UCSD Pathologist Muses: Were Drugs or Disease the Muse Behind These Famous Artists?

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If our modern clinical chemistry, toxicology, immunology, and infectious disease labs had existed during the 16th to early-19th centuries, the world might have missed out on the work of some of the world's most creative painters, sculptors and poets, hints a paper recently published in November 2005 issue of the Archives of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine.

According to Paul Wolf, M.D., Professor of Pathology at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine, artists ranging from Renaissance sculptors Benvenuto Cellini and Michelangelo to Romantic poets Coleridge and Keats, may have been creatively driven by the effects of their disease or the drugs and chemicals they ingested.

"Their inspiration may have been shaped by their human condition," Wolf says. "The associations between illness and art may be close and many, because of both the physical limitations of the artists and their mental adaptation to disease."

In his article, Wolf cites the stories – some frequently heard; others more surprising – of artists, and their illnesses and addictions. He paints a picture of what pathological symptoms may have contributed to their most productive and creative years, along with what modern-day medical diagnosis and treatments could have done for them.

If we could somehow transport painter Vincent Van Gogh to the UCSD Medical Center today, doctors may diagnose him with epilepsy and manic-depression and treated his symptoms with lithium carbonate instead of the drug digitalis, which was prescribed for him by his doctor. The drink absinthe – which he reportedly enjoyed to excess – wouldn't be available at the local liquor store; a drink with side effects which also include "yellow vision." Patients over-medicated with digitalis can also develop yellow vision or see rings of light. Once cured, Van Gogh might no longer produce paintings that inspire viewers with their vivid yellow hues and swirling orbs of stars in the night sky.

Michelangelo depicted his own mental and physical conditions in paintings and sculpture, as did subsequent painters, according to Wolf. His right knee was swollen and deformed by gout, depicted in the painting, "School of Athens" by Raphael that is displayed in the Vatican. Obsessed

with his work, Michelangelo would go for days on a diet of bread and wine, drinking wine processed in lead containers and possibly working with lead-based paints. Lead can injure the kidneys, inhibiting the excretion of uric acid, resulting in increased serum uric acid and gout. It is also commonly believed that he suffered from depression, exhibiting the signs and symptoms of a depressive illness, Wolf states in his paper. Would Michelangelo have been driven to create the marvelous fresco paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel had this depressive disease been diagnosed and treated?

Opium mostly likely contributed to the creativity of many famous composers and poets, among them French composer Hector Berlioz, who took opium to relieve agonizing toothaches, and poet Coleridge, who saw the palace of Kublai Khan in a trance and sang its praise, "in a state of Reverie, caused by two grains of opium."

"Modern-day clinical chemistry might have unraveled the mysteries of many artists' afflictions," said Wolf. "After diagnoses were established, aided by anatomic and clinical pathology findings, these famous artists may have benefited from resultant treatment with today's medical techniques."

But one wonders, would their artistry have been "cured" as well?

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