

Henry Darger

(Henry Joseph Darger, Jr.)

Apr 12, 1892 (Chicago, IL) - Apr 13, 1973 (Chicago, IL)

DURING HENRY'S LIFETIME, NO one knew what he was doing inside his cheap second-floor flat at 851 W. Webster Avenue in the Lincoln Park section of Chicago.

No one cared what he was doing, and as long as he didn't let his rent become overdue, not even his landlord cared, nor would he have taken the time to look inside.

As far as is known, Darger had only one friend in the world during his lifetime, a man named William Schloeder, and it's not known if he ever entered Darger's apartment.

He may have been invited inside, we'll never know, but even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. He was as down-and-out as Darger, perhaps worse off, and what he would have seen wouldn't have been anything that he cared about anyway, nor would he have felt any reason to tell anyone.

Henry Darger worked faithfully as a hospital janitor for forty-one years, doing the same thing day after day from the time he was thirty in 1922, until his retirement at the age of seventy-one in 1963. After retiring, Darger lived another ten years in the same plain second-floor apartment until just before his death in 1973.

He currently resides in the All Saints Catholic Cemetery in Des Plaines, Illinois, in a plot known as the "Old People of the Little Sisters of the Poor Plot." His marker reads:

Henry Darger

1892-1973

ARTIST

Protector of Children

Illinois records show that Henry was born at home to Henry and Rosa Darger, the third of four children. Rosa died giving birth to the fourth child, a girl that was afterward given up for adoption.

Henry lived at home with a disabled father and his older siblings in a state of impoverishment until he was taken in by a Catholic boys' home at the age of eight.

When his father died in 1905, Henry was moved to the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln.

His placement was the result of a doctor's unscientific diagnosis that "Little Henry's heart is not in the right place."

At the asylum, Henry didn't get along well with the staff or with his asylum-mates. Discipline at the shelter included the use of threats and corporal punishment, which, though harsh, were within the state's accepted practices.

Henry tried to escape from his environment many times, and in 1908, at the age of sixteen, he finally succeeded.

Free of the asylum, he walked back to Chicago, where he took a job in the maintenance and custodial department of a Catholic hospital.

Except for a brief stint in the army during World War I, his life was one of little variance. A devout Catholic, he attended Mass every day without fail, sometimes more than once a day, collecting street garbage as he walked to and from the church.

Although his appearance was rumpled and shabby, he kept himself and his patched clothing quite clean.

Darger was a loner except for his one friend, Schloeder, the two often talking at length about how they would take care of helpless children as if they were wealthy men.

Much of their talk centered on a desire to establish a Children's Protective Society, where good families could adopt needy children, but it was just talk.

Around 1935, Schloeder moved away, but the two men maintained a connection until Schloeder's death in 1959.

Darger continued to work at the hospital, picking up whatever people dropped on the sidewalk as he walked to and from work. After his retirement in 1963, his daily walks were limited to attending Mass.

Near the end of his life and shuffling slowly in pain, he walked one last time to St. Augustine's Mission, where his father had died, checked himself in, and awaited death himself.

The final entry in his diary reads:

I had a very poor nothing like Christmas. Never had a good Christmas, nor a good New Year, and now I am very bitter but fortunately not revengeful, though I feel I should be how I am

Henry Darger died April 13, 1973, one day after his 81st birthday. It wasn't until after his death that the world discovered the artistic genius of a man that almost no one knew existed.

That was when his landlord, Nathan Lerner, entered the one-room apartment to clean it for a new tenant. His would be the first eyes to gaze upon Darger's art. Not just a little bit of art, but hundreds of pieces, art that varied in taste from beautiful sweeping landscape panoramas to strange erotic fantasies.

There was also a very large, 15,145-page, single-spaced typed manuscript titled, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*.

In addition to the text, the manuscript contained hundreds of beautiful pen-and-ink sketches and watercolor illustrations.

Darger's art, that he never shared with anyone, nor received any praise during his lifetime, is today included in the permanent collections of numerous art museums, including: The American Folk Art Museum in New York, The Center of Intuitive and Outsider Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Collection de l'art brut in Switzerland, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and dozens of other locations.

If you're interested in owning a Darger original, you need to start saving as an original piece of Henry's artistic soul commands more than just a few dollars today.

Prints, however, are available from a few internet sites.



*There is one really important thing I must write,
which I have forgotten.*

Henry Darger (1892–1973) artist, recluse