

# Medicine and Pictures

## Beauty and the dole

RICHARD SMITH

Many of Britain's hospitals are ugly and depressing, and more than three million people are unemployed. Wouldn't it make sense if some of the unemployed helped beautify our hospitals?

It would, and a walk down the several hundred yards of corridor of Bethnal Green Hospital shows that it is already happening. The corridor is lined with paintings by unemployed people. The first one you see shows a boy fishing in one of the East End's hidden canals. It must be five feet by four, and a casual observer could be excused for thinking it a particularly vibrant and large colour photograph. In fact it is a painting, which might be described as ultrarealist, painted by an unemployed girl who had never painted before.

If you were one of the old people who are now the inhabitants of the hospital, you might be reminded of when you were a child and fished in the canal. Or perhaps you would think of your grandson, fishing there at that moment. As you walked on down the corridor you would be reminded of much more, particularly if you knew the East End well. Tubby Isaacs is selling shellfish; bells are being cast

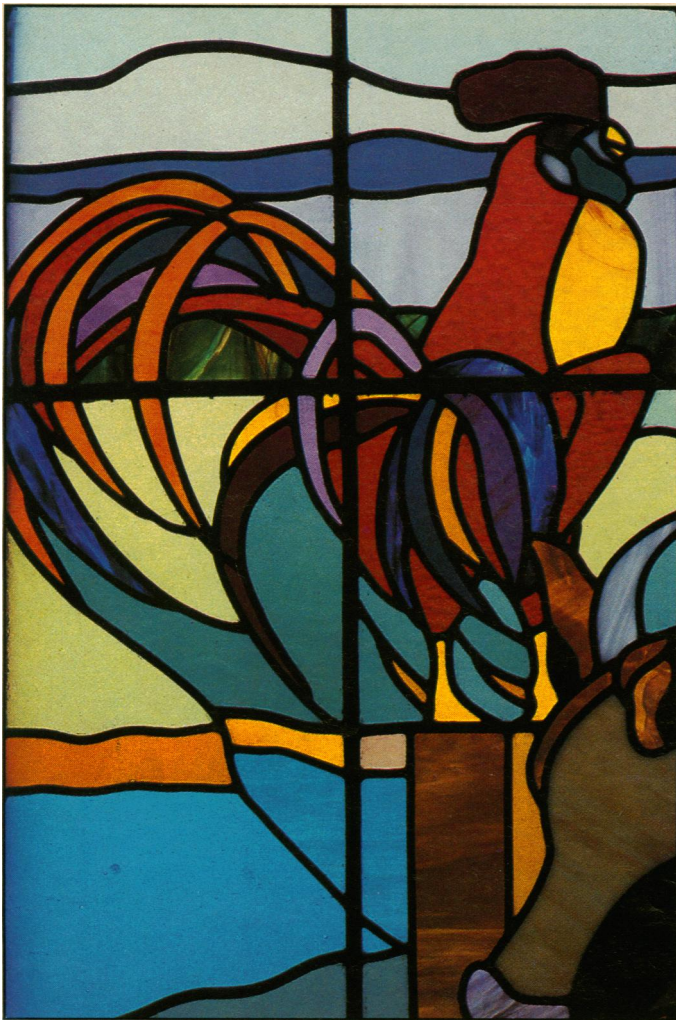
in the Whitechapel foundry; people are snoozing on deckchairs in the park; small boys are collecting money for Guy Fawkes night, while others are painting themselves as clowns; an Asian man and his son are looking out of their shop window, just a little frightened; the cat meat man is coming; and that cheerful woman (what's her name again?) is still selling cigarettes from her tiny kiosk.

Similar pictures can be seen in the outpatients department at the London Hospital. The biggest one shows the market across the road from the hospital in full swing, and patients waiting to see the doctor can study the characters and often recognise friends. One of the greengrocers recently died, and in his obituary the *Hackney Gazette* said that he had been "immortalised" in the painting at the London Hospital.

The 30 or so pictures at Bethnal Green are large, and they might—until you look closely—all have been painted by the same person. But they weren't, although most were painted by a similar technique, one borrowed from Venetian painters like Canaletto.







The Venetians used lenses and mirrors to project canal scenes on to their canvases, whereas the unemployed of the East End have used slides and projectors. In a painstaking process that takes up to six months they have painted the projections and created startlingly evocative scenes. The result is that what might have been a depressing and seedy corridor distinguished only by the smell of boiled fish is as well worth a visit as the Hayward Gallery.

Most of these paintings are now several years old, and the programme that gave long term unemployed people the confidence to paint so well has moved on. Now 120 people are working on projects as varied as creating gardens for the disabled, making stained glass windows for the hospitals and residential homes of Tower Hamlets and Hackney, producing health promotion material, and building strong wooden chairs for disabled people. In addition, the participants in the project are making sure that the patients in Bethnal Green Hospital can share in their work, and most recently some of the participants have begun to work directly with the old people, helping them to make their own pictures.

