

The Red Boy, the Black Cat

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Sarah Gregory] Hi everyone, this is Sarah Gregory, and today I'm talking to Byron Breedlove. He's the managing editor of *Emerging Infectious Diseases* at CDC. We'll be discussing his article about the June 2019 cover essay, "The Red Boy, the Black Cat." I'm glad to have you back with us, Byron.

[Byron Breedlove] Thanks, Sarah. It's good to be back in the studio.

[Sarah Gregory] As you say in your cover essay, "Goya's painting has some very weird elements." In all your research to write this cover story, is this ever expanded on in relation to his personal life or even what he might have said about himself in the paintings?

[Byron Breedlove] Well, not so much in my research, but Goya's story was more complicated than I realized. Art historians and medical specialists have considered what may have befallen the artist in the autumn of 1792 when he was 46 years old. And they've suggested syphilis, lead poisoning, or other maladies, including Susac's syndrome as causes of his headache, hearing loss, and hallucinations. His illness is cited as a common, and perhaps too convenient, line of demarcation in the evolution of his art. I'm not a specialist by any means, but I agree with assessments that Goya was already incorporating weird elements into his earlier works, including this portrait, and his increasingly strange works were, in some measure, his reaction to political and social conditions of his time.

[Sarah Gregory] Byron, tell us how you go about writing one of these extremely interesting and, I must say, popular cover stories.

[Byron Breedlove] Well, I hope folks do find 'em interesting; I can say they're interesting to write. You know, I was an English major, so I had to write a lot of essays and research papers. And these essays are kind of a hybrid between those two forms, essentially creative nonfiction.

So, I'll start by researching the art and the artist. And if an artist is well-known, such as Goya, then I find and note details about his or her life that are pertinent to the theme and painting. And if there are commentaries or descriptions from museums, galleries, or art historians, I try to fold those perspectives into the essay and credit those sources. But this is crucial to me—I also spend a lot of time looking at the artwork and make notes about its key features, colors, shape, textures—about how it makes *me* feel. Sometimes it's a challenge, but I knew as...when I saw the Red Boy, that this painting was going to be one that I wanted to pursue.

[Sarah Gregory] Okay, then how do you see the intersection of art and science in this particular piece of art?

[Byron Breedlove] That's one of the hardest things about any of these essays, and sometimes it's a challenge to connect the two. I looked at the painting and I saw three dominant things—cats, birds, and a small child—and our theme was zoonoses. So, for me, there was a lot to work with there. You've got the diseases that cats or birds might give a small child. You've got behaviors a child might have that an adult might not. And just the contrast of light and dark and then the tension between birds and cats. This one just...I could just see a lot of potential here.

[Sarah Gregory] Okay, so do you have any cats of your own, evil or otherwise?

[Byron Breedlove] Well, of course I do! I've had at least one cat, and typically three or more ever since March 1976. Typically, the cats find me, as that one did back then, and we work things out. I wouldn't say any of them are evil, though some take a bit longer to domesticate than others, and take longer to get used to human contact. And we do have a pair of black cats, like the one in Goya's painting, that are nearly invisible sometimes, except for their golden eyes.

[Sarah Gregory] Okay, on that note, would you care to read the June 2019 cover essay?

[Byron Breedlove] I'd be happy to.

"Portraits of children accompanied by animals have a long tradition in Spanish painting," notes the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Francisco de Goya contributed to that tradition with this painting, commonly dubbed "The Red Boy." But Goya also subverted tradition in this popular painting by instilling a sense of discomfort and darkness to what could have been a simple proclamation of youthful innocence.

Such tension appears in many of Goya's portraits. Art critic and historian Laura Cumming notes "That Francisco de Goya . . . was a portrait painter first to last is a truth often neglected," but she also observes a "strain of weirdness" in his portraits. Whether one agrees fully with her assessment, Goya's art, which includes nearly 1,800 paintings, cartoons, murals, and etchings, defies convenient codification. He garners mentions as being among the last of the great masters and among the vanguard of modern artists.

Goya painted four portraits of members of the aristocratic Altamira family; of those, "The Red Boy" is the best known and most discussed. He completed those works nearly a decade before he suffered the debilitating, mysterious illness that caused headaches, vertigo, and delusions and is believed to have been triggered by his exposure to lead-based paints.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art offers this arm's length description of this portrait: "Outfitted in a splendid red costume, the young boy, Manuel, the son of the Count and Countess of Altamira, is shown with a pet magpie, a cage full of finches, and three wide-eyed cats. Although they add an engaging element for the viewer, Goya may have intended them as a reminder of the frail boundaries that separate the child's world from the forces of evil, or as a commentary on the fleeting nature of innocence and youth. Manuel died at the tender age of eight."

Manuel, resplendently dressed, dark eyes and hair, cuts a bold figure for one so young. He walks his magpie on a string while a trio of cats sizes up his pet, which grasps Goya's calling card in its tilted beak. To the boy's side, captive finches cluster near the bars of their green gazebo-like cage. Goya's juxtaposition of cats and birds and of shadow and light creates a sense of latent unease and interjects an atmosphere of fidgeting discomfiture into the portrait. The black cat, cloaked in shadows, nearly invisible save for its eyes, amplifies the undercurrent of menace. (This cat is so deep in the shadows that some critical assessments and many reproductions overlook it.)

Essayist and critic Morgan Meis observes that Goya paints a child who, because of his social standing, is not allowed to dress or play like a child. Meis notes, "The boy is trapped in layers of refinement that he cannot possibly understand," and that "he knows nothing about court intrigues, just as he is unaware that the cats behind him are eagerly sizing up his pet bird." Cumming echoes those sentiments. She writes, "the 'Boy in Red' may be a much-loved treasure,

but the moppet in his pool of light is surrounded by more nightmare critters in the shape of owl-eyed cats waiting to savage a magpie, while sharp-beaked finches chatter in the darkness.”

Such elements of danger and tension in Goya’s work find traction with modern viewers. The trio of cats, especially the spectral shadow cat, seem intent on menacing the tethered magpie and caged birds. Both felids and fowl could themselves be potential sources of zoonotic diseases or harbor zoonotic disease vectors. More than 60 percent of known infectious diseases in people are spread from animals, and 75 percent of new or emerging infectious diseases in people are spread from animals. Among those who may be at greater risk of acquiring zoonotic infections are young children who may not have learned how to practice effective hygiene or who have close contacts with pets or domestic animals. Human infections associated with cats include rabies, cat-scratch disease, ringworm, tularemia, plague, Q fever, salmonellosis, *E. coli* infections, and toxoplasmosis. Influenza and salmonellosis are among the diseases birds may transmit to humans.

The cause of young Manuel’s death, if known, is not reported. Goya lived into his 80s and experienced a career that veered between triumph and torment. In the two centuries since Goya’s death, our knowledge about infectious diseases etiology and treatment has coalesced into an impressive body of knowledge. Still, like the nearly invisible black cat in Goya’s painting, some threats are harder than others to detect, and the need for constant vigilance remains a public health priority.”

[Sarah Gregory] Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today, Byron, and reading that very intriguing essay. And thanks for joining me out there. You can read the June 2019 cover article, “The Red Boy, the Black Cat,” online at [cdc.gov/eid](https://www.cdc.gov/eid).

I’m Sarah Gregory for *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

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