

Mental Illnesses in Symbolism

Mental Illnesses in Symbolism

Edited by

Rosina Neginsky

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Mental Illnesses in Symbolism

Series: Art, Literature and Music in Symbolism, Its Origins and Its
Consequences

Edited by Rosina Neginsky

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INTRODUCTION

ROSINA NEGINSKY

The collection of essays *Mental Illness in Symbolism* consists of eight articles, five of them inspired by conference presentations, some given at the Congress of Comparative Literature in Paris in 2013, and others at the Conference of American Association of Comparative Literature in Seattle in 2015. These papers were presented in the frame of the Research Center on Symbolist Movement, Art, Literature and Music in Symbolism and Decadence (ALMSD, <http://www.uis.edu/hosted-orgs/ALMSD/index.html>), which was responsible for organizing the panels at those conferences. Two essays published in this collection, Nora Buhks' "Nabokov and Psychiatry: The Case of Luzhin"¹ and Olga Skonechnaya's "Russian Paranoid Discourse,"² were previously published in Russian, and the third essay, my own, "The Hidden World of the Unconscious: Expressions of Underground Chaos in the Work of Mikhail Vrubel,"³ was originally published in French. In this collection, these three essays appear in my translation and this is the first time that they are available to an English-speaking audience.

All essays in the collection relate to the Symbolist movement, either directly or indirectly, and they all treat the issue of madness in art, literature, and music. The definition of madness that these articles use is quite broad and derives mainly from Michel Foucault's vision of madness, which he expressed in his book *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*). Jean-Claude Lanne summarized some of Foucault's ideas on madness and art in his article "Poésie et folie: le cas du futurisme russe" (Poetry and Madness: The Case of Russian Futurism)⁴ and this is directly applicable to essays published in *Mental Illness in Symbolism*. Lanne wrote:

Madness, first of all, is a question of judgment, thus it is a relative concept. One is declared insane when his behavior, sentiment, discourse, actions betray a difference in relation to the social norm, the system commonly accepted and responsible for the smooth running of the society. When a

specialist (a medical doctor) makes a judgment, it implies, for the one who is its object, the treatment, and a return to the “normality,” to the ordinary social life. In the artistic area, one is declared insane not only when his behavior can be distanced from the social norm (there are myriad examples in the history of art: Holderlin, G. de Nerval, Van Gogh, Vrubel, Garshin, etc.), but also, and mainly, when the one’s work (verbal and other) is distanced from some criteria commonly accepted which are the basis and definition of the poetical and of the esthetic system of the given time period. First of all, these are the specialists in the area of literature, the critics, who carry that judgment of value about the work, who stigmatize it as delirious, eccentric, absurd, extravagant, in short “mad.”⁵

Foucault’s definition is also directly applicable to contemporaries’ perception of the Symbolist movement and its artistic expression in different media (visual arts, literature, and music). For example, and for the reasons that Foucault mentions, when the works of Western European Symbolists, articles about them, and the works of native-born Symbolists began to appear in Russia, many critics called the works of Symbolists insane and labeled those who produced them psychopaths. In one instance, Russian civic critic Boris Glinsky, in his article “Illness or Publicity” (“Bolezn’ ili reklama”) published in *The Herald of History* in 1896, decried the famous Russian Symbolist journal *The Northern Herald* (*Severny Vestnik*) as a psychiatric asylum and all its members as mentally ill, these representing the flower of the first generation of Russian Symbolists and being the founders of the movement. Zinaida Vengerova, a journalist, translator, Russian literary critic and one of the first theoreticians of the Symbolist Movement, laughingly comments on it in a letter to her sister, the pianist Isabelle Vengerova:

By the way, together with the latest issues of *The Northern Herald*, I will send you the issue of *The Herald of History* that contains a curious article about *The Northern Herald* written by B. Glinsky. Glinsky calls Luba [Gurevich, the editor of *The Northern Herald*] the landlady of the establishment for the mentally ill; all of us are the interns and the most hopeless is Minsky because he proclaims the publication of my book. I can be cured if I let myself be rescued from Minsky’s and Volynsky’s company, if my decadent articles are not published, and I am handed over to my respectable brother, Semen Afanasievich. Isn’t it good? Now we call the publishing house an “establishment,” and each other psychopaths.⁶

The study of the Symbolist movement is sometimes perceived as a study of insanity, partially because it is a movement whose essence derives from the importance of the unconscious, the uncontrollable and irrational part of the human inner world, the world of Dionysus,⁷ which artists attempt to

depict through various artistic forms and media. It is not accidental that in Plato's *Republic* the poet is excluded from the ideal city, wherein rationality reigns. Plato describes the poet as a "madman," full of "divine frenzy," because he "destroys the reasonable part" of the soul.⁸

