Roland Littlewood
Self Devouring Brain

Royal College of Psychiatrists
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Self Devouring Brain is the first exhibition ever held of artworks by Professor Roland Littlewood (1947–2025). Though he made art throughout his life, it focuses on his paintings and works on paper in the 1970s, when he graduated from medical school at Bart's, worked on psychiatric inpatient wards at Hackney Hospital, then studied in Oxford's Department of Anthropology.

As a child, Littlewood had wanted to become a pirate and explore the world. He was anti-institutional throughout his schooling, which included being expelled from primary school and occupying himself with his own academic interests rather than the prescribed requirements of secondary school. He committed to the sciences for long enough to get into medical school in part to satisfy his parents, but was fascinated by history, politics, economics, religion and other cultures, and from a young age his knowledge was extraordinarily rich in a broad range of disciplines. He would often miss teaching at medical school (though not in psychiatry, which became a field of immense interest) to attend intermittent life drawing classes for a couple years at what was then the Sir John Cass School of Art. Through his time at the Cass and his friends there, he became more familiar with the work of international artists who had gained prominence in the 1950s and '60s, including Americans such as Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, and avant-garde movements and artists across Europe, including Kurt Schwitters, CoBrA and Pierre Alechinski, and, significantly, the French artist Jean Dubuffet. Dubuffet celebrated 'art brut', or 'raw art' – art made by those who were untrained and existed outside of academic art institutions, including work by psychiatric patients. Today, volumes of *Raw Vision* magazine, devoted to 'outsider art' across the world, are stacked around Littlewood's home.

Littlewood embraced the idea that artistic expression could exist without constraint by rules and expectations, and generate more meaningful representations of human thought and emotion as result. As with many avant-garde movements of the early- and mid-twentieth century, he treated with suspicion a separation between 'outside' and 'inside' ,'mind' and 'body' ,'rational' and 'irrational' ,'low' and 'high', and was interested in the conditions and institutions that might maintain these distinctions. This appears to have moulded his approach to psychiatry and to art. He was very politically active, and was involved in anti-fascist and peace movements in London in the late 1960s and '70s. He also became a doctor in this period, and his approach to social and political transformation was channeled into his work in psychiatry, attempting challenge and adapt the discipline while working within it. Consequently, as his wife Jenny has said, "He wanted to rock the boat, but rock the boat sensibly".

He was a Senior House Officer under the consultant psychiatrist Dr Maurice Lipsedge at Hackney Hospital, which at the time was neglected and decrepit. Early on, Lipsedge was astonished by the range of Littlewood's knowledge, in semiotics, Latin American literature, phenomenology, and he had learnt Sanskrit. Lipsedge also noted "how well he engaged with the patients, how well they took to him, and how devoted and dedicated he was to them." Littlewood was highly unconventional in his approach. He would often sit to paint his own work beside patients while they made theirs, or intermittently collaborate on works, as they discussed individual and shared experiences. It was a way of producing and communicating that was informal and slow, and involved spending long periods of time together. He often met patients outside the hospital as well, including hosting them at his home, where they might talk and continue to make art late into the night.

At Hackney Hospital Littlewood came into contact with patients from the Afro-Caribbean communities of Stoke Newington, and the Hasidic Jewish communities of Stamford Hill. His interest in how these groups were understood and treated by psychiatry ultimately led to the publication of the book *Aliens and Alienists: Ethnic Minorities and Psychiatry* in 1982, co-authored with Lipsedge. In this highly influential text, they argued that the psychological effects of racism, migration and colonialism must be understood to avoid the inappropriate and inadequate treatment of ethnic minorities by psychiatry. The book also explored racial biases in psychiatric theories and diagnoses, and the significance of religious and cultural beliefs in understanding mental wellbeing and distress. It incorporated insights from social anthropology, which Littlewood had gone to study in the 1970s after his work at Hackney Hospital. As Jenny has explained, "anthropology did eventually help him find a model of practice that helped elucidate some otherwise unintelligible behaviours among patients."

Littlewood's artwork is as diverse as his interests. He often used the materials that were at hand – dirt, cigar ash, newspaper, and a range of other detritus, including whatever was in the bin, alongside inks, tempera, crayon, oils and watercolour. He painted in a room that was also his and Jenny's living room and bedroom, in a flat above a launderette on Newington Green Road. Many of Littlewood's paintings from this period were completed on blank, stretched, but damaged and discarded canvases from student storage at what was then Saint Martin's School of Art. Jenny had brought them back in a van to the flat they shared. His artwork can feel comical, joyous, grotesque, morbid, violent or absurd. Broadly, my sense is that his work relates individual minds to broader social and political circumstances. There is a consistent interest in how mental states might coalesce into physical forms, with bodies mutated and morphed by their own emotion, or distorted anatomies that are testimony to people under pressure. I see this in *Joy* and *Forming* (both 1971), *Disembodied Eye, Self Devouring Brain, Head* and *Death* (all 1972), *Alone, Burned, Bent Spine, Spinal Flow,* and *Anxiety* (all 1973), *Disturbance* and *Disorder* (1974), and *Multiple Self* (1979). Alongside this, there are works documenting the violent forces that might affect the psyche, as well as the political upheaval that might be necessary to change the world in response. I see this in *Master* (1970), *Revolution* (1970), *Scenes of Death* (1973), *Revolt* (1973) and *Violence* (1973). Unlike his more public research and academic work, I wonder if his artwork allowed him to be a little less measured in private, and to "rock the boat" entirely on his own terms – a little more spontaneously, and a little less gently. While Littlewood did not exhibit his artwork in his lifetime, his books would usually include one of his paintings on the cover.

As Maurice Lipsedge has said, "the essence of Roland's work as both anthropologist and psychiatrist was to recognise the significance of both the 'personalistic' and the 'naturalistic', by which he meant the humanities and the natural sciences. He taught that both are valid and necessary, and neither can be reduced to the other." Littlewood's life and work serves as an example of the value in pursuing and committing to diverse interests, and considering the connections between them, even when our institutions and professions can seem to demand otherwise. There were times when psychiatrists were sceptical of his anthropological pursuits, and vice versa, but his contribution to psychiatry, anthropology, as well as to art, has ultimately enriched all these disciplines in a combination that is as unique as it is significant.

After the 1970s, Roland Littlewood worked clinically as a consultant psychiatrist in the NHS, including in North London's Focus Homeless Community Mental Health Team. He became a Professor of Anthropology and Psychiatry at University College London and a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, where he was President between 1994 and 1997. Among his numerous publications and edited volumes, some of his subsequent books after *Aliens and Alienists* (now in its third edition) included *Pathology and Identity: The Work of Mother Earth in Trinidad* (1993), *The Butterfly and the Serpent: Essays in Psychiatry, Race and Religion* (1998), *Pathologies of the West: An Anthropology of Mental Illness in Europe and America* (2002), and as co-author with Professor Simon Dein of *Between Anthropology and Psychiatry* (2026), published posthumously.

In writing this text, I have used some information from Dr Maurice Lipsedge's obituary of Roland Littlewood, published in *BJPsych Bulletin*, from Jenny Littlewood's obituary of her husband published in *The Guardian,* and from a catalogue of his works produced by Jenny which includes photographs of his work and book design by Etienne Clément and Dr Ferdinand Carabott. I am also very grateful to Dr Maurice Lipsedge for speaking to me about his experience of working with Roland in the 1970s, and to Jenny for discussing her husband with me, for trusting me and the College with his artwork, and for all her work in making this exhibition possible. Finally my thanks go to Catriona Grant at the Royal College of Psychiatrists for all her assistance and support.

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