

Poverty and painting: representations in 19th century Europe

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The social gradient in health is familiar to many readers of scientific journals as a diagonal line on a graph showing the almost universal and often linear relation between people's social and economic circumstances and their health. The pathways to and from poverty and poverty's impact on health, however, have also vividly been represented in paintings, particularly in 19th century Europe. These paintings let us see what was considered important by the artist and by the wider society. Aspects of poverty that are directly or indirectly related to health were also painted frequently in the 19th century, which suggests that references to the health effects of poverty in these paintings were important in raising and reinforcing concerns about poverty. To early 21st century spectators, these paintings are visual reminders of the values that helped to create the modern welfare state.

In the 19th century the images in paintings had wide circulation, as they were often copied by engravers and reproduced in popular magazines such as *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News*. The 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle attracted more than 50 million visitors in five months and had two palaces of contemporary art, where well heeled visitors were forced to confront the plight and potential power of the urban poor in paintings such as Jules Adler's *The Weary*. This is an example of the work of artists who, with homage to Victor Hugo, were occasionally dubbed "Miserabilistes."¹ Today, visiting galleries remains a popular leisure activity and a common school outing. The visual arts help to tell and re-tell important national stories and not only form a "collective memory" that helps people to define themselves in relation to others² but may also illustrate what Emile Durkheim called the "collective or common conscience."³

We have developed a classification for the iconography of poverty, including the health effects of poverty, as represented in 19th century European paintings. We have identified six main categories of images: sin and charity; poor housing, evictions, and homelessness; working conditions; hunger, crime, and lifestyle risks; disease and death; and revolution and visionary societies. We illustrate this classification with examples, without any pretension to completeness (see appendix on bmj.com).

Images of sin and charity

European art has a long history of moralistic paintings showing the temptations and perils of the seven deadly sins. Poverty was considered by some a consequence of sin and represented by an old woman in rags. A 17th century allegorical Dutch painting by van de Venne shows a man in rags carrying his old father and a child on his back, indicating that a person who is born into poverty is more likely to live and die in poverty. In this precursor to the "lifecourse hypothesis" the scroll at the bottom of the painting announces that poverty

Summary points

The pathways to and from poverty and poverty's impact on health are vividly represented in 19th century European painting

A typology of paintings representing poverty includes images of sin and charity; poor housing, evictions, and homelessness; working conditions; hunger, crime, and lifestyle risks; disease and death; and revolution and visionary societies

Aspects of poverty related to health suggest that references to the health effects of poverty in these paintings were important in raising and reinforcing concerns about poverty and reinforcing values that helped to create the modern welfare state

must carry around its own miserable bones. Stories from the Bible were also used allegorically to warn people of the temptations to which they could fall prey and to remind them of the Christian duty of the father to welcome home the prodigal son and of the wayfarer to be a good Samaritan.

Such pictures were about individual acts of sin and charity. They contained little sense of the social structure that lies behind poverty but instead served to strengthen the age old incentive structure for diligence based on individual and family responsibility. The poor in these paintings provided an opportunity for the prudent and beneficent wealthy to display their charity, such as in Beechey's *Portrait of Sir Francis Ford's Children Giving a Coin to a Beggar Boy*.

By the end of the 19th century, however, paintings of individuals' charity had given way to paintings critical of charity and alms-houses. For the first time, the itinerant and working poor were represented with dignity and a certain majesty, but also as a threat to the established order. The Danish painter Mastrand's *An Englishman Pursued by Beggars in Rome* shows begging by the hungry and disabled as an unwelcome intrusion. The collective power of the workers trudging to work in Adler's *The Weary* is understated. Increasingly, the poor look directly at the viewer, not at their benefactors. Their presence is a challenge to compassion and privilege.

Related to these ideas about charity was the awareness of the moral ambiguity of good fortune—the idea that life is brief, material goods are ephemeral, and much knowledge is vanity. With this religious compass, those who are rich one day may be poor the next, so those enjoying good fortune have a duty to help the unfortunate. There is a tradition of cautionary tales, also derived in part from the seven deadly sins, from which 19th century artists drew. The landlord in Danhausser's *The Rich Glutton* becomes a humble supplicant in the companion painting *The Monastery Soup*.



Brief details of relevant paintings are listed on bmj.com

Images of poor housing, eviction and homelessness

Dispossession from small rural landholdings and the decline in the viability of many smallholdings in the 19th century led to widespread evictions. In the absence of general welfare provisions and with the vagaries of the poor law, many women and children in particular were left homeless—scenes poignantly shown in Millais' *'Blow, blow the winter wind'* and Fletcher's *Evicted* (fig 1). Many rural workers migrated to the colonies, leaving the old and young behind, as in Faed's *Last of the Clan*, or to the industrial cities, where they often lived in appalling, overcrowded conditions that led to the rise of communicable diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis. The tubercular woman in Josef Israëls' *Woman at the Window* seems to look out of a small dark window in despair.