In the second part of the 19th century, the unconscious became a subject of study and of examination by medicine. The French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology Jean-Martin Charcot, who worked at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, searched for ways to access the unconscious in order to cure his patients' physical pains which he believed resulted from psychological trauma. Sigmund Freud, when he still was a student in Vienna, traveled to Paris to listen to Charcot's lectures, to meet him, and to see his public presentations of hypnosis applied to "hysterics," namely Charcot's patients at Salpêtrière. Charcot's method consisted of attempting to access the subjects' unconscious through hypnosis, believing that it was a way to bring out the traumatic experiences and articulate them. According to him, remembering the origins of the pain and talking about them could liberate the patients from ongoing emotional pain and bring them a cure, not only mentally, but also for the physical manifestations of their mental distress. This is the method that Freud later employed in his psychoanalytic talk therapy.

A number of Symbolist artists, among them Odilon Redon, witnessed those presentations, which then had an effect on their artistic imagination, and later, influenced their works. Barbara Larson's book, *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon (Refiguring Modernism)* and some articles such as "L'hystérique, l'artiste et le savant" (The Hysteric, the Artist and the Scholar) by Jacqueline Carroy and "Révolte et folie visionnaire chez Carlos Schwabe: *La Vague* 1906-1907" (Revolt and the Visionary Folly in Carlos Schwabe: *The Wave* 1906-1907)" by Jean-David Lafond-Jumeau in the catalog of the exhibit *L'Âme au corps*⁹ certainly explore those issues.

The Symbolist movement searched for ways to express the invisible reality, particularly the reality of the unconscious world; dark, mysterious, and unreliable. It was for this reason that Baudelaire and later Stéphane Mallarmé were so interested in Edgar Allan Poe's tales that they translated them into French. For this same reason, Redon searched for the "visual language" to describe the indescribable, the life of the unconscious and the chilling feeling that some literary works (including Poe's) awaken through dealing with these topics.

The first part of this book consists of four articles on art and madness: "Psychiatric Photography, the Expression of Emotions, and Italian Symbolist Art: The Search for Self and Identity Crisis at the Turn of the

20th Century” by Mario Finazzi, “The Hidden World of the Unconscious: Expressions of Underground Chaos in the Work of Mikhail Vrubel” by Rosina Neginsky, “*Tout n'est que syphilis*’: Venereal terror and the representation of women in fin-de-siècle Belgium” by Natalia Angeles Vieyra, and “Verhaeren on Rembrandt’s ‘folie’: ‘S’il n’était un génie, on le prendrait pour un fou’” by Albert Alhadeff. The second part consists of three articles on literature and madness: “Nabokov and Psychiatry: The Case of Luzhin” by Nora Buhks, “Russian Paranoid Discourse” by Olga Skonechnaya, and “Sexual Neurosis or Creative Catalyst? Hysteria and Demonic Possession in Alexei Remizov’s *Solomonii*” by Julia Friedman. The third and final part has only one article, “Mental Disorder and Creativity in Composers: The Performer’s Gesture as a Pointer to traces of ‘Madness’” by Jean-Pierre Armengaud, and its topic is music and madness.

Finazzi’s article “Psychiatric Photography, the Expression of Emotions, and Italian Symbolist Art: The Search for Self and Identity Crisis at the Turn of the 20th Century” analyzes the works of three Italian artists: Adolfo Wildt, a sculptor from Milan; Romolo Romani, a painter from Brescia, settled in Milan; and a woman artist, Adriana Bisi Fabbri. Finazzi suggests that they were interested in depicting human emotions of suffering and the tormented inner world of their subjects, partially because they were tormented souls themselves, and because they lived at a time when there was a fascination with the world of the unconscious, especially with its dark side. That fascination was reinforced in Darwin’s, Charcot’s, and Richer’s publications, which stressed the importance of studying emotions in order to access and to understand the world of the unconscious. Charcot’s public presentations of hypnosis and the growing fashion in psychiatric hospitals of taking photographs or making paintings of the mentally ill, purportedly for studying their unconscious through their emotions, were also quite popular and known to artists. Finazzi believes that the interest of the mentioned artists in depicting various emotions was partially inspired by the photographs and paintings of the mentally ill and that some of these artists used those works in order to create their own art.

