



Art Awakens Alzheimer's Patients' Minds

Outings to Art Galleries Seem to Evaporate Some Effects of Alzheimer's

By BILL BLAKEMORE

NEW YORK, July 2, 2006 — Irene Brenton has Alzheimer's, yet here she was at New York's Museum of Modern Art, laughing, getting witty about a painting called "The Breakfast Room."

"Maybe he was hungry," she said. "He painted it before he ate!"

Usually, Alzheimer's patients develop what doctors call "the four A's" — anxiety, aggression, agitation and apathy. Yet there was Sheila Barnes, with severe short-term memory loss, chatting about her past — "My father was a writer and an editor," she recalled — while contemplating a French masterpiece and relaxing in front of Rousseau's mysterious "Sleeping Gypsy." "I think it's a picture of mutual peace and trust," Barnes said. "The animal is not afraid of the man; the man is not afraid of the animal."

The four A's often fade in front of great art, and patients calm down, say doctors. What they call "emotional memory" comes alive — feelings they've had before — related to events and people in their

past lives. Nurses and family members report less anxiety and apathy after the museum visits.

"She talked more," said Myron Brenton, Irene's husband. "She's talking again about doing photography. She was a great photographer. ... We've had many more little conversations."

Why do the paintings have this effect? The program's directors cannot be sure, but they're working with scientists who are finding that most memories are stored as images and are not destroyed by Alzheimer's.

"Alzheimer's doesn't take away memory," said John Zeisel, director of Hearthstone Alzheimer Care. "Your memories are all in there. ... The part of the brain that's damaged in Alzheimer's is ... the part that gives you access to memory. ... It's as if you ... put the memories in the glove compartment and you lost the key ... and the art unlocked it."

The loss of short term memory prevents Alzheimer's patients from enjoying, say, a movie — because you need to

remember the beginning to understand the end. But a painting is always all there, all at once.

Why great art? It's already proven to touch many people deeply.

"There's something about paintings and sculpture that helps bring thoughts and feelings to the surface," said Francesca Rosenberg of the Museum of Modern Art. "Then emotions come out."

The emotions can help revive old memories.

Scientists point out the paintings are no "cure" for Alzheimer's, but a "treatment" to lessen the symptoms — like a strong pill you might take once a week. So a dose of great art may revive rich emotional memories that are still in there and bring them out — with a little help from Rousseau.

"The strings of the mandolin!" a guide pointed out.

"Yes. That, that makes me feel very nice," Brenton said.