Art Provides Window on Epilepsy Experience

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SAN DIEGO — Artwork created by artists with epilepsy can help others gain insight to the experiences of patients with the condition, Dr. Steven C. Schachter said at the annual meeting of the American Epilepsy Society and the Canadian League Against Epilepsy.

Schachter has collected more than 1,200 paintings, photographs, and other works of art by 52 artists with epilepsy from around the world. “I often show the art when I’m seeing other patients to help them verbalize feelings,” he said.

Many of the works in his collection appear in “Vision: Artists Living With Epilepsy” (Elsevier Science and Technology, 2003), a book that was edited by Dr. Schachter. All royalties from sales of the book support the Epilepsy Foundation.

Studying the art of people with epilepsy serves to recognize their contributions to society, but it also raises certain research questions, said Dr. Schachter, professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School, Boston, and director of neurorobotics at the Center for Integration of Medicine and Innovative Technology, Boston.

For example, are people with epilepsy particularly likely to engage in artistic activities? “I asked, ‘Is there a link between epilepsy and creativity? If so, what are the epilepsy-specific variables that are involved?’”

Although he did not offer answers to those questions during his presentation, he did discuss four general themes that emerge in the artwork in his collection:

- **Seizures and the postictal state.** Many works represent the artists’ conscious experiences during their seizures. “One artist says there are many times during her seizures when she feels very unreal,” he said. “She feels like she’s walking in a dreamlike state. Her art represents this experience.”

- **Disability.** He added that for many epilepsy patients, “the postictal state is their only clue that they’ve had a seizure. It can be a period of time with very intense emotional symptoms.”

One of the artists told Dr. Schachter that, after having a seizure, “she has an overwhelming sense that everything she knows to be present in her world is actually in time and space. With that comes a powerful sense of anguish, pain, and loneliness.”

- **Psychiatric comorbidities.** Themes that reflect anxiety and depression also are common in the artwork, and the prevalence of these conditions may be higher in people with epilepsy than in the general population. “The fear of the next seizure and the fear of dying, ‘are all common anxieties people with epilepsy have,’” he said.

- **Epilepsy is a chronic condition.** One of his patients likened the beginning of a seizure to being “in front of an oncoming train with no way to escape.” Psychosis also occurs in patients with epilepsy, perhaps as a function of severity.

- **Psychosocial aspects of epilepsy.** These include themes of isolation from society, stigma, and reminders of living with epilepsy. “For some patients, the place where they feel the safest is their home or bedroom, which is a common theme in the art,” Dr. Schachter said.

- **Non-epilepsy-related work.** There are many artists with epilepsy whose art has no ostensible connection to their epilepsy at all,” he said. Such works serve to destigmatize epilepsy, “to emphasize that people with epilepsy ... can be creative and contribute to society in ways that are a part of their everyday experience.”

The presentation was part of the AES Annual Course, which is supported by an educational grant from Abbott Laboratories, Cyberonics, and GlaxoSmithKline Pharmaceuticals.