Original Article

Journal of Medical Biography
0(0) 1–8

DOI: 10.1177/0967772015583444
jmb.sagepub.com
SAGE

Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847–1919): Psychiatric hospitalization and the abduction of an American landscape artist

Jonathan RT Davidson

Abstract

Ralph Blakelock was a leading American landscape painter. Much of his life was lived in obscurity and destitution. He developed late onset paranoid schizophrenia, resulting in prolonged hospitalization. During his time in hospital, demand for Blakelock's works grew, but he was unable to enjoy any of this success. Instead, the artist fell prey to unscrupulous and unlikely exploitation by a self-appointed guardian, aided and abetted by Blakelock's psychiatrists, which broke his spirit and may well have hastened his demise.

Keywords

Blakelock, artist, schizophrenia, exploitation

Introduction

Ralph Albert Blakelock was a preeminent late 19th-century American landscape artist. His fame came after considerable struggle and he was unable to enjoy the spoils of success. The exploitation and betrayal which this trusting and somewhat innocent man endured cast a dark shadow over his life and caused his family great anguish. Accounts of penury among artists are common and the occurrence of mental illness in this group has been well described by Post,[1] Davidson,[2] and Slater and Roth.[3] Blakelock's life, while exemplifying those themes, goes far beyond. His poignant story tells of how a supremely talented painter was affected by late onset schizophrenia, for which he was confined to an asylum for 18 years. As he rusticated in obscurity at the Middletown Homeopathic Asylum, Blakelock's reputation grew, not because he was producing new masterpieces, but because the art world developed a belated appreciation for his early works. He then became unwittingly exploited by a self-proclaimed philanthropist who wrested complete control over his life, aided by the collusion of Blakelock's psychiatrists. Throughout it all, and in spite of suffering from chronic schizophrenia, Blakelock retained his enthusiasm for painting.

The following account briefly describes Blakelock's place in American art and essential biographical details. It then discusses his prolonged hospitalization, the relation between his painting and his psychotic illness, his exploitation by Beatrice Adams, and the complicity of his psychiatrists. Finally, Blakelock's resilience is noted as he coped with his trials and tribulations.

Blakelock and his place in American art

Blakelock's art has been referred to by Smith as "one of the great treasures and great mysteries of the American 19th century";[4] he is particularly well known for his landscapes and moonlight paintings (Figure 1). Although art scholars find it difficult to place Blakelock's work into any clear category, they generally agree that this largely self-taught artist can be identified with the Barbizon and Hudson River schools and with tonalism. Unlike many of his contemporaries who traveled to Europe in their formative years, Blakelock took long trips alone to the American West between 1869 and 1872, where he became acquainted with Native American culture before its decline. This experience had a lasting influence on his work and gave rise to many of his later masterpieces. Smith has written about

Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC, USA

Corresponding author:
Jonathan RT Davidson, 3068 Baywood Drive, Seabrook Island, SC 29455, USA.
Email: david011@mc.duke.edu

Figure 1. Moonlight (c. 1885–1890). Columbus Museum of art. Source: http://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ralph_Albert_Blakelock_-_Moonlight_(c._1885–1890).

the "pervasive gentleness and restraint of his art, [but] the qualities of innocence, solitude and melancholy that characterized the life infuse his paintings." She refers to Blakelock as a "painter of darkness," a "nocturnal impressionist" like Whistler. Gamwell and Tomes[5] (p. 143) note that Blakelock's landscapes adopted a more intimate and personal quality than the panoramic vistas of the Hudson Valley school.

Blakelock failed to be invited into, or eschewed membership of, professional clubs, which may in part have accounted for the initial neglect of his art. On many occasions, when his paintings were hung at exhibitions, they were assigned places that failed to show them to advantage. In the 1890s, a destitute Blakelock walked the streets in search of buyers and sold at almost any price. In one instance, the artist sold 30 paintings to a dealer for $100. Blakelock continually struggled to support his large family, and sometimes depended on advances against future work from friendly colleagues in the art world. Yet, 20 years on, in 1913, his *Moonlight* painting was sold for $13,900, a record at that time for a living American artist. In 2000, his large canvas *Indian Encampment Along the Snake River* sold at Sotheby's for $3.5 million[6] (p. 120).

