

Transformations: The history of the asylum

THE MIDDLE AGES AND EARLY MODERN PERIOD



Left: Mental illness and witchcraft often were associated and belief in supernatural causes of mental illness was present throughout the Middle Ages.

Above: In the series of prints by William Hogarth known as "A Rake's Progress," careless living by the "rake" leads to confinement in Bedlam.

Right: Hieronymus Bosch, Extraction of the Stone of Madness (The Cure of Folly), painted ca 1475-80. The practice of trepanation may have been used to cure mental illness by creating a means for demons to escape from the brain.

Right: A method of restraint. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine



The mentally ill eventually came to live in monasteries and poorhouses, facilities originally meant to provide a home for the indigent. Increasingly during the Middle Ages certain poorhouses came to function as permanent homes exclusively for mentally ill. For instance, St Mary of Bethlehem, later known as "Bedlam," in London opened in 1247 as a religious facility to house the poor. By the late 1300s, it began to house people called "lunatics" and later became overcrowded- relying on physical restraint and punishment to control patients.