

Oil on Canvas: An Isolation Cell Constructed by the k.k. Hofoperntheater for the Asylum

Mascha Deneke

The question of how to accommodate disturbed patients given to self-destructive behavior, without using restrictive means, long ago led to the equipment of mental asylums with so-called padded cells. Thus, in many asylums there are cells with padded frames on their walls up to a certain height. These frames are constructed with the aim of protecting the patients from injury during attempts to hit their heads, hands, feet, or other parts of their body on the cell walls. Since the ordinary padded cells have various disadvantages, it was my intention to construct a cell in which these disadvantages are eliminated or at least minimized.¹

(Schlager 1883: 321, transl. by M. Deneke)

In this text from 1883, the Austrian psychiatrist Ludwig Schlager describes in detail the “canvas cell” [*Leinwandszelle*], which he invented and had constructed by the k.k. Hofoperntheater in Vienna. Conceived as a textile room that is installed into the actual cell almost like a stage set in a theater, it is meant to protect the patient from self-injury as well as to counteract the disadvantages of the padded cell. In contrast to a stone wall, the surface of the canvas is smooth, and it is able to absorb movements without losing its shape. Based on Schlager’s descriptions, the stage designer Mascha Deneke built an accurate 1:25 scale model of this cell, which facilitates a specific form of spatial perception.

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Ludwig Schlager (1883):

“Die sog. Leinwandszelle zur Isolirung von zur

Selbstschädigung geneigten Geistesgestörten.”

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pp. 321–326.

