were hitherto ignored as peripheral, if not redundant.

It is instructive to consider the shift in aesthetic tolerance which, from the 1880s onwards, became perceptible within French culture, where taste in art is habitually qualified by other orders of discrimination (especially pertaining to education and class). When Georges Courteline put together a pioneering collection of non-academic work, much of it naïve and anonymous, he dubbed it his 'Cabinet of Horrors', as if to answer any charge of bad taste by invoking it himself with his tongue firmly in his cheek. When Alfred Jarry paid homage to obscure popular woodcuts, or made supportive gestures toward the untutored painter Henri Rousseau, he still did so in an idiom of ironic deviousness. When Guillaume Apollinaire in turn moved from amused curiosity to an earnest commitment to Rousseau, he could not entirely suppress a note of condescension in praising him as 'without doubt the strangest, most daring and most charming of exotic painters'. In those same years, psychiatric collections such as that of Dr Auguste Marie, who showcased his patients' pictures in his cabinet at the Villejuif asylum, tended to be envisaged as documents symptomatic of clinical disorder, rather than as mature artistic achievements worthy of display in an art gallery context. Some revolutions advance slowly, and it would take some while before the activity of collecting popular prints from Épinal could be seen as more than the whimsical hobby of a privileged élite; or before self-taught painters such as Séraphine Louis or Louis Vivin were able to shake off such sentimental labels as Wilhelm Uhde's 'Painters of the Sacred Heart', and aspire to the status of artists pure and simple. Cultural habits die hard, and forms of art lacking any official seal of approval were long classified as exotic curiosities and denied a status conducive to proper discussion and appraisal. Not until the mid-twentieth century were principles of aesthetic tolerance and adventurousness sufficiently disseminated to allow one to speak about them without elaborate apology, addressing them evenly and on their own terms.

And then came Jean Dubuffet, whose revolutionary proposals for revolutionizing the field of creativity were to attack the ideology of metropolitan visual culture at its very base. Of course, we should remember that much of Dubuffet's trenchant theorizing was indebted to an agenda set by Gauguin, Apollinaire, André Breton and others; and that the five decades or so which preceded his interventions had in fact already seen the recognition and relative popularization of several modalities of untutored art, including rural folk art, with its decorative imagery and often functional objects, various sorts of vernacular and popular urban art, naïve painting and sculpture, children's drawings, mediumistic drawings, and the pictures, carvings and assemblages



of the mentally deranged. Yet it was Dubuffet's passionate promotion in the late 1940s of the notion of an Art Brut—an art at once savage and sophisticated, shocking and seductive—that was to prod Western aesthetics into perhaps one of its most critical efforts of rethinking.

The plain fact is that Dubuffet's penchant for polemic and mischief led him to propose an abrupt and vastly disturbing choice: either one could stick with authorized forms of cultural production and sink into a vapid anaesthesia, or one would have to grapple with a host of unpredictable and culturally illicit forms of expression. Dubuffet insisted that the arts of the European establishment were no more than sugar-coated sham, whereas the non-academic and unheralded art he was busily discovering—the work of psychotics such as Heinrich Anton Müller, Adolf Wölfl or Aloïse Corbaz, of mediumistic painters such as Augustin Lesage, Laure Pigeon or Joseph Crépin, or of perfectly sane yet recalcitrant individuals such as Pascal Maisonneuve, Scottie Wilson or Xavier Parguey—must henceforth be acknowledged as the only authentic touchstone of artistic creativity. From now on, the official masterpieces of the fine art tradition were to forfeit all their privileges: for Dubuffet wanted to turn taste inside out, relocating the centres of excellence in spaces which hitherto had lain in the darkness beyond the cultural pale.

I surmise that Dubuffet's championship of Art Brut was fuelled by an unusual confidence in his own intuitions, as if he knew he could always detect what would and what would not fit the category. His most impressive decisions, I would argue, were first and foremost a matter of unreflecting feeling, rather than of intellectual assessment. It was only afterwards that Dubuffet began writing about his finds, ingeniously interpreting them in the light of insights gained from his own practice as an artist, as well as using sheer infernal guesswork. The next stage came when he felt obliged to justify and protect them by drawing up a formal definition, laying down his decisive criteria of spontaneity, imperviousness to visual influences, freedom from contacts with the mainstream art-world, temperamental resistance to social norms and so forth. Curiously, the flow of his discoveries seemed to gather momentum the more he built exact and impermeable banks to channel it.

