

Epilepsy in Art: A Historical Exploration of Representations Across Eras

Epilepsia na Arte: uma Exploração Histórica de Representações através de Épocas

A painting without something disturbing in it – what's that?

Georges Braque

Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon.

Pablo Picasso

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ABSTRACT

This narrative review explores the diverse representations of epilepsy in art across different historical periods, examining the intersection of artistic expression with evolving cultural, medical, and societal perceptions. Beginning with ancient and medieval depictions intertwined with religious symbolism, the paper progresses through the Renaissance, and Baroque, and transitions into modern and avant-garde movements. Each period reflects changing attitudes towards epilepsy, from divine interpretations, and religious concerns to anatomical realism and, later, explorations of psychological themes. The contemporary lens focuses on inclusive and empathetic portrayals, utilizing digital media to challenge stigmas and foster understanding.

Keywords: Epilepsy, Art History, Cultural Evolution, Medical History, Societal Perceptions, Digital Media

RESUMO

Esta revisão narrativa explora as diversas representações da epilepsia na arte em diferentes períodos históricos, examinando a intersecção da expressão artística com a evolução das percepções culturais, médicas e sociais. Começando com representações antigas e medievais entrelaçadas com simbolismo religioso, o artigo avança através da Renascença e do Barroco, e transita para movimentos modernos e de vanguarda. Cada período reflete mudanças de atitudes em relação à epilepsia, desde interpretações divinas e preocupações religiosas até o realismo anatômico e, mais tarde, explorações de temas psicológicos. A lente contemporânea centra-se em representações inclusivas e empáticas, utilizando meios digitais para desafiar estigmas e promover a compreensão.

Palavras chave: Epilepsia, História da Arte, Evolução Cultural, História Médica, Percepções Societais, Mídias Digitais

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INTRODUCTION

This article, the sixth in a seven-part series about neuroaesthetics and visual art, sheds light on frames of epilepsy within the context of art, culture, and medical understanding, illustrating the multifaceted nature of the condition and its varying impact on individuals.

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso developed a revolutionary style of art making known as Cubism, and their quotes at the beginning of this article emphasize the need for something beyond conventional aesthetics or beauty in a painting, suggesting that art isn't confined to prescribed standards but rather springs from imagination, instinct, and the boundless creativity of the mind. This holistic view is also useful for understanding the challenges faced by individuals with epilepsy that intertwine medical aspects and social implications, underlining the need for comprehensive approaches to the disease. The acknowledgment of the diverse experiences among patients emphasizes the importance of tailored treatments and ongoing research to enhance therapeutic options for all individuals affected by epilepsy. The depiction of epilepsy in art traverses centuries, encapsulating changing perceptions, cultural beliefs, and medical advancements. Epilepsy holds a unique position within the annals of medical history, serving as a foundational precursor to the field of neurosciences. Its historical trajectory illustrates a significant shift from religious and magical explanations toward scientific understandings. This transformation denotes an explicit evolution in cultural practices surrounding the condition, marking a pivotal moment in the demarcation between mystical beliefs, religious rituals, and the scientific study of neurological disorders³. William Richard Gowers (1845-1915), based at the National Hospital in London, was a notable junior colleague of John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911), a formidable thinker and revolutionary in the field of epilepsy. Gowers' 1881 book on epilepsy was of great importance for propagating Jackson's revolutionary concepts on epilepsy in comprehensible and broadly consistent accounts of epileptogenesis⁴.

This exploration investigates the multifaceted representations in various artistic movements according to Invaluable¹⁰, highlighting the evolution from divine interpretations to realistic portrayals and abstract expressions. Epilepsy's artistic journey mirrors societal attitudes, offering insights into the intersection of art, culture, and the evolving understanding of this neurological condition. The illustrations of different art períodos regarding epilepsy depictions are from Wikimedia Commons or Wellcome Collection, and the Digital art painting by Image Creator of the DALL-E platform with recommendations given by the author of this paper.

There are varying approaches of artists across different periods, showcasing the evolving representations of epilepsy and its intersection with art, culture, and medical advancements.

Ancient and Medieval Depictions

Epilepsy in ancient times and the Middle Ages was often associated with divine or supernatural possession. Artists depicted seizures through symbolic or allegorical representations, often intertwining them with religious or mythological themes. The portrayal of epilepsy was shaped by the prevailing belief systems, where the condition was considered a manifestation of spiritual forces or divine intervention. These artistic renditions often depicted the dramatic nature of seizures but interpreted them within the context of religious or mystical experiences. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, the visual arts were dominated by religious motifs. People often commissioned works of art and had the right to determine what was portrayed. The motivation to commission a picture was often gratitude for mercy and help given by God and the saints. The content and manner of portrayal enable us to make certain assumptions about the life of the person who commissioned the pictures⁸.

