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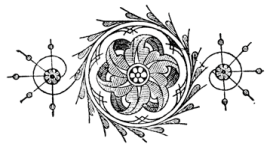
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Myrllen's Coat

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Abstract: In 1948, a schizophrenic woman admitted to the Eastern State Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee, began shredding rags into coloured thread and begging hospital staff to give her a sewing needle. In the space of seven years, she created several garments, densely embroidered with images and glossolalic text. Ward notes dismissively summarized, “She sews without purpose...is non-productive”. In 1955 she was medicated with the newly developed drug, chlorpromazine, and stopped sewing. Over the years, most of the works were lost — along with the medical records of their creator, who is known by the pseudonym, “Myrllen”. Today, only two artifacts remain: a scarf, which hangs in Lakeshore Mental Health Center in Knoxville; and a coat, preserved in the Tennessee State Museum. My research is the first academic study of these artifacts, which are virtually unknown outside of Tennessee and Maryland.



Early in my artistic career, I worked extensively in embroidery, choosing this medium for its resonance with women's histories. While I was spending months hunched over an embroidery hoop creating *Freud's Bride* (1996) and *Efflorescence* (1997) I began to ruminate on the history and process of embroidery. A few years later, in 2001, I visited the American Museum of Visionary Art in Baltimore. I was drawn to a densely embroidered coat, covered with text and images, made by a schizophrenic patient named Myrllen sometime between 1948 and 1955. Little is known about Myrllen — not even her surname. Her medical records have been lost and her biographical information has been transmitted orally, resulting in gaps and uncertainties. To date, there has been no academic writing about her work. Myrllen's coat has been exhibited in Tennessee and Maryland, but is little known outside of this region.¹ (See Figures 1, 2, 3)

Although Myrllen embroidered her coat only fifty years ago, it was created under a unique constellation of circumstances that changed radically in the mid-1950s. Thus, it has more in common with artifacts that were created several decades before it, than with those created even a few years after it. In this paper, I propose two readings of the coat: the first imagines how the coat may have been understood in its own era, had it come to the attention of a sympathetic psychiatrist aware of the seminal texts by Walter Morgenthaler (*Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, 1921) and Hans Prinzhorn (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 1922). My second reading of the coat analyzes

the embroidered images and text on its surface, revealing Myrllen's extensive use of appropriated imagery and contradicting the widely held belief that her work was autobiographical.

The primary source for Myrllen's story has been former nurse, Nancy Luttrell, who met Myrllen when she was admitted to Eastern State Psychiatric Hospital in 1948, at the age of 28. Luttrell remembered her as a beautiful redhead with a pale complexion, who was admitted from jail, where she had been incarcerated for her threatening behaviour toward her husband and neighbours.² The year that Myrllen was admitted to the Eastern State Hospital, Albert Deutsch published *The Shame of the States*, which exposed the deplorable conditions of psychiatric hospitals in the United States.³ Run-down, overcrowded, understaffed hospitals kept violent patients physically restrained in locked wards.⁴ Against this dark background, Myrllen's embroidery begs for interpretation.

Over the years, most of Myrllen's embroidered garments were lost — today only two remain. Dr. Nat Winston rescued the coat out of a pile of rags on the floor of a disused sewing room in the Central State Hospital in Nashville, when he was making a tour of all of the state's psychiatric hospitals in 1966, the first year of his appointment as Tennessee State Commissioner of Mental Health.⁵ For nearly two decades, the origin of the coat remained a mystery to Winston. It wasn't until the early 1980s, when he saw the scarf on display at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute (formerly Eastern State Hospital), that he realized that the coat he had found years before was created by the same patient.⁶ It isn't clear how the coat ended up in the Central State Hospital, as Myrllen is believed to have spent her entire time as a patient in the Eastern State Hospital in Knoxville. Dr. Winston believes that the coat may have been loaned for a planned exhibition of art by the mentally ill, which never came to pass. He surmises that the coat must have subsequently been misplaced then found later by someone who did not recognize its significance and discarded it.⁷ There are no records to verify this chain of events, but Dr. Winston presents one plausible explanation of how the coat may have traveled from one hospital the other.

Without additional biographical or medical information, it is not possible to provide more than a rough sketch of who Myrllen may have been as an individual. Therefore, I will turn to the past to imagine how her practice might have been compared to other art by schizophrenic patients by contemporary scholars. The seminal texts that shaped the way art by the psychiatric patients was understood were Hans Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*⁸ and Walter Morgenthaler's *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*⁹. Although these texts were well known in Europe, their impact in America was limited, as they were not translated into English until 1972 and 1992, respectively. Consequently, while the art of the insane was central to the Art Brut movement in Europe, it played a lesser role in American Outsider Art.¹⁰ At the time Myrllen was creating her work, there were no American texts comparable to Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn's studies and American psychiatrists were seemingly less aware of art being created by patients in psychiatric institutions than their European colleagues.

Although Myrllen was institutionalized on another continent, more than twenty years after these studies were published, conditions in psychiatric hospitals had changed little during the intervening years and were similar in America and Europe. Prior to the invention of psychotherapeutic medication, psychiatric hospitals functioned as custodial institutions where incurable patients could be institutionalized for life. In Germany in the 1920s — and America in the 1940s — popular therapies included sleeping cures, hydrotherapy (cold baths or showers) and shock therapies (including insulin coma, electroconvulsive therapy and metrazol therapy).¹¹ Aside from these attempts at treatment, patients were frequently left to their own devices, and could spend years without being involved in any structured activity.¹² Some of these patients spontaneously began create works of art from the rudimentary materials available at hand. Reading Prinzhorn and Morgenthaler, we can hypothesize how Myrllen's work might have been understood had it come to the attention of a psychiatrist familiar with these seminal European texts. Examining Myrllen's work



Figure 1: Myrllen's Coat (front, closed), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.



Figure 2: Myrllen's Coat (front, open), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.



