Psychiatry in pictures

CHosen by Robert Howard


Dorothy H. was a patient in St Augustine’s Hospital, Canterbury, from 1929 until her death. Diagnosed as having schizophrenia, she had an elaborate system of beliefs around a central conviction that she was married to the Chinese Emperor. She embroidered pictures, like the cushion cover illustrated here which was given to the medical superintendent, Dr Ainslie.

All of these featured stories about the Emperor. Although their bizarre narrative content makes them harder to follow, her embroideries are reminiscent of the Willow Pattern plate design. In an earlier picture, My name is Chadros. Story of the real Chinese Emperor and Empress, the green dragon and seven-eyed cat (1947), she had detailed her transformation from a mortal woman to the resurrected Chadros, following application of a gold serum invented by ‘tiny Chinamen with infinite patience’. The picture (right) continues the story. Although it takes some effort to follow her own description, this slightly abridged version shows that her life with the Emperor was filled with religious and mythological meaning and had been ultimately tragic.

‘Three bridges are the theme of this picture. A green Dragon, mighty in winged splendors, climbs the top bridge of rope ladder connecting roof to roof. A lady opens a window and hands him a nice pot of thea. The young Empress plays Ma-Hong on the roof with her baby boy, sable winged. Only dead Converse with Caste, in mauve desaced walks up arm out off over green shrub angels soon forecasting the failure, guillotine and cross and thorne crown ere God his tiny people will hearon the Sun platform the legless Emperor Jesus wears real crown forget me not on guise Tron. Nor Man a woman huddles her bade to breast, rearing, charging steads plunge forward in man’s arms and slumbers two more. Second bridge connecting door of stone houses stone constructed. My own family in left two bays in red below a tame peacock feeding out of bogs best basket bonnet. The stone work is covered with blossoms. Right boy naked climb from sailing vessel to rope ladder. A marble woman holds air up in glass slaps water bark in blue ball stands on ash sand ridge cosmos square. Centre piece charging bull Hercules follows stone shield held high. Cage holds corpore in spikes slowly ground for ammunition. The stone bridge is divided by monument holding gigantic ball over-roofed. Passing in mauve holy man

This and other embroideries by Dorothy H. can be seen at the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum in Beckenham, Kent (Tel: 020 8776 4307).