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The British Journal of Psychiatry



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Cover picture

© Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg Sterelation/9 by Wilhelm Werner, Inventory Number 8083(2008)fol.9.

This picture is one of 44 pencil drawings by Wilhelm Werner, a psychiatric patient who was murdered by the Nazis. It is believed to be the only preserved work of visual art by the 400,000 people whom the Nazis forced to undergo sterilisation. Werner's drawings have recently been acquired by the Prinzhorn Collection at Heidelberg University Hospital in southern Germany, which is known for one of the largest collections of art by psychiatric patients in the world. Its Director is the art historian, Thomas Röske.

Born a Catholic on the 18th September 1898, Werner was diagnosed with 'idiocy', though this is disputed by Röske, who argues that Werner could read and write. In October 1940, when he was 42, Werner was transported to Pirna Sonnenstein asylum, near Dresden. He was subsequently murdered in its gas chambers as part of the Nazis' 'euthansia' extermination programme.

Werner's drawings depict scenes from the sterilisation clinic. This drawing shows a contraction labelled 'Sterelation', which was his term for sterilisation. Inside sits a nurse with a white hat, whilst on top there is a clown-like figure, who clutches a sharp implement and a book displaying a cross, while his other hand holds a testicle next to a plate containing more testicles. Outside, a second nurse holds a cross and a holy book. Werner depicts sterilisation as a literal castration, though as Röske points out, the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring only stated that patients should be rendered infertile.

We are always looking for interesting and visually appealing images for the cover of the Journal and would welcome suggestions or pictures, which should be sent to Dr Allan Beveridge, British Journal of Psychiatry, 21 Prescot Street, London, E1 8BB, UK or bjp@rcpsych.ac.uk.