Figure 3: Myrllen's Coat (closed), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

through this lens establishes it as comparable to the masterworks of acclaimed outsider artists, including Adolf Wölfli, whose work shares compositional similarities with Myrllen's embroideries.

Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli was the first book addressed to a general audience that recognized a mental patient as an artist, dignifying him by identifying him by name, and balancing biographical information with clinical data. Reading Adolf Wölfli's story through the words of his physician, Walter Morgenthaler, I cannot help but regret the vast amount of information that might have been known about Myrllen, had a similar mentor discovered her compulsive creativity. Morgenthaler's book is divided into four chapters that chronicle Wölfli's life and illness, describe his artistic practice, analyze his psychological history and discuss the artistic impulse as an innate human drive. Although Morgenthaler writes in the language of a disinterested medical professional, there is an underlying sense of empathy and respect, implied by Morgenthaler's intimate observations of the details of Wölfli's practice, acquired through hundreds of hours of observation. The book also contains Wölfli's rendition of his own life story, written for his doctors when he initially entered the Waldau Asylum in Bern in 1895 at the age of 31. In comparison, the scant information known about Myrllen generates more questions than answers.

Morgenthaler's publication was followed in 1922 by Hans Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. This text analyzes a sampling of works from an archive of over 5000 works of art by 450 patients, most collected between 1919 and 1922, from psychiatric hospitals and private sanatoria, primarily in Germany and adjacent European countries.¹³ The first section of the book describes the impulses that Prinzhorn theorized were characteristic of artistic works produced by the mentally ill. The second, longer section discusses the work of ten patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in art historical language. Prinzhorn did not use patients' images diagnostically; instead he analyzed them as examples of man's innate creative impulses, untainted by trends in contemporary art. In comparison to Morgenthaler's biographical approach to Adolf Wölfli's practice, Prinzhorn's text offers more in-depth formal analysis of the images and suggests a theoretical framework for understanding them.

Prinzhorn was uniquely positioned to write about the psychological aspects of artistic creation as, prior to becoming a doctor of psychiatry, he earned a doctorate of art history from the University of Vienna.

Prinzhorn identifies six roots — or impulses — that function together in the creative urge. The proportionate balance and effect of the component roots varies in each maker's practice and in each creative work within individual practices. Each root impulse can dominate an image or disappear entirely. However, when analyzing a creative image, a complete explanation can never be derived from study of the work in relation to a single impulse.¹⁴ Prinzhorn's root impulses can be summarized as: an expressive urge, an urge to play (active urge), an ornamental urge (environment enrichment), an ordering tendency (rhythm and rule), a tendency to imitate (copying urge) and a need for symbols (significance).¹⁵ I have chosen these impulses as a framework for discussion of the formal aspects of Myrllen's embroideries. In cases where the works discussed by Prinzhorn and Morgenthaler parallel or contrast Myrllen's aesthetic approach, I will reference specific works as contextual comparisons.

The first urge Prinzhorn discusses is the expressive urge, which actualizes the psyche in concrete form. This drive is not embodied in works created for an outside purpose but is, "directed solely and self-sufficiently toward (its) own realization".¹⁶ Thus, a patient creating a work as part of directed occupational therapy not engaging the expressive urge in the manner that Prinzhorn describes it. It must be noted, however, that the patients Prinzhorn describes were encouraged and rewarded for their work, receiving tobacco, letters of thanks and paint boxes.¹⁷ Nonetheless, only patients who were motivated internally would create quality works on an ongoing basis and, although they were sometimes encouraged, patients generally received little or no direction from staff.

Both Myrllen and Wölfler began to create their works spontaneously and persevered despite the difficulty of obtaining materials. Wölfler was given a pencil on Monday mornings and after a day or two, when it was used up, he would write with broken leads, holding them between his fingernails. Morgenthaler describes how his patient would, "run about the house, knocking on all the doors he can, to beg a piece of paper or the stub end of a pencil."¹⁸ Myrllen, similarly, went to great lengths to acquire what she needed to create her work. Sharp objects such as needles and scissors were forbidden in the hospital. Nancy Luttrell remembered Myrllen fretting when she saw someone with a tear in their clothing or a loose button, wishing that she had a needle and thread so that she could mend it for them. Eventually, she was granted a needle and a dull pair of scissors. Having no coloured thread she began shredding rags from the hospital laundry to create a palette for her embroidery. Her intense searches through piles of laundry rags earned her the nickname, "The Inspector."¹⁹

The second urge Prinzhorn calls to the reader's attention is the urge to play — the active urge. This urge is embodied in activities that have no purpose other than entertainment, passing the time or enjoyment."²⁰ Playful drawing emerges in childhood, and continues to be manifested by adults: for example, in our tendency to doodle during lectures or phone conversations. Despite Myrllen's withdrawal from other patients and her volatile outbursts, the coat embodies the essence of play in its brightly coloured, energetic imagery.²¹ Particularly noticeable in the sleeves of the coat, the embroidered images curve and undulate to create pleasing rhythmic variations of line and shape, which seem to reflect the pleasure Myrllen took in her work. (Figure 4)

Closely related to the playful urge are the ornamental urge and the ordering tendency, which Prinzhorn names as his third and fourth principles. Ornament has two primary characteristics — it is decorative and is based on abstract formal principles. Present to some extent in all creative acts, the ornamental drive fulfills the primal need for man to distinguish his productions from the natural environment by enriching them with surface embellishments. Prinzhorn's fourth root, the ordering

tendency, is difficult to separate from the ornamental urge as the two are closely aligned. For example, ornamental elements are usually ordered in rows and may take the form of continuous, wallpaper-like patterns. They are often organized to form borders, or contained within shapes that divide a surface.



