

The most beautiful flowers often bloom in hidden places

If you walk through the gates of 'Het Dolhuys' museum in Haarlem one of these days, you will most certainly be captured and enthralled by the new exhibition, "Hidden beauty from Japan". The exhibition displays 1000 works by 46 outsider artists from Japan. Ranging from Marie Suzuki's obsessive fascination with genitals to the unceasing accuracy of Takanori Herai, this until recently unknown Outsider Art from Japan has never before been shown in the Netherlands.

Matthias Naranjo Aguilera

HANS LOOIJEN, DIRECTOR of the museum Het Dolhuys, was introduced to the exhibition 'Art Brut Japonais' in 2010; an exhibition of Japanese Outsider Art in Paris. He became fascinated by the works and their beauty and decided to examine the stories behind their makers. This fascination led him to Japan, where he made an inspiring journey through various welfare organisations and was able to meet several of the artists. It was during this trip that the idea was born to develop an exhibition that would focus more on the lives of the artists, in relation to their work. The concept grew and, in collaboration with the Aiseikai Organization and the No-Ma Borderless Art Museum in Japan, the exhibition "Hidden Beauty from Japan" was established.

25 of the artists whose work is shown are exhibiting in Europe for the first time. More importantly, most of the artists have a psychiatric disorder or a mental disability. Thus Looijen says about the exhibition: "This exhibition revolves around the art of people who have generally not been trained as artists. To differ from the norm is not readily acceptable in the Japanese culture. There is a great social pressure to conform and a psychological problem involves total disqualification in the country that most people like to associate with beauty and elegance."

"Hidden Beauty from Japan" is a taboo-breaking exhibition. In Japan, more than in most countries, people are terrified of madness, and the mad. People with mental illnesses are often literally kept behind locked doors. This severe tradition, in combination with the characteristic Japanese culture, is often identifiable in the works on display.

The thoughts, feelings and obsessions of the artists include different themes. Some express their deepest desires, vivid fantasies or let their most cherished or suppressed memories run free. Others are clearly fascinated by interpreting and organising the world around them through a personal system. But all the artists have one thing in common, they communicate with the outside world through their art.

Take Marie Suzuki, for example; breasts and genitals, scissors and human figures, who are neither adult nor childlike, dominate her paintings. An extreme violence is vigorously recorded by black and coloured markers on large sheets of sketching paper. In 2007 she suddenly started to express the images that were haunting her, but which she had always suppressed. Suzuki's illness manifested itself in high school, and she eventually graduated through a correspondence course. Today she lives in a local welfare facility. The subjects in her drawings are unmistakable memories from her childhood. Suzuki explains her expressive drawings as, "The ugliness of the idea that human life comes from the womb, a dislike of female and male genitalia, and conversely an obsession with all these things." It is clear that a horror and fascination for the origin of life intertwine in Suzuki's drawings. Yet, drawing seems to help her relax and has become an indispensable part of her life.

Suzuki was one of the eight Japanese artists present at the official opening of the exhibition in the museum Het Dolhuys. It was a unique event at which the extraordinary cooperation between the various welfare organisations in Japan, and museum Het Dolhuys, was celebrated.

The term Outsider Art is at times hard to fathom. Among the genre, which was first launched under the synonym 'Art Brut' by Jean Dubuffet in 1948, are both artists that dismiss the conventional 'high-low' art world, as well as artists with mental illnesses. In general, those labelled as outsider artists were considered to have little or no contact with the mainstream art world or society in general, and thus uninfluenced in their expressions by the civilized world outside. These views were later slightly adjusted to the fact that it is unrealistic to assume that anyone can live completely isolated from the outside world. Nevertheless, this is actually occasionally the case for some of the artists in this exhibition, mainly because of the taboos that reign in Japan. There are a number of works of art for which the artist's family name cannot be mentioned, nor a photo of the artist be publically shown. Fortunately, these artists' participation in this exhibition has had a positive impact; families are starting to see the makers in a new light. Through the art comes appreciation and recognition for their qualities. The aesthetic beauty of the works speaks for itself.



The exhibition "Hidden Beauty from Japan" is proving to be a great success in Haarlem and is enjoying tremendous amounts of attention from the media, and art- and museum lovers. Several European museums have also shown their interest, and there is a good chance that the exhibition will travel to various museums on the continent. In this way we can hopefully further chip away at the taboos surrounding psychiatry, and continue to blur the boundary between 'normal' and 'abnormal'. Ever since its inception, museum Het Dolhuys has asked its visitors to reflect on this boundary, and it will continue to question the prevailing labels and prejudices through its permanent and forthcoming exhibitions.

"Hidden Beauty of Japan" is on show until 2 September 2012.



Het Dolhuys

Het Dolhuys Museum is the museum of psychiatry in the Netherlands, located in the beautiful old town of Haarlem. Het Dolhuys [The Madhouse] is located in the former 'leper, plague and madhouse', established in 1320. The leper, plague and madhouse was situated outside the city walls of Haarlem as a shelter for "lunatics" and people suffering from infectious diseases. For the following 700 years, the building continued to function in healthcare; most recently as a crisis centre and day care centre for demented elderly.

In 2005 the building became a museum, whose main aim is to chart and disclose the cultural heritage of psychiatry in Europe. Areas of focus include: psychiatry and photography, psychiatry and architecture, and psychiatry and art. With varying exhibitions and events, the museum zooms in on current social issues in psychiatry. In the museum one can observe the boundaries between crazy and sane, normal and abnormal, in an interactive and thus impressive manner. In Het Dolhuys it is mainly the patients who tell you what 'madness' means, and so the personal stories act as your guide through the museum.

In its relatively short life, museum Het Dolhuys has become a household name in Haarlem, and is widely recognised as an educational institution of high quality. The museum wants to leave visitors with a positive, lasting impression, which contributes to the de-stigmatisation of people with a psychiatric disorder. It hopes to accomplish this by creating a personal encounter with the (ab)normal.

Visit the website at www.hetdolhuys.nl



Top: Shinichi Sawada. 2010. *Untitled*. 445x190x190mm. Ceramic Sculpture, Clay.

Middle: Shota Katsube. 2011. *Untitled collection*. Various sizes (±3 cm tall each). Twist ties.

Below: Koichi Fujino. 2001-06. *Octopus*. 540x380mm. India Ink, Drawing Paper. This yellow version of the drawing has been adapted by designer Kees Peerneman for commercial purposes – the original is black on white.