



Darger, Henry (1892-1973)

by Jim Elledge

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Now considered one of the most original and important artists of the last half of the twentieth century, Henry Darger died completely unknown in his native Chicago. When he moved out of his one-room apartment on November 24, 1972 into an old folks home a few blocks away, his next door neighbor, who had been hired to clear out Darger's room, discovered over 300 canvases Darger had painted and the huge manuscripts of two novels and an autobiography that he had written.

The canvases, which depict naked little girls with penises (who, in many of the paintings, are being eviscerated, strangled, and crucified by adults), became synonymous with the man, causing critics who were unaware of their relevance to the gay subculture of the time to call Darger a pedophile, child killer, and sadist.

Darger's Life

Darger was born into utter poverty on April 12, 1892. His mother died in childbirth when he was four. Within a few years, his father, a failed, alcoholic tailor, had all but abandoned his parental responsibilities to the boy.

Growing up in one of the darkest and most desperate vice districts in Chicago, now the much-gentrified Near West Side, Darger became involved in male-male sexual activities early in life, admitting to the most significant one in his autobiography decades later. In it, he reported that, by the time he was eight years old, he had developed a relationship with an adult guard whom he visited late at night at the lumberyard where the man worked.

Unable or unwilling to check his son's sexual behavior, Darger's father sent the eight-year-old to live at the Mission of Our Lady of Mercy, a priest-run home for boys. Instead of being protected there, he became even more involved in sexual activities. As one newspaper article at the time reported, after lights-out, the boys engaged in sexual activities with one another--some consensual, others coerced. Darger would later confess that, had he known what was going to happen to him at the Mission, he would have run away.

In 1904, the priests who ran the Mission grew tired of Darger's activities and told his father to send the boy elsewhere. He had the twelve-year-old confined to the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, Illinois because the boy engaged in "self-abuse," a nineteenth-century euphemism for



Henry Darger. Photo by David Berglund, c. 1970.

masturbation. At the time, physicians believed self-abuse was a symptom of homosexuality and even used it as a synonym for same-sex sexual activity.

Illinois' prisons had become so full that authorities sent adult convicts to live at the Asylum among what were called the "bright boys." These were children who, like Darger, had no mental disability, but were problems for their families and society. The convicts slept in the same dormitories as the boys, with no substantial supervision at night. In words that echo the summary of his life at the Mission, Darger stated that, had he been aware of what he would experience at the Asylum, he would have run away before being taken there.

After three attempts to run away, Darger successfully escaped the Asylum in 1909. Penniless, he walked nearly 170 miles back to Chicago. There he became a janitor at St. Joseph's Hospital on the Near North Side, the first of his many menial jobs--all mind-numbing, ten-hour (sometimes more) shifts with only a half-day, sometimes a full day, off per week--that he would have for the rest of his life.

In 1910, Darger began writing his first novel, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, and painting the canvases that would illustrate it.

The novel, which would not be completed until 1932, depicts a war between evil Gladelinians and godly Angelinians. Gladelinians have kidnapped millions of Angelinian children, forced them to work naked as slaves, and routinely crucified, strangled, and eviscerated them. After they are no longer useful as slave laborers, some become sex slaves.

Darger's other novel, *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House*, was written between 1932 and 1968, and also features the Vivian children as protagonists. In this novel, they attempt to exorcise a haunted house.

Set in 1911 in the neighborhood in which Darger spent his childhood, most of the six Vivians are involved in same-sex sexual relationships. One of the characters describes Angeline, the oldest of the Vivians, performing a live sex show naked with a group of other boys. Angeline and Joice, another of the Vivian children, go on dates with adult men.

Near the end of *Crazy House*, Darger depicts a man named Bill and his friend who run into yet another Vivian "sister," Jennie, at a corner. As they pass her, Bill's buddy thinks she's a girl and begins to tell Bill how beautiful she is, but stops in mid-sentence. He has realized "she" is a cross-dressing "he" and expresses disgust. In contrast, however, Bill appreciates Jennie and comments about how alluring and beautiful "she" is. Bill is likely based on Darger's lover William Schloeder, whom he met in 1911.

Schloeder was thirteen years older than Darger. After their meeting, he quickly became his "special friend," code among gay men at the time for "lover." Darger stated that they spent every minute that they were not at their jobs together and that he paid their way when they went to Riverview Amusement Park, a popular site for dating couples. Their relationship lasted forty-eight years, although they were never able to live together.