Figure 4: Myrllen's Coat (detail, back left of sleeve), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

Myrllen's embroidery may have satisfied the ornamental urge through its differentiation from the clinical environment of the hospital and the utilitarian garments provided to the patients. The transformation of worn blue denim uniforms and white cotton sheets, which became the dominant colours in the coat, is a near magical metamorphosis. Not only is the coat embellished with wide borders of ornamental vignettes, even the blue areas of the coat—which initially appear to be a plain surface—are revealed, on closer inspection, to be completely covered with rows of wheel stitch that are so tightly packed together that no glimpse of the original fabric is visible. Prinzhorn observed that some patients were compelled to fill their pages to their very edges and blank spaces spurred them into frenetic activity²² and, similarly, Morgenthaler commented on Wölfli's *horror vacui* and his repetition of rows of identical motifs, "pursued with a typically schizophrenic stereotypy in endless repetition"²³ When we conceptualize thread as a line drawn through fabric, Myrllen's needlework becomes comparable to Wölfli's minutely patterned drawings, which frequently feature areas filled with coloured hatching and other patterns resembling stitches.

In the lower section of the coat and the sleeves, which incorporate imagery and text, Myrllen used a variety of stitches (predominantly satin stitch, chain stitch, and wheel stitch). Her technique was immaculate — rows of precise, perfect stitches follow the shapes of the forms that are being filled, and the width of the stitched rows are frequently flared or compressed so that a consistent number of lines of stitching can be used to fill a shaped form. As in Adolf Wölfli's works, pattern is used to help define shapes. However, unlike the abstract shapes filled with textures that predominate in Wölfli's works, Myrllen's designs center on images and her directional embroidery respects each shape's signification — for example, stitches representing hair fall vertically, stitches on bent arms and legs follow their curves, and rows stitches filling the shapes of gathered skirts flare out as they move downwards, following form and suggesting movement. A similar strategy can be observed in some of Adolf Wölfli's works, where imagery is combined with abstract patterns and borders. For example, in his 1907 drawing, *Felsenau*, the varying scale and direction of the patterns representing windows on the buildings, and bricks on the tower suggest perspective and add to the realism of the objects that emerge out of the patterned fields of the drawing.²⁴ Myrllen also found other ways to increase the sense of realism in her embroidery — certain stitches suggest the textures of hair, wood grain, tree bark and other surfaces, while other areas are built up to create a bas relief surface, for example, to make noses and lips stand out dimensionally.

In 1975, Swiss artist, Markus Raetz drew an inventory of Wölfli's vocabulary of forms, many of which resemble embroidery stitches.²⁵ Raetz's depictions of Wölfli's "Steam-Propeller-Rings" correspond closely with Myrllen's repeated wheel stitches that make up the blue background texture of the coat; and Wölfli's bands of "Snails" resemble the bands of satin stitch Myrllen used to create text and imagery. Wölfli's tendency to work in an orderly way, filling the page from the edges inwards, is echoed in Myrllen's work, the blue areas of the coat, where the overlapping "fish scale" effect of the wheel stitch and the variations in the blue colour, caused by re-threading the needle with different shades of blue thread, reveals orderly progress across the fabric. In other areas she fills circular forms with concentric rows of stitching, or works in rows back and forth across shapes. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: Myrllen's Coat (detail, wheel stitch embroidery), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

Myrllen's systematic approach can be contrasted with an early work in the Prinzhorn collection, attributed to Miss G,²⁶ in which sewn lines meander across the fabric and small areas of

formal embroidery stitches are overwhelmed by an abandon of exuberant, random threads tacking down skeins of silk thread.²⁷ Comparing the two works highlights how difficult it is to conceptualize and embroider a picture freeform with no sketch as a guide and a reminder of one's original intentions. Myrllen's shapes are rarely outlined with a row of containing stitches, yet the images remain coherent and organized, raising questions about her process. Morgenthaler observed Wölfli at work and questioned him extensively about his motives and decisions. Morgenthaler, describing Wölfli's method, wrote,

(The images) emerge...full-grown from his spirit; he throws them onto the paper without changing anything...once he has begun a ...drawing he carries it through as if he were obeying a mechanical law. Almost never is there a conscious consideration of details. From the incessant flood of his imagination he retains individual images, or even individual names, numbers or series of numbers in words or in forms. He chooses them most often from a purely personal, unconscious, instinctive viewpoint.²⁸

Myrllen may have worked in a similar manner, spontaneously developing the images without sketching or planning in advance. Some vignettes incorporate figures that are oriented in different directions, suggesting that the images were not systematically planned and that, like most embroiderers, Myrllen rotated her fabric as she worked around it from different perspectives. Unfortunately, there are no details available from observers about how Myrllen made her works, and no partially completed panels that would reveal whether there were underlying drawings or roughly stitched outlines that served as guides. (Figure 6)

Prinzhorn identifies the tendency to imitate or copy, as the fifth root of the creative urge. He uses the term, "imitate" to indicate that, regardless of whether the imagery is based on reality or drawn from the imagination, regardless of its degree of abstraction, it is an eidetic image and its primary psychological importance to the maker is as a transformation of a vivid image from the mind's eye into concrete form. Prinzhorn notes that when the urge to imitate dominates, the expressive values of the playful urge and the ornamental urge decline.²⁹ Myrllen's childlike, eidetic images strike a balance between expressivity and mimesis. Although the scenes and figures are stylized, certain aspects, including hairstyles, clothing and nail polish, are rendered with great attention to detail.

Prinzhorn identifies the sixth root of the creative urge as the need for symbols (significance). When the copying urge is engaged to create a naturalistic image — for example, a picture of a vase of flowers, a landscape or a portrait — the symbolic significance of the image is low. Myrllen's pictorial imagery exhibits a strong copying tendency and, correspondent with Prinzhorn's theory — as it does not convey overt allegorical and religious themes — has low symbolic significance. This hypothesis can be reinforced by comparing Myrllen's coat to five categories of works established by Prinzhorn — unobjective, unordered scribbles, playful drawings with a predominant ordering tendency, playful drawings with a predominant copying tendency, visual fantasy, and increased significance (symbolism). Myrllen's work most strongly resembles works Prinzhorn places in the category of playful drawings with a predominant copying tendency. One work in this category has a striking similarity to Myrllen's production. Similar to Myrllen, Gabriele Urbach embroidered domestic imagery using a variety of stitches that were sewn in tightly parallel rows, creating areas of colour and texture. (Figures 7, 8)

A harbinger of today's academic embrace of interdisciplinary, Prinzhorn's scholarship in the 1920s mapped the uncharted territory between the disciplines of art and psychopathology. He sidestepped the value judgment accompanying the term "art" and by reviving the term "Bildneri"



Figure 6: G. (Miss G), 1897, Case no. 516, The Prinzhorn Collection. Inv. 6053.
Embroidery thread on linen handkerchief. 37 x 36 cm.