Life course

Ralph Blakelock (Figure 2) was born in 1847 to an English immigrant father, Ralph Sr., and American mother, Caroline. Ralph Sr. arrived in the United States from Yorkshire in 1828 and grew up in New York. Initially employed as a carpenter, Ralph Sr. then joined the police force and later trained as a homeopathic physician, which brought him a measure of prosperity. He died in 1897. Little is known about

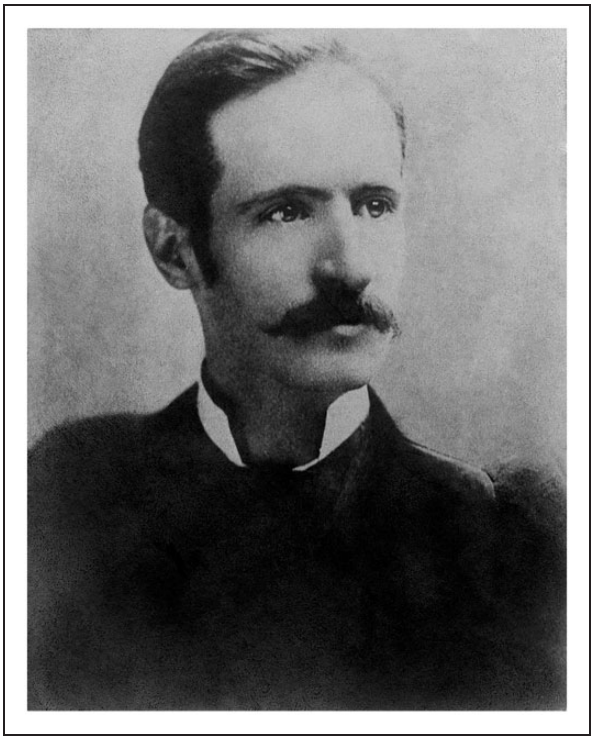

Figure 2. Ralph Albert Blakelock 1870. Source: http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Albert_Blakelock.

Caroline's background, but she cast a strong influence over the family and was thought to have been a "pillar of strength and support" (p. 193 of Vincent[6]). Caroline died in 1888. Ralph Albert was the oldest child in the family, being followed by one brother and one sister. Ralph Blakelock Sr. intended that his oldest son should become a homeopathic doctor, but such a plan conflicted with Ralph's desire to become an artist. Thus after leaving college, instead of going to medical school, he set about establishing himself as an artist. Meanwhile, Ralph's younger brother, George, followed in his father's footsteps and became a fully qualified homeopath.

Ralph met Cora Bailey (Figure 3) in 1865, when Ralph was 17 and Cora was 9 years old. Cora recalled this meeting in the following terms: "I met Mr. Blakelock who was . . . full of love and enthusiasm for his art. He had recently lost a younger sister, of whom he was very fond, [and] I in measure took her place" (p. 77).[6] Subsequent to that meeting, they had little contact until Blakelock returned from his travels and their relationship was renewed, leading to marriage in 1877, with Cora already four months pregnant. Of their relationship, Vincent[6] (pp. 137–138) describes Cora as adoring, steadfast, calm and, for the next 22 years until his commitment to an asylum, his anchor at home. Their daughter Ruth described Cora as a beautiful unworldly innocent, who was devoted to her

Figure 3. Cora Blakelock ca, 1876.
Source: http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Albert_Blakelock.

family. Friends remembered the Blakelocks as living a Bohemian life, often behind in the rent, and rather idiosyncratic in habit. Ralph was mystically inclined and became an earnest devotee of the Swedenborgian church. As Ralph's reputation grew in the art community, Cora kept largely at a distance from that side of Ralph's life. Yet, they remained a devoted and caring couple who raised a large family of nine children born between 1877 and 1899. During this time, it was usually hard for Cora and Ralph to provide adequately, but in the 1890s, as Ralph's mental state deteriorated, the stress on Cora became even heavier.

Blakelock's mental disorder

It is unknown whether major mental illness was present in Blakelock's paternal or maternal families, but it did appear in two of his children. Marian was a landscape artist in the style of her father. Unfortunately, she was victimized by forgers who appended Ralph's signature to her canvases to inflate their value, causing dealers to refuse to sell her work. This rejection led to a psychotic breakdown and prolonged hospitalization in 1915. Another daughter, Mary, suffered from mental instability and Vincent[6] (p. 302) observed that fear grew up in the next generation of the Blakelock family about the "Blakelock curse," which led family members to admonish Ralph's grandchildren to avoid taking up art, writing about Ralph in school projects or even mentioning his name.

