In 1944, world famous psychologist Carl Gustav Jung slipped on some ice and broke his foot. While in the hospital he suffered a heart attack. Jung hung on the edge of death as the doctors battled to save him. A nurse described Jung’s unconscious body as being surrounded by a strange glow. When he regained his senses, Jung spoke of a vivid series of visions. He believed he had experienced a near death experience, also known as an NDE. Jung said, at first, he was floating 1,000 miles above the earth. He felt as free as a bird and about to leave orbit. And then as quick as a flash a huge black temple caught his attention. At the temple’s entrance, Jung saw a Hindu man sitting cross-legged. As he neared the temple he felt that everything artificial in his personality was being stripped away. All that remained was something he described as the “essential Jung.” Jung knew that within the temple the ultimate mystery of his existence and life’s purpose would be revealed. He was about to cross the threshold when he was stopped in his tracks. Rising up to pull him back to his earthly existence was the King of Kos, the island site of the temple of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. He explained to Jung that he had no right to leave the earth and he must return. Upon hearing this, Jung awoke from his NDE. Jung would always recall the sting of disappointment at being brought back to earth. He wrote “Life and the whole world struck me as a prison. I had been so glad to shed it all.” For three weeks Jung could take no pleasure in life. But slowly he began to take comfort from his visions. For locked within was a valuable lesson. In his professional life as a psychologist, Jung argued that our unconscious mind consists of both personal experiences and those that we inherited from our ancestors, which he called the collective unconscious. Jung believed the collective unconscious contained universal images which are eternal and which we all instinctively know. He called these images archetypes, and he claimed that he saw some of them during his near death experience. For example, he believed the King of Kos represented his actual doctor, while the Hindu man was not only an archetype of his own higher self, but also of the god-image within us all. For the rest of his days, Jung would stress that his NDE came from something real and eternal. He wrote, “It was only after the illness that I understood how important it is to understand one’s own destiny.”

Great art can move us to tears, inspire us, and its beauty can take our breath away. For some people though, a trip to the art gallery is like experiencing a physical attack. This condition even has a name: Stendhal Syndrome. Sufferers cannot view art they perceive as beautiful without falling ill. Exposure to art they enjoy triggers a rapid heartbeat and overwhelming dizziness. This often leads to panic attacks and fainting. Confusion, temporary amnesia, and paranoia are also common in Stendhal Syndrome sufferers. In rare cases, the sufferer experiences hallucinations and temporary madness. It does not seem to be limited to art. A setting sun, waves crashing in on the shore, or a high and lonely mountain range can all induce the condition. Thankfully the effects are short-lived and sufferers do not need medical help. The condition was named after 19th-century French author Henri-Marie Beyl. His pen name was ‘Stendhal’. At the age of 34, in 1817, Stendhal visited Florence’s Santa Croce Cathedral. It was the first time he had seen Giotto’s famous ceiling frescoes. He recalled, “Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. I had palpitations of the heart. Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling.” After Stendhal went public with his experiences other cases were reported. People used to call the condition ‘Art Disease’ or ‘Tourist’s Disease.’ In 1979 Dr. Graziella Magherini coined the term ‘Stendhal Syndrome’. She used it to describe the symptoms of many visitors to Florence. These tourists would suffer panic attacks and bouts of madness after viewing famous paintings or sculptures. Neurosurgeons have argued that novelists Fyodor Dostoevsky and Marcel Proust also suffered from Stendhal Syndrome. During a visit to Basel Museum, Dostoevsky suffered textbook Stendhal Syndrome symptoms. His second wife, Anna, explained her husband seemed out of sorts when looking at the painting by Hans Holbein called Dead Christ. The image portrayed Christ after he had been taken down from the cross. Like a deer caught in the headlights, Dostoevsky was overwhelmed by it. He stood in front of the great work of art, ‘nailed to the spot’, for over 20 minutes. His wife described a look of great agitation and fear upon his face. Eventually, she took the disorientated Dostoevsky by the arm and led him away. He slowly calmed down, but insisted upon seeing the painting one last time before he left. Great works of art affect us profoundly. Some, it would seem, more than others. Einstein once said, “Art is standing with one hand extended into the universe and one hand extended into the world and letting ourselves be a conduit for passing energy.”