NEUROLOGY AND ART

Fainting painting

Philip E.M. Smith

Consultant Neurologist, Department of Neurology, University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff, CF14 4XW, UK;

E-mail: SmithPE@cardiff.ac.uk

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SYNCOPE

Fainting (syncope) is temporary loss of consciousness and posture due to impaired cerebral perfusion. Vasovagal syncope, the commonest form, typically is situational (bathroom at night, or hot, crowded environments) with specific triggers, e.g. prolonged standing, emotional trauma, pain, coughing, swallowing or micturition. Vasovagal syncope is generally benign, but fainting without provocation or warning, or for the first time in older individuals, suggests the more serious cardiac syncope – this must be investigated and managed urgently.

There are three phases to syncope: prodrome, unconsciousness and recovery. The vasovagal syncope prodrome — light-headedness, nausea, sweating, blacking of vision — develops over 1–5 min. Unconsciousness lasts usually less than a minute, with pallor, sweating, cold skin, eyes open and elevated, and sometimes limb stiffness and convulsive jerks. Incontinence and injury are uncommon, and lateral tongue biting very rare. Recovery is prompt and any postictal confusion resolves in seconds.

SYNCOPE IN PAINTINGS

Although syncope is far more common than epilepsy (prevalence 22% compared to epilepsy 0.75%), in classical paintings, syncope is far rarer, and is usually depicted as a reaction to high drama and emotion, itself adding to that drama. In paintings showing epileptic seizures, demons are often implied as the cause (e.g. Peter Paul Rubens, 1577–1640, *The Miracles of St Ignatius of Loyola*. c. 1615/16. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria). But this is not the case for syncope. In paintings, it

is generally women who faint (often beautiful women), with the frequent implication that they are feigning unconsciousness. A man fainting in a painting is rare; when it happens, there is usually a serious, medical explanation such as exsanguination, heart attack or poisoning.

Crucifixion fainting

The best and most common depictions of syncope in classical art show Mary, mother of Jesus, fainting at the Cross. There is no finer or more beautiful example than Rogier van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross*.

Figure 1. Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1399–1464). *The Descent from the Cross*. c.1435–40. 220 × 262 cm. Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

den's 'The Deposition' (Fig. 1.) Van der Weyden here used the newly introduced medium of oil painting, allowing a minuteness of realistic detail hitherto impossible with fresco. Despite this, the scene's composition is traditional, more symbolic than natural, with figures closely crowding the dead Christ as he is deposited from an unrealistically small Cross. Mary's posture replicates that of the dead Christ. Her pallor is highlighted by the pure white of her head-dress and Jesus' robes. Her posture and plight echo her son's physical and emotional agony. Mary's calamitous collapse serves as a metaphor for Christ's Passion — her prodrome, unconsciousness lying still and pale, and recovery symbolizing his suffering, death and resurrection. These parallels are reinforced by Christ's almost unblemished appearance, with only fine blood trickling from his five wounds, implying that he too has only fainted and will rise again. Many similar crucifixion scenes also have Mary's faint as almost the focus of the painting. In most, her oneness with her crucified son is re-stated through similarities in posture. (Agostino Carracci, 1557–1602, *Lamentation of Christ*. 1606. National Gallery, London, UK; Sebastiano Del Piombo, 1485–1547, *Deposition*. 1516. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia; Giovanni Sodoma, 1477–1549, *The Descent from the Cross*. c.1505/10. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, Italy; Jacopo Tintoretto, 1518–94, *Descent from the Cross (Pietà)*. c. 1559. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy.

