

Visual Artistic Creativity in FTD

Sara Wessen Chang, Hulya Ulugut, Caroline Prioleau, Bailey McEachen, Katherine Rankin, Bruce Miller
Fein Memory and Aging Center, University of California, San Francisco

UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences

Fein Memory and Aging Center

Introduction

Our research examines the artistic career and neurological decline of Anna Held Audette (1938–2013), an American painter, printmaker, and educator whose artistic oeuvre underwent significant transformation following her diagnosis with behavioral frontotemporal dementia (FTD) at age 71.



Fig 1. *Bascule Bridge*, 1990, Oil on canvas. Private Collection

Anna Held Audette

Artist Background

Born in New York City in 1938, Anna was the daughter of an art historian and an arts conservator. She received formal training at Smith College and the Yale School of Art, later becoming a professor of art at Southern Connecticut State University. Her artistic focus centered on depicting America's industrial landscapes, particularly obsolete factories, machines, and objects that she viewed as "modern ruins." Prior to her diagnosis, Audette's artistic process was traditional, methodical, and analytical: photographing restricted industrial sites and later creating detailed sketches and paintings in her studio (Fig 1 & 2).



Fig 2. *Tractor Engine*, photograph, 1998.

Neurological Context

FTD is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that primarily affects the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain^{1,2}. These regions are crucial for executive function, language processing, personality, and social behavior^{1,2}. Research has documented cases of individuals with FTD who experience a surge of visual creativity as language, social cognition, and executive functions decline^{3,4}. This phenomenon may result from degeneration in certain areas which can lead to the release of other capabilities⁵.

Methods



Fig 3. *Tractor Engine*, oil on canvas, 1998.

In the final years of Audette's life, she revisited subjects she had previously photographed and painted. Our methods included a comparative visual analysis of Audette's paintings of the same subject pre- and post-diagnosis, alongside brain scans and neurological reports.

Pre-Diagnosis Period (1960s-2006) (Fig. 3)

- Precise draftsmanship and careful attention to proportion and detail
- Methodical composition planning through preliminary sketches
- Realistic representation of industrial subjects, with underlying conceptual theory
- Controlled use of color and form

Transitional Period (2006-2008)

- Gradual alterations in line quality and proportional relationships
- Shifts in compositional approach
- Bold color usage and spatial relationships

Post-Diagnosis Period (2008-2013) (Fig. 4)

- Increased spontaneity in mark-making
- Reduced inhibition in color choices
- Simplified forms and compositions

Results

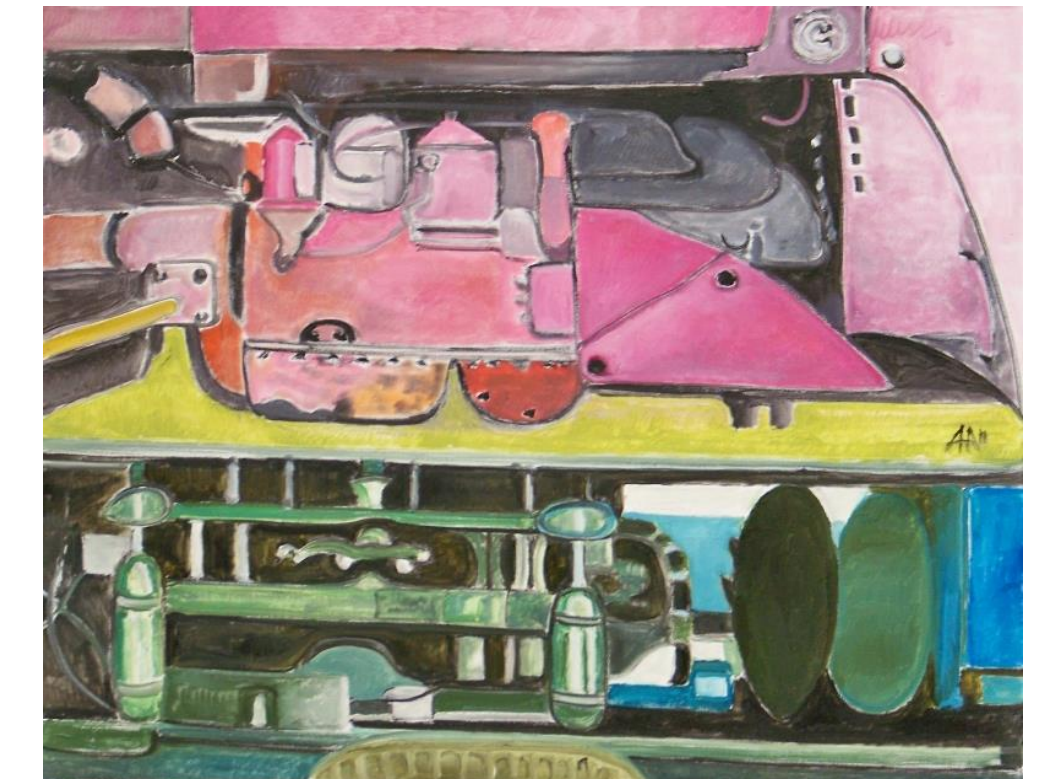


Fig 4. *Tractor Engine*, oil on canvas, 2011.

Disinhibition Effects

- Reduced self-censorship in artistic choices
- Departure from previously rigid artistic conventions
- Greater willingness to experiment with unconventional techniques

Altered Artistic Processing

- Visual-spatial perception decreases; lack of depth and layers
- Color choices increasingly expressionist and less realistic
- Less attention to symmetry and geometry

Altered Semantic Processing

- Changes in semantic integration
- Reduced relationality between objects
- Shifts in the relationship between past artistic training and current expression

Anna Held Audette's case demonstrates that neurological conditions like FTD, often associated only with deficits, can also lead to unexpected forms of neurological difference and artistic gains.

References

1. Rascovsky et al., *Sensitivity of revised diagnostic criteria for the behavioural variant of frontotemporal dementia*. Brain. 2011.
2. Gorno Tempini et al., *Classification of primary progressive aphasia and its variants*. Neurology. 2011.
3. Seeley et al., *Unravelling Boléro: progressive aphasia, transmodal creativity and the right posterior neocortex*. Brain. 2008.
4. Miller et al. *Portraits of Artists: Emergence of Visual Creativity in Dementia*. Arch Neurol. 2004.
5. Ulugut & Mandelli et al., *Network changes associated with right anterior temporal lobe atrophy: insight into unique symptoms*. Brain Communications. 2025.