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### Creativity's melancholy canvas

Artists suffer more than their share of depression, a tendency that may fuel their creativity while it shatters their personal lives, according to a report in the April [1994?] `American Journal of Psychiatry'.

Joseph J. Schildchild, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School in Boston, and his colleagues charted the turbulent psychological histories of 15 mid-20th-century abstract expressionists of the New York School, only one of whom is still alive. The reserachers made psychiatric diagnoses based primarily on the artist's medical records, known suicide attempts, and evidence of periodic inability to work or function socially.

Four artists - Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston, and William Baziotos - suffered recurring bouts of severe depression. Two others - Arshile Gorky and David Motherwell - suffered milder forms of depression and mania. Similar conditions probably also afflicted Franz Klein and David Smith, notes Schildkraut's group.

Pollock, Rothko, Kline, Guston and Willem de Kooning abused alcohol, and Motherwell and Smith apparently also imbibed to excess, the scientists assert. Gorky and Rothko committed suicide; Pollock and Smith died in car crashes while driving, both under circumstances that may reflect suicidal intent.

Prior research has probed the link between creativity and mood disorders such as depression (Science News: 9/3/88, p.151).

Art may have evolved as a way of accentuating the emotional significance of communal rituals, Schildkraut proposes. It can still express shared spiritual and sacred meanings, although few exist in modern "secular" societies, he contends.

The depressed artist examines painfully the purpose of living and the possibility of dying in this spiritual vacuum, often at great personal cost, according to Schildkraut. "Yet depression in the artist may be of adaptive value to society at large," he maintains.

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