



EXHIBITION

Asylums and after

A new exhibition probes the ever-evolving treatment of mental illness

By Andrew Robinson

Vincent van Gogh's only etching forms a small but profoundly significant part of *Bedlam: The Asylum and Beyond*, the Wellcome Collection's mind-stretching new exhibition on madness and the history of its treatment. It is a melancholy portrait of Paul Gachet, a professional physician and amateur painter who treated van Gogh after his release from a famously productive year spent in a French mental asylum in 1889–1890.

According to the exhibition's caption, van Gogh referred to Gachet as “a ready-made friend and something like a new brother ... he's very nervous and very bizarre himself.” But in a letter from van Gogh to his actual brother Theo, he wrote, “I think that we must not count on Dr. Gachet at all. First of all, he is sicker than I am, I think, or shall we say just as much.... Now when one blind man leads another blind man, don't they both fall into the ditch?” (1).

Such insights from a great but mentally ill artist remind us how difficult it has been—and still is—to fix a boundary between sanity and insanity. Would today's physicians, with their arsenal of brain-scanning techniques and mood-changing drugs, have had more success than Gachet in curing van Gogh? Prob-

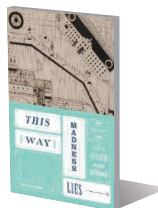
The reviewer is the author of Sudden Genius? The Gradual Path to Creative Breakthroughs, Oxford University Press, 2010. Email: andrew@andrew-robinson.org

Bedlam

The Asylum and Beyond
Wellcome Collection, London.
Through 15 January 2017.
<http://wellcomecollection.org/bedlam>

This Way Madness Lies

The Asylum and Beyond
Mike Jay
Thames & Hudson, 2016. 256 pp.



ably not, according to *Bedlam*, as Mike Jay, one of the exhibition's two curators, implies in *This Way Madness Lies*, his illuminating, generously illustrated book that accompanies the exhibition. In the 21st century, as much as in the 17th century, writes Jay, “physicians, apothecaries, astrologers, preachers and folk healers competed with remedies that ranged from gentle herbs to powerful poisons, from horoscopes to exorcisms to cranial surgery.”

The exhibition's linking thread is the history of London's Bethlem hospital, originally founded in the 13th century as a priory dedicated to St. Mary of Bethlehem. By the time of Shakespeare in the late 16th century, Bethlem had ceased to be a peaceful cloister and was filled with cell blocks. Its atmosphere was crowded and noisy—hence its popular name, Bedlam, among the London public, who were permitted to visit and observe the inmates at the “madhouse” until 1770.

Although Bethlem survived London's Great Fire in 1666, it moved to a new site at Moor-

A precursor to the modern practice of “Care in the Community.” Mentally ill boarders have lived alongside locals in Geel, Belgium, for centuries.

fields, where a palatial building designed by Robert Hooke was built in 1676. After being condemned for its scandalously inhumane conditions, it moved again in 1815 to a new building in south London, which today houses the Imperial War Museum. Finally, in 1930, it relocated to a semirural estate on the outskirts of the city at Beckenham, where it continues as a respected National Health Service hospital, still dedicated to mental illness.

In advance of the 1815 move, James Tilly Matthews, a tea merchant who had been incarcerated at Bethlem after publicly accusing members of the British government of treason, came up with a set of architectural drawings for the new facility and detailed proposals for its reform. Matthews's plans, which are on display in the exhibition, included spacious grounds where the inmates could work as gardeners rather than being confined indoors—in some cases shackled—with nothing to do. With a new regime of therapeutic harmony between inmates and wardens, he argued, recovery rates would naturally rise. But the medical world was not willing to take advice from a “lunatic,” and Matthews's prescient redesign was rejected.

The reform of “madhouses” into more compassionate “asylums” took place during the 19th century in Britain, France, and some other parts of Europe. In the 20th century, art therapy became important. One of several compelling films in the exhibition, *Abandoned Goods* by Pia Borg and Edward Lawrenson, reveals the art produced by inmates of the Netherne Asylum under the pioneering encouragement of Edward Adamson in the 1940s. Many of these works were lost when the asylum closed in 1993; the remainder were abandoned in another hospital, but almost all of them—more than 5500 paintings, drawings, sculptures, and ceramics—were eventually relocated to the Adamson Collection at the Wellcome Library.

In postwar Britain, mental asylums were increasingly felt to be outmoded relics of the Victorian period and were closed for redevelopment. But are their current substitutes—today's psychiatric hospitals for those who are wholly incapable of looking after themselves, along with sedated “care in the community” for the rest—a definite improvement? The evidence offered by *Bedlam* is hardly reassuring. ■

REFERENCES

1. Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, 10 July 1890; www.webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/21/648.htm.

10.1126/science.aah4751

EXTENDED PDF FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



Asylums and after

Andrew Robinson (October 13, 2016)

Science **354** (6309), 188. [doi: 10.1126/science.aah4751]

Editor's Summary

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only.

- Article Tools** Visit the online version of this article to access the personalization and article tools:
<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/354/6309/188>
- Permissions** Obtain information about reproducing this article:
<http://www.sciencemag.org/about/permissions.dtl>

Science (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published weekly, except the last week in December, by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. Copyright 2016 by the American Association for the Advancement of Science; all rights reserved. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.