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**Image** [modified]: Main exhibition hall with view of the Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler exhibit. © Sammlung Prinzhorn.

## “She was not an Outsider Artist” – Interview with Thomas Röske about the Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler exhibit at the Prinzhorn Collection Museum

Thomas Röske\*, Lucia Reily\*\*

The special exhibit of the visual artist “Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler – Questions about Works and Documents”<sup>1</sup> opened on April 27th, 2023, at the Prinzhorn Collection Museum in Heidelberg, Germany, running through to August 20th. This interview was conducted with Dr. Thomas Röske, director of the Prinzhorn Collection Museum on May 30th, 2023, focusing on three main issues: 1. introducing the artist and her oeuvre in relation to her history as a visual artist in the nineteen-twenties and thirties; 2. discussing her status as an artist affected by psychiatric experience [*psychiatrisch Erfahrung*], and 3. reporting on the acquisition process of this significant estate for the museum.

**Lucia Reily:** For readers that are unfamiliar with the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, could you please give some background information on the Museum and the original collection, as well as the acquisition policies that enable further additions to the museum?

**Thomas Röske:** The Prinzhorn Collection is named after Hans Prinzhorn, who was an art historian and psychiatrist; he came here as an assistant, and was employed by the new director Karl Wilmanns to look after a small collection of artworks which had been assembled from around 1900 until 1919, when he started working here. It was his idea not to stop with these artworks, which were not only from Heidelberg; they came from the nearby Wiesloch Asylum and from all over Germany. He decided



FIG. 1. Main exhibition hall with view of the Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler exhibit. Rio de Janeiro). ©Sammlung Prinzhorn.

FIG. 2. Upstairs landing of the exhibition hall. ©Sammlung Prinzhorn.

to build up a kind of research collection, so he and his boss sent out appeals to a lot of colleagues, mostly in German speaking countries, but also in Italy, Japan and France, to send artworks for a “museum for pathological art”. He wanted to become the director of that museum, but that museum and the job never materialized, and that is why he left in June, 1921. But he was still writing his book based on the collection, called *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken*, or *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, which was published in 1922. Through this book, a lot of people became aware of the creative energy, you could say, in these artworks and the special creativity of people in asylums. The book made the field visible for the first time. It includes 187 illustrations, 170 from the Prinzhorn Collection itself. It opened up a lot of issues which are still interesting for us today, when we look at this material.

The collection kept growing after Prinzhorn’s time, just a little bit, and there was some swapping as well, especially with a guy named Ladislaus Szécsi, a Hungarian art dealer who dealt with artworks by African artists – sculptures. He convinced doctor Hans Gruhle, who looked after the collection then, to include three African sculptures into the collection, and give him some works from the collection in exchange. Later he was also instrumental in swapping with the Auguste Marie collection in France. More than 40 works were swapped with the Marie collection and that is why we have quite a substantial collection from France from around 1900 as well. During the Nazi times, the collection was nearly forgotten. It was misused, as you probably know, as comparative material for the touring exhibition “Degenerate Art”. After World War II, it was rediscovered, but they only started taking in new works at the end of the 1970s, when the collection became known again. When I entered the

museum in 2001, it had just been opened, and there were already about ten thousand new artworks. The old collection with works up to 1945 had grown as well, partly because there were artworks found in the medical files of the people who were represented in the collection. In Prinzhorn's time, it consisted of about five thousand artworks, mostly on paper. In 2001, it had grown to about six thousand works. Today the whole collection contains about forty thousand works, still almost all on paper.

About the acquisition policy – we take works by people who have at least special psychic experiences. This can be drug experiences, but the majority of them have had psychiatric experiences. And a quite subjective point is that the works have to be outstanding, interesting or relevant historically. We have some decades that are not very well represented in the collection. If we are offered artwork from the fifties or sixties, we will usually take them anyway, if they are from mental patients.

Most of the artists who are in the collection are self-taught without any academic education, and many of the works would count as Outsider Art. But the scope of the museum is wider, as you can see with our acquisition of the estate of Lohse-Wächtler, a professional artist who did not produce Outsider Art. But some visitors just expect that in our museum. There was even a protest by a visitor, who said “How dare you include artists with an academic background? This is not the agenda of the Prinzhorn Collection.” When did we ever say that we would not take artwork by a professional artist? In 2008 we did an exhibition titled “Artists off the rails” about men and women represented in the collection who had an academic background. But none had been as successful or well known before being hospitalized as Lohse-Wächtler.