Ralph first showed signs of decompensation in the late 1880s, just after he began to experience success with exhibits at the National Academy. This success was followed by difficulty in selling his work during a nationwide economic recession, imposing hardship, rejection, and humiliation on Blakelock. His mother, Caroline, then died in 1888. In the same year, Cora observed her husband to be worried and terribly downcast. His association with the local church provided support and comfort at this hard time. Blakelock had been previously characterized by his wife and daughter as having a sunny, optimistic countenance, and being one who "inspired all the family with the faith in the goodness of the morrow" but, by early 1891, disintegration was evident. Cora initially attributed Ralph's worries to external circumstances, but paranoid symptoms later emerged and prevented him from venturing out of the house. If he did so, it was furtively, as he feared that he was being followed and would be arrested for failing to provide for his family. His behavior turned more erratic and destructive: one day Cora found him slashing and burning a large number of finished paintings, and she tried in vain to stop him. He was fearful of being discovered to have paintings in his possession if anyone should come for him. In March 1891, severe insomnia had recurred and later in that month, the following heart rending event took place. One of his masterpieces, *Brook by Moonlight*, had come up for sale. Blakelock offered it to the buyer for $1500, but eventually let it go for $600. (This painting sold for $20,000 a few years later.) When Blakelock returned home with the money, his family watched helplessly as he tore up $600 worth of bills and threw them into the fire. He then became unmanageable, destroying furniture, threatening his wife and children. Ralph's physician brother, George, attempted to administer morphine, but Ralph then turned violent. He was admitted to the Flatbush Insane Asylum, an admission that was publicized in the local press. In one article, it was stated that the patient was convinced that his family had been conspiring for years to blow him up with dynamite. After a week in Flatbush, Blakelock was discharged as cured from that particular episode.

Between 1891 and 1897, Blakelock appeared in good health for much of the time and his family grew steadily in number. In January 1897, an eighth child, Allen, was born. Meanwhile, poverty was dire and at times the family was unable even to keep a fire burning in the home. In March of that year, Ralph's father passed away. Ralph did not attend his father's funeral and forbade his wife and children from so doing, for fear that something would happen to them. In the words of

his wife, he started acting "queer" again. He insisted on frequent home moves, dressed bizarrely, and carried a dagger, which caused others to see him as a threat. Cora knew that he remained fundamentally affectionate toward his family, and thus refrained from admitting him to hospital. In 1898 he had deteriorated, believing himself to be a savior, calling himself Julius Caesar, believing that he was the Duke of York and related to the Rothschild family. He was readmitted to Flatbush, again being released after a brief stay. With her husband's state of mind and the family's extreme poverty, things were desperate for Cora; in the midst of all this, she and Ralph conceived a ninth child, to add further burden on her life. Not long afterwards, Ralph descended into more severe psychosis, believing he was profoundly wealthy, wandering around naked and threatening to kill his son for buying a coat. Doctors told Cora that her husband needed to be in hospital. On September 12, 1899, the same day that their ninth child was born, Ralph was committed to Long Island State Hospital, where he spent 17 months, and where he resided at the time of his first-ever one man exhibition in New York. On June 25, 1901, he was transferred to Middletown State Homeopathic Asylum, where he remained until 1916. On admission, he weighed 102 pounds, down from a previous weight of 126, although later in his illness, his weight dropped far below this level to a point of cachexia. He was noted to be well but "voluble." The admitting doctor, Selden Talcott, diagnosed schizophrenia, or *dementia praecox* as it was then called. Within a few weeks, Blakelock became uncooperative and angry, confused his doctor with his father-in-law and wanted to go home. Over time, psychotic episodes became less frequent and less disruptive. He spent much time walking in the grounds, painting, sketching, or making jewelry. Over the years, Blakelock's illness fluctuated but never left him completely, and it was not possible to release him. A variety of treatments were used, including hydrotherapy and many different homeopathic medicines; when he became disruptive, he was transferred to the locked ward, where enforced bedrest was used to quieten patients. For many years, the Middletown Hospital staff remained unaware of Blakelock's reputation and disbelieved his claims to fame. Once the medical director, Dr. Ashley, learned the truth of the matter, he began to take a special interest in the patient. Further recognition in the outside world came in 1913, when Blakelock was elected an Associate of the prestigious National Academy of Design. When told of this honor, he replied that he knew why he had been declared insane: "It was simply because they could not remove his paintings from the State of New York" (p. 239).[6] He was of the belief that the government wanted duty on his works because of their French influence.