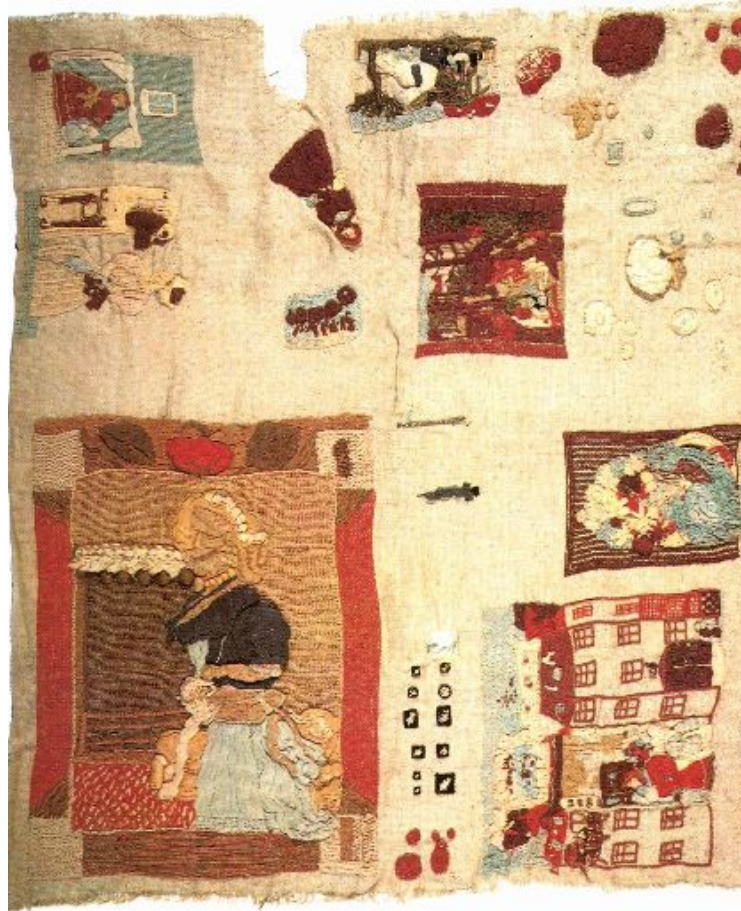


Figure 7 (above): Gabriele Urbach, Case no. 6, The Prinzhorn Collection. Inv. 40. Embroidery thread, cotton yarn on canvas. 94.5 x 80 cm.



Figure 8 (left): Gabriele Urbach's embroidery as it appeared in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* in 1922, Case no. 6, The Prinzhorn Collection. Inv. 40. Embroidery thread, cotton yarn on canvas.

(image making or art) and “*bildende Kunst*” (creative art) rather than using the more common term “*Kunst*”. He articulated his point of view in the introduction to *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*,

The public has heard a great deal about “mad art;: the “art of the mentally ill,” “pathologic art” and “art and insanity.” We are not overly happy with these expressions. The word, “art” includes a value judgment within its fixed emotional connotations, it sets up a distinction between one class of created objects and another very similar one that is dismissed as “non art”³⁰

In today's academic climate, which stresses the assessment of a broad range of production as visual culture, the need to categorize anomalous objects as “art” or “non art” may seem inconsequential beside the more pressing matter of understanding what these objects may reveal about their makers, comprehended through the lenses of circumstance and personal history. However, John MacGregor makes the compelling argument that the refusal to recognize the objects made by a specific group of people as art is tantamount to the societal rejection of these creators. He states,

The long invisibility of the art of the insane was the result of a determined effort to ignore, or deny, the existence of the insane. Their sculpture, their paintings and drawings, were dismissed as valueless because the men and women who made them were understood to be either inferior human beings, or even “inhuman” human beings.³¹

The tension between these two points of view underlines the problem of how to approach Myrllen’s work. In her own time, her work was overlooked; and it is only by lucky chance that artifacts of her artistic practice remain. Part of the reason for her work’s invisibility may have been American psychiatrists’ unfamiliarity with Art Brut. But, even if Myrllen had been working in Germany, where there was a lively interest amongst psychiatrists in works of art created by their patients, would her work have been acknowledged? Despite the fact that a larger number of women than men were confined in psychiatric facilities in Germany in the 1920s, women’s work makes up only 20% of the Prinzhorn Collection and, significantly, Gabriele Urbach’s work was the only example of embroidery included in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*.

Bettina Brand-Claussen attributes the absence of women’s creations in the Prinzhorn Collection to women who, not having been brought up to express themselves spontaneously, when institutionalized, “put their energies into women's work, wrote religious verses in their notebooks and kept quiet.”³² I am skeptical of the hypothesis that female patients passively accept their place in the institutional framework while male patients rebelled creatively. Margaret Henninge, the curator of *Irre ist Weiblich*³³ comments that, despite there being no evidence to suggest that mental illness is more severe in the female population, female patients in German institutions during Prinzhorn’s era were disciplined more frequently and received four times as much therapy as their male counterparts. During an era when therapy used as a means of punishment and as a means of behavioral control, this evidence suggests that, far from being passive, women patients also rebelled within the institutional framework.³⁴

