Dementia and Art

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Some individuals with the semantic variant of primary progressive aphasia (svPPA) develop new artistic skills in the setting of neurodegenerative disease. With svPPA the UCSF Memory and Aging Center has reported increased creativity in visual art, music and mechanical design as the patient loses verbal language aptitude. The artwork of people with svPPA tends to be literal versus abstract and the use of color is striking. Pictures of animals and people are common. As the illness encroaches upon the right anterior temporal lobe, faces often become distorted, bizarre and even alien, reflecting their specific deficits in recognizing faces, emotions and their meaning. As patients lose the meaning of words, the images become more vague and eccentric. The elements often show no contextual meaning or relationships to other elements and are reduced to reflecting the pure perception of the visual properties. While the composition may not represent a planned, coherent creative expression of an idea, the arrangement and representation of the fundamental pieces can be highly original. Generally, the paintings are realistic or surrealistic without a significant symbolic or abstract component.