The effect of mental illness on Blakelock's art

Vincent,[6] Davidson,[2] and Smith[7] have all discussed the relationship between Blakelock's mental state and his painting. Vincent[6] (p. 107) noted that it was "impossible to ignore the degree to which his [Blakelock's] patience varied and the early evidence in his drawings of unusual and extreme mood swings." He went on to say (p. 210) that even in the early years, Blakelock's drawings veered from one extreme to another; his paintings showed at times a quality of "madness" and at other times a quality of "sanity," with some of his moonlight masterpieces revealing a seductive blend of passion and attention to detail.

During his long confinement at Middletown, Blakelock's works displayed "a sense of reality and clarity not seen in his earlier work" (p. 210).[6] Vincent believes that Blakelock's illness affected every aspect of his life except for his painting skills, although it perhaps added a sense of impatience in his work. As Blakelock's psychiatrist, Maurice Ashley, put it he remained "artistically sane" even at times of active psychosis.

Davidson noted two characteristic painting styles when Blakelock was in Middletown: one that had been described by the medical attendants as poorly executed and finished, but which to the art critic revealed looseness, freedom, and spontaneity of handling, evoking in his landscapes a "vehemence reminiscent of Van Gogh when he was in St. Remy [Asylum]." The second style, in contrast, showed "a tightness of handling, dryness of detail and sense of rigid control." One painting, which is thought to be an image of Beatrice Adams, suggests the intrusion of active psychosis. Closer study of Blakelock's Middletown paintings, however, suggests greater penetration of psychosis into his work. Gamwell and Tomes[5] (p. 147) consider the dollar bill landscapes to reflect the "symbolic conflation of art and money [which] was often literalized in the deranged mind of the artist." These watercolor landscapes were painted on cloth in the form, size, shape, and color of dollar bills, and some of them bore actual dollar values. While technically sound in their portrayal of landscape, they took on an element of the bizarre in that Blakelock carried them in his pocket as though they were currency. In one instance where the artist had painted $1,000,000 in yellow numerals, he gave the bill to an art collector and told him not to spend it since it was an interest-bearing note which would keep him comfortable for many years. This particular work had been painted on a torn piece of Blakelock's shirt. Many other works were of this type.

In 1996, an exhibition was held in the Hecksher Museum in New York, of over 40 of Blakelock's Middletown paintings. Rather than these works

reflecting mediocrity or madness, as one might expect, they reveal high skill in the use of miniature painting. In hospital, Blakelock had to make do with lack of basic supplies and was forced to improvise. His paintbrushes were made up of strands of his own hair or bits of tree bark, while his canvases were usually the tops of cigar boxes, cardboard, clothing, or small pieces of paper the size of playing cards. Paint was sometimes made up from ink, out of which he produced different shades. In these trying circumstances, his work is seen by Vincent[6] (p. 264) as representing mastery of "the details of fairly broad landscape in the space of a few square inches, all the while maintaining the dash and spontaneity associated with an impressionist style." Also, freed of commercial pressures, his Middletown works show a livelier and more approachable quality than the often somber pictures of the 1890s. Smith refers to an "amazing" level of control, economy, and observation, and says that "one never senses a wasted mark or gesture or an unsettled, delusional mind." Even as he was being treated for psychosis, Blakelock's paintings showed a "more realistic, less visionary style" and greater "truthfulness to nature" compared to his work prior to developing schizophrenia.[7] Smith refers to an abstract style, which presaged later art by Jackson Pollock and describes some of Blakelock's unusual techniques in the application of paint to his Middletown works. One of the more telling of Smith's conclusions, at least from a psychiatric perspective, is the following passage, which recognizes the artist's remarkable resilience: "But in the end, these works attest above all to Blakelock's quiet, almost joyous attention to nature, his ability to convey the effects of light hitting tree trunks, leaves and undergrowth, bare patches of ground and rocks, as well as the pools of water and streams so frequently found at the center of his images. They evoke the places and vistas that sustained the artist, enabling him to pursue and even develop his vision, despite the odds." Slater and Roth[3] (pp. 276–278) comment that, while some schizophrenics can preserve their artistic abilities, it is "obvious that higher artistic qualities are easily affected by a disease interfering with expression and communication." They go on to say, however, that paranoid schizophrenia typically occurs later in life than other forms of the illness, that personality is better preserved and this subtype is accompanied by greater constitutional powers of resistance. The particular kind of paranoid schizophrenia which affected Blakelock may have allowed him to retain a capacity to produce good art even in the face of his disorder. Two illustrations of his Middletown paintings are shown in Figures 4 and 5. *Rider in the Park* (Figure 5) portrays Blakelock's treating doctor, Robert Woodman, and shows the doctor's house, where he was often invited to play the piano as

