



HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

Talisman of the Ward The Album of Drawings by Edward Deeds

It's impossible to know how many passed by a curbside junk heap without noticing the remarkable gem that somehow lay amid the debris. It took an uncommonly sensitive fourteen year-old boy named Reid Henderson to pause and appreciate a small, hand-sewn album of 283 richly imagined and crisply executed drawings that deserved a far better fate. In plucking the book from the rejected mound, Reid not only saved an American treasure from certain destruction; he unknowingly rescued from oblivion the memory of its equally marginalized creator, Edward Deeds, a near life-long ward of the state of Missouri and colorful mental patient at State Hospital No. 3 in the small town of Nevada.

Reid's next greatest feat was to safeguard the portfolio for an astonishing thirty-six years. When in 2006 he finally relinquished it through a bookseller, the emergence of such an extraordinary and heretofore unknown collection of works caused a stir in Outsider art circles and touched off a scramble for the artist's identity. The anonymous artist was quickly assigned a sobriquet "The Electric Pencil" based on an enigmatic title inscribed at the top of drawing no. 197. The works are, in fact, filled with tantalizing names, words, people and places, yet nothing revealed the identity of the author but for one overwhelming clue that belied his circumstance whenever he put pencil to paper. Invariably, the drawings are executed on the official ledger paper of the institution that was the center of the artist's existence for nearly four decades – "State Hospital No. 3," or "State Lunatic Asylum, No. 3." It is an almost poetic detail, the indisputable manifestation of the artist's predicament, in bold type, and on every page.

It took five years and multiple articles in a Springfield, Missouri, newspaper to capture the attention of the artist's nieces, who recognized not only the hand, but individual drawings, and recalled visiting their Uncle Edward at the hospital in Nevada and watching him sketch. From them, and from newly-released medical records, a portrayal of this elusive artist has emerged.

James Edward Deeds, Jr., was born in Panama in 1908 to Edward Fount Deeds and Clara M. Deeds (née Coldwell). The Deeds family was stationed at the Panama Canal Zone while the elder Deeds served military duty as paymaster aboard the USS Marblehead. In 1912, the Deedses returned to Clara's family homestead in McCracken, Missouri, where they settled as farmers. Edward, the eldest, had three sisters, Helen, Dorothy and Josephine, and a brother, Clay. Family accounts paint

Edward as a well-meaning but increasingly troubled youth, with difficulty adjusting socially and further complicated by a disciplinarian father incapable of nurturing a child with special needs. As Edward aged into his teens, father and son clashed at every turn. The young man was relegated to second house on the farm's property, the first salvo in his father's quickening campaign to isolate him from the family. Eventually Edward's frustration erupted in a threat of violence that prompted the father to seek hospitalization for his son. Fearing a looming separation from his family, Edward attempted suicide, an act of desperation that would institutionalize him for life.

Records indicate an initial stint at the State School for the Feeble Minded at Marshall, Missouri, before Deeds was finally committed in 1936 to Nevada's sprawling mental hospital, diagnosed with dementia praecox and schizophrenia. He would live there involuntarily for the next thirty-seven years. An enormous, palace-like structure with flamboyant Second Empire-style architecture, formal gardens and on-site factories and farms, State Hospital No. 3 was conceived under the popular Kirkbride plan, the predominant design theory behind mental institutions built in the 19th century. Through a practice he termed "Moral Treatment," psychiatrist Thomas Kirkbride promoted the design of grand utopian sanctuaries that sought to rehabilitate patients by surrounding them with beauty, spaciousness, and outlets for productivity.

Deeds may well have enjoyed the benefits of Moral Treatment and its elegant trappings during his early years in Nevada. He was described by a doctor as a "hilarious" and "boisterous" presence on the ward, vocal but not combative, prone to singing and wild delusions of grandeur. But as the twentieth century wore on, any idealism in America's healthcare system inevitably gave way to budget cuts and overcrowding as state institutions became convenient dumping grounds for society's unwanted. Over the course of his long tenure at the hospital, Deeds undoubtedly experienced changes in the quality of life there. It has been suggested that his drawings, with their vintage costumes, old-fashioned cars and boats, might be nostalgic odes to an earlier, bygone era. It is reasonable to assume that drawing was a therapeutic form of escape for Deeds. He carefully sewed each sheet into a crude, lovingly-made binding that, today, shows the wear of having been clutched unceasingly as a sort of palliative or even a talisman.