When she wrote that women poured their energies into “women’s work”, Brand-Claussen made the same oversight as Prinzhorn and his contemporaries. The underrepresentation of women’s art in the Prinzhorn Collection is concurrent with the underrepresentation of women in art history and museum collections, a phenomenon well known through the writings of feminist art historians, including Linda Nochlin, Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock. The absence of women’s artworks in Prinzhorn’s collection can be attributed to the contemporary bias that excluded women from the

definition of artistic genius and upheld a narrow definition of art, which dismissed embroidery as craft. There are no women among Prinzhorn's ten schizophrenic "masters" — not because women did not produce works of art inside psychiatric institutions — but because women's works were overlooked. In German institutions, women's access to writing materials was limited because writing rooms in clinics were reserved for men. Women were relegated to the sewing rooms and their access to pen and paper depended on good behavior. Those who were not allowed writing materials found other means of self-expression. Some going so far as removing thread from bedding and clothing and embroidering text — often words of protest — on the inside of their garments.³⁵ The inequality of access to pens and paper may have meant that women were even more inclined to express themselves through sewing or embroidery than through drawing. As drawing was recognized as an art form, and embroidery was not, this would have skewed Prinzhorn's sample in favour of collecting work by male patients. For example, Prinzhorn writes in passing about a male patient, Case No. 114, who filled notebooks with patterns resembling common patterns in commercial embroideries.³⁶ It is easy to imagine these images being overlooked as craft, had they been executed as embroidery by a female patient. However, the works stood out because the patient was male and the voluminous works were drawn, rather than embroidered.³⁷ (Figure 9)

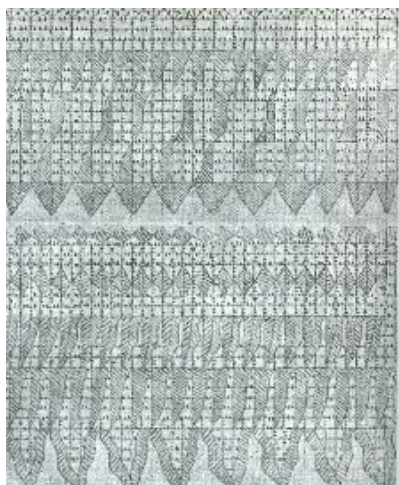


Figure 9: Case no. 14, The Prinzhorn Collection. Pencil on paper. 9 x 15 cm

Gabriel Urbach's is the only embroidered work in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, and is framed in the context of other realistic work. Prinzhorn writes that the "woman embroiderer" executed numerous other works, including, "whole landscapes with gardens streams, houses, merchants' booths, and people." Although he says that these images stand out because of the unusualness of the materials, he qualifies this by adding,

Astonishing as it appears on first glance, one must not forget that (the patient) continues an old technique which has long been used in countries with a rich folk art tradition, like Sweden or Bohemia. Samples from those countries are retained by most handicraft museums.³⁸

Interestingly, Prinzhorn's book shows a cropped version of this image. Taken out of context of the whole, the portrait of the woman appears to be contained in an ornamental frame as it were a painting prepared for hanging in a gallery of fine art. In the context of the whole, however, it is one of a series of domestic vignettes and scattered images that are oriented with their bottoms towards

the edges of the fabric.³⁹ Their orientation skews the primacy of the largest image in the work, as a viewer handling the piece would tend to rotate the fabric to view all of the images in turn. Rather than a portrait, the artist, Gabriele Urbach created a sampler — both in the traditional sense that the embroidery resembles the type of work girls were traditionally taught to do for the purpose of learning a wide variety of stitches, and in the sense that it records a variety of conventional domestic scenes displayed in a non-hierarchical manner. (Figures 7 & 8)

When Prinzhorn reminds the viewer that the embroiderer continues, “an old technique which has long been use in countries with a rich folk art tradition,” he diminishes the significance of the work as art by a linking it to the lineage of craft. Yet, by presenting a cropped version of the image, he emphasizes its visual connection to fine art traditions. This contradictory treatment of the image reveals his ambivalence towards women’s work and craft, and hints at the problem it presents in relation to his beliefs about the male privilege of creative genius, predominant when Prinzhorn completed his training as an art historian. Doctors selected what they considered to be the most significant works made by their institutionalized patients to donate to Prinzhorn’s collection. These doctors undoubtedly would have shared Prinzhorn’s prejudices about what constituted a work of art. The consistent perception of sewn work as handicraft and its relegation to the lesser category of traditional folk art was undoubtedly one of the factors that led to the exclusion of many sewn works from the Prinzhorn Collection. As a result of this bias, female patients in institutions undoubtedly received less encouragement to undertake artistic work than male patients and reaped fewer rewards for doing so. Henninge elucidates, “Seldom was (women’s) creativity acknowledged, and their actions and reactions in the clinics were seen as symptoms of madness.” The continued, widespread acceptance of a definition of art that excluded embroidery may also have led to Myrllen’s work being overlooked by her own doctors. Tellingly, Myrllen’s ward notes sum up her work with the words, “She sews without purpose...is non-productive.”⁴⁰

Works of art by the mentally ill are disconnected from the canon of art history in the sense that, while they inspired early 20th century avant-garde artists, the flow of information was not reciprocal and the patients were likely unaware of the theoretical issues and debates driving avant-garde production. However, works by the mentally ill artists respond to the same external stimuli as their contemporaries outside of the institution’s walls. Although the images Myrllen embroidered on the coat have generally been interpreted as scenes she remembered from her life, it is more likely that Myrllen was responding to the utopian aspects of the American Dream by appropriating and reproducing commercial images — just as American Pop artists did. With their flowing lines, slightly exaggerated forms, and intense blocks of colour, Myrllen’s images have a surprisingly similar feel to Andy Warhol’s commercial drawings from the 1950’s. In the bottom border on the back of the coat, the motif that most strongly suggests a pop culture source is the white square featuring a fashionable black shoe framed on a pale brown oblong, with pink shapes suggesting flowers flowing diagonally across the image. To the bottom left of the shoe, is a small walking figure. This arrangement evokes the composite images common in advertisements, which depict a large detailed image of a product along with a smaller illustration of a person using it.