Neginsky’s article “The Hidden World of the Unconscious: Expressions of Underground Chaos in the Work of Mikhail Vrubel” examines various representations of the image of the Demon by Russian Symbolist artist Mikhail Vrubel. His demon was originally inspired by Mikhail Lermontov’s long poem *The Demon*, but eventually moved into its own original direction. The article closely studies how Vrubel’s hallucinations affected his choice of colors, shapes, and ornamentation in some of his representations of the Demon and led to the creation of a new Demon, different from the one that appears in Lermontov’s poem.

Vieyra's article "*Tout n'est que syphilis: Venereal Terror and the Representation of Women in Fin-de-Siècle Belgium*" explores the idea of madness in relation to the role of women who were perceived as carriers of venereal diseases responsible for madness. Vieyra examines visual works such as those of Belgian artists Fernand Khnopff and Felicien Rops, and especially Khnopff's front-piece illustration for Pelladan's novel *Istar* and Rops's engravings *Human Parody* and *Mors Syphilitic*, which exemplify the responsibility put on women for being carriers of venereal diseases. She stresses how social and medical ignorance, labeling women as the only responsible parties for venereal diseases, contributed to the creation of an image of a *femme fatale*: a beautiful and seductive destroyer of men.

In his article "Verhaeren on Rembrandt's 'folie': 'S'il n'était un génie, on le prendrait pour un fou,'" Albert Alhadeff explores the Belgian culture at the turn of the century by analyzing the writings of Symbolist Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren, whose poetry was dedicated to the 17th century Dutch artist Rembrandt. Alhadeff demonstrates that these writings are particularly interesting because they express Verhaeren's world-perception which allows him to see Rembrandt's works from a Symbolist point of view and explains the reasons why his contemporaries, as well as later art critics, perceived Rembrandt as a madman. Alhadeff specifically uses the example of Rembrandt's painting *Night Watch* to demonstrate that Verhaeren sees this work as a precursor of Symbolism, since he believes that it depicts the unconscious as expressed through a dream. Alhadeff stresses that "Verhaeren qualifies Rembrandt as [a] madman, because of his unconventionality, his capacity to dismiss the social conventions and expectations, and the ability to live entirely in his own inner world, the world of an inner dream," and that is what makes Rembrandt's works diverge from "normality" and makes him a precursor of Symbolism.

Nabokov's novel *The Luzhin Defense* is the topic of Nora Buhks' article "Nabokov and Psychiatry: The Case of Luzhin." Her article is a study of the novel's main character, the chess player Luzhin, who Nabokov creates using the model of autism, the mental condition which psychiatrist Bleuler describes as "the escape from reality with, at the same time, relative or absolute predominance of the inner life." Buhks notes that Luzhin's fear in front of the real world contributes to the development and growth of his imaginary world, which seems to him "understandable, harmonious, and subjugated to his will." The article addresses a mental condition taken to the extreme as a reflection on the Symbolist movement, whose prerogative was based on the philosophy of withdrawal from physical reality and immersion within the inner world as the foundation for creativity and

building a better world. The autistic Luzhin could be perceived as an example of a danger with such an attitude and a satire on Symbolism.

Olga Skonechnaya's article "Russian Paranoid Discourse" is a study of how Russian Symbolist novels, such as those by Andrey Bely and Fedor Sologub, treat paranoia. Skonechnaya explains the particularity of madness in the Symbolist novel and stresses that "Symbolism distinguishes between two types of folly: the elevated prophetic folly whose role is to unveil the mysteries of existence; and the low folly which represents the supreme level of stupidity/silliness or the confinement to that absurd world." Through an analysis of Russian Symbolist novels, she demonstrates how "the clinical folly can appear as a degeneration of the elevated folly into illness ... or as the opposite, a sort of hypertrophy of earthly thought, a hypertrophy of a limited intelligence, which in its impotency destroys its own limits (such is 'Peredonov's mania')."

Julia Freedman's article "Sexual Neurosis or Creative Catalyst? Hysteria and Demonic Possession in Alexei Remizov's *Solomoniiia*" examines Remizov's text "*Solomoniiia*." It is a study of the main character Solomoniiia's demoniac possession. Freedman explains that this text is a result of Remizov's interest in and knowledge of Jean-Martin Charcot's studies of "hysterics." One of Freedman's questions is about the relationship between creativity and madness. By citing Remizov's attestation that he connects his pain with his writing, Freedman implies that mental illness is often prompted by outside conditions and leads to uncovering the world of the unconscious, which Symbolists (and, following them, Surrealists) believed to be a foundation for the creative process.