Figure 4. Middletown landscape. With permission, Questroyal Fine Art, LLC, New York, New York.

Figure 5. Rider in the Park. With permission, Adamson-Duvannes Galleries, Downey, California.

entertainment when the doctor had company. *Rider in the Park* is believed to have been Blakelock's last major work, and shows an unusual and dendritic bleakness.

Of some interest was the appointment of Ales Hrdlicka as staff psychiatrist at Middletown between 1894 and 1895 and prior to Blakelock's arrival. Hrdlicka was a graduate of the New York Homeopathic Medical College and later became a world famous physical anthropologist. While at Middletown, he recorded the artistic activity of 400 psychotic patients and analyzed the effects of insanity on their powers of artistic expression. He noted that for the most part, painting of such patients was not up to their premorbid standard, and that themes that appeared typically reflected their psychotic state, being loaded with allegorical and symbolic material, supernatural themes, and intercalated faces. There was often a childlike quality and a crudeness or grossness to their work. Hrdlicka also observed that such patients were more comfortable working with ink and had difficulty painting in colors. He concluded that insanity typically caused deterioration in those mental

functions necessary in producing art.[8] For the most part, Blakelock's Middletown art did not conform to Hrdlicka's observations, although the dollar bill landscapes and portrait of Beatrice Adams are exceptions in this respect.

Enter Svengali: The arrival of Beatrice Adams

It was no secret that Blakelock had been confined for over a decade in a remote mental hospital and that his family lived in great poverty, while his paintings fetched increasingly high sums of money. However, there was little concerted action to remedy this situation until the arrival of Beatrice Adams in early 1916. Mrs. Adams had a shady past, having been previously married to a swindler. As of 1915, she had turned into a self-styled philanthropist, who had once raised modest funds for needy women and children and university students. Perhaps her main claim to fame had been belated appointment as President Wilson's representative at the National Child Labor Conference in 1914, even though she never attended the meeting. She knew next to nothing about art. However, she was an attractive and persuasive figure, quite capable of sweet talking others in support of her goals. In 1915, Adams first heard from a friend about the impoverished but famous artist locked away in an asylum, but took little further interest until the abovementioned sale of *Brook by Moonlight* on 22 February, 1916. Ever the opportunist, and now seeing the potential for financial gain, Adams visited Blakelock in hospital the next day. Not only did she make an impact on the artist, but the medical director, Dr. Maurice Ashley, fell quickly under her spell and acceded to most of Mrs. Adams' subsequent wishes. Blakelock saw Adams as a beacon of hope for release and the return of sanity. Adams presented herself as a would-be benefactor, committed to the welfare of the artist's family and promoting his success as a painter. By March 1916, she had secured the cooperation of newspapers, which expressed outrage at Blakelock's treatment: the nation, she said, should be ashamed for allowing such a talented artist to languish in poverty. Adams arranged for an exhibition of Blakelock's art at the Rheinhardt Gallery in New York. A $1 admission fee was charged, ostensibly to be deposited in a benefit fund for the Blakelock family. Adams even arranged for Cora Blakelock to shop for fine clothes and they traveled to Middletown, along with a newspaper reporter, for a staged photograph of Cora and Ralph. All of this activity received front-page coverage in the *New York World*. When the exhibition opened, Adams kept Blakelock's wife and family away, while Ralph was present and much *fêted*. It was only the next day that they were invited to attend, after Ralph had been returned to Middletown. Over the following weeks, donations poured in and further articles appeared in other New York papers. To organize and promote her charity, Adams assembled a committee of individuals who were prominent in the art world. Pointedly, Dr. Maurice Ashley was a member of this committee, even though he was without any artistic qualification.

