NEUROLOGY IN ART

The Madhouse

The Madhouse (c1800) by Francisco de Goya, Academia de San Fernando, Madrid/Bridgeman Art Library, London.

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The problems of the mentally ill have challenged both society and physicians for centuries. In times past their odd behaviour often associated with insanity was interpreted as the result of demonic possession. It could also, sometimes, be a source of public amusement. To control their behaviour the insane were often manacled. This appalling state of affairs is well illustrated in this work by Goya (1746–1828). He was not the first or last to depict the institutionalized insane (for example, Hogarth's *Bethlem Hospital* in 1735 and Chepik's *The Madhouse* in 1987), but Goya's work certainly evoked the suffering and torment of these individuals. Interestingly, Goya had been taken seriously ill in 1792 at the age of 47 with loss of balance, difficulty in walking, partial blindness and deafness. It has been suggested that this could have been a viral-induced Vogt–Koyanagi–Harada syndrome. Over the following months he gradually recovered but remained permanently deaf. This harrowing illness may well have had an influence on his later work. It is also quite possible he had a fear of insanity himself because two of his relatives (an aunt and uncle) were affected in this way.

By the 19th century it was becoming clear that insanity was a disease of the nervous system, an idea pioneered, among others, by William Cullen (1710–1790), an Edinburgh physician. Later, mental illness became clearly associated with the speciality of neurology with the establishment of a University Chair of Neurology and Psychiatry in Berlin in 1865 first held by Wilherm Griesinger (1817–1868).

However, for many years individuals with mental problems continued to be cared for in large institutions or asylums, though their management became more humane, encouraged by Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) in France and Samuel Tuke (1784–1857) in England. By the mid-Victorian era, medical care for the mentally ill had been accepted with the creation of trained Medical Superintendents.

The situation changed dramatically however, from the 1950s when lithium and other antidepressants and later anti-psychotic drugs became available and most patients could then be treated and managed in the community – a very far cry from Goya's madhouse.

Se by Francisco Goya