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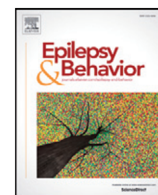

Review

Epilepsy through the ages: An artistic point of view

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ABSTRACT

The historical allure of epilepsy transcends academic circles and serves as fascinating critique of the state of the times—its values, judgments, mythos, and people. Immortalized and laid bare in artistic renderings of epilepsy are societal truths, at times both disparately grandiose and grotesque. During the middle ages and Renaissance, the European discourse on epilepsy assumed religious fervor. Epilepsy was considered a demonic machination and its cure an act of divine intercession. A similar theme is found in the artistic depiction of epilepsy from the Inca and Aztec civilizations of that time. After the 19th century drew to a close, the ascendency of empiricism coincided with waning creative interest in epilepsy, with few paintings or pieces to capture insightful perspectives on the illness. In this paper, we review the relationship between art and epilepsy and present two contemporary paintings that convey current western perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Historical accounts of epilepsy date back to 2000 BCE with descriptions found in Assyrian and Babylonian texts [1]. Over the course of millennia, the world has oscillated between drastically different notions of what epilepsy represents—notably whether it is a physical disease borne of the profane or an illness rooted in faith, divinity, and possession. During the Hellenistic epoch, scholars declared epilepsy as merely a disease, no more or less sacred than any other. A divine explanation for ictus was explicitly rejected, and Hippocrates devised the revolutionary idea that epilepsy was a disorder of the brain [2]. In the European middle ages, epilepsy came to be viewed as punishment for sinful behavior. The Christian prerogative was to exorcize the devil who had supposedly taken control of the patient's body. The convulsions of ictus came to symbolize the tormented spirit of the victim. The Catholic church urged the afflicted faithful to beseech the aid of St. Valentine, so identified as the patron saint for epilepsy [3]. The Renaissance heralded a dramatic shift in the conception of epilepsy from sinful affliction to physical disease process, a shift made possible because of rapid advances in understandings of anatomy, pathology, chemistry, and pharmacy [4]. Despite the prevailing scientific consensus on epilepsy, it remains an enigmatic entity in many parts of the world, and those with epilepsy are subject to stigma and marginalization.

The history of "the falling sickness" reveals as much about the culture of the times and artistic trends as it does about the state of medical knowledge [4]. The pathophysiology of epilepsy remains a work in progress, nonetheless vividly accurate portrayals of seizure semiology can be found in several artworks. Epilepsy has regaled and fascinated artists over centuries, and their fascination and enthrallment are dutifully on display in paintings, drawings, sketches, copper engravings, woodcuts, canvases, ceiling frescos, ceramics, sculptures, crafts, and printmaking. In this article, we review selected paintings depicting what was once considered a divine illness. This paper highlights artistic depictions of epilepsy with an emphasis on historical, medical, and cultural contexts.

2. Methods

We performed a comprehensive search for articles published from 1800–2014 using Medline, Embase, Index medicus, Cochrane database, and bibliographies of pertinent reviews and original articles to identify artistic depictions of epilepsy. We also manually searched internet resources including art galleries, private art collections, online museums, newspapers, and personal webpages. Search terms were: antiquity, art, artwork, ceramic, crafts, dancing mania, death, demon, depiction, drawing, engraving, epilepsy, epileptic, falling sickness, graphic, history, historical, illustration, image, mental illness, myth, painting, paintwork, picture, portrayal, Renaissance, sacred disease, St. Valentine, and sculpture. A representative sample of European and Latin-American

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paintings was compiled. Commentary is based on review of historical records with inferences made as to societal, religious, scientific, and cultural significances.

3. Results

Artworks were classified and compiled into five categories: 1) Greek mythology, 2) Christian/Renaissance art, 3) early Latin-American civilization depictions, 4) modern artwork, and 5) contemporary artwork. Pre-19th century illustrations tended to portray ancient beliefs with an emphasis on magical or miraculous imagery, historical myths, and fantastic behavior. These paintings were often colored by prevailing misperceptions with respect to epilepsy causation [5]. By contrast, modern and contemporary artists were able to integrate insightful perspective into their portrayals of epilepsy. In particular, focus was placed on the impact of disease course on both psychological and physical levels. These paintings were characterized by an undercurrent of optimism, itself a reflection of advances in the understanding of epilepsy and of the continued progress in its treatment.

