

Expert unravels disease that took the hearing of world-famous painter

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Francisco Goya is the most important Spanish artist of the late 18th and early 19th century. He was famed for his sensitive portraits, and many historians argue that he was the first truly modern painter.

But he was not immune to tragedy.

In 1793, at the height of his artistic powers, Goya, then 46, came down with a severe, undiagnosed illness. He was bedridden for months, suffered from hallucinations and constant headaches, and could hardly walk. Eventually most of the symptoms went away, but his hearing never returned. Perhaps in response to this, his work became increasingly dark.

After examining a range of evidence about Goya's condition, Ronna Hertzano, a hearing [expert](#) at the University of Maryland School of Medicine (UM SOM), has developed a diagnosis. She thinks Goya likely suffered from an autoimmune disease called Susac's syndrome; a second possibility is syphilis. The main symptoms of Susac's are impaired brain function, as well as loss of vision, balance and hearing. While most of these symptoms usually disappear with time, patients can suffer from permanent [hearing loss](#); syphilis can also lead to severe hearing loss. And in the [19th century](#), there was no treatment for either of these illnesses.

Dr. Hertzano will deliver her diagnosis at the 24th annual Historical Clinicopathological Conference, held Friday, April 28 at UM SOM. The conference is devoted to the diagnosis of disorders that afflicted historical figures; in the past, experts have focused on the diseases of

luminaries such as Lenin, Darwin, Eleanor Roosevelt and Lincoln.

"This required real detective work," says Dr. Hertzano, an expert on the cellular and genetic mechanisms of hearing loss. "The question of Goya's ailment was a fascinating medical mystery. I think his case has several plausible possibilities."

She notes that the outcome today would have been completely different. Even with his [hearing](#) loss, Goya could have gotten cochlear implants, which would have enabled him to hear once again. "He would not have lived a deaf life after his disease," Dr. Hertzano said.

Also speaking at the conference will be Janice A. Tomlinson, director of special collections and museums at the University of Delaware. Dr. Tomlinson is an expert on Goya's art.

Provided by University of Maryland School of Medicine

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