

The Melancholy Pose

from 500 B.C.
to 2013 A.D.

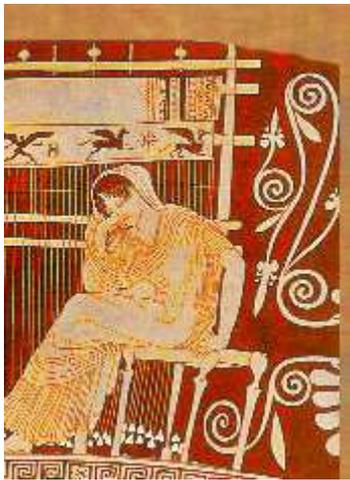


For details on the images see pp.6-8

This overview shows a surprising continuity in the pose attributed to persons suffering from melancholy or sorrow; the heavy head is supported by the hand, often the right, sometimes the left hand.

The sorrow from which the person suffers is however not final. Often it refers to the salvation or joy close at hand. Following Aristotle the melancholic is often an outstanding person.

Marlies ter Borg



1st row, Melancholy, Classic period

Melancholy was described by Aristotle as a state of mind common to outstanding persons. It included low and high moods. Extremes could spell disaster.



2nd row, *Devil's bath*, late medieval

The term used for what is now termed 'depression' in this period was 'the Devil's bath'. This led to tristitia and lethargy. However there was also another type of sorrow, 'sorrow unto God'; a sadness which led to remorse and finally to salvation.



3rd row: *Sorrow unto God*, late medieval/early renaissance.

It was a compliment to depict a holy person in the melancholy pose, expressing remorseful sorrow unto God, thus preparing the soul for salvation.



4th row *Melancholy Genius*, Renaissance

The Renaissance saw a rediscovery of Aristotle's works. The idea of the melancholy genius, the melancholy philosopher or thinker. It was a compliment to depict someone in the melancholy pose.



5th row *Melancholie*, The Dutch Golden Age

This creative period in Dutch history had its melancholy side, with disease, war and financial ruin awaiting even the successful Burgher. The melancholy pose, perhaps inspired by the authors own life experience, was also an allegorical warning not to rely too much on earthly values. Melancholy was associated with learning and prophecy.



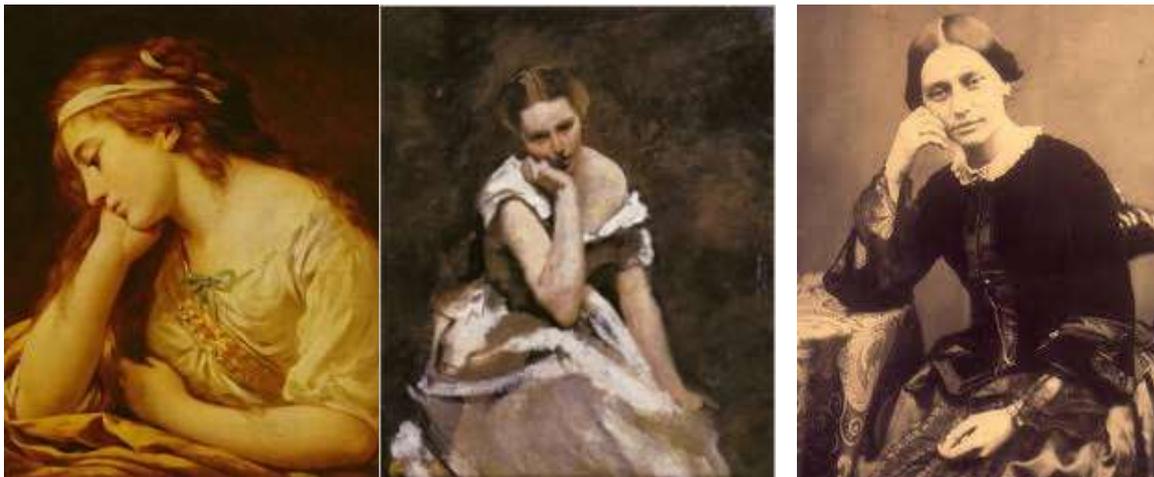
6th row *Suffering Melancholy*, 19th century

These images show that melancholy to be more than some romantic notion, it was a serious mental affliction, entailing deep suffering, comparable to hell, sometimes leading to confinement in a mental hospital



"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Inscription on the gates to Hell, Dante



7th row *Spleen, fashionable melancholy*

Now melancholy or the English word Spleen became a fashion. It became popular to depict Melancholy as a lady of society.



