The Role of Ocular Disease in Art

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Several world renowned artists have dealt with and experienced ocular disease that has greatly influenced their art. Before the 20th century the major problems plaguing artists were due to aging such as cataracts. Once cataract surgery became a practical option, diseases such as glaucoma and retinal ailments became the main afflictions. Artists like Monet and Degas had their lives and their art severely change due to their eye disease. By investigating the causes, progress, and treatment of their ocular disease I hope to gain a better understanding of how different ocular ailments have influenced the perspective and production of art of different artists.
Monet

Claude Monet (1840-1926) was arguably the most famous Impressionist, and one of the most well known artists today. In 1912, Monet was diagnosed with bilateral cataracts. He had been struggling with color perception for a couple of years before then. This was a big problem for him because his artistic career focused on the perception of color and light. He refused surgery until 1923 when he only had light perception in his right eye. He underwent surgery in the right eye only.

During the years when Monet’s vision was severely compromised by his cataract his painting changed drastically. They went from focusing on a naturalistic style (above) to a more abstract and obscure representation of the same object (left). His later works were full of dense swirls and loose strokes of color. In his earlier works he uses more representative colors, several greens and blues. His later paintings featured several maroons, rusts, and oranges, which had not been seen often in his earlier works.
After cataract surgery Monet became severely depressed due to the slow and painstaking recovery at the time. It was not until 1925 that he fully recovered and had normal vision in his right eye. Monet continued to paint after his surgery and his paintings more closely resembled his earlier works (Figure 6, 7). He never again used such vivid colors or broad strokes as he did during his cataract days.

The painting above was done before Monet was afflicted with cataracts, and the one to the right is after his cataract surgery and recovery. Both works are of similar style.
Edgar Degas was a French Impressionist well known for his depiction of the human form through his art. He had a healthy and relatively visually unimpaired youth followed by a long-lasting incapacitating blindness that ultimately led him to sacrifice his love of painting. It is known that he suffered from a retinal disease, but the details remain unknown because his ophthalmologist’s records are no longer in existence. He frequently complained of intolerance to bright light, blurring in parts of his visual fields, as well as a blind spot in the center of his visual field. His visual problems plagued him for the greater part of his life, and led his art to change through time. This early painting of his (left) shows great precision and detail in his paintings, whereas in his later works (right) he could no longer portray faces or hands and his painting is much coarser. He ultimately was forced to quit painting and turn to sculpting, where the use of his hands greatly helped him, as his form of artistic expression.
A surprising number of artists were stricken by eye disease, many more than the few I have mentioned in this presentation. There are artists who were afflicted at a young age, such as Degas, and found amazing ways to let it sway their art. There are also artists like Monet, who changed their style without knowing, creating beautiful abstract pieces of art. Through this presentation I hoped to point out the way eye disease played a major role in these artists lives, which was transmitted through their art. Their ocular problem was always in the back of their mind, whether the artists were trying to camouflage it or trying to incorporate it, it was constantly present and ultimately expressed itself in their art.

References: