



# The Mad People's Movement Engages 1001 Queen Street West's History: Transformation through Art and Activism

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## History of the Site

Located at 1001 Queen Street West, Toronto, CAMH is an association of clinics dedicated to the assessment and treatment of mental health issues. People diagnosed with mental illnesses have been housed and treated at this location since 1850. Until the 1998 founding and building of CAMH at 1001, the asylum was located next door, at 999 Queen West, currently CAMH's parking lot. The building at 999 has gone by many names, including the Toronto Hospital for the Insane.

One project fuelled by compulsory, unpaid or underpaid, patient labour was the brick wall encircling the property. When various segments of the wall were being built, Queen West was located on the outskirts of Toronto. Mad persons were thus literally marginalized, removed from the city centre and relegated to the countryside. The preoccupation with wall building only further served to separate mad persons from their communities, for a wall marked the boundary lines, the separation of city and asylum.

Another wall - a metaphorical wall - has been erected throughout this hospital's history. Only recently have historians begun to explore mad people's narratives (Dwyer, 1987; Eds. Geller & Harris, 1995; Ed. Ingram, 1997; Ed. Peterson, 1982; Reiss, 2004), rather than the once common academic practice of dismissing these narratives for no better a reason than a refusal to take seriously the words of a mad man, those who supposedly lack lucidity and competence, coherence and rationality. Instead, the history of madness has been depicted through the lens of physicians and psychiatrists.

## Honouring Patients of 999 Queen West

Historian and mad rights activist Geoffrey Reaume applied under the *Freedom of Information Act* to access clinical records of patients who lived at Queen West from 1870 until 1940. *Remembrance of Patients Past – Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940* (2000) tells stories about patients at what was then called the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, stories which he gleaned mainly from conversations that physicians noted in case files.

*The primary motive for writing this book is to present inmates in mental institutions as individual human beings who deserve to be understood on their own terms as people, rather than labels, free from the clutter of medical terminology and diagnostic categories that has too often served to obscure just who those people were who filled the rows of columns in annual reports* (p. 5).



In 2009, Nuit Blanche and Mad Pride showcased the installation "in SANITY"; *The Story Behind the Wall*, which was produced by artistic director Lisa Brown of Workman Arts. The participating artists, all of whom use CAMH services, each chose a patient whose narrative was depicted in Reaume's *Remembrance of Patients Past*, and re-created the narrative through mixed-media sculpture.

*The goal of this project is to creatively and expressively tell the stories of these former patients who have mostly been confined to a history of silence* (Workman Arts, 2009, pg. 2). See pieces from exhibit below:



## Madness and Art

Workman Arts discusses the cathartic force of art in their mission statement: "the creative process is integral to the quest for personal and spiritual development". Despite the therapeutic potential behind artistic expression, mad art is not always simply therapy, for it does not particularly matter what therapeutic art looks like nor how it resonates for an audience.

It is possible that the experience of madness may heighten an artist's sensibilities and yield unique, meaningful art: "there is something about prolonged periods of melancholia – broken at times by episodes of manic intensity and expansiveness – that leads to a different kind of insight, compassion, and expression of the human condition" (Jameson, 1993, p. 102).

For some artists, pain informs art. That is, art that has the power to affect people must push them to uncomfortable, intense places, must force introspection and shift perspective, must take control of their reality and deconstruct it: "Aesthetic beauty is born from experiences of powerful reconfiguration linked to suffering" (Gruson-Wood, 2009, p. 11). Hans Prinzhorn, art historian and psychiatrist, compiled a collection of 5,000 drawings, paintings, and other kinds of art, all created by institutionalized Europeans. These works are described as "a new view of reality, born out of...the terrible suffering that always accompanies mental illness" (Douglas, 1996, p. 35).

