

## The “Mad” Art of Opicinus de Canistris: Modern Topographies of the Soul

Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness.

— Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a

There is only one difference between a madman and me. I am not mad.

— Salvador Dalí, 1956

The fundamental event of the Modern Age is the conquest of the world as picture.

— Martin Heidegger, 2002

Dalí famously claimed that, through his method of “paranoiac-critical” analysis, he could transform the private syntax of the fully idiosyncratic, irrational, and extraordinary into accessible art forms. In this, his genius, Dalí was something of a mystic, and, in denying his own madness, the difference between him and a madman turns into its reverse—a striking commonality, namely, the impulse toward creativity that marks both mysticism and madness. The creative association of outsider art with madness, and often with the visionary or mystical experience, is well attested (MacGregor, 1989). Worringer (1908) once wrote that “art is simply one more form for the expression of those psychic energies which, anchored in the same process, determine the phenomenon of religion and the diversity of conceptions of the world” (pp. 127-28).

Here we will briefly consider one artist from the late medieval period, Opicinus de Canistris (1296-ca. 1354), a relatively minor papal scribe from Pavia who developed a pictorial syntax unique in the history of medieval art, one concerned above all to offer multiple conceptions of the world as self-projection and self-mastery. Opicinus’s corporeal cartography offered diverse, often shifting, world-views, layered approaches to the geographical world that failed to cohere. Prominent here is the collapsing of graphic binaries meant to distinguish the Church from its enemies: Babylon/Christianity, Africa/Europe, infidelity/faith, and, at abse, the empirical world/the world converted to a state of grace.

His prodigious pen drawings were precipitated by the acute onset of an illness, dated precisely by Opicinus (March 31, 1334), a malady that has been variously described, by classical psychoanalytic authors, including Jung (2013) and Kris (1952), as psychosis and, more recently, by other commentators as Geschwind syndrome resulting from a stroke (Maizels, 2012). Whatever the nature of the illness, it unquestionably altered Opicinus’s state of consciousness, bending it more excitedly toward the mystical. Contemporary investigations recognize elements of the psychotic (Heinrichs, 2003; Laharie & Roux, 1997), borne out of intense suffering (psychic, legal, financial) and conflict (Nuss, 2015) and located at the unstable intersection of art, religion, and madness.

The maps and drawings represent a spiritual *renovatio*, and Opicinus, like many mystics, presented images as instances of revealed truth that could serve others as a guide to perfection of the soul. Like the famous neuropath and mystic Judge Schreber, Opicinus sought to examine his own position in relation to the transcendent. This necessitated a totalizing point of view, from above, in which his “interior eye,” as he called it, ranged over a hyperconnected universe. His maps offered a mobile architecture of place, a dynamics of space with a utopic impulse. Mapping relationships was his preeminent concern, and thus the geographical, the geometrical, the allegorical, the exegetical, the corporeal, the historical, the etymological, and the astrological offered ways to illustrate relationalities through comparison, hierarchy, analogy, correspondence, substitution, mirroring, and resonance. So, if Africa was Infidelity, then Europe was Faith; Babylon confronted Prudence; and Judas, or the Carnal Man, dialectically reflected the Church or Universal Christianity.

Place only holds interest, according to Thomas Aquinas, because it reflects movement, that is, bodies succeeding each other in one place. Opicinus radically realized movement within a fantasy structure of superimposition where his art marked an attempt to restore links with objects whose reality had become blurred or disturbed and whose boundaries were breached, not only by the historical schisms of the time but by his own penetrating consciousness and, often, absolute certainty.

Attempts to recuperate Opicinus’s spiritual or allegorical project within the terms of its contemporary contexts (e.g., cartography; devotional and visionary imagery) have apparently necessitated a chastening of its “mad” qualities. Departure from psychological insight in favor of unalloyed historicism unfortunately elides the utter eccentricity of Opicinus’s productions. Opicinus’s pictorial art is not so easily normalized, or so easily pathologized, and may be best seen as a schizo production reflecting an externalizing of personal conflicts and internalizing of cultural conflicts that it struggled to contain. Like *art brut* and outsider art, the maps present more meaningful tensions with their contemporary visual culture than affinities,

Opicinus’s art is productively compared to the asylum productions of schizophrenics, including the lavish nineteenth-century watercolor maps of Richard Nisbett, the spectacular *Weltkarte* (world map) of Josef Heinrich Grebing (1876-ca. 1940), the geometric mappings of mind by Hyacinth Freiherr von Wieser (pseudonym Heinrich Welz, an artist of the Prinzhorn Collection like Grebing), and the “Metaphysical Drawing” (1903) of Théophile Leroy. Having attended the renowned 1980 exposition of maps and images of the earth in Paris, Italo Calvino (2014) was impressed by Opicinus’s drawing, calling it “an extraordinary example of ‘art brut’ and cartographic madness...[he] simply projects his own interior on to the maps of lands and seas” (p. 24). As Opicinus claimed, God gave him understanding to copy maps of lands and seas without being tutored, and his outlandish creations stand as some of the more remarkable instances of the simultaneity of the material and the spiritual.

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Fig. 1: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 6435 folio 58r, 1335-1338

Fig. 2: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 6435 folio 77r, 1335-1338

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### Conflict of Interest

None.

### Ethical Standards

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

Fig. 1

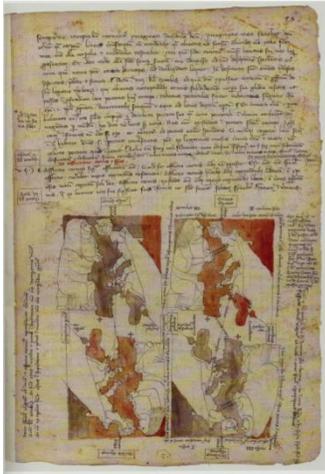


Fig. 2