L.R.: That is kind of a Jean Dubuffet view, that they have to be completely untaught, working fully from the unconscious, isn't it?

**Thomas Röske:** Yes.

L.R.: And that leads us into the next question. From the perspective of the special exhibit "Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler - Fragen an Werke und Dokumente", could you describe the artist's trajectory and the importance of the collection that was recently acquired by the Prinzhorn Museum?

**Thomas Röske:** Well, the trajectory we still have to uncover, in a way. What has been published and shown in exhibitions is that she was a professional painter, mostly of watercolors. There are a few oil paintings still existing, but she was mainly a watercolorist, and she was a masterful watercolorist. But she also was obviously by academic education somebody who did arts and crafts. She did a lot of craftworks as well, and of this craftwork, namely batik, and some embroidery and so on, hardly anything survived. At least we do not know if anything survived. We know that she also made a lot of *ex-libris*, for example, for books, and she designed *signets* for people, using letters from their names. She tried to be professional in that area as well. That was obviously a very important source of income for her.

L.R.: Like graphic design, then?

**Thomas Röske:** Graphic design, yes! Unfortunately, we still know very little about that so far. Therefore, in a way, we have a distorted view, I think, of the whole oeuvre. In her paintings and drawings, she was mainly interested in a kind of very acute, expressive and sympathetic view on the people around her. She also showed some humor, but she never laughed at people. In the exhibition I compare her for example to Otto Dix. Otto Dix

is often cynical and distant and cool and designs caricatures of men and women. She never does that. She always shows women with a lot of experiences who have suffered a lot. They do not look great, but they look real. She tries to do them justice in her work. Also, she is very upfront in showing her own appearance, as she was not, in a conventional way, beautiful. And she was quite hard on herself, it seems. She is quite fixed on reality and she depicts reality, but there are some openings, you could say, in her oeuvre, which enabled her to include some phantasy material. Interestingly enough, I found that it is her graphic design work – her *ex-libris*, for example –, which allowed for the depictions of phantasies as well, allowed her to include some personal, subjective and very expressive ideas about herself and reality. And that is what we can also find in her last years in the hospital. We acquired mostly works from her early period and her late period – although it is hard to say *late* when somebody dies at forty. We do not have much from the time in between; so, from the very important Hamburg years, we own just a few watercolors and drawings.

There is a lot to do about the early and the late works. I also wanted to show in this exhibition that she was not, as people tend to believe, in despair in the first years of her second stay in the hospital, from 1932. She still believed that she could leave and she wanted to train herself to be able to continue her professional life outside of the hospital. She was not so much showing the fellow female patients as kind of projections of what could happen to her, but she was “misusing” them as models. The medical file tells us that some of the fellow patients were not very happy to be portrayed, and there were even some fights.

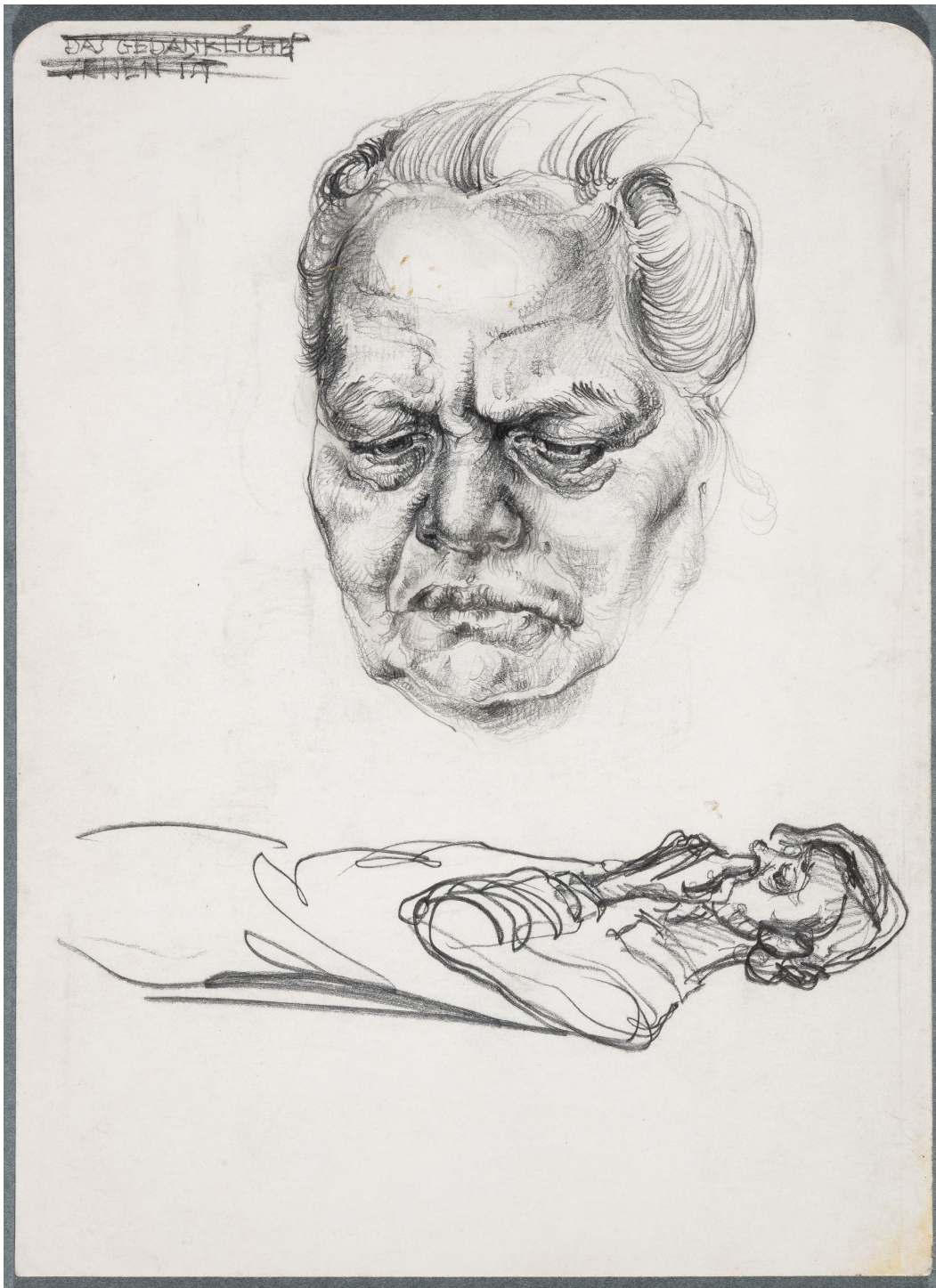


FIG. 3. *Das gedankliche Sehen ist ...* ["*Ver com a mente é...*"], 1933, lápis sobre cartão, 15,1 x 11,1 cm, SP Inv.Nr. 8600/193.  
© Sammlung Prinzhorn



Lohse-Wächtler really wanted to stay in touch with her training. I also brought up the idea that her works become more classical during the period in the asylum, from 1933 onwards. That is in line with the development in the oeuvre of a lot of New Sobriety<sup>2</sup> artists who become more classical and orient themselves, Dix included, on German Renaissance artists like Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien. Lohse-Wächtler seems to be aware of this development and takes it up in her own work as well. So, she is really keeping in touch, it seems, with the outside world. She does not completely succumb into the hospital world, but she still holds onto the idea that she will be able to leave and work on. And even in the works from 1935, it seems, there is no despair. She only abandons the topic of portraits, but she turns to drawing and painting flowers. And those flowers are not flowers of despair or from the cemetery. Lohse-Wächtler's plants symbolize resurrection, hope, love and so on. She just turns away from the portrait paintings and she turns to plants, which are a symbol of life anyway. They also decay, but they spring up again and again and they tell you something about life. So, I don't think that even her late work is full of despair, but it's full of hope.

**L.R.:** Do you know if she was writing letters or getting information from Otto Dix or other artists?

**Thomas Röske:** Yes, she exchanged letters, but she also had the possibility of leaving the hospital with her parents for walks, or even of staying with them over the weekend, for example. She always had to come back, but she was even able, probably, to see some exhibitions in Dresden. So, she was not completely cut off from reality during that period.



FIG. 4. Main exhibition hall with view of the Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler exhibit.  
©Sammlung Prinzhorn.

L.R.: She was in Dresden, right? And by then Otto Dix was already considered a degenerate artist, so their works wouldn't be exhibited, would they, except in the Degenerate Art Exhibit [*Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*].

**Thomas Röske:** That was in 1937. There were already some precursors of that show from 1933 onwards. And Lohse-Wächtler definitely knew that there was some wind blowing against modernism. Being interested in old German art was obviously in line with the National Socialist ideal of art as well. Otto Dix

becomes really classical and old masterly too. In the late twenties, beginning of the thirties, he uses this style of German late gothic and Renaissance art also to show the effects of war, but later his landscapes become quite harmless, you could say. Some of the artists who had been representative of the New Sobriety, in the twenties, were later even able to show their works in the Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung, for example. So, the opposition that we tend to make out today between the progressive artists and the Nazi artists was not as clearcut in their time. A lot of the New Sobriety artists were quite conservative anyway, and some were very interested in traditional values as well.

**L.R.:** That is a whole chapter of Art History.

**Thomas Röske:** Yes, and it is very interesting to position Lohse-Wächtler within that, and to try to imagine how she would have thought about her work in that context.

**L.R.:** Many significant female German artists working between World War I and World War II have been overlooked in Art History. In Brazil, Käthe Kollwitz and Gabriele Münter are probably the best-known female representatives of German expressionism. Käthe Kollwitz came to Brazil, actually, in 1933. As a woman artist, how did Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler fit into the political and cultural scene during that period? From her letters, do you have insights into her creative process?

**Thomas Röske:** We do not know much about her political leanings. On one sheet of paper in her late work, she lines up all kinds of crosses and there is also a swastika as if she wants to say, “it’s relative, it’s not really important, but it is one of many”. And there is a letter to her parents at the top of which she does her own design of a swastika, with round corners, which is interesting, as if she wants to say: “It’s a bad design, what the Nazis did”. It’s a quite obedient letter to her parents on the front page, but on

the back page she is very demanding. “When will you send me material?”, and so on. Of course, we have to assume that she was not very appreciative of the Nazis, but there is hardly anything in her letters about that, and we do not know what leanings she had in her Hamburg time. But we know that at the beginning of the twenties, when she was befriended by Otto Griebel, also an artist of the Secession group in Dresden and a good friend of Otto Dix, she visited Communist Party meetings with him.

**L.R.:** In the flyer I read that Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler was assassinated in the T4 program in 1940, like some of the other psychiatric patients that the Prinzhorn Collection has published about. Can you say more about that? You mentioned that she was forcefully sterilized. Was her work actually labelled “degenerate” by National Socialism? Or was she killed for being a psychiatric patient?

**Thomas Röske:** Well, to my knowledge no artist was killed because his/her work was called degenerate. The only famous artist that was killed in a concentration camp was Otto Freundlich, but because he was Jewish and he was also, I think, a very lefty artist. You were not killed because you were a progressive artist. As far as I know, no works of Lohse-Wächtler were confiscated during the degenerate art campaign. She had very few artworks in museums anyway. There were some watercolors in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, and there were two watercolors, I think, in the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, and some in the Altonaer Museum. But she was not present at any of the degenerate art shows, although she could have been. She probably knew that some of her colleagues had been excluded from exhibitions.

**L.R.:** Many of the items that are part of the Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler exhibit, according to the flyer, seem to be quite fragile – paper, letters, and so on. How was this collection kept and preserved by the family over so many years?

