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Mediumistic and Psychopathological Pictorial Expression An Introductory Comparative Study

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Abstract. The main objectives of this paper are: (i) To present a classification, based on the common features of structure, content and context, between mediumistic pictorial expression and psychopathological pictorial expression. (ii) This should show that both types of expression are very similar in many aspects, which have been described as the main patterns of psychopathological pictorial expression. (iii) Difficulties in dealing with the topics under examination are discussed.

This article should serve as a preliminary classification of corresponding features of so-called 'mediumistic' pictorial expression and psychopathological pictorial expression. 'Mediumistic art' was studied as long as a century ago and there have been attempts to classify aspects of it (*Bernoulli*, 1919; *Flournoy*, 1900; *Deonna*, 1932; *Wilkinson*, 1858; *Freimark*, 1914; *Petry*, 1872; *Cohen-Portheim*, 1922; *Osty*, 1928). Mediumistic art, then, was conceived as pictorial expression being the product of so-called spiritistic mediums, i.e., persons with presumed paranormal faculties, like extrasensory perception and psychokinesis (*Nicol*, 1977; *Rhine*, 1977), who often were active in spiritistic circles as mediants of 'information' interpreted as coming from the beyond. Most of the paintings of such mediums were performed during altered states of consciousness under the guide of 'spirit guides'. A great number of case studies of medium-painters of more or less reliable content can be found in the literature (cf. *Assagioli*, 1935; *Cassoli*, 1975; *Courquin*, 1933; *Deonna*, 1932; *Egidi*, 1953; *Sulyac*, 1952; *Osty*, 1928).

In this article a comparative classification of structure, context and content is provided without discussing special and aesthetic aspects. Hence, this paper is

only an introductory guide to the interdisciplinary study of pictorial expression executed during special states of consciousness. Correspondence between mediumistic and psychopathological pictorial expression is, in fact, strikingly evident and has already been discussed by spiritists interpreting the works in clear favour of mediumistic pictorial expression as 'refined and inspired', while the same structural components of psychiatric art were qualified as 'morbid and degenerated' (*Friedenthal, 1911; Peter, 1913*).

In the framework of parapsychology, pictorial expression may not only be conceived as 'inspired painting' during a trance state but can also have a different basis: paintings with telepathic, clairvoyant, or precognitive contents, or paintings in the same style as dead known artists, or it may also be the case that a person who shows paranormal faculties may be a painter, too, without painting during unusual states of consciousness and not showing the features described below.

Parapsychological phenomena seem to have a close relation to some psychopathological features (*Alberti, 1974; Bates and Newton, 1951; Ehrenwald, 1948; Eisenbud, 1949; Rogo, 1974; Urban and Köck, 1949; Ullman, 1977*) and sometimes, in the course of their spiritistic activity, spiritistic mediums develop what *Bender* termed a 'mediumistic psychosis' (*Bender, 1958/1959; Prince, 1906*). The specific state of consciousness of mediumistic painters is another link to psychopathology, although experimental results in this area often seem to be contradictory and not easy to interpret (*Bowers and Bowers, 1973; Fischer, 1975; Kampmann, 1973*). Much of what has been said about psychiatric art, especially when described according to a specific state of consciousness during the productions (*Copelman and Copelman-Fromant, 1969; Fischer, 1975; Jakab, 1969; Siegel and Jarvik, 1975*) or when dealing with the structure of psychiatric art (*Bader, 1961; Bader and Navratil, 1976; Fischer, 1969, 1970; Jakab, 1956; Müller-Suur, 1948; Navratil, 1967; Réja, 1907. Rennert, 1966; Simon, 1888; Volmat, 1956*) or when considering psychiatric and modern art (*Bader, 1958; Benedetti, 1975; Dubuffet, 1967; Maran, 1970*), appeals to mediumistic pictorial expression, too. *Bader and Navratil (1976)*, to quote an example, noted the striking similarity between the paintings of the mediumistic painter, Augustin Lesage (*Courquin, 1933; Osty, 1928*) and psychiatric art.

The comparison of similarities in the structure, context and content between mediumistic and psychiatric pictorial expression led to a preliminary comparative classification. The following classification comprises the main common features of both types of pictorial expression. The name of mediumistic painters whose work is typical for a certain feature will be provided in parentheses.