Renaissance Realism

As medical knowledge advanced during the Renaissance, artists began to portray epilepsy more realistically. The emphasis shifted from purely symbolic representations to depicting the physical symptoms of seizures or surgical treatments associated with the condition. Renowned artists like Raphael Santi's "The Transfiguration," completed just before his passing in 1520. In this masterpiece, a child experiences an epileptic attack amidst the transfiguration of the Lord, depicted with oculo-lyric crisis, hyperextension of the hands and fingers, and bodily torsion, witnessed by onlookers filled with wonder and anxiety. Raphael Sanzio depicted epileptic seizures in a dramatic and anatomically accurate manner, incorporating these episodes within religious or historical contexts¹. The portrayal of saints associated with healing epileptics became a recurring theme, reflecting evolving cultural perceptions and medical understanding.

Baroque Dramatics

The Baroque period marked a significant evolution in the portrayal of epilepsy, characterized by intensified emotional and spiritual depictions within art. Notably, artists such as Caravaggio and Nicolas Poussin employed heightened drama and emotion to portray scenes related to epilepsy. Works like "The Miracle of Saint Francis Xavier" and "Conversion on the Road to Damascus" exemplify this, intertwining epileptic episodes into religious narratives to capture the intense emotional and spiritual dimensions of these events. Moreover, epilepsy held a substantial position in pictorial art during this period. Artists depicted epileptic seizures with profound expressiveness, capturing the essence of the condition in their works. Another significant

artwork is Peter Paul Rubens' "The Miracles of St. Ignatius of Loyola" from 1620⁶. Within this altarpiece, among the patients seeking mercy and treatment, epileptics during seizures are also prominently featured. These artworks serve as powerful visual testaments to the artists' interpretation of epileptic episodes, portraying the condition's physical and emotional dimensions with profound insight and depth.

Transitioning Art Movements

During the eras of Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Realism, explicit depictions of medical conditions, including epilepsy, became less prevalent as artists turned their focus toward exploring emotional and psychological themes rather than directly illustrating specific health conditions.

Jean Duplessi-Bertaux, an artist active during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, worked primarily in the artistic style associated with the Romantic period⁵. This work embodied elements of Romanticism, characterized by an emphasis on emotions, individualism, and dramatic scenes, this specific artwork leans more towards visual documentation or medical illustration rather than adhering to a particular artistic style.

This shift allowed for a deeper exploration of human psychology and emotions, leading to artworks that touched indirectly on aspects of epileptic experiences.

Vincent van Gogh's artistic legacy is intricately entwined with his tumultuous inner struggles and speculated health conditions, among which epilepsy remains a prominent conjecture. While epilepsy is often associated with his artistic genius, other disorders such as manic-depressive disease, Meniere's disease, acute porphyria, or absinthe intoxication have been considered in the discourse surrounding his health⁶. The use of vivid yellow colors in Van Gogh's paintings has been connected to xanthopsia, a disorder that impairs vision and is frequently associated with the consumption of drugs such as absinthe or digitalis⁹. Van Gogh experienced periods of self-mutilation and severe emotional upheavals throughout his life; these themes are poignantly depicted in his artwork. His paintings not only portrayed the physical aspects but also delved into the emotional and perceptual experiences linked to epilepsy. Among his celebrated works, the renowned "Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear" from 1889, exhibited at The Courtauld Gallery in London, immortalizes a significant event in van Gogh's life. Despite artistic interpretation regarding the bandaged ear on the right side (while in reality, he mutilated his left ear), the self-portrait resonates vividly with his disfigurement and the psychological torment he grappled with due to his mental state. Through his art, van Gogh revealed his distinctive perspective on the challenges posed by his condition, leaving an indelible mark on the artistic and medical realms alike.

Avant-Garde and Modern Art

In the 20th century, avant-garde movements like Expressionism and Surrealism offered artists a platform to experiment with abstract and dreamlike representations. While not explicitly focused on epilepsy, artworks from these movements often conveyed a sense of disorientation, altered perception, or psychological states that might parallel aspects of epileptic experiences.

Contemporary Perspectives and Digital Art

Ultimamente many artists declared themselves as having epilepsy such as Jennifer Hall, as mentioned by Engelsen⁶, uses "the imagery of performances called; out of the body theater, drawn from the world in which I exist during seizures", and the artist Juliane Ahrens called one of her pictures "seizures like a dream". As said by Engelsen⁶, during her seizures, her vision flourished and she had indescribable smells.

Modern representations of epilepsy aim for precision, empathy, and inclusivity. Artistic endeavors seek to portray epilepsy sensitively, shedding light on the experiences of individuals living with the condition. Through visual representation, artists might aim to depict brain activity during seizures, the neurological underpinnings of the condition, or the impact of epilepsy on cognitive and emotional processes. This allows for a creative exploration of the complex neurological aspects of epilepsy.