The question of how literally to take the doctrine of Art Brut in its purest and most extreme form continues to haunt contemporary debates about authenticity and artistic excellence in the field. What later emerged—and not before a certain amount of damage had been done as a result of his over-zealous application of his own rules, as witness his treatment of Gaston Chaissac—was that Dubuffet himself tired of hyperbole and began to concede that there are after all several shades of aesthetic pleasure, and that one might successively appreciate differing kinds of art. By the 1970s it had become clear that there would be no end to the emergence of interesting non-academic artists whose work was at once compelling and at odds with his strictest doctrine. No doubt it was the impressive coherence and sharpness of Dubuffet's primal intuition which was responsible for the fact that so many other people had become keen to discover work worthy of it. The frenzied haste with which some dealers and collectors have tracked down new specimens of Art Brut has led to a good many quarrels and frustrations (not all of them due to misunderstandings about what Dubuffet had actually said).

No doubt it was to be predicted that the pressure of other people's discoveries and opinions, including those emanating from parts of the world remote from European debates, would in time begin to override one man's singular specifications. That wonderfully unruly wave of enthusiasm for contemporary folk art which has gripped Americans over the last two decades or so, and the consistent expansion of interest in a wide range of non-establishment art forms, from the psychotic to the aboriginal, which has affected art lovers from Austria to Australia, have ushered in a period of ever more fluent and uninhibited connections. Fifty years since Dubuffet sharpened the modern eye, it begins to seem that his strictest criteria have lost their relevance in the face of the sheer prolixity and fertility of the material still coming to light. Not everyone would deplore the fact that Dubuffet's revolutionary doctrine has in turn been overthrown by mass enthusiasm, for critical scruples about taxonomy can seem fastidious in the face of the evidence that an increasing number of non-specialists are finding real pleasure in the marginal arts. All the same, given that I have spent several years maintaining sharp distinctions between Outsider Art, Naïve Art, Popular Art and the rest, I would deplore a thoughtless plunge into the indiscriminate: for I believe that the appreciation of art still does benefit from a consciousness of differences. What I think we now need is a balanced, generous effort of responsiveness toward the myriad forms of art, an alertness to novelty coupled with a healthy refusal to allow novelty to become an absolute or an abstraction.

Since its first appearance in 1989, the international magazine *Raw Vision* has maintained a vigilant gaze over all these busy domains, exposing its readership to a progressively more exciting if sometimes bewildering sampling of the marginal arts from across the globe. As its editor, John Maizels has been wilfully eclectic in sponsoring articles about individual creators, and sometimes groups, along with reviews of exhibitions and books of interpretation and critique, which together form a panoply of the most disparate approaches. One common denominator has remained constant: the notion of a certain intensity and purity of vision, a never-quite-defined yet palpable freshness of invention, or what Maizels here calls 'raw creation'.

It is this editorial experience, along with that of meeting artists and seeing their work, and his repeated pilgrimages to the sites of untutored creativity—whether it be the prominent museums of Europe or North America which permanently house specimens of raw creation, those public or commercial galleries which mount temporary exhibitions of such art, or the classic large-scale environmental installations made by Ferdinand Cheval, Nek Chand and others—which constitute John Maizels's excellent qualifications for the daunting task of making sense of what, by the mid-1990s, has become a bewildering mass of wonderful and varied material.

As a guide to self-taught art in this century, this book comprises a brief history of the discoveries and influential theories of enthusiasts from Hans Prinzhorn to Leo Navratil, from Dubuffet to Alain Bourbonnais. It is good to see that Maizels balances theory against the detailed exposition of the work of individual artists; while these do tend to be outstanding examples, I believe he wants to make it clear that he is a pluralist and an enthusiast, rather than the solemn defender of a limited, immutable canon. Certainly



his book is unprecedented in its breadth of coverage, and makes an immediate case for dispensing with any lingering hesitancy about exposing one's eye to artistic expressions as they emanate from unknown regions across the world. And *Raw Creation* is not a compendium of exotic eccentrics but a cosmopolitan gathering of equals.