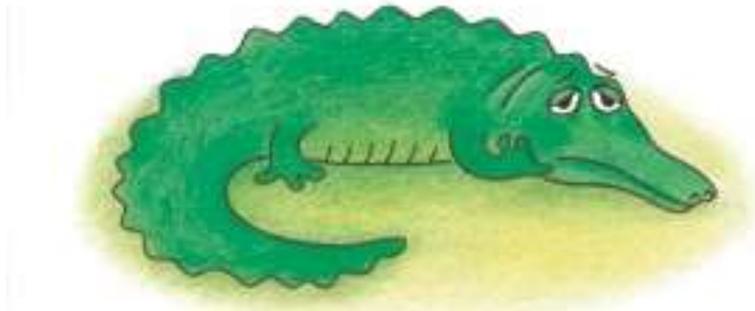
8th row *Poets melancholy Romantic Era*

In the Romantic movement melancholy was not a state one was ashamed of, which one would try to hide. It was seen as a sign if not a proof that one had artistic talent. Those associated with the arts were depicted in the melancholy pose. Whether or not they actually suffered from melancholy was less relevant.



9th row *Manic depression and psychosis, in the troubled 20th century.*

In the 20th century optimism typical of melancholy seems to disappear. The term is replaced by medical terms such as manic depression, a socially unacceptable state best kept secret.



10th row *Toothless melancholy, 21st century*

The term melancholy has lost its teeth. The melancholy pose attributed to an animal in a children's book: *The toothless crocodile*

The Melancholic Pose

Marlies ter Borg

The melancholy pose, with the head resting in the (right?) hand, has been a constant in art since 500 B.C. It expresses sorrow, even despondency. Usually however the dark mood depicted by the artist anticipates the breakthrough of light. Mingled with sorrow is hope.

From left to right

1st row, Melancholy, Classic period

Melancholy was described by Aristotle as a state of mind common to outstanding persons. It included both low and high moods. Extremes however could spell disaster. Thus Ajax, hero of the Trojan War, described as a melancholic by Aristotle, finally committed suicide. However usually there is a bright side to melancholy. Thus Penelope's patience is finally rewarded by her husband Odysseus coming home after 10 years of war and another 10 years of wanderings.

- Penelope waiting for her husband Odysseus, about 500 B.C.
- Ajax, Greek bronze around 0 B.C., the George Ortiz Collection, Genève
- Ajax pierced by his own sword, Etruscan vase, 400-350 v. Chr. Brits Museum

2nd row, *Devil's bath*, late medieval

The term used for what is now termed 'depression' in this period was 'the Devil's bath'. However there was also a positive side to sorrow, called by Saint Paul 'sorrow unto God'; a sadness which led to remorse and finally to salvation. Sorrow was associated with death, but sorrow unto God led to victory over death.

- Pangs of love, or the devil's bath, Walter von der Vogelweide, Codex Manesse, round 1200
- John in Sorrow, Orlando di Deodato Orlandi ca. 1300 B.C.
- Memento Mori, Skeleton sitting on grave, 1547
Museum of Decoratif Arts, Paris.

3rd row: *Sorrow unto God*, late medieval/early renaissance.

It was a compliment to depict a holy person in the melancholy pose. Did not Christ, man of sorrows, cry out on the cross 'My God my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' Yet He was to rise again from death. Thus deep sorrow unto God points to the promise of salvation.

