

Art for Health

by Joan Altabe



Researchers in Sweden say they've discovered that viewing and discussing art eases constipation. No joke. A recent Utne Reader reports that a group of 20 elderly art lovers who met once a week for four months to look and discuss art required fewer laxatives than usual. Their blood pressure also went down. One wonders what kind of art they looked at.

This isn't the first report of its kind. "The Guardian," a newspaper out of London cited research from the University of Westminster showing stress levels dropping nearly 50 percent after 28 city workers looked at the Guildhall Art Gallery collection for 40 minutes.

Have you seen this collection? One example is "La Ghirlandata" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a tortured soul who made the painting after attempting suicide, and you get a hint of this by the mopey and melancholy mood of what should be a benign subject: a woman playing a harp.

Another example is "Israel in Egypt" by Sir Edward Pointer, which illustrates the part of Exodus that tells of the enslaved Israelites building the pharaohs' storehouses. Pointer shows some nasty stuff, including the image of an Egyptian princess helping her small son to

lash some slaves with his toy whip.

But, hey, if Londoners find such things peaceful, they're liable to be put to sleep by some of the paintings at the Ringling Museum in my city (Sarasota, FL), like Jan Steen's "Rape of the Sabine Women" - a pictorial of smirking attackers tearing women from their loved ones.

Then there's "Judith with the Head of Holofernes" by Francesco del Cairo. Judith was the Old Testament heroine who cut off the head of the Assyrian general Holofernes to keep his army from overrunning her town. Judith shows no facial expression as her handmaiden lowers the lopped-off head from a plate into a sack. The decapitation couldn't have been easy. Certainly it must have been messy. It's hard to imagine Judith doing it without a look of repugnance at the sight of blood that had to have spurted everywhere, including on her. Yet there she is, looking as if she were watching her maid doing the dishes. She seems so unfeeling that you half expect to see her pat a curl while the gory scene takes place.

Getting sleepy yet?

Of course, Ringling isn't the only showcase of blood and gore. If Londoners find relaxation by looking at pictures of slavery and melancholy,

they'll feel like they're on vacation when seeing "Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus," two unclothed females forcibly taken by a pair of burly young men on horseback, by Peter Paul Rubens, on view at Munich's Alte Pinakothek.

I don't get it. Maybe I should move to London.

Or Sweden.

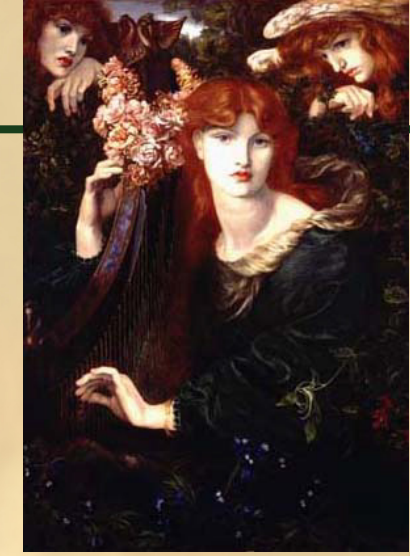
Matisse would have understood. He dreamt of an art "free from disturbing and engrossing subject matter . . . like a palliative, a mental soother, something similar to a good armchair that does away with the strain of his physical fatigues."

I hope you don't take him or these health reports seriously. Next thing you know, you'll be saying that exposure to art makes you a better person.

You have only to look at the number of scoundrels who made art through the ages to know that goodness and art do not necessarily go together. Three painters from the 17th century come to mind.


Alonso Cano, an ordained priest who painted devotional religious pictures of supreme serenity ("Mary" shows a beatific facial expression), was an ill-tempered man suspected of murdering his wife.

Agostino Tassi's reputation was in marine landscape painting. But he also was a convicted rapist, his victims being one of his students and his sister-in-law, who he impregnated. His wife was missing and presumed dead at the hand of Tassi.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was celebrated for fervent religious paintings and described with great heart and grace an inert Lazarus ("Raising of Lazarus") slumped against the supporting arms of those behind him. He was also a murderer who fled to escape punishment. And in the process of movingly describing Lazarus' lifeless form in paint, Caravaggio asked his assistants to dig up a corpse in a semi-decomposed condition and pose it in their arms. When they balked at the smell, he threatened them with a knife.

Such horror pleads the question, should art be measured by the good mood it produces? Hitler's answer is on the record. He believed that art should be a refuge, an escape from reality into a world of wishful pictures of bucolic innocence, of romantic, Arcadian rural settings uncontaminated by real life, by a "rotting world," as he put it. He should know.

But a question goes unasked, unanswered: if art is truth, how can artists ignore the world around them? 

Joan Altabe is an art critic, artist and author of *Art Behind the Scenes: One Hundred Masters In and Out of Their Studios*.