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## The Madwoman: a portrait of a choreic woman?

*The Madwoman* is part of a series of four canvases known as the *Cycle of the living*, painted by the Italian futurist artist Giacomo Balla, best known for capturing light, movement, and speed in his works. *The Madwoman*, painted in 1905, depicts an unsteady, ambiguously gesturing, clumsy woman standing at the threshold of a doorway. Looking at this shocking portrait of a woman who seems to have lost her balance, brings to mind the words of Huntington in his report,<sup>1</sup> published in 1871: "The eyelids are kept winking, the brows are corrugated, and then elevated... the mouth is drawn in various directions, giving the patient the most ludicrous appearance imaginable... The hands are kept rolling, first the palms upward, and then the back. The shoulders are shrugged, and the feet and legs kept in perpetual motion, the toes are turned in, and then everted; one foot is thrown across the other, and then suddenly withdrawn, and, in short, every conceivable attitude and expression is assumed, and so varied and irregular are the motions gone through with, that a complete description of them would be impossible."

The woman in the painting was Matilde Garbini. She was one of Balla's most studied subjects, depicted in almost 100 of his drawings. In particular, Balla made several sketches to study Garbini, trying to capture her awkward movements. Garbini, often found begging and drunk, lived in the slums of Rome, Italy.<sup>2</sup> She lived close to thieves and this could easily get her into trouble. Balla's daughter noted that Garbini wrote a letter to the artist

from jail, some years later, and Balla eventually arranged for her release.<sup>2</sup>

In 1910, Balla was one of the co-signatories of the *Manifesto of futurist painters*. The Futurist movement depicted modern life as a dynamically unfolding forcefield of bodies in motion.

*The Madwoman* shows how much he spent during his career studying the dynamics of movement. *The Madwoman* not only demonstrates Balla's ability to capture movement, creating a vivid visualisation of chorea, even in the present era of video demonstrations of movement disorders, but also reflects his great empathy for the social outcasts of the time.

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*The Madwoman* by Giacomo Balla, 1905, oil on canvas, 175x115 cm: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (GNAM), Rome, Italy