Darger painted and wrote throughout his life. His "little girls with penises" reveal that he was associated with and influenced by Chicago's nascent gay subculture of the late 1800s and early 1900s. At that time, gay men explained their sexual orientation by comparing it to a man who has a woman's soul or psyche.

Darger used the hermaphroditic figures to represent his childhood experiences at the Mission and the Asylum. While they sometimes appear at peace in an Arcadian landscape, at other times adults, frequently dressed in army uniforms or academic garb, strangle, eviscerate, or crucify them. As he explained in his first novel, the scenes of evisceration represent rape.

Darger was less metaphoric in his novels. All of his protagonists, both the symbolic hermaphrodites and the biologically "correct" boys, engage consensually in sexual activities with other boys and men.

In 1959, Schloeder died, leaving Darger devastated. He wrote to his beloved's sister about how lost he felt, how nothing held any meaning for him, and how he was barely able to deal with the death.

Almost immediately, Darger's own health began to fail, and he was forced to retire in November 1963. He hated retirement, but he kept busy, continuing to work on Crazy House and then on the autobiographical *A History of My Life*, as well as painting.

Freed from his ten-hour shifts at the hospital where he had worked, he became a dumpster-diver and hoarder and so withdrawn that he often refused to respond to others.

Those who remember Darger knew nothing about his life, how his father had abandoned him to institutions where he was physically and sexually victimized, that the love of his life for nearly half a century had died, and how his body was so racked with pain that it sometimes incapacitated him, keeping him in bed for days.

Unable to care for himself, in November 1972 Darger moved out of his one-room apartment, in which he had lived for forty years, into a nursing home. He died there five months later on April 13, 1973, the day after his eighty-first birthday. His death certificate states he succumbed to heart disease and senility.

Posthumous Fame

After Darger's work was discovered, his landlord decided to keep his room as he left it and began selling the paintings.

The first exhibition of Darger's paintings occurred in 1977. By the late 1990s, the artist had become well-enough known in the art world that collectors paid thousands of dollars for his work.

Although during his life, Darger never earned more than \$3,000 in any given year, some of his more important paintings now sell for upwards of \$250,000.

In 2000, the American Folk Art Museum purchased a large number of Darger's paintings and created the Henry Darger Study Center and the Darger Archives in Manhattan, where his paintings, novels, and other items are housed and available to scholars.

A decade later, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art purchased Darger's room, de-constructed it board by board, and then re-constructed it as a permanent exhibit on its premises in Chicago. The exhibit includes a large number of items from the room: pieces of furniture, the fireplace, the table on which Darger painted, his typewriter, and even tins of paint that he used.

At the same time, the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, among many other museums, purchased and exhibited Darger's paintings.

Darger's work also became the subject of several scholarly books and numerous reviews, articles, and essays, as well as the inspiration for gay poet John Ashbery's book-length poem *Girls on the Run* (1999).

In 2004, Academy Award winner Jessica Yu released her beautifully-crafted documentary *In the Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger*. Most recently, Jim Elledge published his biography, *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist* (2013).

Interest in Darger initially developed out of critics' interest in the "little girls with penises." The much-parroted accusations of pedophilia, serial murder, and sadism (along with the less-libelous, but no less incorrect characterization of the artist as hermit and misfit) did little to dampen interest in his work and, in fact, may even have enhanced it.

Yet, more objective critics have focused their attention on Darger's craft and themes and praised his ability to bridge the huge gap between his lack of training and his ability to paint intriguing scenes despite it.

They were also captivated by his deft use of collage, his appropriation of figures from comic strips and coloring books, his expert use of watercolor to produce brilliant scenes that captivate the eye, and his unflinching portrayals of brutality aimed at children.

Indeed, Darger has sustained the attention of art lovers and critics by virtue of his artistic achievement rather than the sensationalism that initially inspired interest.

Discovered only months before he died on April 13, 1973, Darger's manuscripts and paintings are testament to his ability to rise above the obstacles in his life to create a unique and powerful body of work.

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About the Author

Jim Elledge is author or editor of twenty-four books, including a textbook on publishing, four anthologies on queer culture, and numerous poetry collections and chapbooks. His *H*, a collection of prose poems, was issued by Lethe Press in 2012, and his *History of My Tattoo: A Poem* won a Lambda Literary Award in 2006. With David Groff, he is editor of *Who's Yer Daddy? Gay Writers Celebrate Their Mentors and Forerunners*. He is currently director of the M.A. in Professional Writing Program at Kennesaw State University. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.