The last article in the collection is "Mental Disorder and Creativity in Composers: The Performer's Gesture as a Pointer to traces of 'Madness'" by Jean-Pierre Armengaud. Armengaud analyzes mental imbalance in composers such as Robert Schumann, Eric Satie, Alexander Scriabin, Serge Rachmaninov, Anton Brückner, and Gustav Mahler who lived and created in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. He studies the insanity of these artists from the point of view of a performer of their works. He explains that:

In general, the aspect of madness shows itself to the fingers of the pianist as an impossibility, a step beyond the musical project, the crossing of a red line, or even an aggression. . . . The pre-symbolism in Schumann . . . gives the music the power to access a meta-rational order, where the hands of the pianist are arbiters between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, like symbolist painting would be between the visible and the invisible. . . .

The collection of essays *Mental Illness in Symbolism* makes explicit the link between the Symbolist movement's artistic expression and madness. It complements the earlier studies of madness in the arts and especially in art, literature, and music that are part of the Symbolist movement or derive from its precepts.

Notes

¹ Nora Buhks, "Nabokov i psichiatriia. Sluchai Luzhina" ("Nabokov and Psychiatry: The Case of Luzhin"), in *Semiotika bezumiia*, ed. Nora Buhks, Sorbonne, Paris-Moscow: Russian Institute, 2005, 172-193.

² Olga Iu. Skonechnaya, "Paranoidal'ny roman russkogo simvolizma: Fedor Sologub, Andrei Bely, Universalii russkoj literatury, v. 5, in Collection of Essays, ed. Faustov A.A., The State University of Voronezh, Voronezh: "Nauchnaya kniga," 2013, 63-77.

³ See Rosina Neginsky, "Inconscient et Clandestinité: l'expression du chaos souterrain dans la peinture de Vrouble," in <http://irphil.univ-lyon3.fr/accueil-philosophie/philosophie/recherche/publications/la-clandestinite-etudes-sur-la-pensee-russe-582181.kjsp?RH=1326705502535>, ed. Françoise Lesourd, 2011, 236-245.

⁴ Jean-Claude Lanne, "Poésie et folie: le cas du futurisme russe" (Poetry and Madness: The Case of Russian Futurism) in *Semiotika bezumiia*, ed. Nora Buhks, Sorbonne, Paris-Moscow: Russian Institute, 2005, 128-142.

⁵ *Ibid*, 130. See also Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason), Paris: Plon, 1961.

⁶ See Rosina Neginsky, *Zinaida Vengerova: In Search of Beauty. A Literary Ambassador between East and West*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004, 70. For the Russian version see, Rosina Neginsky, *Pis'ma Z.A. Vengerovoi k S.G. Balakhovskoi-Petit, Revue des Etudes Slaves*, Paris, LXVII/2-3, 1995, letter N 33, 499.

⁷ See Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, London: Penguin, 1993. See also Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, New York: Signet Classics, 2006, and *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, eds. Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, *Dionysus in Literature*, ed. Branimir M. Rieger, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994.

⁸ See Corinne Saunders, "'The Thoughtful Maladie': Madness and Vision in Medieval Writings," in *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, eds. Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 68.

⁹ *L'Âme au corps*, the catalog of exposition, Paris, National Galleries of Grand Palais (october 1993-janvier 1994).

PART ONE:

MADNESS IN ART

CHAPTER ONE

PSYCHIATRIC PHOTOGRAPHY, THE EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS, AND ITALIAN SYMBOLIST ART: THE SEARCH FOR SELF AND IDENTITY CRISIS AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

MARIO FINAZZI

In this article, I will suggest the hypothesis that a group of Italian late symbolist artists, especially interested in the representation of psychological states and moods, could have seen and taken inspiration from the illustrations of scientific texts about physiognomy and perhaps from the albums of psychiatric photography circulating in Italy at the end of the 19th century.

On a secondary level, we will see how the research of those artists, pointed toward the definition of their individual identities in a growing mass society, in itself matches the onset of mental anomaly and neurosis.

In 1898, in an article published in *Emporium*, the popular Italian magazine about art, science, and general culture, Giuseppe Antonini suggested that artists look at pictures of lunatics and psychiatric subjects to study human expressions better.¹

For Antonini, the mentally ill were an unlimited source from whom to take inspiration, especially regarding the feelings of inherent pain and suffering, and “in each one of those, we will find some expressions of their emotional state so intense and lively, such suggestive and characteristic models, constituting a real treasure of observation for those artists that could be able to fix them on canvas and in clay.” In fact, looking at the psychotic subjects, it was possible to see and analyze “the muscular contractions of the face, of the trunk, of the limbs, the partial convulsions,

the tremors, the paralysis, the breathing irregularities, the sighs, the crying, the sobs, the laments, the shouts, the peripheral vasodilator phenomenons, the pallor or the sudden reddening of the face, the quietness and the unusual and paroxysmic eloquence of despair.”²