**Thomas Röske:** She hardly sold anything of her paintings and drawings during her lifetime, so most of her works were kept together. They were inherited by her brother Hubert, and Hubert kept them together with a kind of family archive, including even some hair and teeth – and a little box with mercury! Lohse-Wächtler obviously needed it for some process of her work. Everything was kept by her brother until his death in 1988, and all of the estate was given to a couple in Hamburg. He was a civil servant in the cultural authority of Hamburg. The couple was not very enthusiastic about the works. They found them quite ugly. Rosowski was their name. But they realized that Lohse-Wächtler had become a victim of the euthanasia program when they visited Pirna-Sonnenstein once, the asylum near Dresden where she was killed, and they decided to do something. It is amazing what this couple did – they sold work from the estate to finance the first big monograph about her. This was absolutely essential to make her better known again. They also financed exhibitions, they arranged to put a *Stolperstein*<sup>3</sup> in Dresden in front of her parents' house, and in Hamburg they got a street named after her. They were really instrumental in making Lohse-Wächtler known again. They are now in their mid-eighties, and what was left of the estate, they wanted to sell to an institution that could look after this archive. We were not the first address, I have to say; their first choice was the Pirna-Sonnenstein memorial site, because they thought as a victim of that place, her archive should go there. I got to know about that plan because I knew the art dealer mediating the negotiation. I also knew the couple quite well because I had done shows of Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler's works before, from the beginning of 2000. I met this dealer at an art fair and he said: "The county of Saxony is really hesitating about whether they have the money to buy the estate." So I

said: “Well, if they don’t buy it, we will, definitely.” And so, when Saxony finally decided not to buy it, he approached me. It was not easy to get the money, but in the end, we managed. The Rosowskis were very happy to give it to us. And after they received the money, they donated ten thousand euros back to us to help inventorize the estate.

**L.R.:** That leads to the next question. Are you in the process of cataloguing this new collection? How are her works going to be organized: chronologically, according to genre, themes? Since the curatorial argument was not chronological, what aspects of her poetics as a visual artist would you like to highlight?

**Thomas Röske:** Maybe I’ll start with your first question. We employed some students to help with inventorizing, and we are nearly through already, although the material is vast, because it’s a kind of family archive as well, which includes a lot of letters by her parents and grandparents, documents about the later life of Hubert Wächtler and so on. And there is a flood of photographs and negatives of photographs as well, and not only from Lohse-Wächtler’s time. The ordering is by material, by technique and then by topics. The chronology of the art works is a bit tricky. There have been several attempts to put her works in chronological order, but I have found that these attempts for certain periods are not very convincing. I think we still have to really understand the work and the context better before being able to establish a chronological order. All in all, we can roughly state which works were done in the early Dresden period and then later in the Hamburg period up to the end of the twenties and then later in Dresden when she was in the hospital. But within these chapters, it’s quite difficult to put the work in chronological order.

L.R.: And what issues related to her psychiatric condition emerged?

**Thomas Röske:** We do not discuss much about the psychiatric diagnoses here at the museum. Mainly we try to find out why the people were subjected to being diagnosed and being put into mental hospitals. What were the criteria? Especially with a professional artist like Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler, it is really difficult to point to features that can be connected to her mental state in her work. She is too much of a professional for that. For her it was obviously also important in the hospital to keep up the connection to her profession, as a kind of connection to her sane period. For that reason, not much has been done yet regarding this. Maybe somebody will want to try that later, but at the moment, we are not planning to do that.

We didn't produce a catalogue with the show, but we do have copies of older books about Lohse-Wächtler, biographical studies which we sell instead of a catalogue. We plan to publish a volume which introduces the whole estate, quite a big one, maybe in two years' time. My idea is to have little essays about certain aspects of her work and life, spread out throughout this kind of catalogue, and there, of course, will also be a kind of discussion of the diagnoses she got. Her father was very eager to state that she was not schizophrenic, but that she had a kind of reactive psychosis. I think there are a lot of indications that this might have been the case. It is also quite fruitless to do a kind of retrospective diagnosis. And there is probably not enough information to really state one or the other. But what's important is that this diagnosis pushed her into the arms of the psychiatric system. She lost her rights. She got a guardian. Her father, and she as well, of course, tried to prevent her from being forcefully sterilized. But he was

not successful. And although the parents were often with their daughter, and often took her out of the hospital, somehow they were tricked by the doctors and Lohse-Wächtler was simply put into another hospital, and then disappeared and was killed, and they couldn't do anything against it. It was a bit like a hide-and-seek game, to confuse the relatives and to do what the doctors wanted to do with the patient.

**L.R.:** The curatorial design is very interesting, as it invites audience participation as well as researcher contributions. So how is the exhibit going?