Over the next three years, an improbable story unfolded. Adams' sole intent, as it ultimately became clear, was to wrest exclusive control over the artist, keep him away from his family, and serve as the only portal for others who wanted dealings with him. It was her plan that Blakelock should paint and sign his works for her to sell. However, and despite her public affirmations to the contrary, she had no intention of using the charitable funds for the benefit of Blakelock's family. A critical development occurred on 8 July, 1916, when Adams and John Agar were quietly given complete custody over Blakelock's personal and financial affairs by the New York court. (Agar was a prominent New York attorney and president of the National Arts Club, who had been appointed president of the Blakelock Fund.) It may be asked how this ruse succeeded, and the answer lies in deception used a few weeks earlier when Adams informed Cora Blakelock that she was planning to set up the fund, but required Cora to sign some legal documents. The document was vaguely worded and did not spell out the names of the committee members. Trusting in Adams' good intentions, and thinking that it was Cora who was being appointed guardian, she signed away control of Ralph and his affairs to Adams and her committee.

With custody secured, Adams then arranged for Blakelock to be transferred from Middletown on a six-month probationary period, to a comfortable private sanatorium, Lynwood Lodge, where she had sole access to her charge, set him up with a studio and grand piano, and determined visiting access. His stay at Lynwood did not last long. Ralph's family had not been told of their father's whereabouts, but eventually Carl Blakelock was able to find out and went to visit. Adams had been given advance notice and, not wishing to be confronted by an angry Carl, spirited Ralph away to New York. She even went on the offensive and claimed there was a conspiracy by his family and others to kidnap the artist, a story that was readily picked up by the media. Meanwhile, Carl Blakelock took up a counteroffensive and wrote in the newspapers that his father was being exploited (p. 270).[6] Without telling the family, Adams arranged for Ralph to be admitted to another private psychiatric facility in Riverdale, New Jersey, and once again a son (Melville) had to inquire as to his father's whereabouts, which he found out only with difficulty. The medical

director, Dr. Flavius Packer, at first proved uncooperative and went along with Adams' insistence that Ralph could only receive visitors if Adams gave her permission. Packer, the medical staff and members of the Fund Committee made themselves as inaccessible as possible. It took Melville's threat of an investigation to force Agar to relent, but even then any visit had to be under conditions determined by Packer and the staff attempted to prevent Melville from entering his father's room when he had enquired about seeing any paintings. On another visit from an art promoter friend of Cora's, Dr. Packer told him that Cora was not to be given any of her husband's paintings. Packer also complied with Adams' demand that all mail to Ralph must go through her hands first. At this point, the enraged family initiated legal action, but failed to follow through, partly for reasons of expense and because of their various other obligations.

To keep up the charade, Adams ensured that Blakelock was comfortably cared for in Riverdale, had what he needed for painting and was able to take accompanied trips into New York. She encouraged his work and cultivated relationships with any benefactor in the art world who was willing to donate to her fund. In the summer of 1917, Adams acceded to Blakelock's request to spend the summer at Lake George. Blakelock returned to Riverdale in the fall of 1917, where he stayed until the next summer, when he again went back to Lake George. Meanwhile, Adams' fund was running low and, with the war in progress, new donations were infrequent. A significant part of her expenses, moreover, had gone to offset costs of an investigation Adams initiated into Blakelock forgeries, which were appearing on the market. It was estimated that between 1916 and 1918, Adams had spent up to $20,000 without offering any explanation where the money went.