These thoughts of Antonini’s were based on some ideas of Charles Darwin, who viewed the psychiatric hospital as an excellent place to study human emotions. In his work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin explained that along with the study of children, who show emotions more easily, it is extremely important to study the insane, “as they are liable to the strongest passions, and give uncontrolled vent to them.”³

Moreover, in an essay about the physiognomy of pain, Paolo Mantegazza, a friend of Darwin’s and an Italian translator of his works, encouraged artists to visit hospitals often.⁴

There were many literary works or chapters of books at that time that investigated the psychiatric aspects of classical and renaissance art masterpieces; Jean-Martin Charcot and Paul Richer together wrote *Les Démoniaques dans l’Art* (1887) and *Les Difformes et les Malades dans l’Art* (1889), in which they scrutinized art of the past with the instruments of modern neurology. These texts, fully illustrated with drawings and photographs, were kept in the libraries of the Italian Academies of fine arts. Moreover, many Italian artists knew the French and English languages and traveled often in France and the United Kingdom.

The treatise by Darwin about emotions was very popular in Italy after having been translated into Italian in 1878,⁵ just six years after the first English edition was published. It contained a very large set of photographs and drawings illustrating diverse kinds of emotions. Some of the photographs were incredibly impressive and a little morbid; they were mainly taken from a previous book by Duchenne de Boulogne⁶ and portrayed a man on whose face were applied electrodes to provoke intense facial expressions [Fig.1-1]. The photographer was Adrien Tournachon, the brother of the more popular Felix Nadar.⁷ Photography was yet a young technique, and people of the 19th century were still dealing with this cultural revolution as a way of representing reality. The accuracy in reproducing the visible reality, made possible through the photographic device, was now uniquely suitable for scientists to study cases and to illustrate their research.

Photographs were also commonly used by Cesare Lombroso, the father of modern anthropological criminology to prove how the criminal attitude of an individual was a genetic factor strictly connected with the traits of his face. Lombroso’s major work, widely known in Italy and published in several editions, was a sort of atlas in which the different cases of criminal

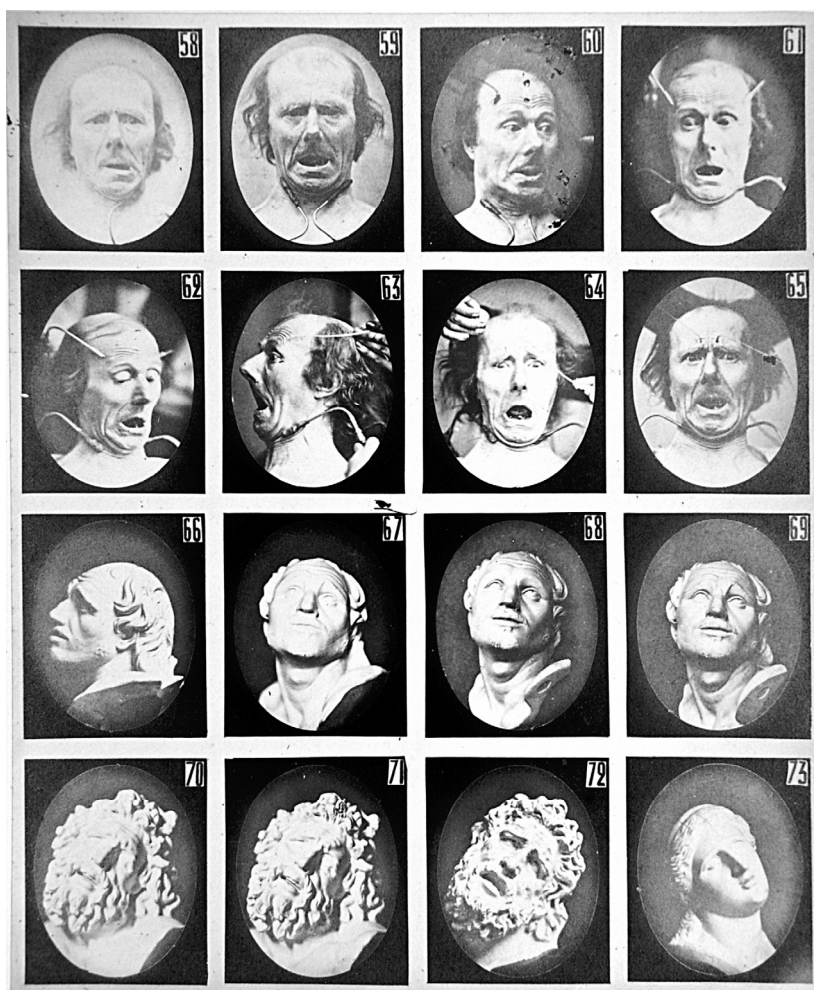


Fig. 1-1. Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne, *Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine*

behavior were catalogued according to scientific principles [Fig.1-2].⁸ In addition, *Genius and Madness* was very popular.⁹ Here Lombroso provided an interpretation of the genius as a psychiatric abnormality. The *scapigliato* literatus Carlo Dossi wrote in *La Riforma* of March 11, 1872 that women who were enthusiastically interested in crime news could have read it pleasurably and easily.