It is noticeable that, as far as possible, each artist Maizels addresses is honoured with his or her true name, for anonymity or coy pseudonyms are absolutely a thing of the past. To recognize individuality and a distinctive style is indeed essential to the activity of appreciating art of such honesty and committedness. Maizels writes with equal zest about drawings, paintings, sculptures, assemblages and performances, though he seems especially taken in his imagination by single-handed installations and environments. However, what matters is not any material variability of scale but the central fact of the omnipresence of the maker within any true artwork. Even the tiniest drawing can be 'inhabited' or invested with personal meaning; and this sense of a caring, shaping subject is crucial to the impact of Outsider Art. (It is true that there are difficulties for those concerned to arrive at some sort of objectivity as regards aesthetic appreciation. Yet such difficulties should not be avoided, and this is probably one of the vexed yet necessary lessons which such art imparts.)

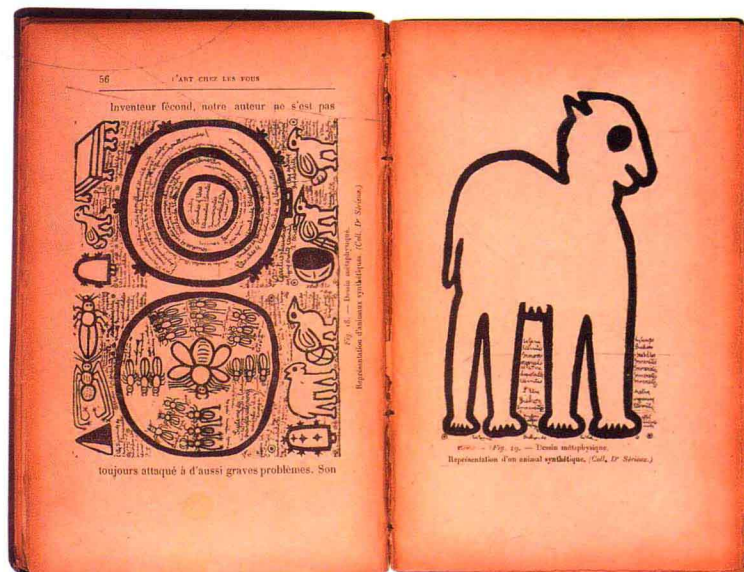
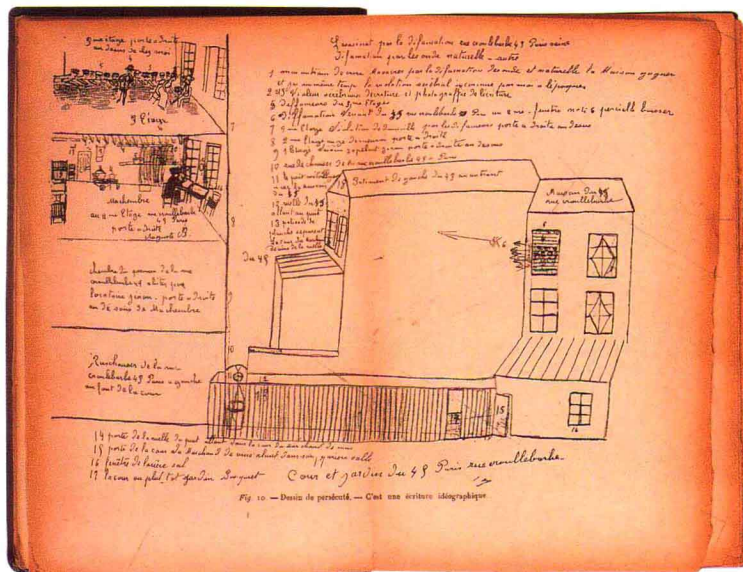
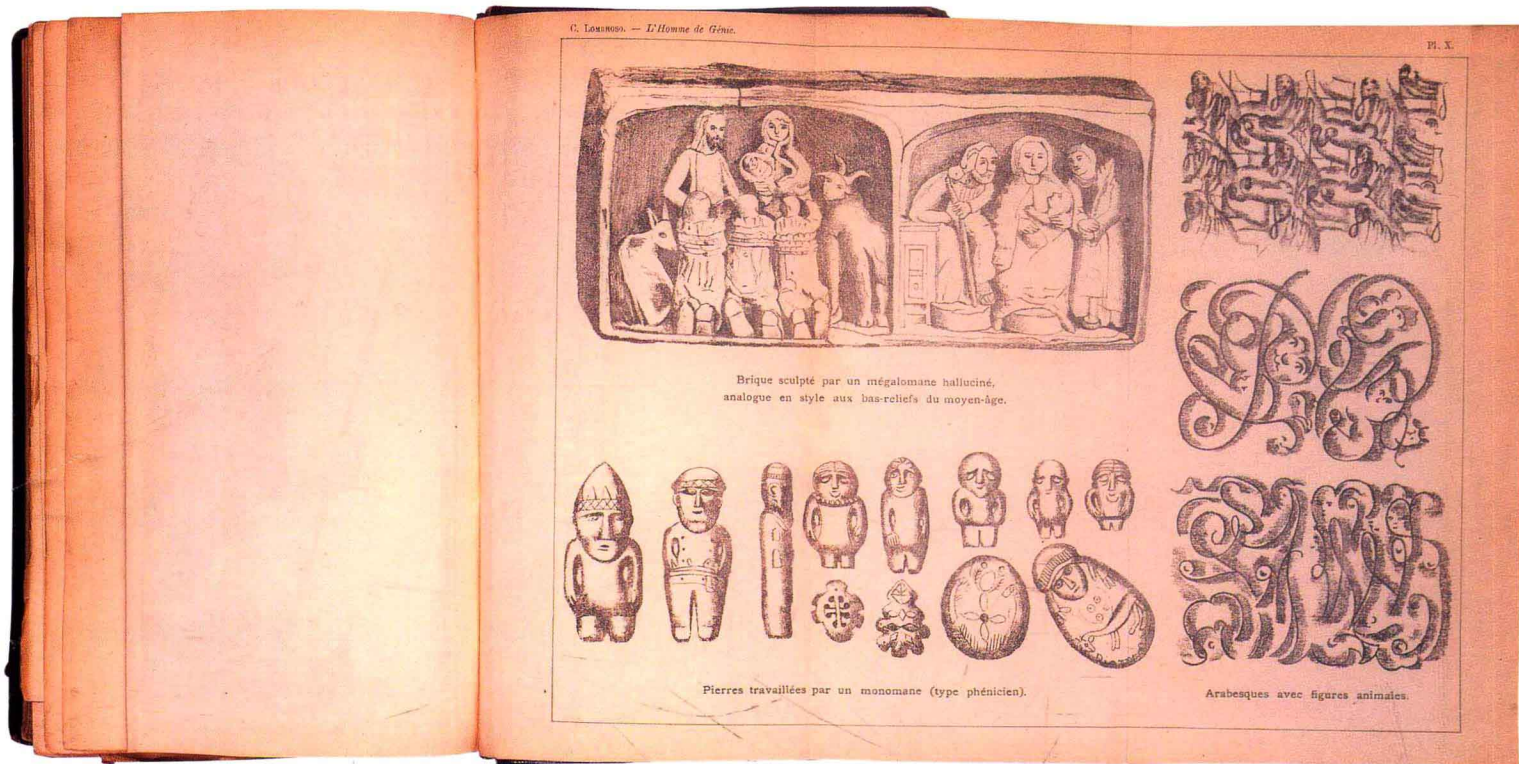
What is admirable about his exposition is that, rather than pigeonhole artists by reference to a rigid standard, John Maizels is quick to show that there is no discovery without context, no context without complexity, and no complexity without the need for empathetic understanding. There can be no shortcuts to insight into the work of so disparate and intense a sequence of creators as those to whom we are introduced in these pages. Maizels wisely situates individuals against their social background, and notes the often revealing circumstances whereby they were discovered and brought to public notice. The indispensable contribution of Dubuffet is discussed, yet he is seen as but one in a whole cycle of practical collectors and conjectural thinkers; while the qualities which emerge as touchstones (of authenticity, or of sheer visual pleasure) tend to lose any trace of absolutism as they are attributed to deviant and always idiosyncratic expressions. Dubuffet always maintained that the real failing of conventional art appreciation is its deference to the critical judgement of an élite minority: and it may well prove to be one of the greatest gains of the expansion of our interest across the fields of self-taught and person-centred art that we should learn to trust our own unmediated responses, finding that taste is equally a matter for self-determination. Readers of this book will, I hope, take pleasure in meeting dozens of inventive creators; yet while they may be struck by most of the work, they are unlikely to be able to enjoy all of it to the same pitch of intensity. It is natural that there should be fluctuations of response, and nuances of judgement. Let each reader determine his or her own preferences, entering into the egalitarian spirit of this enterprise and rejecting all dogma, even that of Art Brut itself.