Blakelock produced few paintings after he had been taken away from Middletown. An increasingly exasperated Adams realized that her plans were not bearing fruit. On one occasion, she lost control and slapped and punched Ralph during an argument. The artist was deeply affected by this trauma, which caused him to lose all faith in his "protector." Soon afterwards, in November 1918, Adams wrote to Dr. Ashley that Ralph required to be rehospitalized in Middletown "as a matter of discipline," even having the effrontery to complain that his erratic behavior caused her hardship. She had no further intention of supporting him in a private hospital and asked Ashley to take him back, which he dutifully did. She left Ralph there in winter without any warm clothing and his eyeglasses, essentially discarded from her life. As in the past, Blakelock's family had not been told of his transfer and their Christmas gifts sent to Riverdale were returned: it took some months before they learned of his whereabouts. Back in Middletown, Blakelock was cooperative and gave little trouble, but he exhibited a detachment and lack of interest that contrasted with his previous enthusiasm for painting. His physical condition deteriorated and his weight had dropped to 76 lbs, and then even further to 70 lbs at discharge in July 1919. Letters to Mrs. Adams asking for a return of his clothes went unanswered. In February 1919, opportunity flashed one more time for Adams when some old paintings came up for sale. With the $4000 proceeds, Adams renewed her interest in Blakelock and set about again removing the patient from Middletown. Meanwhile, Cora had become deeply concerned at her husband's ill-health and emphatically wished him to remain in Middletown; even Blakelock protested to hospital staff at being taken away, saying that he wanted no more dealings with Adams. Notwithstanding, Dr. Ashley meekly turned his patient back to Adams, oblivious of protestations. She took him to a country cottage in the Adirondacks in July 1919, where Adams, Blakelock, and a nurse all shared residence. He refused to paint. One month later, Blakelock was found unconscious in the bathroom, dying before the doctor arrived. Some said it was from atherosclerosis, but his family wondered if death was caused by Adams, since injury marks and bruises were visible on his body. In Adams' last callous act toward the family, she contacted Cora to discuss funeral arrangements and suggested they meet at a New York Hotel. When the family arrived, they learned that Adams was unavailable and had left a message that such a meeting was unneccesary. Two days after the funeral, Adams announced that the fund was insolvent. As a strange postscript on Adams, she too was eventually diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 1941 and hospitalized for several years at Kings Park State Hospital, unlamented and ignored by the art world.

Summation

Blakelock's life and "stranger than fiction" kidnapping are of interest for several reasons. (1) Blakelock was a preeminent artist who broke new ground in defining American art. (2) He developed an illness quite late in life that probably was paranoid schizophrenia. Schizophrenia typically develops at an earlier age and is believed to be associated with reduced fertility,[9] so in this regard, Blakelock was unusual. The possibility remains that he exhibited a variant of bipolar disorder, but the evidence to this author is not persuasive. (3) Blakelock remained productive throughout most of his life, including his confinement in Middletown and the content of much of his work was not indicative of psychotic material despite having active disease.

However, the eccentricities of his ''dollar bill'' landscapes do reflect the intrusion of psychosis. (4) Errors in judgment of Blakelock's psychiatrists, particularly Maurice Ashley, reflect poorly on their professionalism and call into question their own complex motives. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?* is a question that must always be kept in mind for providers of psychiatric care. (5) Above all, Blakelock's resilience enabled him to remain upbeat and enthusiastic in his love of nature and of painting, which clearly continued to provide solace as he endured so many vicissitudes. Perhaps his art was his therapy. The tranquility and cheerfulness of the Middletown Asylum gardens and countryside may have been significantly therapeutic, consistent with the experience of others who were confined to Victorian-era asylums.[10]

Acknowledgment

The author thanks Mr. Jerry Kleiner, President, Historical Society of Middletown and the Walkill Precinct, for providing information about the artist and the Middletown Asylum. David Hay-Edie made helpful comments on the manuscript.

Funding

Financial disclosure for past the 12 months: Consulting income from Edgemont Pharmaceuticals, Tonix Pharmaceuticals, Lundbeck, University of California San Diego (Data Safety & Monitoring Board, INTRuST Consortium). Royalties from Guilford Publications, Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, Davidson Trauma Scale, Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN).

References

1. Post F. Creativity and psychopathology. A study of 291 world-famous men. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 1994; 165: 22–34.
2. Davidson AA. Art and insanity: one case. *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1989; 3: 54–71.
3. Slater E and Roth M. *Mayer-Gross Slater and Roth clinical psychiatry*, 3rd ed. London: Baillière: Tindall, and Cassell, 1970.
4. Smith R. Art view; islands of peace in a life awash in sadness. *New York Times* 1996, March 17.
5. Gamwell N and Tomes N. *Madness in America: cultural and medical perceptions of mental illness before 1914*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.
6. Vincent G. *The unknown night: the genius and madness of R.A.Blakelock, an American painter*. New York: Grove Press, 2003.
7. Smith R. Art: the landscapes of Ralph A. Blakelock. *New York Times* 1987, September 11.
8. Hrdlicka A. Art and literature in the mentally abnormal. *American Journal of Insanity* 1899; 40: 385–404.
9. Kyaga S, Lichtenstein P, Boman M, et al. Creativity and mental disorder: family study of 300,000 people with severe mental disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 2011; 199: 373–379.
10. Hickman C. Cheerfulness and tranquility: gardens in the Victorian asylum. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2014; 1: 506–507.