Deeds's drawings, using mostly crayon and pencil, are delicately executed. They are innocent, often fanciful, and notably devoid of suffering, violence, or the anger one might associate with an artist presumably under psychological or emotional stress. One glaring exception is the unmistakable recurrence of the initials "ECT," a probable acronym and thinly veiled reference to the controversial shock treatment known as electroconvulsive therapy. ECT appears in several drawings, most emphatically in the creatively spelled word "ECTLECTRIC" in drawing no. 197. What at first glance seems an awkward, dyslexic attempt to spell "electric" may instead be a purposefully coded sign of the artist's acute distress. Elsewhere ECT is subtly etched into the façade of an architectural rendering (no. 94), or more prominently beneath a cigar-like form that might also be interpreted as the notorious "bite stick" used in administering ECT (no. 95). More indirectly, and perhaps most profoundly, is the portrait of a gentleman with a curious top hat, like a circus ringmaster's, and the words "WHY. DOCTOR" (no. 33).

The subjects of the drawings can be loosely categorized into several groups: machines, especially vehicles like boats, trains, and cars; wild and domesticated animals and birds; people, mostly adults;

architecture and formal gardens; and landscapes. All share a meticulous, stylized draftsmanship that is the artist's own. Psychologists have noted there is a degree of proportional and linear exactitude across all the subjects that reflects the obsessive precision and rigidity that today is often associated with an autistic mind (see Susan Scheftel, "The Electric Pencil: Using Art to Diagnose the Artist: Diagnosing the Artist through his Works" [www.medscape.com]). Balance, order and repetition seem paramount. Lines are unerringly straight, shoulders level, bricks numbering in the thousands perfectly measured. Favorite motifs recur throughout: plumed feathers, eagles, stars, smokestacks, "coon-skin" caps, quills, coins, clocks, and watches. Themes explored in some depth include the circus, the Civil War, politics, garden design, architecture, famous horses, and athletes. Almost all are brought to life with various titles and annotations that are creatively spelled and often puzzling.

Visual sources for each drawing have proven mostly elusive. Some likely stem from National Geographic magazines sent to Deeds by his family, or from books he had access to in the hospital's library, portraits in its halls, first-hand experiences both in the hospital and its environs, and of course his own rich imagination. Not surprising are the surreal elements in many of the drawings. In spite of their detailed complexity the vast array of boats, cars and trains are fascinating for their toy-like appearance. There is preposterousness to the boats in particular, and many are fitted with loops on the bow as if for a pull string. Meanwhile Deeds's menagerie of elephants, horses, monkeys, cats, rats, raccoons, and deer represents the artist at his most charming, whimsical and symbolic. But it is the portraits, with their arresting gaze, odd vintage costumes and elaborate accoutrements, that are perhaps his most ambitious, inspired, and unforgettable images. They are also Deeds's most distinctive contribution to the Outsider canon: each one featuring the same mesmerizing, enlarged pupils, gray-shaded or "smutty" noses, thin, pursed mouths, and exaggerated chins. If that formulaic style indicates how Deeds liked to draw faces, it might also reflect how Deeds *saw* faces: all attention on the eyes, the proverbial "windows of the soul;" then the nose, a three-dimensional artistic challenge; then the mouth, and the empty words it spews, far lower on the artist's hierarchy. What uniqueness the artist could not, or would not, give to his sitters' faces, is instead imparted through their trappings and accoutrements. Attention is lavished on feathered hats, braided hair, trim costumes with elaborate patterning, ribbons and bows, and floral bouquets.

In 1973, the sixty-five year old Deeds had declined in health and was determined by doctors of no danger to himself or others. He was released to a nursing facility in Christian County, Missouri, and died at that institution fourteen years later.

Due to worsening arthritis Deeds had stopped drawing by the early to mid-1960s and presented the album to his mother. She in turn gave it to Edward's brother Clay for safekeeping. Then, in the chaos of relocating his family in 1969, Clay Deeds mistakenly gave the album to two movers whom he had offered the contents of the attic in partial payment for their service. They would later discard it on the street as valueless.

Happily Reid Henderson thought otherwise. Today the pages are carefully separated, conserved, and spread across the world with beauty and poignancy intact. The talisman album of Edward Deeds has been found and opened. His voice is heard, his pencil seen, his life remembered.