

Mary Olsen Suit

Neal Holtan: Hello.

Mary Olsen: Hi.

Neal Holtan: I'm Neal Holtan. I'm here with Mary Olsen. And we're going to be talking about an artifact from Anoka State Hospital that has been in the possession of the hospital for some time. Could you demonstrate what this is, tell us what it is, how it came to be?

Mary Olsen: Absolutely. So this is a suit that was made by one of the patients and we're not exactly sure at what point he started this suit. There are years embroidered on it showing I think it's back over into this area, 1948, 1949 obviously dull. That's the year he embroidered that day. This gentleman was -- what we know about him was that he was a Polish immigrant and he was a tailor by profession. He ended up at the hospital and somehow managed to get this material and he basically tailor made this suit himself.

We believe his diagnosis was Schizophrenia and so he proceeded to draw all over this suit and then to embroider it. He has messages all over the suit as you can see on the arm. And what's interesting about these messages some of it are just written with regular ways that the letters ought to be but for the most part the messages are written upside down and backwards so that you have to mirror it to be able to read the message. It's very typical of the scattered dissociation in the messages so it doesn't make a lot of sense. Sometimes you'll start to read something that makes sense and then it just kind of starts to ramble and becomes disjointed.

I'm sure as to how he secured the material; I'm sure as to how he secured the threads. The thread is silk thread. It's very typical of schizophrenic art work though. You can see on it in different places a lot of eyes that he puts out particularly in this area, it's -- you can see that the stitchery is just amazing. It's almost like paintbrush strokes. Back over in here he has a message -- I'll see if I can bring that out a little bit where he says I'm neither Christian nor Jew. And we're not exactly sure what that means. We often have wondered could he have been a Polish Jew post war. You didn't talk about it when you consider the Holocaust and since he was denying different things.

He obviously didn't have a chance to complete his suit. He did take his own life. He jumped into the Rum River that comes alongside of the Anoka State Hospital at the time and drowned.

If you look at the back you can see on the back he continues with some of his messages and again the art work. It's a very fascinating piece. So when you look at it you think of almost some Native American type things because it has almost a totem pole kind of look where you think of maybe some African type art work. Nothing very typical that you can lay your hands on but definitely very schizophrenic art work.

Neal Holtan: Can you say something about the history of the suit itself after its creator departed?

Mary Olsen: It's unknown as to how the hospital continued to take security of it. When I talked with various staff that were from the early years of the hospital they said that was a time when mental health of course was perceived to be you know, there was a lot of prejudice and things like that. And because of the way the art work is and whatever would have probably been considered to be bizarre and so family members once he passed away would have been able to receive all his possessions. But they believed that probably the hospital staff at the time, the administrative staff more than likely felt that the piece would be so bizarre to the family members that it would have

Mary Olsen Suit

been upsetting so therefore was not given to them. I really cannot say between probably 19 -- late 1940's, early 50's and up to the time when I heard about the suit who really took care of it. I do know that when I started in 1987 there was a staff person that did staff orientation; her name was Marlene Pritchard (ph). And Marlene had the suit in her possession and she took very good care of it. But she would bring the suit out every time there were new staff starting and orientate them and talk about schizophrenia and show the suit because it was such an interesting piece.

So yeah, it's a real -- it's really quite fascinating when you see the messages that he made. You look at the stitchery that he had and I think on one of these pieces there was a face, yeah on this one. You look at the face that he has amongst this type piece and with small little dots of how he managed to be able to do that was just incredible. But it does show a lot of that disjointed thinking that comes with schizophrenia.

Neal Holtan: Where is this suit kept now?

Mary Olsen: Presently the hospital's auxiliary has been caring for it and they keep it in their office and part of the reasoning for the auxiliary to have possession is that a staff come and go as they retire, as they leave for change if you give it to a staff person like how Marlene had it. When she left and retired somebody had -- it either had to be handed to somebody else or there was that chance of losing the historical value to it, the hospital. And so when I was able to secure that I said the people that continue to always be is the hospital's auxiliary. They might come and go, they might leave but there's always been the auxiliary and so for them to keep it secure and in their office it continues to be a very valued piece of artifact to the hospital.

Neal Holtan: I noticed earlier that it stored in a museum quality box, has that always been true or is that a recent thing?

Mary Olsen: That's a very recent thing. It actually was just in a dress box from a general store when Marlene had it and she handed it to me, that's how it was. I put it into some tissue to try and preserve it and then I think it was handled a lot -- it was handled a lot when Marlene had it by staff and by other people. But when we started to realize the historical value and realized it needed to be preserved we started to acquire more safety measures for the suit so that it would continue to be preserved.

Neal Holtan: Have you given any thought to the future of the suit?

Mary Olsen: Yes.

Neal Holtan: What do you think should happen?

Mary Olsen: Well the suit has always been something that the auxiliary, the volunteer department for the hospital has wanted to put on display within the hospital and I'm hoping that will be the future for it. The auxiliary has been working with the hospitals administration, they would like to acquire a case that will preserve and keep the suit safe and then determine a place that would be best for everybody to be able to see, to be able to understand about not just the suit but about mental health, about the education of schizophrenia and what that does. It really does help you when you see the artwork to understand the mind and where it goes when people are not on their medications and sometimes probably that dark world that schizophrenia can bring for them.

Mary Olsen Suit

Neal Holtan: Do you think there's any way that the suit's creator could be identified at this point or would that not even matter?

Mary Olsen: Probably due to privacy laws you know maybe because so many years have gone by it could be brought out but I think probably for the sake of his family members and whatever it might be best to keep that part preserved. But as I said we do know that he was a tailor and he was a very good tailor from what I can see. And I think that's an important piece to understand with it is that just because you have a mental illness and just because you have voices pounding in your head telling you various messages, doesn't mean you're not capable of doing something very profound. You -- often mental illness takes away people's ability to do jobs and to do work but those talents can continue and I think we need to enhance those talents and bring those up for people of mental illness. And many of your artists Van Gogh and others we know had mental illness and remarkable artwork; so I think that speaks to something that we need to be able to embrace in today's world and our future.

Neal Holtan: Any final thoughts about the suit or the art?

Mary Olsen: My final thoughts are -- my goal is to hope that it will be -- continued to be preserved in an area that could be displayed for others to see and to learn from and to realize that just because people are mentally ill doesn't mean that they cannot bring something that can be of value to all of us and that is my hope for this suit.

Neal Holtan: Thank you very much for sharing your knowledge about this suit and your thoughts about what it represents. Thank you.

Mary Olsen: Thank you.