The recurring motifs on Myrllen’s coat are conventional domestic scenes: houses with gardens and cheerful domestic interiors populated by girls and women. Rather than being engaged in activities suggesting narrative progression, the female figures are nearly all positioned frontally, smiling out at the viewer, as if posed for a photograph. A typical image from the sleeves of the coat is a theatrically posed woman wearing a girdle and brassiere that resembles contemporary girdle advertisements. As in a commercial drawing, the girdle is rendered with great attention to detail, including lines of stitching that curve to suggest the shape of the woman’s body, side and crotch seams, garter belts and the bordered edges of the stockings they are holding up. The face of the woman has a similar degree of detail — her mascaraed eyes and bright red lips peek through the

frame of her parted fingers, which are complete with red nail polish. To the right of this image is a dancing flapper wearing an elaborate feathered headdress, like the woman wearing the girdle, her stylized pose is reminiscent of contemporary pop culture illustrations. Myrllen was described as a woman who, “liked pretty things...like a ribbon in her hair.”⁴¹ Her fondness for fashion is evident in the imagery she embroidered. (Figures 10, 11, 12)

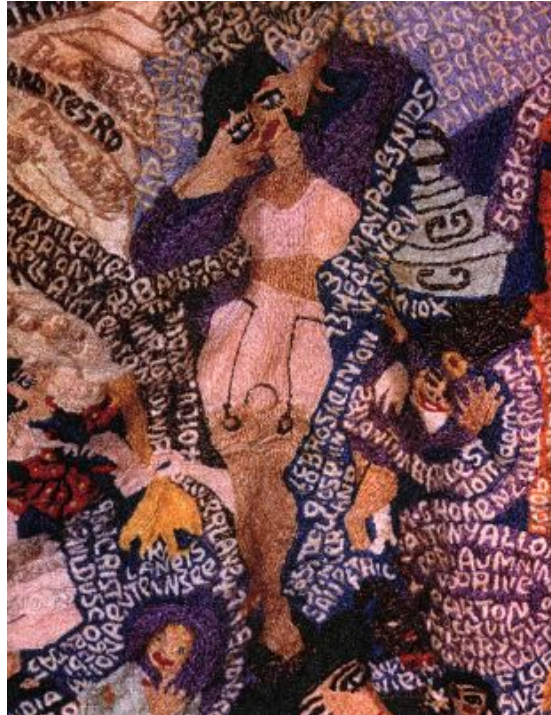


Figure 10: Myrllen's Coat (detail, from sleeve), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.



Figure 11: Look to Mabs. Advertisement, 1947
 Figure 12: Skippies by Formfit. Advertisement, 1954.

Although the majority of the imagery on the coat appears have been generated from advertising imagery, other popular press references are woven into the coat's complex imagery. One square from the tapestry on display at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute depicts the popular 1940's cartoon character, Little Lulu (captioned by Myrllen, "Little Lula"). The shape of the character's body and hair strongly resembles those of the cartoon. The only significant difference in Myrllen's rendering is that Little Lulu's trademark button eyes have been transformed into darkly outlined shapes resembling cat's eye glasses. Another square on the back of the coat is captioned, "Madison Square...Paletine (sic), Israel". The imagery accompanying the text is of the interior of a church, featuring a gothic window and a lamp emanating beams of light. Two people wearing hats and scarves, possibly representing Christmas carolers, hold what appears to be sheet music. Out of place beside the Christmas scene, a deciduous tree with green foliage arches over the figures. The disconnection between the text and images in this vignette suggests that as many as three popular sources were appropriated and combined to create a composite image. (Figures 13, 14, 15)



Figure 13: Myrllen (detail from scarf/tapestry), c.1948-55, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Lakeshore Mental Health Institute, Knoxville. Photograph courtesy of the Office of Communications, Tennessee Department of Mental Health & Developmental Disabilities, Nashville, TN.

Figure 14: Little Lulu Model Sheet (1943). Famous Studios. Stat model sheet dated 5/27/1943. Original basic paper. Ok by storyboard artist Isadore Sparber, [18w x 13.5h]
<http://cowancollectionanimation.blogspot.com/2008/05/little-lulu-1940s-photostat-model.html>



Figure 15: Myrllen's Coat (detail from top right of back border of coat), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

Despite the fact that the majority of the imagery appears to have been sourced from the mass media, traces of Myrllen's autobiography intrude into her idyllic depiction of the American Dream. Sandwiched between images of a rustic kitchen interior and a house surrounded by a garden, is the inverted square that depicts two policemen holding the hands of a bare legged prisoner in a striped shirt. The trio of figures stands before a man wearing a white shirt and a tie, seated at a desk. This atypical narrative scene is likely Myrllen's memory of her arrest, or possibly her appearance before a judge, before she was transferred from jail to the hospital. The policemen are anonymous their faces are hidden as they turn toward the desk in three quarter view, showing their ears and the backs of their necks. The figure of the prisoner is barely half the size of the policemen who flank her. She looks over her shoulder, turning her face toward the viewer. Unlike the other images of women on the coat, this figure — like Myrllen — has red hair. The inversion of the rectangle within the border is significant. Because the image is inverted in the middle a grouping of densely packed images, viewers tend to misread it as an abstract image or to inadvertently skim over it in favour of images that resolve more readily. Does the inversion of this image signal Myrllen's attempt — conscious or unconscious — to indicate the image's oppositeness to the idyllic images on the coat? Does it signal her ambivalence to her own story's darkness in comparison to the positive pictures conveyed in the magazines? The inversion seems unlikely to be an error. Although some images that were embroidered on horizontal rectangles have been turned on their sides to fit into the borders of the coat, this appears to be the only pictorial square that is deliberately inverted. (Figures 16, 17)

One of the simplest graphic images on the coat is one of the most disturbing — a woman's faceless, falling body holds a crutch aloft. The arms and torso of the figure are correctly proportioned, but the legs are truncated and have no indication of a knee joint. Three unidentifiable objects float in the embroidered blue void surrounding the figure. While the image of the woman standing in front of desk can be interpreted as a record of an event, this image captures a raw emotional state. The naked figure implies psychic trauma; the floating shapes a hallucinatory aura.