**Thomas Röske:** Quite well. I just read a newspaper article where a critic asked, "Why all these questions? Do they really help to understand this work?" But most people seem to be quite happy with the way we are presenting the works. There is much more text than we usually use, and the text is on big panels which structure the whole show. I want people to rethink certain ideas about this artist who is often seen through her biography as a victim, and I think she is much more than this. She is really very present in positioning herself in the art scene and thinking about what the other artists are doing. She is not completely isolated. It is interesting – some clichés that you find about outsider artists are projected onto her, although she is not an outsider artist, she is a professional and an academic artist.

**L.R.:** Was the person that asked about the questions a Heidelberg critic?

**Thomas Röske:** Yes, she is somebody who writes for a Mannheim newspaper. But it is good that people think and they have some critical remarks. Usually, critics just reproduce the biography, which is quite gruesome anyway, because Lohse-Wächtler ended up in hospital, was then forcefully sterilized, and then killed in



the “euthanasia” program. It’s good that people dare to look at the works and ask questions and ask themselves, what do they want to know, and why is this artist important, and so on.

**L.R.:** What are your expectations about further research initiatives into the Lohse-Wächtler archive, based on what you’ve been able to apprehend? The exhibit has been ongoing for a month, so you have not had that much time to hear from the audience, but what do you think is going to happen?

**Thomas Röske:** I don’t know how the audience in general reacts to it, but it seems to be ok, they seem to be happy. You can visit the exhibition without studying too much of the text there. And it is hung in chronological order. In a way, you can still go through the show and have an impression of the whole oeuvre, and those people who really want to know more, to be more engaged, can do that within the exhibition. There is also a cabinet in the middle where I hung copies of newspapers articles from 1928 to 2022, and I underlined certain phrases and sentences which show what makes her work outstanding and impresses people. And I think it is important to say that people became really engaged in looking at these works, and it somehow opened their eyes. In fact, it is often the eyes of the people depicted which fascinate and make people engage in looking at the works.

The Prinzhorn Collection is now THE archive for Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler, with the effect that a lot of people who want to know something about her, because they write articles or books or plan exhibitions, approach us. It’s a new interest in works and documents of the collection, from the side of professional art, you could say, not just from the side of Outsider Art.

Just before we had this conversation, I had a talk with a student who wants to write her Master’s thesis with me, and she wants to

write about Lohse-Wächtler and her relationship with her body. We have two words for body in German, which are *Körper* and *Leib*. The *Leib* is the body as experienced from inside. I just did a seminar about this perspective in artworks by female artists from the nineteenth-century up to the twenty-first century, and she thought that this way of looking at Lohse-Wächtler's work was interesting. I think that can be a quite successful and revealing way of looking at the work. I wrote in the introduction to the show that the research on Lohse-Wächtler has just started, in a way, and I think there is a lot of research to do, still. I do not doubt that a lot of art historians will study her works. How the audience will react is something we will find out when we do our guided tours, which should engage the audience more with questions. I have only done that at the beginning of the exhibition. We will see how that works when we do it during the exhibition.

**L.R.:** And that is the next question. I thought it was interesting that you propose a sequence of four guided curatorial visits, and one of those is open to people with or without visual impairments. Could you tell us more about what is going to happen? You have chosen different people to do this with you, and one of them is Ingrid von Beyme.

**Thomas Röske:** We have only done that once, and it was a very interesting experience, because it forces you to describe the works quite intensively and to do it together with all the participants. So, the group I had once was a mixed group of some people who had visual impairments and some who did not. And they were all very engaged in describing the artwork.

This is something you learn when you start studying Art History. A lot of beginners say: "Oh, why should I describe this work? You can see everything." And only when they start to describe

an artwork they realize that they haven't seen everything, and somehow the artwork opens up in a completely new way, and this is always fascinating. I plan to repeat this experience, and I am sure that it will work in the same way.

The idea is also to work with an iPad, which will allow us to enlarge some parts of the artworks that are on the walls, so that people with visual impairments will be able to access certain details. I don't know if it will work out. We'll see.

**L.R.:** It's a very brave initiative. From my experience researching when I was in Heidelberg, I was interested to witness how the Prinzhorn Collection and the current exhibits enabled ongoing dialogue with various university departments. As an art museum that is part of the department of psychiatry at Heidelberg University, how do you envision motivating visitation and discussions at the university level?