Digital art epilepsy representation

The artistic interpretations expressed in Figures 1 in the Art Nouveau Style offer an appreciation of the multifaceted aspects of living with epilepsy, with general well-being or depression, e.g., in addition to being able to suffer from some of the types of seizures as exemplified by four of them according to the ILAE Classification, 2017¹².

Therapies

There are varying degrees of effectiveness in drug treatments and the challenges faced by the 30% deemed drug-resistant, some had surgical options and the absence of treatment for some cases, highlighting the complexity and limitations in managing epilepsy. These patients also face Adult epilepsy patients are confronted with psychological and psychosocial burdens¹¹.

The journey of epilepsy treatment and the incorporation of art therapy in its management reflects a multifaceted approach aimed at addressing the psychosocial dimensions of the condition. From ancient beliefs tied to crude surgical practices to modern therapeutic art, the evolution of treatment paradigms has been profound.

The integration of psychological therapies, specifically art therapy, emerges as a promising avenue to enhance the quality of life for individuals with epilepsy. The

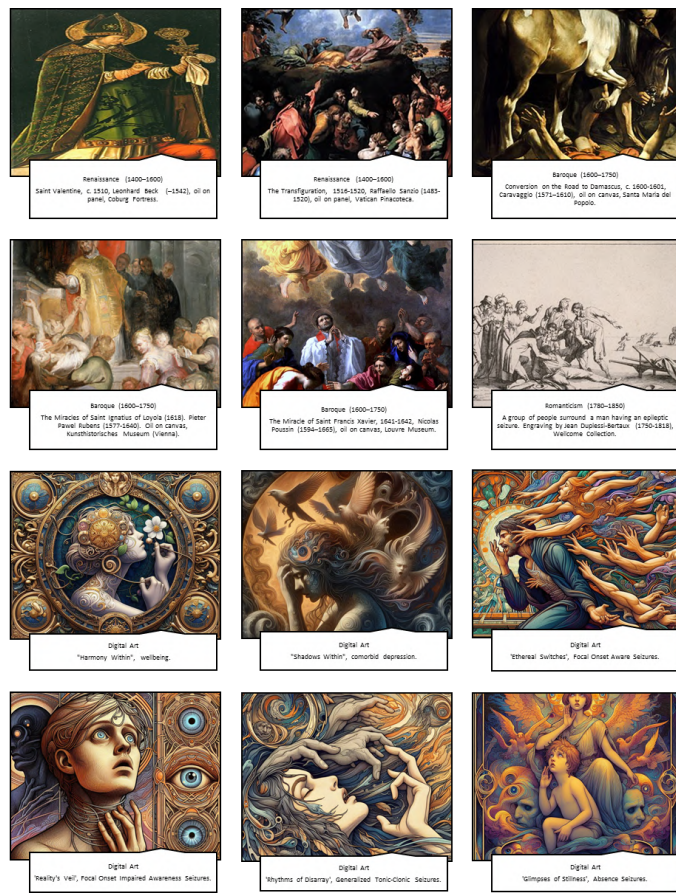


Figure 1: 'Artistic Odyssey Through Time and Neurological Realms from Digital Interpretations'. Sources: Wikimedia Commons / Wellcome Collection and Digital Arts by Image Creator of the DALL-E platform with recommendations given by the author of this paper.

The supposed neuroscientific basis is presented in the paper about painters with epilepsia of this series².

Programs such as Studio E: The Epilepsy Art Therapy Program¹³ and scratch art therapy in Japan¹¹ underscore the potential benefits of bolstering self-esteem, aiding emotional expression, and facilitating social adaptation. The utilization of art as a therapeutic medium opens avenues for self-expression and emotional regulation among patients facing difficulties in social adaptation or expressing their emotions.

Moreover, a pioneering endeavor led by Téllez-Zenteno and artist Eduardo Urbano Merino signifies a pivotal shift towards using art to elucidate the journey of epilepsy surgery. The painting 'Epilepsy, leaving behind the nightmare' visually narrates the transition from darkness and affliction to hope and recovery post-surgery. Placed at the Royal University Hospital in Canada, this artwork serves as a beacon, elucidating the potential benefits of epilepsy surgery through the universal language of art, bridging the gap between medical science and patient comprehension¹⁴.

CONCLUSION

Artistic representations of epilepsy, ranging from medieval allegories to modern digital media, mirror the changing public perception of this neurological disorder. The numerous depictions highlight evolving medical advancements, changing social attitudes, and expanding artistic expressions. They vary from ancient symbolic interpretations to Renaissance physical realism and emotional explorations in modern art. A notable shift is the emphasis on empathy and inclusivity now prevalent, which aims to raise knowledge and acceptance of epilepsy by demystifying the condition and eliminating stigma through innovative creative methods.

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