Counter to Myrllen's elaborate embroideries of the American Dream, this image serves as a punctum, revealing her reality as a woman who was ill, isolated and vulnerable. This image alone reverberates with fear. (Figure 18)



Figure 16: Myrllen's Coat (detail back), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

Figure 17: Myrllen's Coat (detail from top centre of back border, inverted), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

Figure 18: Myrllen's Coat (detail from bottom right of back border), c.1948-1955, Cotton thread embroidered on cotton fabric. Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photographer, Strawberry Luck.

Embroidered text fills virtually all of the spaces between the images on the coat. Initially it gives the impression of being a Rosetta stone that, diligently studied, would yield up Myrllen's lexicon. On closer inspection, it disintegrates into confusion of fragments and tantalizing hints at deferred meaning. The patterns in Myrllen's written text are consistent with the verbal language disruptions typical of schizophrenia, including the incoherence, inability to maintain a discourse plan and invention of neologisms.⁴² The majority of the embroidered text is gibberish — a visual manifestation of the segmental phonology common in schizophrenics' spoken language.⁴³ The gibberish is "...so consistent with the phonemic rules of English, one thinks that the patient has actually made utterances of the language which one has failed to catch."⁴⁴ Some bands of lettering seem to be composed of word fragments that overlap or invade one another. For example, one stream of letters reads *3pmaypolesnids*, embedding *3pm* and *may/poles* in the same band of lettering. The configuration of the overlapped words suggests that during the time it took to embroider the text, its meaning shifted in the mind of the creator. (Figure 10)

The words of the text that are legible establish place as a dominant theme. In addition to Myrllen's references to Palestine, other famous place names appear on the coat, including, *Paris*, *Wall Street*, and *Bermudia* (sic). However, most of the references are to the local. The word *Knoxville* is repeated numerous times throughout the surface of the coat. Other place names from the Knoxville area that appear scattered over the coat and scarf include, *District 31*, *Route 16*, *Lonsdale Village*, *Kingston Pike* and *Willow Fork*. Frequently, what appear to be Knoxville street names are preceded by groups of numbers. Originally, I had hoped that the street names and numbers would point to specific areas of the city, possibly even generating addresses where Myrllen had grown up or spent her married life. However, most of what appear to be street names are either non-existent or are misspelled, leading to difficulty in determining which street was intended. For example, *5163 Kelster* appears on the sleeve. No Kelster Street exists in Knoxville, but the name is similar to streets in different parts of the city — Kelso Way, Kelton Lane, Kelvin Lane and Kelvin Street. *Floridia* (sic) *St* is similarly problematic, as the word *Ave* appears directly underneath it; and, both a Florida Street and a Florida Avenue exist in different parts of Knoxville. Morgenthaler notes a similar pattern in Wölfli's adoption of unusual spellings and neologisms. He comments that some of these mutated words stem from Wölfli's memories of what he had read in magazines and atlases, for example, "giant klevators". This parallels Myrllen's incongruent versions of recalled street names. Myrllen also occasionally embroidered what appear to be people's names, *Will Papy*, *Cinthia* (*Abeker?*), and *Myrtle Lee Dychs*. Like the street names, they remain untraceable. More rarely, other words and word fragments occur embedded in the embroidery, including *kelwinator* and *trashdunp* (sic). The written surface of the coat is a frustrating puzzle with no solution. Meaning seems inherent just below the surface, but the deeper one peers into the problem, the more opaque its solution becomes.

Myrllen stopped sewing in 1955, the year that a new drug, chlorpromazine (Thorazine), transformed the chaotic wards of state hospitals.⁴⁵ Described positively by its inventors as a "chemical lobotomy" and by its detractors as a "chemical straightjacket", chlorpromazine relieved acute psychiatric symptoms including severe anxieties, obsessions and paranoid psychoses. Agitated, hostile patients were rendered calm within hours of taking the drug. In the crowded, understaffed, cash-strapped public hospitals of the United States, chlorpromazine was a welcome panacea.⁴⁶ Although effective, the side effects of the drug could be severe. Dr. Nathaniel Lehrman described his experience being prescribed chlorpromazine after suffering a psychotic break in 1963, "I couldn't stand up straight. My eyes weren't focusing properly and walking — or anything else, even thinking — became a terrible effort. I couldn't even read."⁴⁷ Nancy Luttrell recalled that, once she received the medication, Myrllen's violence abated and she became very reclusive — she also stopped sewing.⁴⁸ Later, Myrllen even denied having made the garments.⁴⁹ Living in the era before the advent of psychotherapeutic drugs, Wölfli was never medicated, and was highly — though intermittently —

productive throughout his life in Waldau. Whether Myrllen would have continued to embroider, had she not been medicated, is a question that is impossible to answer. It is, however, tempting to imagine that her production would have continued unabated, had her circumstances not changed.

Whenever I think of Myrllen's coat, I remember the intense physicality of working on the embroidered sculptures I completed 1996 and 1997. The way that my field of vision narrowed to a narrow cone of focused while my mind wandered and I lost track of time. Each stitch became a minute declaration – like a printed letter on the page, generating meaning only in the context of its neighbours. Sewing has nowhere near the fluency of writing or drawing and the accumulation of meaning is tediously slow. I imagine Myrllen in the hospital: her hunched posture, her aching muscles, her calloused finger tips, the stitches accumulating, filling the void of time and fabric with text and images. While the private meaning of her images is destined to remain a cipher, Myrllen's embroidery stands as a testament to the powerful urges of creativity that assert themselves in the most adverse of circumstances.