Images of working conditions

With the rapid industrialisation in many European countries, the nature and organisation of work became a subject of painting. In Ford Madox Brown's *Work* his strong Christian socialism is shown in the placement of the workers digging drains in front and their bosses behind. This arrangement is replicated in the painting of a sweatshop by Isaac Israëls, but the sombre colours show none of the bright light that radiates across Brown's paintings. There was a new sympathy for the physical exhaustion of manual labour, as shown in paintings of washerwomen by Degas, Daumier, and Arkhipov (fig 2) and factory workers. As workers attempted to take more control of their conditions of work, the devastating effect of strikes and lockouts was a common theme.



Fig 2 *The Laundresses* (1901) by Abram Arkhipov



Fig 1 *Evicted* (1887) by Blandford Fletcher

A whole catalogue could be drawn up of specific occupations portrayed in 19th century paintings—for example, floor scrapers, stone cutters, miners, laundresses, seamstresses, coffee pickers, and foundry workers. Many of these jobs have specific health risks that are graphically portrayed, such as the dangers of being burned by molten iron in Luce's *The Steel Works* (fig 3).

Images of hunger, crime, and lifestyle risks

Many European museums have paintings with haunting images of famine and starvation. In Finland, a whole genre of painting shows the hunger and depression of rural poverty, such as Sparre's *First Snow*. The most famous and controversial is *The Wage Slaves* by Järnefelt, who, as the title indicates, was influenced by Tolstoyan ideas. It shows in stark form the social position of landless rural peasants. The peasants were contracted by landowners to burn off forest and till and cultivate crops. If the harvest did not fail, as it had the year before this painting was painted, they received a third of the crop in payment. A young girl with a blackened, skull-like face stares out at the viewer in mute protest. Millet's famous painting *The Gleaners* also shows the plight of landless peasants, who were permitted to pick up the remainders left in the field after the harvest. Swedish painter Zorn's *Our Daily Bread* shows a young girl bringing wood and gleanings to her mother, who sits in tired dejection by a cooking fire. Krohg's *Struggle for Existence* shows the plight of those who flocked to the cities, fighting for stale bread handed out as a charity each winter morning.

Often, assuaged hunger and exhaustion were—as Daumier, Manet, and Degas showed—through the taking of drugs such as tobacco, alcohol, absinthe, and laudanum.

Images of disease and death

The consequences of hunger, poor nutrition, and recurrent communicable diseases were shown in the common themes of disease and death. Despite conflicting theories of miasma or germ theory causing disease, many paintings of the period preferred a religious or symbolist explanation, such as Delaunay's *The*



Fig 3 *The Steel Works* (1895) by Maximilien Luce

Plague in Rome, in which the poor and sinful fall literally by the wayside while the righteous and those with wealth are protected from the avenging angels for a little longer behind their closed doors.

Reflecting the toll of epidemic diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis for the first time, paintings depicted children's disfigurement, such as Sorolla y Bastida's *Sad Inheritance*, or their dying, such as Krohg's *Sick Girl* (fig 4) and *The Inheritance*. The companion paintings of funerals, such as Edelfert's *A Child's Funeral* and Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans*, shocked gallery goers by their unsentimental focus on the pervasive reality of early death. Slot-Moller portrayed poverty leading to premature death in his gripping and controversial *The Poor: The Waiting Room of Death*.

High rates of maternal mortality left large number of orphans, many of whom had to fend for themselves on the streets. The child left alone in Munch's *The Dead Mother* looks out at the viewer and covers her ears to block out the horror.

Images of revolution and visionary societies

The 19th century was also the age of revolution, most famously epitomised by Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. The fall of the Paris Commune led to several paintings of the heroic resistance put up by the workers, 30 000 of whom were killed. Paintings such as Goya's *Execution of the defenders of Madrid, 3rd May, 1808* invoke the image of Christ (fig 5). Morisco, a Spaniard of Moorish descent, is depicted as the common man and hero, and, to emphasise this point, he is shown in a posture of crucifixion, making him a symbol of oppressed humanity in general and, in particular, of Spain oppressed by Napoleonic troops. Defeat contains the seeds of affirmation of the right to life. Painters also evoked the horrors of war by showing the tide of human refugees made homeless by war, such as Daumier's *The Refugees*.