Fig.1-2. Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente* [The Criminal Man] - Mad Criminals

Beyond the scientific and popularizing literature, the production of photographs of alienated individuals in asylums was probably a considerable source of inspiration for artists. In the San Servolo Hospital in Venice, for example, Prosdócimo Salerio had utilized photography since the 1870s. The same was happening in the Asylum of Aversa with Doctor Gaspare Virgilio.

However, a more structured case is the psychiatric hospital of San Lazzaro in Reggio Emilia, where there was a photographic laboratory and, from 1878, photography was frequently used to study patients. Emilio Poli, the first photographer of the hospital, made some albums with close-up photographs of patients [Fig.1-3]. Some photographs have notes about mental diseases, which were probably used by doctors as illustrations during lessons at universities or conferences. In 1892 Poli collected another album of photographs of both the heads and chests of the patients, so their gestures were better shown, as well as their facial expressions.¹⁰ Giovanni Morini edited another two albums in 1904–06. The San Lazzaro hospital was very popular in the early years of the 20th century, and this was represented at the 1900 Universal Exposition of Paris, as well as at the 1910 Bruxelles World Fair.¹¹ Given those facts, we can presume that those photographs had been widely exposed and circulating publicly.

In 1878, the professor Arrigo Tamassia welcomed the innovation photography brought in freezing alienated individuals' expressions, particularly the more pure and spontaneous ones. It was a way to use the medium of photography that the pioneering work of Duchenne de Boulogne and Darwin had suggested. Tamassia himself used to show some of those pictures in his classes on legal medicine in Pavia.¹²

In addition, such images were often used, even in conferences or presentations of psychiatric matters, because some directors of those hospitals were also professors in universities or head physicians.¹³

Artists who studied the facial expressions of alienated subjects to better represent human emotions of course looked too at the discipline of physiognomy, which was experiencing a revival phase.

In 1876, Agostino Tebaldi drew a brief history of physiognomy, quoting Charles Bell's *The anatomy and physiology of expression as connected with the fine arts* from 1844,¹⁴ and he concluded that physiognomy could be useful in two ways. On the one hand, some features of the facial expressions are linked to some aspects of the fixed character, and so it is possible to determine a cause-effect relationship between the two. On the other hand, we can put the expression in relation to the temporary feelings, thoughts, or states of the person's mood.¹⁵ In another passage, the author wrote that the most interesting expressions are visible



Fig. 1-3. Emilio Poli, *Lunatics of the San Lazzaro Asylum* (1890 c.)

when two different passions trouble the mind of the subject, and it “is in the representation of these mixed feelings that artists can show their power; and painters and actors take delight in reproducing those.” Tebaldi also highlighted how, since ancient times, art had been using physiognomic devices to develop the most accurate analysis of different countenances.¹⁶ Following the path of the French physiologists, such as Charcot, Tebaldi wrote a book that investigated the expressions of altered states of mind in relation to art works of the past.¹⁷

Therefore, scientists tried to take from artists’ works data useful to the study of expressions, but they also gave the artists suggestions about representing madmen, as Charles Bell did in *Anatomy of Expression*.

During the 19th century, some Italian artists were already portraying the interiors of asylums. These artists included the *macchiaioli*—a group of Italian painters whose research was similar to that of the impressionists. Among the *macchiaioli* was Telemaco Signorini who painted a scene of some mentally ill female subjects in a Florentine hospital, *La sala delle agitate nell’ospizio del San Bonifazio in Firenze*: it was 1865, far before Mantegazza and Antonini’s suggestions, and even before the writings of Jean-Martin Charcot about female hysteria. Some years after, a critic commended the painting for its veracity:

[Signorini] went to the asylum to study scrupulously the madwomen one after the other: the one that punches the table, the one that put her forehead on the palm, the one that leans her head back looking up to the sky, the other huddled up on the floor, the idiots, the melancholy, the furious ones, not women anymore but misshapen, repulsive bodies, and he made a painting in which the quality of the execution seems not at the same level with the strong concept.¹⁸

