

Art and Disease Lecture

Introduction

This lecture is somewhat organic. We'll look at some of the instances in which disease appear in some of the "monuments" of the western artistic canon.

Some of the works feature disease prominently

Some are less clear about the connection between the art work and disease

In one case, a work of art is 'diagnosed' by a medical archaeologist

I should note that finding works of art that were clearly about disease was very difficult, which raised the question, "why aren't there more images of disease in the canon?" Because its not attractive, heroic, religious, is not a beautiful subject (for most of the history of western art, 'beauty' has been the primary goal of artistic production.) There is plenty of work about death (think crucifixions and martyrdoms, battle scenes, dying gauls and all).

Additionally, this lecture will not present works in chronological order, but rather works will be grouped thematically. Since you know something about the chronology of art history, you should be able to place the works in their proper context.

Social Criticism and Disease

Poverty, Kathe Kollwitz, etching, 1897

This work predates contemporary social and scientific criticism that links poverty and large scale health issues.

Kollwitz was a printmaker of the early 20th century whose work took up the causes of impoverished and marginalized peasant laborers.

In this image, she depicts a weaving family – the working poor – and a child who is malnourished and sick. There is something of a pieta in this work, but Kollwitz also deliberately includes an image of a yarn spindle in the background suggesting the ultimate cause of the child's poor health. The context for this piece dealt with weavers working in subjection – as serfs – in a feudal system that polarized the rich and poor.

But this work could also be read as an illustrative (and *visionar*)y example of the 21st century social criticism appearing in literature focused on world health concerns. Richard G. Wilkinson, author of *Mind the Gap* (Yale U Press, 2001) offers the following thesis:

Inequality kills. Both rich and poor die younger in countries with the greatest inequalities in income. Countries such as the United States with big gaps between rich and poor have higher death rates than those with smaller gaps such as Sweden and Japan. Why? In this provocative book, Richard Wilkinson provides a novel Darwinian approach to the question.

Wilkinson points out that inequality is new to our species: in our two-million-year history, human societies became hierarchical only about ten thousand years ago. Because our minds and bodies are adapted to a more egalitarian life, today's hierarchical structures may be considered unnatural. To people at the bottom of the heap, the world seems hostile and the stress is harmful. If you are not in control, you're at risk. If you are in control you live in constant fear that someone will take what is yours.

Afflicted Artists

***Melancholia*, Albrecht Durer, engraving, 1514, 10 x 6 inches**

In the fourth century B.C., Hippocrates associated melancholia with "aversion to food, despondency, sleeplessness, irritability, restlessness," symptoms included among the current diagnostic criteria for depression.

While historical descriptions of melancholy have varied little over the ages, there has been a range of theories and treatment.

In ancient times, melancholia was attributed to "black bile," which was thought to wander around the body, finding "no exit or escape. The treatment for the excess of this cold bile was purging, bloodletting, warm baths, exercise and proper diet. This theory persisted with minor variations until the middle of the 17th century, when it was eclipsed by a shift toward more chemical explanations.

In addition to being associated with black bile, melancholy was also associated with astrological origins, melancholics having a link with the planet saturn – thus the term 'saturnine' for someone who is melancholic.

Marsilio Ficino, 15th century Florentine, had discussed the effects of the planet Saturn on the melancholy temperament in his treatise on medicine and astrology. This work was a significant source for Durer. Ficino promoted a theory of three varieties of melancholy, including *melancholia imaginativa* which afflicted artists, artisans and architects.

Today, melancholy – depression – appears in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health IV* as a disease with links to environmental factors, genes, and neurology.

This work is an enigmatic image, much discussed and analyzed for its dense symbolism and mastery of the medium of copper engraving. It seems to suggest *melancholia imaginativa*

Here the muse is represented in a gesture that suggests melancholy – sad, dejected, unable to engage her disciplines. Her face is darkened (like black bile) – clouded.