3.1. Greek mythology (the cycle of death and rebirth)

The book of Characteristics is the fundamental work of the Franciscan monk Bartholomew the English. The chapter entitled "*Serious Scourge the Physicians call Epilencie*" contains a miniature (see Fig. 1) that depicts the tale of Jesus Christ purportedly healing a man who has just experienced a seizure. The man is found lying supine amidst the grass, having fallen to the earth and frothing from the mouth. A hat on the floor indicates the severity of the fall. In the forefront are two hyacinths, a genus native to the eastern Mediterranean [6]. The tranquility of the man's surroundings contrasts with the devastation that has befallen him. While contemporary clinicians may easily recognize a stereotyped seizure, in Bartholomew's time, such an event would have been framed in terms of "le haut mal" or "divine wrath." A generalized seizure is a dramatic, albeit paroxysmal and usually self-limited event. It is characterized by an unresponsive state and may be associated with "violent" vocalizations, with pronounced tonic and clonic phases, posturing, and eye deviation. Unsurprisingly, Bartholomew and his contemporaries would have viewed seizures as a transient form of death with tonus reminiscent of rigor mortis.

Enshrined in the painting is the story of life and death, of loss and renewal. In Greek mythology, blooming spring flowers came to symbolize the goddess Persephone's escape from the underworld—itself an emblem of renewal, prosperity, and fertility [7]. In this illustration, the hyacinth reflects the belief that the ictal loss of consciousness is indeed transient and that life will start again anew. Hyacinth is derived from the Greek, *Hyakinthos*, himself a pre-Hellenic god, young and handsome, who befell tragedy when he died unexpectedly after sustaining head trauma from being struck by a discus. He was made to enter the cycle of death and rebirth, metamorphosized by being reborn from his own blood in the form of the flower hyacinth. The Y-shaped configuration of the leaves of the hyacinth flower evokes the first letter of the name Hyakinthos [7]. The miniature contains the promise of rebirth following death, providing an uplifting message that is empirically verified by the subject's seizure resolution [6].

3.2. Christian/Renaissance art

Fifteenth century Christian Europe made epilepsy a popular theme, with elaborate artwork depicting patients with epilepsy purportedly cured by Christian saints such as St. Valentine of Terni [8], Saint Luis from Normandy, Saint Ubald of Gubbio, Saint Severin of Noricum, Saint Cyriakus, and Saint Bernhard, among others [9]. Delivering the penultimate salvation, there are several portrayals of Jesus delivering patients from the horrors of epilepsy. Perhaps the most famous example is that of Raphael de Sanzio's last painting, "*The transfiguration*" (1516–1520). This oil painting is exhibited in the Vatican Museum in Rome, Italy [6]. In this work, Raphael shows a boy seizing—eyes and mouth wide open, cyanotic lips, fixed eyes accompanied by gaze and head deviation, and elevation and extension of the right arm [10]. Jesus heals the boy by driving out the evil spirit [5]. "The transfiguration" has frequently been the subject of scrutiny and critique in medical literature, and we urge the reader to peruse the enclosed references in order to acquire a more complete understanding [3,6,11,12].

3.2.1. St. Valentine

Valentine's Day is celebrated on February 14th, a date auspiciously known to lovers and romantics the world over. However, a lesser-known fact is that Valentine of Terni [8] is also the patron saint of epilepsy. His help is also invoked against diseases of cattle and pigs, uterine disease, gout, and madness. St. Valentine was a priest, physician, and bishop [13] in Germany. We cannot be certain whether his patronhood to epilepsy was indeed based on the coincidence that his name sounds like the old German word for "*fallen*", and epilepsy was frequently referent to as the "*falling sickness*" [3]. The faithful affected by epilepsy make pilgrimages to beseech the intercession of St. Valentine. They may go to Terni, to

et sur la face choses qui font dormir et
arrouser de lait de femme et nourrir le
corps de bonnes viandes ¶ Le ix.e chapitre
du hault mal que les phisiciens ap
pellent epilencie
euuangile la
compte que
Jhesucrist guerit ung
homme qui a leur de
sa maladie cheoit a
terre et escumoit par
sa bouche Ceste maladie est en commun
langaige appellee le hault mal et les phi

Fig. 1. Miniature of the Chapter "*Hault Mal que les phisiciens appellent Epilencie*" in English: "Serious scourge the physicians call Epilepsy" of the book of Characteristics, 15th century.

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