Rembrandt, however, worked his 'Descent from the Cross' (Fig. 2) rather differently. His is a darker though equally touching portrayal of Mary's collapse. This chiaroscuro illuminates centrally a very human Jesus, floppy, bruised and bleeding as he is taken from the Cross. His distraught mother, equally human and (typically for Rembrandt) rather plain, is very much a secondary figure collapsing in the dim periphery. In another Rembrandt painting, 'The Deposition', Mary is even more peripheral, older and plainer, supine and pale in the foreground darkness. 1634. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

Historical fainting

Historical paintings were popular in the 18th century, providing not only beautiful decoration, but also a vehicle to impress friends with the owners' historical and legendary education and knowledge. In Jean-Joseph Taillasson's 'Virgil reading the Aeneid to Augustus and Octavia' (Fig. 3), the Emperor and his sister listen to Virgil reading from the Aeneid. Octavia has fainted at the reference to her dead son Marcellus. A closer inspection shows her to be frowning and distressed, with pink skin and

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Figure 2. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). *The Descent from the Cross*. 1634. Oil on canvas. 158 × 117 cm. Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Figure 3. Jean-Joseph Taillasson (1785–1809). *Virgil reading the Aeneid to Augustus and Octavia* (1787. Oil on canvas. 147 × 167 cm. National Gallery, London, UK.

half open eyes; on balance this is most likely a simulated faint. Although there is no written evidence that this scene occurred, Octavia, the great niece of Julius Caesar, was not unaccustomed to compromise for her family's benefit (Smith 1999). After her first husband's death, she married Mark Antony to reconcile him to Augustus; Antony then left her for Cleopatra. Following his death, she brought up Antony's children by Fulvia, his first wife, and also those by Cleopatra. This scene was probably invented to appeal to the neoclassical taste of late eighteenth century polite society, where simulated fainting was relatively common.

A more frequently painted historical scene of emotionally provoked fainting (or swooning) is of Esther, Queen to King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I of Persia). Following his search for the most beautiful woman in the land, he chose Esther, a Jewish orphan brought up by her soldier cousin, Mordecai. Esther had kept her Jewish identity secret. Haman, the king's chief minister, plotted to destroy Mordecai and eliminate all Persian Jews. Esther warned the king, even though to address him unbidden and to identify with her people risked her own death. But the king, impressed by her courage, ordered Haman's execution on the gallows built for Mordecai, whom he elevated to chief minister (The Bible). All this made Esther faint with relief. Caucig's 'Queen Esther before King Ahasuerus' shows an apparently unconscious but rosy-cheeked and discretely smiling Esther held upright by her courtiers. (Francesco Caucig 1755–1828. *Queen Esther before King Ahasuerus*. c. 1815. Oil on canvas, 141.6 × 207 cm. University of Virginia Art Museum, USA). However, since the apparent faint was likely a manipulative swoon, her health was never threatened by remaining upright. This posture is repeated in other works on the same theme: Antoine Coypel, 1661–1722, *The Swooning of Esther*. c. 1704. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France; Valentin Lefevre, 1637–1677, *Esther before Ahasuerus*. Late 17th century. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia; Nicolas Poussin, 1594–1665, *Esther before Ahasuerus*. 1640s. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Genre fainting

Genre is a painting style focusing on domestic scenes and was popularised by 18th century Dutch and Flemish artists. With art no longer the preserve of rich country house owners, wealthy collectors preferred meticulously painted, small-scale, portable canvases rather than large history paintings. Fainting occasionally featured, usually in response to emotion and again with suggested psychological components. Marguerite Gérard, among the few women artists of her time, developed a popular style of sentimental domestic genre painting, rendering minutely accurate details with subtly blended brush strokes. Her 'Bad News' (Fig. 4) shows a mother's response to learning of her son's death; an attendant attempts revival by smelling salts. As with Esther, the circumstance and lack of pallor suggest a swoon.

Pietro Longhi offered intimate glimpses of Venetian upper class social and domestic life in a period of refined decadence. His best work showed his well-to-do patrons at leisure in their living rooms. 'The Faint' depicts a young woman apparently

Figure 4. Marguerite Gérard (1761–1837). *Bad News*. 1804. Oil on canvas. 63 × 50 cm. Musée de Louvre, Paris, France.

having fainted, looking not particularly pale, and evidently causing a commotion. (Pietro Longhi 1702–1785. *The Faint*. c. 1744. Oil on canvas. 50 × 61.7 cm. Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC USA). Her concerned and wide-eyed attendants provide a pillow and smelling salts. Closer viewing shows her surprisingly to be grey haired and with closed eyes brimming with tears. Her right breast has been bared in the chaos – perhaps Longhi used this as an excuse to titillate potential male customers. A table on the left has spilt cards, coins and an open purse. It is likely the lady had been gambling, conveniently fainting to turn the table and cut her losses.