The garland on her head is woven of two plants: watercress and ranunculus – both remedies for melancholy which was said to dry the body.

Symbols of the artisanal, artistic and architectural disciplines clutter the picture plane:
Tongs, plane, molding curve, hammer, ladder crucible, ruler, nails....
Also a sphere and polyhedron (or cube with corners cut off), and compass.

The hourglass, scale, bell and magic square (also used to counteract the effects of saturn)

“keys mean power, purse means wealth” according to notations left by Durer.

This work, of all Northern works, perhaps best details what it meant to be an artist in the 16th century – Durer captures the discrepancy between the physical nature of art and the metaphysical concepts it can (and should) address. It is a work that recounts both the curse and blessing of artistic production – the creative frustration: melancholy.

***The Artist's Sister* Paul Klee, oil, 1903**

***Pomona Growing Up* Paul Klee, oil, 1937**

Paul Klee (1879 - 1940), Swiss painter, watercolorist, and etcher, who was one of the most original masters of modern art. Belonging to no specific art movement, he created works known for their fantastic dream images, wit, and imagination.

In 1931 he began teaching at Dusseldorf Academy, but he was dismissed by the Nazis, who termed his work "degenerate." Shortly thereafter, Klee came down with the crippling form of scleroderma, which forced him to develop a simpler style and eventually killed him.

scleroderma means 'hard skin.' Scleroderma is a condition where the skin gets thick and hard.

There are two main types of scleroderma. **One type is localized scleroderma**, which affects mainly the skin. It can also involve the muscles and joints. **The other type, generalized scleroderma**, affects the skin as well as the internal organs, such as the heart, lungs and kidneys.

In Klee's case, the scleroderma restricted the fine motor movements in his hands and joints, having a direct impact on the work he made.

While his work is not about disease, his later style was strongly influenced by the disease.

***Untitled (The End)* Felix Gonzalez Torres, offset lithography, 1990**

Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres belonged to a generation of contemporary American artists who reinterpreted Minimal and Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s as a psychological, personal endeavor.

His best-known works are the “stack” pieces—neat piles of unlimited-edition prints that viewers are encouraged to take but are then intermittently replaced, resulting in a constantly changing height of the sculpture.

His stacks acquired special poignancy when the artist began to link them with the AIDS epidemic: the slowly dwindling piles were a metaphor for the atrophy of AIDS victims' bodies. The artist himself died of AIDS in 1996.

Diagnosing Images

Mona Lisa, Leonardo da Vinci, oil paint, 1503

This work has been the subject of several medical archaeological studies.

The visual arts, especially of the Flemish school (this is not Flemish, it's Italian) have been used in paleopathologic research, in combination with documentation about the sitters/models, to shed light on the kinds of diseases and conditions that might have been prevalent in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Dr. Jan Dequeker of Belgium has suggested that a "yellow, irregular leather-like spot at the inner end of the left upper eyelid" suggests xanthelasma. The "soft bumpy well-defined swelling at the dorsum of the right hand" appears symptomatic of subcutaneous lipoma.

These conditions are commonly found in middle-aged and elderly people suffering from "essential hyperlipidemia or secondary hyperlipidemia due to longstanding diabetes.... Hypercholesterolemia, jaundice..." or other diseases.

Dequeker indicates that the sitter, Lisa Maria di Gherardini, was 24 when she sat for this portrait. She died when she was 37 years old, though no record of the cause of death remains, and documentation of the longevity of family members do not indicate early death. Since hyperlipidemia is familial and her relatives lived longer lives, this may rule out hyperlipidemia as a familial disease causing her death, and pointing toward hypercholesterolemia which is compatible with normal longevity.

Other studies of the Mona Lisa have suggested that Mona Lisa's smile is the result of Bell's Palsy, which has partially degenerated, then regenerated (1989). Borkowski has suggested that the smile is consistent with the smiles of people who have lost their front teeth (1992).