Nietzsche (who had himself been institutionalized) has exclaimed: "How much did this people have to suffer to be able to become so beautiful!" (as cited in Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 242). Rather than focus on pathologies when explaining mad people's pain, we should also acknowledge that mad persons have throughout history been removed from their communities and families, confined within walls and bed restraints, drugged to the point of compliance, shocked and water-boarded in the name of treatment; they have been demonized and dehumanized, incarcerated as though their dispositions were criminally offensive, forced to work for the sake of moral therapy as if madness and moral depravity were irrevocably entangled. Perhaps the beauty made manifest in mad art is borne out of suffering associated with deep-seated, long-standing prejudice, with a history that is painful both to have experienced and to reflect upon.



## Cynthia H. by Annalise Walmer

Cynthia H. was admitted in 1904 at 49 years of age, and stayed until her death in 1909. Her clinical files indicated she was restless during her previous confinement at the Homewood Sanitarium in Guelph, and feared being abandoned and left unfed. Given her anxiousness and her approaching menopause, Cynthia's uterus, fallopian tubes, and one ovary were removed.

The concept of the wandering womb, *hysteria* in Greek, goes back to as far as ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, who sought to explain female madness as a phenomenon whereby a woman's wayward uterus, light as a result of lack of sexual intercourse, caused physical and psychological effects. This category of mental illness was used since his time to diagnose and treat women, up until the nineteenth century, where we find this all too common practice of surgically removing women's reproductive organs. Forced sterilization continued in Canada through the 1960s, and committees that determined whether the procedure was necessary were arguably motivated by prejudices pertaining to gender, sexual orientation, race, and class, in intersection with biases about psychiatric and developmental disabilities.

Like so many other women throughout the history of madness, Cynthia H. lacked the right to control her own body. She was also historically silenced, for her story was buried under medical records while the involuntary sterilization of disabled women continued in Canada well into the twentieth century: "The views of women who experienced this operation, such as Cynthia, will have to go undetected as the records are silent on this point" (Reaume, 2000, p. 31).

Walmer's sculpture portrays the violence committed against Cynthia: her body was cut into just as the coat is cut into; her uterus was mischaracterized and her reproductive functions were pathologized, just as the uterus set apart from her body had a spongy texture that matched the medical description of the uterus as spongy and life-sucking; she lost her personhood and became a faceless body just as this headless sculpture is turned away from its audience. Her body ceased to be her own and was read as a site of contagion; her uterus became something entirely other to what it originally was once under the microscope of medical scrutiny. This sculpture thus depicts the violent transformation of Cynthia's body.

## Angel Queen XIII (Felicity T.) by Elizabeth Jun-en Allen

Felicity T. was committed to the asylum from 1894 until her death in 1924. Believing herself to be Angel Queen XIII, ruler of the asylum, she crafted garments for herself and her fabled Angel King, from materials her husband and daughter brought.

*Having established her abilities as a superb dressmaker she was given free rein to order as much material as desired, so long as it was paid for by her family. Her sense of style, along with her dramatic pronouncements and insistence on being called Angel Queen, served to enhance this relative freedom, which she pushed to the limit. From her private room on Ward 7, Felicity believed she ruled the asylum* (Reaume, 2000, p. 124).

Felicity's story could have been a tragic one, a story about her life-long imprisonment. She was instead able to transform her reality and identity, and thus to shift how she would be remembered. Unlike Cynthia's commemorative sculpture, Felicity's is not faceless; she stands tall and regal, facing us square on, gazing upon us with firm blue eyes. Whereas Cynthia's sculpture indicates how her body was interpreted and broken by medical professionals, Felicity's sculpture is a celebration of Felicity's creative resistance and enigmatic character.

*Above all, the story of Angel Queen's ability to realize so much relative independence while incarcerated says a great deal about the importance of agency and external support in pursuing a lifestyle that was far less encumbered by institutional rules than was the case for those inmates who had fewer resources to tap into* (2000, p. 125).

It is important to acknowledge the conditions which enabled Felicity to transform her identity and surroundings, for external funding and support were advantages her fellow inmates often lacked. In contrast with Felicity, those patients without community connections were more easily silenced and forgotten. Perhaps the lesson we might take away from Allen's celebration of Angel Queen is that resistance is possible, and can be expressed beautifully, with the right support.