A more satirical depiction of fainting features in Hogarth's 'A Rake's Progress' (William Hogarth 1697–1764. *A Rake's Progress. VII The Prison*. 1733–4, Oil on canvas. Sir John Soane's Museum, London UK). Tom's hapless first love Sarah collapses in horror when visiting him in Fleet, the debtors' prison, while his one-eyed wife scolds him for gambling away her money. Sarah's faint is managed rather heavily-handedly by smelling salts and slapping.

Men fainting

Men rarely faint in paintings. Isaac Cruikshank's 'A Dandy Fainting' shows an effeminate caricature fainting on hearing a divine castrato singing, as several male friends flap around him

Figure 5. XI. Benjamin West (1738–1820). *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*. 1778. Oil on canvas. 71.4 × 92.0 cm. Kimbell Art Museum, Texas, USA.

(Isaac Cruikshank, 1756–1811, *A Dandy Fainting or, an exquisite in fits*. Scene a private box opera. 1818. The Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK). But almost always when men faint in classical paintings, the cause is serious, even life-threatening. For example, in Benjamin West's 'The Death of Nelson', the pale and dying English hero is presyncopal, exsanguinating at Trafalgar (Benjamin West 1738–1820. *The Death of Nelson* 1806. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool UK). West, though born in America, had enjoyed King George III's patronage and later painted a similarly structured 'Death of the Earl of Chatham' (Fig. 5). This shows the House of Lords on 7th April 1778, with 70-year-old William Pitt the Elder, the First Earl of Chatham, collapsing from a myocardial infarction during a crucial American colonies debate. Despite the painting's title, the Earl died not immediately but a month later. This has become the best-known fainting painting, commonly used in talks on syncope.

CONCLUSIONS

- Although fainting is common in real life, it is depicted less commonly in paintings than epilepsy.
- Emotion, particularly grief, usually causes fainting in paintings; however, real life common causes (prolonged standing, hot environments) are rarely depicted.
- Women much more commonly faint in paintings than men, and are typically young and beautiful, and reacting to grief.
- Faints in painting, particularly among women, frequently have psychogenic overtones (swooners typically have pink skin, rosy cheeks, closed eyes and are held upright, seemingly without harmful effect).
- When men faint in paintings, there is usually a medically serious, even life-threatening cause.

Figure 6. William Hogarth (1697–1764). *An Election Entertainment*. 1754, Oil on canvas. 100 × 127 cm. Sir John Soane's Museum, London, UK.

In fact a better example comes from West's pupil, John Copley, in his more detailed 'Death of the Earl of Chatham' (John Copley 1738–1815). *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*. (1779–1781. Oil on canvas. 228.6 × 307.3 cm. Tate Gallery, London; on loan to National Portrait Gallery, London UK). With impressive observation of medical detail, Copley shows the Earl looking pale, with eyes open and elevated, having his legs raised by fellow peers.

Less fortunate is William Hogarth's mayor in 'An Election Entertainment' (Fig. 6), a political satire criticising the corruption of the 1754 Oxfordshire election. 18th century elections depended on the number of franchised men (those worth more than 40 shillings per year) who could be bribed to vote for a party (Gordon 1775). Here, the two Whig candidates on the left have hosted a lavish banquet. The mayor on the right of the round table has collapsed from overindulgence, the empty oyster shells and the plentiful ale giving sufficient explanation. A barber-surgeon, smilingly content in his work, treats the faint by mopping his sweaty brow, maintaining the upright posture, and applying a tourniquet, as he prepares to venesect.

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