Notes

- ¹ The coat was exhibited in 1988 in a traveling exhibition titled *Creativity Unlimited*; in 2001 at the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore; and in 2007 at in the Parthenon Museum in Nashville. It is owned by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities and is housed in the Tennessee State Museum for conservation.
- ² Demetria Kalodimos, "Myrllen's Coat," (United States Genuine Human Productions, 1990), Lorene Lambert, "Background on Myrllen's Coat, Research Compiled for The "Creative Expression and Recovery" Exhibition at Parthenon Museum, Nashville, Tennessee, April 27 – July 7, 2007.," ed. Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Office of Communications (Nashville2007), "The Story of Myrllen's Coat," The American Visionary Art Museum (Baltimorec. 2000).
- ³ Albert Deutsch, *The Shame of the States*, [1st ed. (New York,: Harcourt, 1948).
- ⁴ Paul R. Docecki, Janice D. Mashburn, *Beyond the Asylum: The History of Mental Handicap Policy in Tennessee: 1796 — 1984* (Nashville: Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, 1984), 45.
- ⁵ Nathaniel T. Winston, phone interview with Catherine Heard, March 22, 2008.
- ⁶ Lambert, "Background on Myrllen's Coat, Research Compiled for The "Creative Expression and Recovery" Exhibition at Parthenon Museum, Nashville, Tennessee, April 27 – July 7, 2007.
- ⁷ Winston.
- ⁸ Originally published as *Bildnerer der Geisteskranken*, 1922.
- ⁹ Originally published as *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler*, 1921.
- ¹⁰ Jane Kallir, ""European Self-Taught Art: Brut or Näische?," ed. Galerie St. Etienne (New York: Galerie St. Etienne, 2000).
- ¹¹ Hirshbein, Laura, and Sharmalie Sarvananda. "History, power and electricity: American popular magazine accounts of electroconvulsive therapy, 1940 – 2005," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 44 (2008): 1:1–18
- ¹² Gail Hornstein, *Agnes' Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness* (New York: Rodale, 2009), 239.
- ¹³ Carl Blesius, "The Prinzhorn Collection of the Psychiatric University Hospital in Heidelberg: Overview," The Prinzhorn Collection, http://www.prinzhorn.uni-hd.de/im_ueberblick_eng.shtml.
- ¹⁴ Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill; a Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration* (New York,: Springer-Verlag, 1972), 11.
- ¹⁵ Prinzhorn, 11 – 34.
- ¹⁶ Prinzhorn, 13.
- ¹⁷ Bettina. Jádi Brand-Claussen, Inge. and Caroline. Douglas, *Beyond Reason : Art and Psychosis : Works from the Prinzhorn Collection* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1996), 10–11.
- ¹⁸ Morgenthaler, Esman, and Spoerri, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, 22–23.
- ¹⁹ "The Story of Myrllen's Coat," ed. The American Visionary Art Museum (Baltimore, Maryland 2000).
- ²⁰ Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill; a Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, 15.
- ²¹ Lambert, "Background on Myrllen's Coat, Research Compiled for The "Creative Expression and Recovery" Exhibition at Parthenon Museum, Nashville, Tennessee, April 27 – July 7, 2007.."
- ²² Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill; a Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, 47.
- ²³ Morgenthaler, Esman, and Spoerri, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, 65.
- ²⁴ Morgenthaler, Esman, and Spoerri, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, plate 2.
- ²⁵ Markus Raetz, "Adolf Wölfli's Vocabulary of Forms," Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts Bern, <http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch/index.php?c=e&level=3&sublevel=0>
- ²⁶ Case No. 516
- ²⁷ Brand-Claussen and Douglas, *Beyond Reason : Art and Psychosis : Works from the Prinzhorn Collection*, 80.
- ²⁸ Morgenthaler, Esman, and Spoerri, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, 23.
- ²⁹ Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill; a Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, 24–25.
- ³⁰ Prinzhorn, 1.
- ³¹ John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989).
- ³² Brand-Claussen and Douglas, *Beyond Reason : Art and Psychosis : Works from the Prinzhorn Collection*, 12.
- ³³ Margaret Henninge, "Irre ist Weiblich (Madness is Female)," *Raw Vision* 54 (2006): 20-27.
- ³⁴ Henninge, 21.
- ³⁵ Henninge, 25.
- ³⁶ Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill; a Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, 46.
- ³⁷ Prinzhorn, 46.

³⁸ Prinzhorn, 54.

³⁹ Brand-Claussen and Douglas, *Beyond Reason : Art and Psychosis : Works from the Prinzhorn Collection*, 191.

⁴⁰ The American Visionary Art Museum.

⁴¹ Pat Fortner, "The History Behind Marilyn's Coat and Tapestry ", ed. Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation (Nashville, Tennessee.1988).

⁴² M.A. Covington et al., "Schizophrenia and the Structure of Language: The Linguist's View," *Schizophrenia Research* 77 (2005): 88.

⁴³ Covington et al., 90.

⁴⁴ Elaine Chaika, "A Linguist Looks at "Schizophrenic" Language," *Brain and Language* 3 (1974): 261.

⁴⁵ Docecki, *Beyond the Asylum: The History of Mental Handicap Policy in Tennessee: 1796 — 1984*, 45.

⁴⁶ Francisco López-Muñoz et al., "History of the Discovery and Clinical Introduction of Chlorpromazine," *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry* 17, no. 3 (2005): 13–20, Joel T. Braslow Sarah Linsley Starks, "The Making of Contemporary Psychiatry, Part 1: Patients, Treatments, and Therapeutic Rationales before and after World War Ii " *History of Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2005): 181–83. formatting

⁴⁷ Robert Whitaker, *Mad in America : Bad Science, Bad Medicine, and the Enduring Mistreatment of the Mentally Ill* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub., 2002), 143–44, 78.

⁴⁸ Lambert, "Background on Myrllen's Coat, Research Compiled for The "Creative Expression and Recovery" Exhibition at Parthenon Museum, Nashville, Tennessee, April 27 – July 7, 2007."

⁴⁹ Lambert.

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