1. Structural features
 - 1.1. Distortion of pictorial expression
 - 1.1.1. Baroque-ornate forms (Assmann, Petitjean, Sardou)
 - 1.1.2. Luxurious and exuberant style (Assmann, Rutherne, Zanstra)
 - 1.1.3. Funny grotesque painting (Swensson)
 - 1.2. Condensation of pictorial expression
 - 1.2.1. Compact disorder (Assmann)
 - 1.2.2. Overloading (Lesage, Capogrossi, Potts)
 - 1.2.3. Insertion of written elements (Lesage, Marmonier)
 - 1.3. Neomorphisms
 - 1.3.1. Combination of people (Dodsworth)
 - 1.4. Disintegration of pictorial expression
 - 1.4.1. Disregard of spatial relations of the elements of the picture (Gruzewski, de Jurco)
 - 1.4.2. Loss of composition (Marmonier)
 - 1.4.3. Decomposition of physiognomy (Swensson, Manning)
2. Special features of the content
 - 2.1. Abstract pictorial expression
 - 2.1.1. Geometrical-linear pictures (Lesage, Petitjean, Kunz, Canavero)
 - 2.1.2. Closed ornamental composition (Assmann, Gentes, Potts, Lesage, Lockhardt)
 - 2.2. Concrete pictorial expression
 - 2.2.1. Preferred topics
 - 2.2.1.1. Landscapes (Lanzillo, Nusslein)
 - 2.2.1.2. Cosmic pictures (Lambert, Nusslein, Hafenscher)
 - 2.2.1.3. Magic or allegorical pictures (Lambert, Smith, Dodsworth)
 - 2.2.1.4. Compositions similar to Byzantine style (Lesage, Marmonier, Lockhardt)
 - 2.2.1.5. Religious topics (Hafenscher, Smith, Lanzillo)
 - 2.2.1.6. Portraits (Lanzillo, Nusslein, Rutherne, Galotti)
 - 2.3. Preferred part-motives: single heads, eyes, symbolized genitals, birds, fish, churches, etc.
3. Features of the context
 - 3.1. Painting during trance states
 - 3.2. 'Inspired' painting
 - 3.3. Painting in complete darkness

All the features, shortly classified above, also apply to psychiatric art (*Rennert*, 1966). Not included in this classification is a different class of parapsychological pictorial expression which can be described from the point of view of extrasensory information: these are paintings with extrasensorial contents or paintings in the style of known artists (among the most known mediums of this type are: Rol, Manning, Swensson). Also not included are mediums who are artists, too (Swann, Silvio).

A classical interpretation of mediumistic pictorial expression consists in structural features 1.1 and 1.2 as well as features of the content 2.1 or 2.2, combined with the spiritistic context in which the pictorial production was accomplished.

Considering now the significance of the similarity between mediumistic and psychopathological pictorial expression, we must admit that there exists almost no psychodiagnostic material on mediumistic painters. It may be possible that some mediumistic painters show pathological features to some degree. The mere fact of the application of the widely used technique of automatic drawing connected with dissociative states is phenomenologically associated with pathological dissociative states. Automatic productions (writing, speaking, drawing) of mediums were an interesting object of research for psychiatrists at the turn of the century (*Gruber*, in press), when the great affinity of mediumistic and psychopathological features were closely studied. The psychiatric tradition did not pursue this interesting field, besides some noteworthy exceptions such as *Bender's* (1958/1959) study of psychoses developing as an effect of applying psychic automatism in mediumistic seances.

The psychiatric study of mediumistic pictorial expression may, therefore, be a valuable method in the research of unconscious expressions, outside the traditional psychiatric framework. Similarities as described above may point to the underlying common process and its symbolic representation through pictorial expression.

Nevertheless, we must be very careful with inferences from the mere fact of similarity, since even after the structures of mediumistic and psychopathological mediumistic expression were described in more or less thorough and detailed ways, no coherent view about them is possible. We badly need a really thorough analysis of psychiatric art and mediumistic pictorial expression, too. If such a study – be it statistical or phenomenological or both – reveals that no common factors can be found because of the great variability of the patterns (as *Bader and Navratil*, 1976, suggested) this can mean that all that has been said about features and patterns of psychiatric and mediumistic pictorial expression may just be artifact. Or it may suggest that the kinds of pictorial expression we are dealing with are manifestations from some 'other side' of human nature which, indeed, seems to us to have very distinct patterns but which cannot be analyzed by means of the scientific method (*Feyerabend*, 1975). According to the special kind of material we have to deal with, it seems that methods other than the 'traditional' scientific ones should be found to understand it better, a need which exists also in related fields of inquiry (*Gruber*, 1978, 1979; *Feyerabend*, 1975).

This article tries to show similarities in the pictorial expressions of two seemingly different fields, and could serve as a basis for further studies of the human unconscious, related to parapsychology (Gruber, 1978).

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