**Thomas Röske:** Unfortunately, Art History students are not here very often, and professional art historians, I think, are still a bit shy when it comes to Outsider Art and artworks by people with mental problems. They seem somehow to think that they do not have the right kind of knowledge to deal with them. So, I hope that this exhibition will help some people "to jump beyond their shadow", as we would say, and to do something which they would usually not do. Maybe there will be some exchange with the art historical department, and there is also definitely an exchange with the medical historical department, but that, I think, is as far as I can imagine for this exhibition.

**L.R.:** The acquisition was made possible through the Schaller-Nikolich Foundation as well as other forms of support. Financial investments are essential for preserving the original Prinzhorn Collection that is over one hundred years old, but adding new works and archives enables researchers to broaden their perspectives on Outsider Art. Could you share how the museum fits into the university budget and how you

negotiate special support for acquisitions such as the Lohse-Wächtler archive?

**Thomas Röske:** It's always difficult to get money for acquisitions. There are some people who want to give money for exhibition activities or certain pedagogical programs, but it is hard to get money for acquisitions. It was especially hard during the Corona pandemic. But we were very lucky. The whole thing cost us three hundred thousand euros. I took half of the money from a former donation of the Schaller-Nikolich Foundation, but to get the rest was quite tricky. Fortunately, there was a very wealthy woman from Heidelberg whom I didn't know before. She was asked to give us money by a friend of the collection. And she not only gave us the money, but she also demanded that nobody should know her name, maybe also to prevent other people from asking her for donations. So, we were very lucky with this private donor. Some money was also donated by private individuals, but it was not a substantial amount.

The financial situation of the Prinzhorn Collection is quite fragile at the moment, because the new financial director of the university hospital wants us to become a Foundation. Maybe that is a good thing. There is also a discussion about how much the university hospital will still be involved in the collection in the future. I think that it is very important from a historical standpoint that they be part of this foundation. I think this financial director does not really realize how important this collection is for the history of the hospital.

I am quite confident that we will not become completely separate from the hospital. There is a workshop tomorrow with some people from the hospital's juridical department about this foundation idea, and I hope that we will soon get a plan about

how we can move on, but the movement is quite slow, in spite of the pressure that this new financial director of the hospital made at the beginning. We are still in the process of negotiating the whole concept of a foundation, so I think that, as long as I am here, it will probably not become reality yet. Until then, I think the hospital will not be able to cut the money for the Prinzhorn Collection. Of course, it's a museum that costs a lot and we don't generate much money with the things we do, but it is a well-respected institution, not only in Heidelberg, but in the county of Baden-Wurttemberg and beyond as well.

**L.R.:** And for the art world in general. What expectations do the sponsors have after they've helped to secure a collection for the museum? You said this one woman didn't want her name in print. Are there other things that they demand? Something like, "I'm giving you this, but I want such and such to happen"?

**Thomas Röske:** Astonishingly little. They are not sponsors of this kind who want to present their logo. The Schaller-Nikolich Stiftung may advertise that they have helped us with this collection, but it's mostly a research and natural science foundation, so it doesn't add that much to their portfolio, which they want to show. This woman did not want to be advertised at all. The other people who gave money are not really interested in advertising their names either. And it is not really helping them. It's quite selfless cultural patronage. It seems to be astonishing, but it is not like a pharmaceutical company that always wants to advertise its name, no. We have always refrained from doing that kind of cooperation anyway, but, in this case, it's not like that.

**L.R.:** Good! As a researcher who also supervises future generations of researchers interested in Outsider Art, what are some of the lines of research that Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler's work highlights?

**Thomas Röske:** I mean, what she produces is not Outsider Art. She is really more of an expressive variety of New Sobriety with her work, and she fits into the line of professional art of her time. We are not a museum for Outsider Art, but we are a museum of psychiatric experience and art. We want to help destigmatize mental illness and mentally ill people. This includes a sober view on their artistic works. For a lot of people, when they find out that a person has had psychosis or was in a psychiatric hospital and was killed in this psychiatric hospital, this tends to overshadow the whole biography. I think it is important to take a step back, to look at the works, and to, somehow, show more empathy, and imagination, and to try to find out, how would you react in that situation? Would you be immediately in despair, or would you think: “Oh, I could do something against it, I would work against it, and my creativity might even help me to do that on different levels.” And for that reason, I think, it is quite important to follow that line of thought.

