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Cover picture

August Natterer (1868–1933). The Miracle Shepherd. 1911–1917. Inv. No. 176.

Pencil, watercolour on cardboard.

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Artistry of the Mentally Ill (1922) by the German psychiatrist and art historian, Hans Prinzhorn was one of the first books to argue that the creations of psychiatric patients should be accorded aesthetic value. Prinzhorn devoted a section of his book to ten artists whom he significantly termed 'Schizophrenic Masters'. One of the most celebrated of these was August Natterer, who was given the pseudonym, 'Neter'. His work was greatly admired by the Surrealists, in particular, Max Ernst, who was inspired by the above picture to pay visual homage to it.

Natterer was born in 1868 in Upper Swabia and was a successful electrical engineer until he became depressed and tried to cut his wrists. He was admitted to hospital in 1907 and diagnosed with schizophrenia. Prinzhorn writes that he had 'one great primary hallucination', which came to dominate his illness and which he was to describe repeatedly. He saw a white spot in a cloud on which a series of thousands of images were projected and which represented the Last Judgment. They were revealed to Natterer by God so that he could complete 'the redemption' that Christ had failed to achieve because he had been crucified. Natterer believed that he was the 'Redeemer of the World' and also the illegitimate child of Emperor Napoleon 1. The medical notes record that he believed: 'his skin had turned into fur; his bones and throat were petrified; in his stomach he had a tree trunk; his blood consisted of water, animals came out his nose... he is the Antichrist... He explains the cracking of his knees as telephone calls by which the devil down below is always notified about his whereabouts'.

In explaining his picture, Natterer said: 'At first a cobra was in the air, iridescent green and blue. And then came the foot (along the snake). Then the other foot came. It was made from a turnip... On the face of this second foot appeared the face of my father-in-law in W.: the world miracle... Then there appeared feminine genitals between the leg and the foot, those break off the man's foot. i.e. sin comes from the woman and makes the man fall'.

After spending the remainder of his life in mental institutions, Natterer died of heart failure in 1933 in an asylum near Rottweil.

Text by Allan Beveridge.

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