Works Incorporating Diseases

Isenheim Altarpiece, Matthias Grunewald, oil on panel, 1510

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is some 9 1/2' tall and over 10' wide. It is mounted on a carved predella (stand) upon the front of which is depicted Mary, the mother of Jesus, and two other women preparing the body of Christ for burial.

Christ is depicted with skin lesions – as a leper himself. This image would have powerful implications for a person afflicted with leprosy, seeing an empathetic Christ with whom a leper could personally identify.

The altarpiece was painted for the hospital run by the Abbey of St. Anthony, which treated primarily patients with skin diseases, plague, and leprosy. The altarpiece commemorated the fourth century Egyptian hermit for which the Abbey was named – we'll hear more about him later.

Part of the medical treatment of the hospital involved each patient viewing and praying at the altar, which was felt to have healing powers.

Flanking the central crucifixion on two fixed wings are depicted St. Sebastian on the left and St. Anthony on the right.

In this instance, then, art can have a curative property if it concentrates prayers.

St. Anthony Tryptych, H. Bosch

This lecture is based on the work of Laurinda Dixon, author of a volume entitled *Bosch* in the Phaidon art history series (Phaidon Press Limited, 2003). Art Historians for decades have included Bosch in the canon of important Renaissance artists, but have, more often than not, understood his visual language. For example, Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, 7th ed (1976). Begins by describing the artist thusly:

“Was he a satirist or an irreligious mocker? Was he a pornographer? Was he a heretic or an orthodox fanatic like Savonarola? Was he obsessed by guild and the universal reign of sin and death? Certainly his art was born of the dark pessimism of his age.” (p. 597)

Dixon asserts that Bosch's work is not that difficult to understand IF one knows something about 15th century images and ideas. Most of his images are actually fairly traditional and draw on a readily and widely understood culture of ideas and images.

The work of Bosch has been difficult to identify readily. This owes to the fact that many of the panels attributed to him have no mark or signature firmly linking them to a single artist. Additionally, because he was the head of a multi-generational, family atelier, it is hard to know if the signature “Bosch” refers to one person or a workshop of many artists. In fact only 7 panels exist with the name Bosch.

Historians also have a great deal of trouble developing a chronology for the works. Dendochronology has been the most successful method for dating the panels. This involves x-raying the panels and counting the tree rings to determine the age of the tree when it was felled and turned into a panel for painting.

St. Anthony Tryptych, Heironymous Bosch, oil on panel (1495 or later)

Three interior panels feature events from the life of St. Anthony, who held a place of esteem in the work of Bosch.

The historical Anthony lived in Egypt in the late 3rd/early 4th century. He is the acknowledged father of Monasticism (his order are the Antonites). He developed the practice of monastic shunning or rejection of the world.

Full view

The left panel shows the hermit, Anthony, senseless after a fight with the devil, being carried back to his cell which is an abandoned tomb (shunning this life and the world). Various kinds of creatures appear in the landscape, including a small critter in the lower right: a bird head, he wears skates and a red cape. A funnel for a hat and a folded piece of paper which some scholars believe says “Bosco” the Spanish equivalent of Bosch.

Satan’s assault continues in the central panel and Anthony wonders why God has not come to his rescue. Christ appears dimly in the tomb/cell of Anthony. Christ indicates that now that he has seen how well Anthony has fought the devil, “I shall spread my glory throughout the world.”

In the right panel, Satan’s persecution still does not abate, Anthony returns to battle, now knowing that his fight is not in vain – he is renewed.

Anthony’s attributes or symbols include a cross, a bell, a book, flames and a pet pig whom Anthony befriends.

St. Anthony’s patient tolerance of pain is an example of forbearance in the face of life’s suffering. His tolerance of physical pain led to an increase in his cult in the 15th and 16th centuries when *holy fire* or St. Anthony’s fire emerged in Europe.

