Exhausted!

There are two versions of an image of a mother falling asleep while rocking her newborn baby by Christian Krohg (1852-1925). At first glance they appear to be identical. The baby is asleep in the crib. The exhausted mother has fallen asleep. The mother’s left hand is still resting where it had been, rocking the baby to sleep. The two works differ in subtle ways. In one (see Figure 1) the mother’s head is resting on a pillow — she has prepared to fall asleep; in the other (see Figure 2) she has fallen asleep without preparation. The clothing of the mother differs in the two; in one there is a table on which rests a bowl and cup. Both show an utterly exhausted mother.

Krohg was a Norwegian artist who influenced the well-known Edvard Munch. Krohg’s work mostly focused on realism, the life of ordinary people, especially the lives of women. His work often portrayed the themes of motherhood, sickness, and sleep. One theme which he explored repeatedly, was illness (Sick Girl – 1881, showing a young girl dying of tuberculosis, and Mother at her Child’s Bed – 1884, showing a mother sitting at the bed of a sick child). Several of his works show women asleep.

Although it is obvious that fatigue must be common in new mothers, up to the late 1990’s, there was very little published literature on the topic. Recent literature, however, shows that postpartum fatigue is related to many factors including education level, age, childcare difficulties, breastfeeding problems, physiological abnormalities (low ferritin level, low hemoglobin level), sleep problems, stress, and anxiety. Postpartum fatigue is common in mothers with depression. The topics of feeding and sleep are the most common on new mothers’ internet support groups.

Krohg’s work beautifully shows the devotion, bonding and love between mother and child and that this may lead to a mother’s utter exhaustion. This is shown in a simple image of a mother who had fallen asleep rocking her baby.
Declaration of conflict of interest

The author has declared he has no conflicts of interest.

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References


Figure 3. Christian Krohg’s themes side by side at The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo. Image courtesy of Meir H. Kryger.