The 19th century was also a time of utopian and visionary images of what was possible in human society. William Blake produced a series of visionary paintings about mankind transfigured by revolution and a series of graphic illustrations to highlight the plight of black slaves tortured in Surinam. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon coming On)* illustrated the growing abhorrence of slavery and the plight of the powerless. Such visionary paintings are given more material form in 20th century works by painters such as Diego Rivera, whose paintings made manifest an idealised progress of the Mexican revolution.

Conclusion

The historian Simon Schama has pointed out that "treating art as a kind of historical evidence has dangers for the unwary" and that paintings and prints "filter the perception of the eye through the lens of moral sensibility."⁴ In this article it is the "moral sensibility" that is of interest, and we consider the paintings not as literal records of historical or social experience but as documents of beliefs. These paintings cast light on contemporary perceptions of social relations, which were critical for the development of public health. The images show the tensions inherent in varying responses to the poor and their health problems—religious charity, humanistic civility and reform, or revolutionary identification. The representations of poverty in 19th century paintings show how poor housing, bad working conditions, and chronic hunger cause ill health and early death, showing that artists clearly saw the fundamental causes of ill health and brought them to wider public attention.

What we see in museums today is only a fraction of the art originally produced. What paintings and prints people chose to collect and preserve, and which of these



Fig 4 *Sick Girl* (1890-1) by Christian Krohg

survive war and decay, is to some extent random, to some extent an outcome of social and cultural construction. None the less, the surviving works of museum art represent potent cultural capital from which nations and the international community can draw to reinforce common notions of social justice and humanity.⁵ For example, in a country that has suffered famine, such as Finland, the strong values embodied in the paintings of charity and social inclusion may have helped to reinforce their cross party policies of social welfare.

By the middle of the 19th century, one of the reasons for the departure from earlier ways of portraying the poor was that patronage of the arts had moved away from institutions like the church and state and was almost entirely in the hands of middle class patrons.⁶ Such patronage apparently did not inhibit a broad range of political opinions, although "the progressive artist, in popular opinion, was considered almost as dangerous to society as was the radical or revolutionary politician."⁷ Painters like Courbet and Daumier were imprisoned for their political acts and opinions. Daumier died in poverty, having never had a commission.

As the 19th century closed, painters were less interested in narratives and making the meaning in their paintings explicit; they became more interested in representing intimate personal emotions or changing perceptions of the nature of reality itself. As art lost its social subject matter it seemed to become more personal and private.⁸ Realism of any kind, and especially social realism, became a marker of cultural backwardness in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the pictorial power of the 19th century artists who highlighted the experiences of the poor in Europe helped open the eyes of the public to the often terrible consequences of poverty. Many of these paintings created considerable controversy at the time as they were seen to challenge the social order. But they also highlighted that poverty has consequences for the rich. The strong humanism of these paintings reinforced national feelings of solidarity and social inclusion that led to the rise of the welfare



Fig 5 Execution of the defenders of Madrid, 3rd May, 1808 (1814) by Francisco Goya

states across Europe. Their prolific reproduction since—in posters, books, and postcards—may have helped to maintain the ties of civility and the idea that we share a common humanity with all people in society, regardless of our present social position.

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Extra vigilance required

While working as anaesthetists and intensive care specialists over the past few years, and in talking to our colleagues around the world, we have noticed that extra vigilance and attention is required when our surgical colleagues voice certain concerns or comments. The list below is a compilation of those comments.

You know you should worry when the surgeon says:

1. She is 91 but otherwise healthy.
2. This will take me two minutes. I'll just be in and out.
3. He was initially admitted to the medical service.
4. Just give him a quick general anaesthetic.
5. There is no need to intubate him; just put in an LMA.
6. I need lots more relaxation.
7. Can you show me that computed tomogram one more time?
8. Are you sure you white balanced the scope?
9. This aorta is like paper.
10. How many units did you type and cross?
11. You are not using nitrous oxide, are you?
12. Get me some suction that works.
13. Do we have that fibrin glue stuff?
14. These scissors are blunt.
15. This is not surgical bleeding ... are the blood products here yet?
16. The intern will be closing.
17. It must be mostly irrigation. There is no way I lost so much blood.
18. I think we should start broad spectrum antibiotics.
19. What do you mean she received 5 litres of crystalloid?
20. Let's start some renal dose dopamine.
21. She needs a PA catheter STAT!
22. Do not feed him quite yet.
23. The anastomosis is fine, but just to be sure, keep the BP below 150.
24. Just keep him in the intensive care unit one more day.
25. In my personal experience ...

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