

Conferencia de clausura

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Tuberculosis and painting

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Tuberculosis is closely related to Art, especially to Painting and Literature. The XIX century brought the industrialization to the main European cities. Peasants moved to the cities looking for a safer salary although their life and work conditions became very poor there. Overcrowded one-room apartments and unsafe working places with poor ventilation contributed to spread tuberculosis among factory workers and miners, among their families and then to the general population. The XIX century was the Romantic Age, a period in which a great number of artists and writers developed their talent and left us a great number of Art and Literature masterpieces. Many artists contracted tuberculosis in the XIX century. At that time it was wrongly thought that tuberculosis and genius were linked. The effect of tuberculosis on the creative, inspirational process of painting was subject to open discussion. It was speculated that the low-grade fever induced by tuberculosis might increase perception, and accentuate the insight of the painter. On the other hand the social stigma of tuberculosis made the artist self-dependent having to exploit inner resources because he could not expect help from outside. Finally the prospect of an assumed but feared premature death added urgency to the act of painting. It was a true career to produce a final masterpiece before death would kill the sick painter.

Tuberculosis influenced the choice of artistic medium due to the disability it produced in the artist. Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), Italian artist, switched sculpting, that required more physical strength, produced dust and increased his respiratory symptoms to healthier painting. Tuberculosis might also influence the creativity and output of the painter for the reasons

described above, mostly an increased insight and self-reliant. But tuberculosis might also be the subject of painting, nothing strange considering the sinister influence of this sickness, then a deadly infection in him, his family and friends. Edward Munch (1863-1944), Norwegian painter, lost his mother and his loved sister Sophia to tuberculosis. So it was natural for him to represent scenes of sickness and death in his paintings, pieces with accentuated and sinister characteristics favored by his mental disease.

During the first half of the XIX century there was a romantic view of the disease, particularly among intellectuals and artists. Tuberculosis gave an aura of exceptionality to the sufferer that kept him separated from the average social standards. It was thought that "Tuberculosis was a disease given by the gods". A similar thought had occurred with epilepsy in the past. If the tuberculosis sufferer was a consecrated artist or writer (Eugene Delacroix and Theodore Gericault in painting, Frederic Chopin in music, the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen or Robert Louis Stevenson in writing), this exceptionality and social distinction was even more evident.

From the second half of the XIX century the social view of tuberculosis changed to worse. Tuberculosis was no more a divine disease but an infectious and contagious disease, many times associated with poverty, with doubtful moral behavior and addictions-prone personality in the sufferer. This social stigma led the artist to avoid medical treatment and increase his addictions tendency mostly to alcohol but also to other toxics. The most illustrative case of this stigmatization by tuberculosis was again Modigliani. He rejected the image of a sick artist, refused the tuberculosis treatment that might be offered at that time,



short life than Modigliani, dying young also victim to tuberculosis. Maria Blanchard (1881-1932), also from Spain, continued the cubist impulse of Juan Gris in Paris dying after a lifelong battle against tuberculosis.

Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918), a Swiss painter residing in Paris was also marked by tuberculosis that killed not only his parents, brothers and sisters but also his own son. A series of paintings by Hodler of his French model and mistress Valentine Godé-Rodel, at her deathbed is one of the more terrifying pieces on death painted in the history of Art. Interestingly, Gode-Darel died of cancer and not by tuberculosis.

As we have seen above the relationship of tuberculosis and painting is very close not only due to the frequency of tuberculosis among XIX and first quarter of the XX century painters but also because tuberculosis was directly or indirectly the subject of many of their works, some of them masterpieces of the history of Art as several paintings from Munch.

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terrified by the consequences of being pointed out as having tuberculosis. Instead he engaged heavily in alcohol, haschisch, opium and other drugs wrongly thinking to increase his energy and artistic inspiration with these toxics. These drugs changed his character to a violent and irritable person, increased his isolation and poverty and accelerated his decline and early death.

At the same time than Modigliani and also in Paris, Juan Gris (1887-1927), Spanish painter and one of the founders of the cubist movement, enjoyed a more peaceful although equally