

Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD

Madge Gill (1884–1961): *Women and Chequered Staircase* (pen and ink on calico)

Born an illegitimate child, Madge Gill was hidden by her mother and an aunt until the age of nine when, on her mother's death, she was sent to an orphanage. She later lived with another aunt, who introduced her to spiritualism. One of her three sons died in the 1918 influenza epidemic and in the following year she had a still-born daughter. Soon after this she became very ill, lost the sight in her left eye and spent several months confined to bed. In 1919 she began to draw, embroider and knit, often working in bed by the light of an oil lamp or candle and sometimes, it has been suggested, in complete darkness. She would often work through the night, standing in front of a huge roll of calico set up on a frame so that the material could be gradually unwound. Some of these pictures are more than 30 feet long. She claimed that a guiding spirit, Myrminerest, conveyed minutely detailed, otherworldly images directly onto the canvas by working through her. The pictures feature a female figure with an oval face and large eyes, thought to represent Madge Gill or her lost daughter. Sometimes her face appears sad and fearful, sometimes proud and triumphant. Dresses and hats often merge into a background that contains abstract patterns and architectural forms. Her pictures were sometimes annotated on the verso with strange neologisms, tortuous French epigrams and musings on Christ's mission, the migration of souls and the inhabitants of Mars. After the death of her husband in the 1930s she became much more deeply involved in the world of spiritualism and held weekly seances. But she did not attribute her inspiration to spiritualism at the start, writing later: 'I was in quite a normal state of mind and there was no suggestion of a "spirit" standing beside me. I simply felt inspired. I felt I was definitely guided by an unseen force, though I could not say what its actual nature was'. Although she exhibited her pictures to favourable reviews, she always refused to sell on the grounds that they belonged not to her but to her spirit guide. This and other pictures by Madge Gill can be seen at the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum (Tel: +44 (0)20 8776 4307). With thanks to Patricia Allderidge, Archivist and Curator at the Museum, for information about Madge Gill.