- Christ, Man of Sorrows, Albrecht Dürer c. 1493. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe
- John the Baptist (meditating) in the Wilderness, Geertgen tot St Jans, 1490
Picture Gallery of the State Museum, Berlin,
- Melancholy, Maria Magdalena, Hendrick ter Brugghen, 1627, Museum of Ontario

4th row *Melancholy Genius*, Renaissance

The Renaissance saw a rediscovery of Aristotle's works. The idea of the melancholy genius, the melancholy philosopher or thinker was stressed by philosopher/medical expert Ficino. The weeping philosopher Heraclitus stood symbol for the melancholy genius, often depicted together with the laughing philosopher Democritus.

- Melencolia I, Albrecht Dürer, 1514
- Raphael as Heraclitus, detail from The School of Athens, Raphael, 1510-1511
- Heraclitus the weeping philosopher, Hendrick ter Brugghen, 1628

5th row *Melancholie*, The Dutch Golden Age

This creative period in Dutch history had its melancholy side, with disease, war and financial ruin awaiting even the successful Burgher. The melancholy pose, perhaps inspired by the author's own life experience, was also an allegorical warning not to rely too much on earthly values. Rembrandt lost his beloved wife and his son to the plague. He enjoyed success and wealth followed by ruin. Melancholy was associated with prophecy. He depicts the lamenting prophet Jeremiah. As Bol and Codde show melancholy was associated with learning.

- Portrait of a learned man, Ferdinand Bol, 1650
- Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1630
- Student at his desk, melancholy, Peter Codde, 1633

6th row *Suffering Melancholy*, 19th century

These images show that melancholy to be more than some romantic notion, it entailed deep suffering. Van Gogh found consolation in the picture of Tasso in the madhouse when he entered the asylum in St. Remy. Rodin's thinker is not an unmoved intellectual but acquainted with grief. He looks down into hell, (6th row). Rodin carried Dante's book *Inferno* around with him.

- Tasso in the madhouse, Eugene Delacroix, 1839, Private collection
- Dr. Gachet, Vincent van Gogh, 1890, Musee d'Orsay, Paris
- The thinker looking into hell, Auguste Rodin, 1902, Musee Rodin, Paris

7th row *Spleen, fashionable melancholy*

Now melancholy or the English word Spleen became a fashion. It became popular to depict Melancholy as a lady of society.

- Melancholy, Louis Jean Francois Lagrenée, 1785
- Melancholy, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, 1860, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen
- Clara Schumann, her husband suffered from severe manic depression, and was internalized after trying to drown himself.

8th row *Poets melancholy*

Those associated with the arts were depicted in the melancholy pose. Whether or not they actually suffered from melancholy was less relevant. Melancholy was not a state one was ashamed of, which one would try to hide. It was more or less openly discussed and seen as a sign if not a proof that one had artistic talent.

- Friedrich Schiller, by Anton Graff, 1791
- Ludwig van Beethoven
- Friedrich Nietzsche, brilliant, precocious philosopher, described himself in Goethe's terms: as knowing the Himmelhoeh jauchszend, zum Tode Betruebt. At 30 he collapsed and was cared for by his family for 10 years before he died.

9th row *Manic depression and psychosis*, in the troubled 20th century.

In the 20th century optimism typical of melancholy seems to disappear. Ludwig Kirchner volunteered for army service in the First World War, but soon suffered a breakdown and was discharged. In 1933, his work was branded as "degenerate" by the Nazis and in 1937 over

600 of his works were sold or destroyed. In 1938 he committed suicide by gunshot.

De Chirico was subject to illness and depression, and a prey to hallucinatory revelations, he portrayed a mysterious and troubling world which was for him as real as the banal world of everyday life. Zoran Music survived a concentration camp.

At the end of the 20th century progress in medicine was beneficial for sufferers from manic depression, providing effective medicine and improved treatment.

-Artist, (Marcella), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1910, Brücke Museum Berlin

-The terrible games, Giorgio De Chirico, 1925, private collection

-The grey armchair, Fauteuil Gris, Zoran Music, 1997

10th row Melancholy without teeth

The last picture is from a Dutch children's book from 2009, *De crocodile zonder tanden, The crocodile without teeth*, by Bonnie Klap, illustrated by Liesbeth Kraal. Here the hidden optimism typical for the melancholy pose reappears. After doing a good work, saving a girl from sure death, the crocodile is rewarded. He is given teeth, including one made of gold.