

Anne Adams and her painting "Unraveling Bolero"

Life



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In 1928, Maurice Ravel wrote Bolero. Sixty-six years later Anne Adams painted “ Unraveling Bolero”, inspired by his work. Coincidentally they both appeared to go mad after their encounter with this piece of music. The similarities between the two are inexplicably eerie, and their shared history gave some insight into a tragic disease.

Anne Adams was born in 1940 and grew up in Toronto. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a BSc in Physics and Chemistry, and spent most of her life working in these fields. She even went back to school later and earned a PhD in Cell Biology. By 1982 she was happily married to her husband Robert, and had four kids.

In 1986 one of her children was seriously injured, and she decided to give up her scientific pursuits to take care of him. It was at this point that Anne decided to start painting full time. She was a very talented artist, and became fairly successful. She painted colorful paintings with extreme detail. As her painting progressed, they displayed intricate patterns and repetition. She would paint the same thing over and over again, for example she painted about 35 variations of red strawberries. She was praised for her work, and even co-founded an artists group called “ Artists in our Midst” with a fellow painter.

In 1994, Adams painting her most popular piece, “ Unraveling Bolero”. She had become obsessed with the composer Maurice Ravel, and decided to translate his music into art. “ Unraveling Bolero” is a colorful representation of every bar played in Ravel’s infamous score. Adams listened to the song over and over again, dissecting it for her painting. What you have to

understand to fully appreciate the work is that every bar is represented in the painting. Every color and rectangle is directly corresponding to a point in the song. She took her inspiration to a new level. The finished work is vibrant and complex, filled with an exhausting amount of detail.

Six years after completing this painting, Anne and her family started to notice some problems with her speech. By the 2000s, she was having great difficulty with articulation. Her family knew something was wrong, but her doctors couldn't give them a clear answer. She progressively had trouble putting words together, and soon lost all use of grammar. In 2002, Anne was diagnosed with Primary Progressive Aphasia. She would progressively lose all of her speech, but continued to paint until she could no longer hold a brush.

What makes this story interesting, is that Maurice Ravel experienced the same symptoms after composing Bolero, the score that inspired Anne. It turned out that there were other similarities between the two. Ravel was a well-known composer in his time, and his work is still respected today. Much like Anne, there was a clear and abrupt shift in his career. His early work has been described as dreamlike and flowery. He was one of the first to pioneer impressionism.

When he is around the same age Adams was when she finished the painting, his style takes a turn with Bolero. It is said that the notes just came to him one day. When he started composing it, instead of developing the notes in his established style, he decided to just repeat it. Over and over again, he plays these same notes, building the volume of the melody. The only thing that changes in the song is the increasing number of the accompaniment.

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That is why this piece is so power. It is overwhelming and frenzied. Although it was a beautiful composition, it was also a sign that Ravel's mental health was suffering. Six years after this, in 1933, Ravel starts to forget words. Much like Adams, he starts to show clear signs of dementia. He forgets recent interactions, and starts to lose control of his everyday habits. By 1935 he was unable to write or speak.

Both Anne Adams and Maurice Ravel had Frontotemporal Dementia. Their obsession with Bolero, is believed to have been one of the first signs of the disease. They couldn't scan Ravel's brain, but because of the shocking similarities between the cases, the information gathered from Anne's brain scans are applied to Ravel. Frontotemporal Dementia is when these parts of the brain start to physically deteriorate, causing the loss of language, some motor functions, and even changes in personality. They both had Primary progressive aphasia, which is the type of dementia that affects language, speaking, writing, and comprehension. Losing language is so devastating because of the wide variety of things it governs in the brain. Because language is so important, it has the ability, when activated, to quiet other parts of the brain. So when the language function is lost, those other sensory functions are able to occupy the mind with little regulation. In relation to Adams and Ravel, patients will experience vivid images and extreme sensitivity to the world around them. Overwhelmed by their senses, these patients feel the urge to express it. This obsession with visual stimulation and self expression is common in people with the same disease. What characterizes their art(the medium varies between patients) as part of the

disease is the painstaking repetition and obsession. The patients take their art to a new level, becoming almost manic.

What most likely attracted Anne to Bolero, was the repetitive component of the composition. Ravel was suffering from the same disease, and Anne was introduced to his work in a very similar stage in her brain's deterioration. This coincidental inspiration makes this a very interesting story, and has brought light to their condition.