St. Anthony’s Fire, or holy fire, (known today as *ergotism*) was caused by contamination of rye grains with ergot mould – so ergotism is a form of food poisoning or contamination that can lead to diseases such as gangrene. Symptoms of ergotism included hallucinations, muscle contortions, convulsions and agonizing, burning pain which were horrific, and gangrenous limbs. St. Anthony was the primary patron for this condition and 15th century folk often thought Anthony had the power to inflict and to heal the disease.

During Bosch’s time the cause of ergotism was not understood and treatment – in Bosch’s day it was considered a disease that could become epidemic in a small village eating from the same contaminated rye lots. “Treatment” took the form of symptom control from doctors and healers and intercessory prayers.

The Antonite Order gives us some context for understanding this work:

In the 15th century, hospitals were run chiefly by the church and monasteries. They took in hopeless cases (St. Anthony is the patron saint of lost causes – the catch-all intercessor) and cared for the disenfranchised sick until the end. By the 15th century, Antonite houses were primarily devoted to care of those suffering from holy fire. They kept the amputated limbs for restoration at the resurrection.

The Antonites also made various herbal remedies and elixirs to treat ergotism. Among these was the “holy vintage” offered once a year on the Feast of the Ascension (40 days after Easter). On that Thursday, suffering pilgrims thronged the monastery where the medicine was given to a select few whose illness was considered to advanced for ordinary measures.

The holy vintage was ritually strained over the bones of St. which the hospitals kept in reliquaries Anthony and ceremoniously offered to the sick.

[During Bosch's lifetime three papal bulls were issued to regulate the making of holy vintage with dubious relics]

Detail of center panel

“If we consider Bosch's triptych in a healing context, it emerges as a devotional image, intended to be viewed by victims of holy fire....” (Dixon, 184)

Bosch shows a re-enactment of the holy ritual when holy vintage was administered. Here we see it in a shallow bowl being offered by a well-dressed lady to a nun and a deformed man (only head and legs). St. Anthony himself is present at this ritual.

On the left, though is a similar ritual, more fantastic and involving more extreme figures – richly dressed presider with assistant offering a cup to one of two ergotants. Dixon suggests that this might be the way that some hallucinating and feverish ergotants might perceive the ritual.

In the central right of this panel we see a figure that personifies another common remedy for ergotism. This figure sitting atop a giant rat is a composite – part fish and part woody bark.

Fish and mandrake root were commonly prescribed. Thus, our bark-covered fish-man suggests healing.

The large, red fruit at the far left of the panel appears to be a mandrake apple, cousin of a tomato. According to the roman physician Apuleius Platonicus, “*If one would cut, let the patient drink one-half ounce of mandrake wine and he will sleep while the member is cut without feeling any pain.*” Based on this knowledge, mandrake apples were used by Antonites to create an anesthetic which induced sleep and was often used as an aid in amputations – the most common ‘cure’ for afflicted limbs.

Unfortunately, mandrake causes hallucinations of its own, thus ergotants often suffered from hallucinations from both illness and remedy.

Detail of right panel

Finally, Dixon argues that much of the architecture on the right half of the painting derives from a common knowledge of alchemical equipment. Flasks and furnaces used to process herbal remedies were commonly known by 15th century people. The domed roofs with flames bursting from them allude to a chemist's furnace which would heat substances and capture steam in a domed form similar to this one.

Thus, the landscape is festooned with healing potential.

This work then, was calculated to appeal to, and comfort, those afflicted by ergotism. In this work, Bosch assembles ergotants suffering from holy fire and surrounds them with the cures on which they depend: mandrake root, fish, freezing water and the patron of lost causes and ergotism, St. Anthony himself.

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Diseases Addressed

melancholia (melancholy or depression)

schleroderma

AIDS (auto immune deficiency syndrome)

xanthelasma and hyperlipemia (also hypercholesterolemia)

leprosy

“St. Anthony’s Fire” (“ergotism” which is a contamination of rye that can cause disease)