Other artists later reprised the visual organization of the image Signorini later depicted, with the lunatics pictured from a distance. Angelo Morbelli, who is a good example, did so during the 1890s in his works about the *Pio Albergo Trivulzio*, a Milanese charitable institution for the elderly. As well, in 1895, Silvio Rotta painted *Nosocomio*, the San Servolo psychiatric hospital in Venice, which was much appraised when exhibited at the first biennial exhibition of Venice: critics highlighted especially the way the painter depicted “the crazies scattered in the courtyard of the hospital, caught in the diverse attitudes and expressions of their infirmity,” so exactly rendered that “a psychiatrist would recognize in them the signs of this or that form of mental illness.”¹⁹ In other cases, the artists looked at the symptoms of the patients with mental problems in a different way. For example, Giacomo Balla in 1903 painted *I malati (The Patients)* (1903),

representing two ill persons while being cured through electricity from his friend Dr. Francesco Ghilarducci,²⁰ while in *La pazza* (*The Madwoman*, 1905), he portrayed, utilizing the divisionist technique, an actual crazy woman, Matilde Garbini, who used to wander near his house.²¹

Sometimes, artists did look to medical sources in search of inspiration; the divisionist painter Gaetano Previati painted *The Hashish Smokers* in 1887, taking accurate information from the book *Le estasi umane* (*Human Ecstasies*), written in that same year by Paolo Mantegazza,²² in which ecstasy was compared with the altered states of drug consumers.

Between the late 19th century and the early 20th, numerous European artists became more and more interested in expressing their inwardness and subjectivity. In fact, the number of self-portraits increased dramatically. This also meant great attention was paid to moods or states of the mind, a feature that we can find in some northern European painters, such as Edward Munch or James Ensor. In some cases, the expressions were represented through facial traits, extremely emphasized, and through dramatic close-up portraits or self-portraits. Many painters took a more introspective path, leaving behind any narrative.

I will analyze especially the works of three late symbolist artists among whom this trend is more noticeable: Adolfo Wildt, Romolo Romani, and Adriana Bisi Fabbri. I contend there is strong visual proof that they looked to psychiatric photography as well as to the great amount of literature about the physiology of emotions and about criminal anthropology.

Curiously, all three artists eventually had mental problems that were likely linked with their artistic research: Wildt had a heavy nervous breakdown, Romani had been cured in an asylum, and Bisi Fabbri never came to terms with her identity problems.

Adolfo Wildt

Adolfo Wildt was a sculptor from Milan. He spent some of his life in Germany at the end of the 19th century, when Germany, especially secessionist Munich, was one of the more lively centers of European Symbolism. From 1900, though, he settled in Milan.²³

He was very interested in the expressive possibilities of the human face since the beginning of his work; he had a taste for stressing facial expressions that could have come from certain expressionist painters of the Renaissance, especially from the Ferrara region, like Cosmè Tura, and from the German Secessionist style. A source of inspiration could have also been the odd sculptures of the Austrian artist Franz Xaver

Messerschmidt, active in the 18th century. I have no proof that images of Messerschmidt's work could have circulated in Italy by that time, but they certainly did in the German-speaking areas where Wildt could have seen them.

From this point of view, the most impressive piece by Wildt is *The Mask of Sorrow* or *Self-portrait*, carved in 1908 [Fig.1-4]. From some late writings of the artist, we know that in those years he was passing through a very difficult nervous breakdown: "I tried to make a self-portrait, I made many of them, an infinite number, always destroying them as soon as I was finishing them."²⁴ Eventually, he realized *The Mask of Sorrow* or *Self-portrait*, a terribly powerful representation of his own face caught in an almost distorted expression of pain. For Wildt, it symbolized the exit from a terrible psychiatric impairment that he described in an autobiographical article in 1931, recalling his life and work after a great professional disappointment:

Terrible weeks and months followed. Everybody was driven away around me. In my studio, everywhere I put my hands, there was the ruin. I was lost; I couldn't find me anymore. I spent whole weeks closed in my studio, sleeping on the floor, crucified to my own pain.²⁵

I contend that Wildt had studied some illustrations from Darwin's book, such as from the chapter reserved for the analysis of several kinds of sufferance, each of which was illustrated with Duchenne's pictures. Even Paolo Mantegazza's writings could have served as inspiration, given that in his *Fisiologia del dolore (Physiology of Pain)* of 1880 he described all the physical features of the feeling of pain. Furthermore, I believe Wildt could have also known of the pamphlet the Italian novelist Antonio Fogazzaro wrote in 1901 after a lecture about the feeling of pain in the arts that he held in Turin the year before.²⁶

Fogazzaro opened his text with the description of a sculpture by Vincenzo Vela of 1851, *Grief*, representing an afflicted seated woman, and then he composed an overview of suffering and despair, as represented through the art of the past, even through theater and music, concluding that the sudden and inexplicable sadness and melancholic pain of men had unconscious roots.