The project was begun in 1978 and sponsored by SHAPE, an organisation that encourages art in hospitals, prisons, everywhere. Four unemployed painters spent six months in the London Hospital and six months in Hackney Hospital. One of those unemployed painters was Michele Bacciottini, who is now manager of the whole project. After the first year Michele approached the London Hospital to "sponsor" the project and the Manpower Services Commission to put up the money. The London Hospital's "sponsorship" cost it nothing: it simply had to find a corner for the four painters and be willing for them to work on hospital projects.

They began by painting a mural of Winnie the Pooh in one of the children's units at the London Hospital. They were criticised by

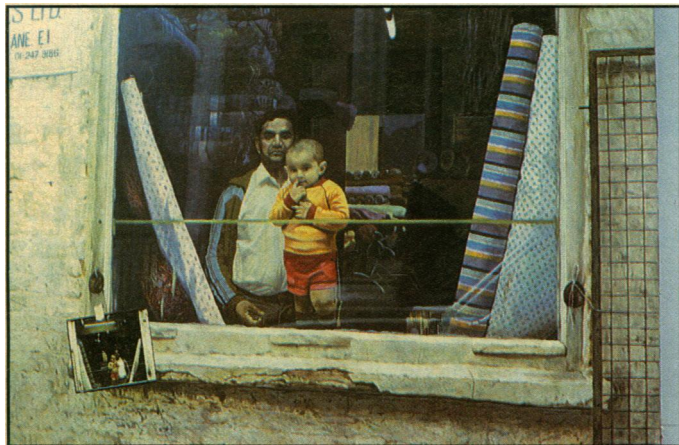
some of the staff for choosing such a middle class subject in such a working class area, but the staff were lagging behind their charges. Although the parents of the East End might not have encountered Pooh and his pals, their children had, and they delighted in the pictures of Eeyore, Baby Roo, Kanga, and Piglet against a Cotswold background.

This picture proved to be important in getting future funding for the project because the Danish minister of health came to visit the unit together with some "bigwigs" from the Manpower Services Commission. He turned out to be a fan of Pooh as well as of the mural, and the "bigwigs" enjoyed the reflected glory. This has been useful because each year Michele must apply again to the commission for money, and it is becoming increasingly oriented towards industrial projects. The commission has always stumped up so far, but one year a panic ran through the commission because of criticism of some of the painting projects that it supported. A decision was taken to stop supporting all painting projects, which could have meant the end of the East End project.

But the people of Bethnal Green were determined that this should not happen. A petition was organised, and local union leaders led the protest. One wrote to Sir Hugh Casson, then president of the Royal Academy, and asked him to come and give his blessing. He was abroad, but the secretary of the academy came and was much impressed by what he saw. Pressure from the academy helped keep the project going.

The local union leaders were most helpful on that occasion, but the unions have been suspicious of MSC schemes. Isn't this slave labour? Aren't these second class jobs? Aren't the participants doing work that should rightly be done by full time workers, union men? Michele understands their point of view but is confident that this





isn't the case. The participants in his project are artists, and there were no artists in the hospitals of the East End before they came. Nobody made gardens or painted pictures to brighten the walls. He is also sure that the work that the participants do with the patients is something new and different. Something extra is being achieved, nobody is being pushed out.

But the real beauty of this project is that it is not just the patients and the hospitals that benefit—the participants benefit as well. All of them are long term unemployed people, and many have spent years unemployed in the East End—"a real tough experience," observes Michele. Many have had their confidence destroyed, and some have had serious problems—have attempted suicide, been for psychiatric treatment, or been in prison. They come to the project for a year, and Michele sees dramatic changes in their attitudes and confidence. These come partly through mastering skills, partly through working in teams, and partly through working with the patients. What can be hard, however, is leaving after the year is up. But 60% do go on to get jobs—many of them as care assistants or in

art related jobs—which is a better rate than for many MSC projects.

Whether the participants or the patients benefit most is anybody's guess, but I had a chance to see what pleasure was given to some of the patients. One of the participants in the project had been given space to exhibit his own work at the Half Moon Theatre in Mile End. He had given over his space to the patients, and I went to see the exhibition. The old people that I spoke to were terribly chuffed that their work was being exhibited. Most had never painted in their lives before and didn't think that they had it in them to create anything that people would want to hang on a wall. As the daughter of one woman said: "I didn't fink she could do nuffin with them 'ands, and yet the painting's wonderful and it's on the wall. It's made 'er really 'appy."

The greatest success of the whole project seems to have been to help people to do things that they never thought they could do.

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