

BJPpsych

The British Journal of Psychiatry



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Cover picture

Else Blankenhorn, Self Portrait with Emperor Wilhelm II. as a Swan

1908–1919 | Oil on gray cardboard | 27.5 × 35.3 cm | Inv.No. 4300

© Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg University Hospital

As a private patient of the renowned Swiss Bellevue Sanatorium, Else Blankenhorn (1873–1920) was extremely privileged. Born in Karlsruhe, the daughter of a professor of viticulture, she made music, composed, photographed, wrote, translated, knitted, and embroidered before she also began to draw and paint at the institution in 1908. She developed an expressive visual language with simplified forms, energetic brushwork, and strong colour contrasts. Many of her pictorial motifs are symbolically charged and difficult to decipher. Blankenhorn believed she was married to Kaiser Wilhelm II, her “husband in spirit”. As Empress Else, she produced bank bills in fantastic sums to finance the resurrection of buried couples. In a self-portrait in oil, she depicted herself with the emperor, recognizable by his characteristic moustache, in a floral landscape. Plants often serve as sexual symbolic motifs for the artist. A defoliating corncob fruit hovers phallically above the kneeling woman. The approaching emperor spreads his arms longingly – in the form of white wings. Is it the swan knight “Lohengrin”, who rescued the duke's daughter Elsa in the Wagner opera of the same name? Blankenhorn, who had lost her singing voice after a nervous crisis, would have liked to become a singer and probably identified with this operatic figure. In her pictorial world, she lives with Kaiser Wilhelm II who is a swan knight. However, a sexual rapprochement is not depicted – the figures remain pure and white and are embedded in the landscape green. Only the spherical motif, which swells diagonally from the lower left to the upper right, suggests a sexual dynamic growing from the female to the male figure. At the upper right edge of the picture the emperor is enveloped by a red aureole. Is it a symbol of ripening grapes? Or the still unplucked apple of sin?

Blankenhorn distinguished the actual reality from a “spiritual reality”. She asked her psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger: “Do you consider thoughts to be the foundation or life? For me it is the thoughts, because I have no other life than getting up and going to bed. Thought life is real, after all.”

The Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg showed a retrospective of this artist from Sept. 15, 2022 to Jan. 22, 2023.

Text by Ingrid von Begue, Curator of the Prinzhorn Collection.

We are always looking for interesting and visually appealing images for the cover of the Journal and would welcome suggestions or pictures, which should be sent to Dr Allan Beveridge, British Journal of Psychiatry, 21 Prescot Street, London, E1 8BB, UK or bjp@rcpsych.ac.uk.

