

# Museum of Croydon

## Frames of Mind: Creativity in Mental Healthcare

Discover historic artworks of international renown from the collections of Bethlem Royal Hospital, the original 'Bedlam', alongside contemporary artworks created by artists supported by the Bethlem Gallery. Over 30 different artists are represented including Richard Dadd, William Kurelek, Stanley Lench, Jonathan Martin, Marion Patrick, Cynthia Pell, Charles Sims and Louis Wain.

The main gallery is dedicated to the display of 50 paintings, drawings, digital images, sculptures and ceramics dating from the early nineteenth century to the present day. All of these remarkable works have been created by people who have experienced mental health problems. Also in this gallery you can see videos of artists working with Bethlem Gallery and listen to oral history interviews with mental health service users and providers.



*Art class. Courtesy of Croydon Local Studies Library and Archives Services.*

### **A History of Mental Healthcare**

Did you know that one in four of us will experience a mental health problem at some point in our life? Many of us have friends or relatives who have experienced it. The Frames of Mind exhibition aims to help destigmatise mental illness by exploring what it has meant to a range of people, including artists from the local area. Art in all its forms has been used for centuries as an informal

therapy and in more recent years art therapy has become recognised as both a professional discipline and major contributor to an individual's programme of care and recovery.

In the smaller gallery you can discover the history of mental healthcare from the foundation of Bethlem Hospital in 1247 to the present day. A timeline illustrates the individual and linked histories of Bethlem Royal Hospital, Warlingham Park Hospital and Cane Hill Hospital. You can also find out more about the art-based care services provided in Croydon today.

## **William Kurelek: 1927- 1977**

William Kurelek was born on 3 March 1927 at his father's farm at Whitford in Alberta, Canada. His upbringing was strongly influenced by the Ukrainian immigrant community into which he was born (the Kurelek children did not speak English until they went to school). According to his autobiography, *Someone with Me*, Kurelek grew up in terror of his father, who appeared to despise him and treated him with harshness and contempt. Throughout his youth he suffered increasing psychological problems which he later attributed to this relationship. Kurelek had shown a talent for drawing and painting from his early school days. He took a degree at the University of Manitoba, trying to satisfy his parents by training to be a teacher, while hoping eventually to become an artist. He briefly attended the Ontario College of Art at Toronto, but left to hitchhike to Mexico to spend five months at an art school in San Miguel Allende. He then decided to come to Europe, principally to seek the psychiatric treatment which he now felt that he needed. He worked as a lumberjack to earn the fare.

Kurelek reached London in 1952 and wandered into the Maudsley Hospital, which he had seen mentioned in a book in the Montreal library, to ask for admission. While receiving treatment as an out-patient he worked at a labouring job for London Transport, taking up the old tram rails. The painting which he made of the scene became his first sale - to London Transport. Eventually he was admitted to the Maudsley as an in-patient, where he painted many pictures including *The Maze*, but was later transferred to Netherne Hospital. After his discharge he made a living for a time selling trompe l'oeil paintings, and spent two years apprenticed to a picture frame maker, hoping to be able to set up his own business in Canada. In 1957 he was received into the Roman Catholic Church. He attributed his ultimate full recovery to this, rather than to the psychiatric treatment which he received.



*The Maze. William Kurelek*

*Photograph reproduced by permission of the Bethlem Arts & History Collections Trust.*

He returned to Toronto in 1959, where he married and lived for the rest of his life. He had his first one man exhibition there at the Isaacs Gallery in 1960. From this time on his reputation gradually increased, and by the late sixties he was established as one of Canada's leading artists. His paintings were particularly valued for their record of prairie farming and other aspects of Canadian life in the 1930s, forties and fifties. He also wrote and illustrated many books on similar themes. His work is now to be found in many public and private collections in Canada. William Kurelek died of cancer in Toronto on 3 November 1977.

## **ELISE WARRINER, b.1968**

Elise Warriner suffered from severe and at times life-threatening anorexia nervosa for ten years between 1986 and 1997, leading to several hospital admissions. The last was to the Eating Disorders Unit at Bethlem. Anorexia was the subject of her art school degree show, called 'Welcome to My World', in 1993. Every aspect of the show was related to food – or its absence. The main installation was a table at which no one could sit and eat (it had no top, and the barbed-wire chairs had no seats), with a 'patchwork' carpet made from polythene bags containing different types of breakfast cereal, and plates made of papier mâché incorporating mashed up vegetables. The edible invitations were printed on rice paper. Although 'anorexia' means literally 'loss of appetite', her show perfectly illustrated its real meaning to the sufferer, which is something quite

different: a fear of eating, and consequent weight gain, which can lead to a total obsession with food and its avoidance. It is unlikely that anyone who had lost their appetite would wish to devote all their creative energy to the subject of eating!

The painting shown here, *The Anger Within*, was painted around the same time, and again shows a personal understanding of anorexia which is far removed from the concept of mere 'loss of appetite'. As the title suggests, it is an expression of her anger during the illness. This anger is hidden within the formless bubble of a body without arms or legs – a body which is 'shut down'. Looking back on this picture, she has said: 'The real element of the painting is the incredible contrast between the somewhat passive outside image of the person and the inside which holds all the emotion.' The formless body 'is all of the outside or peripheral bits of me that could express emotion and which are shut down. Inside is turmoil. Everything is happening here. Emotions are bubbling up.'



*The Anger Within. Elise Warriner  
Photograph reproduced by permission of the Bethlem Arts & History  
Collections Trust.*

Of the anger itself, she says: 'My anger was important. It gave me energy and allowed me to do things and masked my fear, frustration and loneliness. It allowed me to express the way I was feeling in a way that I could use as a tool against other people. If I showed how lonely I was, people would come to try and get close to me, to try to change me. I didn't want that.' The anger in this picture is a monstrous hidden presence, of which only the artist is aware. 'It is all inside. Nothing of that can be seen on the outside. It is as if all the senses are on the inside'.

The poems in Elise Warriner's Poetry Boxes also express anger, directed against the illness, herself, life, and those who are trying to save her from self-inflicted death by starvation. People with anorexia nervosa in its extreme forms feel the need to control and restrict their eating, or more specifically their calorie intake, and to go on losing weight, long past the point at which their health or even their lives are seriously at risk. They may fully understand the consequences of such behaviour, but be trapped in the obsessive need to retain some element of control in a hostile world. If the ultimate indignity is to lose control over one's own body, the ultimate achievement, seen through the distorted vision of anorexia, may be to starve that body to death. These poems explore, with no holds barred, the pain and despair of this situation. The final message, however, though seen only with hindsight, is one of hope. Elise is now completely well. Following her recovery she took a course in stage management, and now works in the theatre and with deaf people.

### **Frames of Mind**

This exhibition opens on World Mental Health Day 2008 (10th Oct 2008) and showcases artworks collected by Bethlem Royal Hospital including those by internationally renowned artists Richard Dadd and Louis Wain as well as contemporary art works created by artists supported by the Bethlem Gallery. Frames of Mind is a FREE exhibition at the Museum of Croydon. The exhibition runs from 10 October to 31 January 2008.

**The Museum of Croydon is at Croydon Clocktower,  
Katharine Street,  
Croydon, CR9 1ET**

[www.museumofcroydon.com](http://www.museumofcroydon.com)  
<http://www.museumofcroydon.com> .

Opening hours Monday to Saturday 11am-5pm closed on 25-28 December 2008 and 1 Jan 2009