Roger Cardinal

## Part I: Outsider Art and Art Brut



## The gradual recognition of the art of the 'insane'





is one of the most fascinating stories in the frequently astounding field of self-taught art. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, as some doctors became interested in theories of mental illness and more humane methods of treatment were introduced, a few enlightened psychiatrists came to realize the importance of the artistic expressions of their patients, some building up collections of pictures and objects. The Scottish doctor W A F Browne published *Art in Madness* as early as 1857, and in 1864 the Italian doctor and early collector of 'psychotic art' Cesare Lombroso published *Genio e follia*, in which he grappled with the tenuous link between creative genius and madness. Lombroso's study was followed over the next few decades by a string of publications in which eminent scholars in the psychiatric field considered various aspects of the art of the mentally

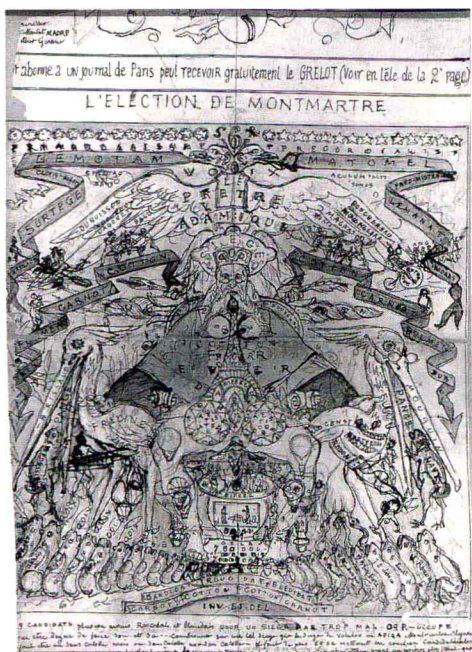


Cesare Lombroso

ill. ¶ In the years preceding the First World War the work of three psychiatrists was particularly important. *L'Art chez les fous*, published in Paris in 1907 under the name of Marcel Réja, was in fact written by a psychiatrist, Dr Paul Gaston Meunier, who argued that the art of the insane had a direct relationship with the art of the 'normal', but also had a special quality of its own. Dr Auguste Marie, who began collecting the work of patients as early as 1900, opened his important collection, 'Le Musée de la Folie', at the Villejuif asylum in Paris in 1905. Also in this period Dr Charles Ladame built up an important collection from the psychiatric hospitals of Geneva and Solothurn. Until the activities of these early pioneers, patients' works were systematically destroyed or swept up at the end of each day, a practice that

in the main continued for many years to come.<sup>1</sup> ¶ Even these eminent doctors, the first to be interested in the artistic works

of the insane, tended to regard the material they studied as specimens, appendages to the analytic and psychiatric process. Patients were never referred to by their own names, but by initials or numbers. Although just about recognized as art, their work was still considered a lower form of expression than that by 'real' artists. ¶ By the start of the 1920s the stage had been set for further



Cotton Xavier  
*L'Election de Montmartre*, 1890  
 Ink, watercolour and coloured crayon  
 40 × 28 cm  
 Collection de L'Art Brut Lausanne  
 Previously in the collection of Dr Marie

1. For a detailed and absorbing survey of early contributions in the field of art and psychiatry, see John M MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, 1989).