

José Guimón, Art and Madness

(Contemporary European Cultural Studies)

Art and Madness offers a critical review of current theories on the relationship between artistic creativity and the psychiatric disturbances that can favor this creativity, the psychodynamic mechanisms proposed by psychoanalysts to explain creativity, and the psychosociological factors that play a role in creativity.

Using a series of vignettes throughout that incorporate brief biographical outlines and psychopathological portraits of artists like De Kooning, Virginia Woolff, Frida Kahlo, Oscar Wilde, Verlaine, Rimbaud and others, the author serves up a rich offering of conditions ranging from psychotic states, to physical defects, to sadomasochism, to exhibitionism, and includes a discussion on the limits between obscenity, pornography and progressive political action.

He concludes with a summary and some conclusions concerning many of the aspects in which the psycho-biographies presented can reinforce consideration of the respective importance of the processes of homeostasis that regulate psychic equilibrium in artists.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I reviews the mechanisms involved in artistic creativity and the psychiatric disturbances that can favor this creativity. In Part II the author summarizes the psychodynamic mechanisms proposed by psychoanalysts to explain creativity. Part III looks at psychosociological factors that play a role in creativity through an examination of different modernist and postmodern movements in the arts.

Brief biographical outlines are included throughout the text, some quite extensive, of selected modern artists, writers and painters from various countries. The author has contributed psychopathological portraits about some aspects of their lives and works that serve to illustrate some of the proposed neuropsychological mechanisms reviewed in Parts I and II.

The author concludes with a summary and some conclusions concerning many of the aspects in which the psycho-biographies presented can reinforce consideration of the respective importance of the processes of homeostasis that regulate psychic equilibrium in artists.

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Preface to the book

In ancient times and in the Middle Ages the mentally ill benefited (occasionally, and to a very limited extent) from an aura of 'prestige', which led to a certain 'positive discrimination'. It was considered, for example, that they should be given special consideration because they were the only human beings who always told the truth, or because they were objects of divine possession (particularly in the case of epileptics). However, this allegedly positive bias does not appear to correspond to a historical reality. Foucault (1972), for example, contends that the only reason mad people were subjected at times to certain "holy" rites (for instance clipping their hair in the shape of a cross) was to make them easily identifiable (just like other undesirable elements in society) as objects of state charity and public welfare.

In the Age of Enlightenment the idea that the madman, like the so-called genius, sees reality more accurately than the ordinary person would, was frequently expressed in Western literature. Madness was viewed in a positive light as an alternative to constricting 'reason', as can be seen from the popularity of the character of Don Quixote. But we should recall that the hidalgo ended up systematically humiliated and beaten in the same way madness has led, over the ages, to ruin.

During the twentieth century, theories that mental patients were more creative than other human beings were not foreign to psychoanalysis. A certain confusion arose in the different terms used when speaking of the relationship between creativity and psychiatric patients. These ideologies have evolved towards the belief that mental patients are more creative than the general population and the prevailing myth of the mad genius.

This book reviews current theories on the relationship between creativity and psychopathology and the psychoanalytical and sociological interpretations of creativity. The eighteen chapters are grouped into three sections referring successively to biological, psychodynamic and social factors. Clinical and biographical vignettes illustrate the text.

I tried to adopt a critical attitude towards attempts to establish a simple correlation between certain artistic characteristics and different types of madness. I will try to show that, in contemporary studies, artistic genius appears to us to be the result of an exceptional creative ability, which is present in unconventional, highly motivated people who are professionally ambitious and have a high level of intelligence. Reliable studies show that artists and various members of their families have a higher incidence of psychiatric disorders than does the general population. However, when mental disorder truly emerges, creativity decreases.

The Author

José Guimón, M.D., PhD, is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychiatry, University of Bilbao, Adjunct Clinical Professor at New York University, and a member of the International Psychoanalytical Association. He is the author of more than one hundred and fifty research articles in various international journals, and the source of more than thirty books for which he served as author or, in some cases, editor.