I think there are a lot of interesting questions, there is still a lot to do related to cultural contextualization and historization of Outsider Art. Too often this work is seen as being completely outside of its time and just coming out of the unconsciousness having no connection to reality. We just do not see a lot of these connections because we are too concentrated on high culture; but to understand these works, we generally need to look at low culture, everyday culture, to understand how these people reacted to the picture world, the image world they grew up in, and how they somehow found their own way to work with the images they were surrounded by. All these people who are in the collection were already part of an image world, or a picture world, and they somehow reacted to that, and we have to find

out by looking at journals, newspapers, advertisements, and so on, what they could have seen and what their connections to the culture of their time were.

**L.R.:** In closing, as president of the European Outsider Art Association, you have had the opportunity of visiting and learning about a number of European collections of the Psychiatric experience or Outsider Art, depending on what the institutions call themselves, as well as other international collections outside of Europe. From your experience with the Prinzhorn Collection, what do you consider to be important in ensuring the preservation of these collections, and maintaining public interest in them, so that they don't become vulnerable or forgotten?

**Thomas Röske:** Well, of course, the profane answer to that question is "money". We must convince people to help these collections with money. I gave a talk last year at the Kassel Documenta in English about Outsider Art, the whole development historically and how it is important today, and so on. Later, I got a call from Gregor Muir, the head of collections at the Tate Modern. He wanted to talk to me because he found the lecture very interesting. And we met, because several weeks later I was in London anyway, and we walked through the collection. He explained to me that his idea is that the collection of the Tate Modern should represent at least a lot, if not all different groups of society. And for that reason, for him, it was very important to include artworks by people with psychiatric experiences, with mental handicaps and by other outsider artists. He said that we have to understand that this is part of the whole spectrum. Maybe that is the right way to look at it. Museums nowadays should represent the society as a whole, and mental illness and mental handicap are part of our society and we should recognize that these people belong into the culture and should also be represented in the museum.

L.R.: Thank you very much for this interview, which is a highly instigating contribution to this dossier!

## Nota

\* Dr. Thomas Röske, born 15.5.1962 in Reinbek (near Hamburg), studied art history, musicology, and psychology at Hamburg University from 1981 to 1986. In 1991 he finished his Ph.D. on the intellectual biography of the art historian and psychotherapist Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933). From 1993 to 1999 he was assistant professor at the art historical department of Frankfurt University, where he functioned as deputy speaker of a graduate and postgraduate project about psychology of art ("*Psychische Energien bildender Kunst*"), funded by the German state, from 1996 to 1999. During this time, he also curated exhibitions for different art institutions in Germany and Great Britain.

In September 2001 Röske became curator of the Prinzhorn Collection at the Psychiatric Clinic of Heidelberg University Hospital, a museum for the famous historic collection of art works by mentally ill people from all over Europe. Since November 2002 he is the director of this institution which stages changing exhibitions about art and psychiatry and shows touring through Germany and abroad. He teaches regularly at the Centre for European Art History of Heidelberg University and at the Institute for Art History of Frankfurt University. In 2012 he became President of the European Outsider Art Association (EOA).

Röske published extensively on art and psychiatry and on outsider art. Other fields of interest are art and art theory around 1800, modern art, especially expressionism, art and homosexuality, art and outsider experience. Email: thomas.roeske@med.uni-heidelberg.de.

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- 1 Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler "Fragen an Werke und Dokumente" – special Exhibit from April 27th to August 20th, 2023 ([https://www.sammlung-prinzhorn.de/fileadmin/prinzhorn\\_sammlung/images/Ausstellungen/Elfriede\\_Lohse-Waechtler/Sammlung-Prinzhorn\\_Ausstellungs-Flyer\\_23\\_03\\_web.pdf](https://www.sammlung-prinzhorn.de/fileadmin/prinzhorn_sammlung/images/Ausstellungen/Elfriede_Lohse-Waechtler/Sammlung-Prinzhorn_Ausstellungs-Flyer_23_03_web.pdf)).
- 2 The New Sobriety movement (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) is also known in Art History publications in English as New Objectivity.
- 3 *Stolperstein* is a stone marker on a pathway that celebrates the life of someone who was assassinated during the Nazi regime.

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