In scientific literature an expressive model closer to Wildt's mask of pain was probably the sketch in Charles Bell's *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* illustrating a suffering man.²⁷ Wildt seems to have looked at more ancient sources, such as certain Hellenistic sculptures, including the ones that adorned the Great Altar of Pergamon, which were moved to Berlin and shown in 1901. Darwin himself had written of the

Laocoon (the popular Hellenistic statue) and about the way Greek artists represented pain. He observed that the wrinkles were expanded in the whole forehead of the Laocoon, while an actual man only knits his brows. The artists prefer to idealize the subject and sacrifice its verisimilitude.

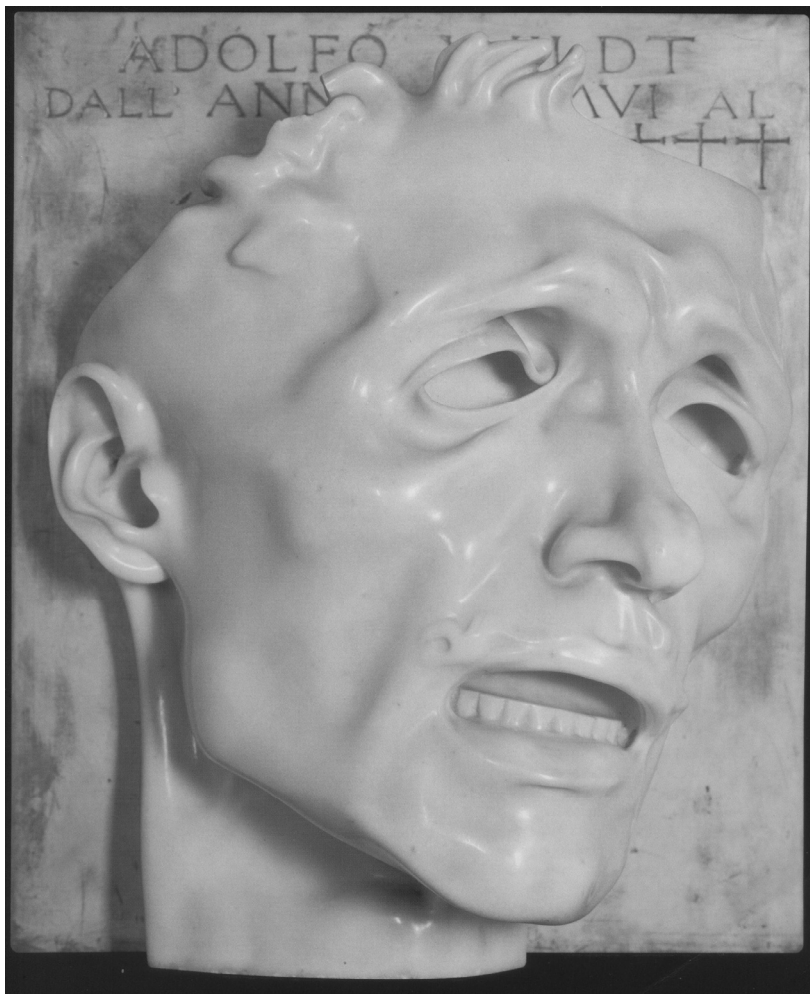


Fig. 1-4. Adolfo Wildt, *Self-portrait or Mask of Sorrow* (1908)



Fig. 1-5. Romolo Romani, *The Laugh* (1903 c.)

Another marble sculpture, *The idiot mask* (1909 c.), represents the face of a man who laughs irrepressibly. We can recall that in those years the subject of the laugh or laughing man was frequently engaged not only by artists (see also Umberto Boccioni's futurist painting *The Laugh*, 1910), but also by philosophers and intellectuals, such as Henri Bergson (*Le rire [The Laugh]*, 1899), Luigi Pirandello (*Umorismo [Humour]*, 1908), and even Sigmund Freud, who related humor to the unconscious (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten [Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious]*, 1905). In Wildt's *Idiot Mask*, the eyes of the man narrowed to slits, which could remind viewers of the expression of a mentally ill individual [Fig.1-5]. This was quite similar to the laughing man Romolo Romani drew in 1903.

Romolo Romani

During the same years, Romolo Romani focused his research on facial expressions. Born in Brescia, he eventually moved to Milan where the artistic scene was livelier. He realized mainly large drawings—though