

Training the “clinical eye”. Rubens’ Three Graces: how many pathologies?

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Art can serve as a powerful resource for medical students to both train the so called “clinical eye” and to better understand disease [1]. Herein a paleopathological analysis is performed on one of Rubens’ final artworks, “The Three Graces” (1630-1635; oil on oak panel; 220.5 × 182 cm; Museo del Prado, Madrid). Rubens depicts the three Graces beside a fountain, under a garland of flowers in a landscape. The circular rhythm and elegant undulation are based on classical sculpture. Painted shortly after his marriage, it bears witness to the happiness of the artist’s life. The figure on the left is directly inspired by his second wife, H el ne Fourment (23 years old); the central and right Graces probably illustrate Rubens’ sisters-in-law. Besides overweight, scoliosis, and hyperlordosis observed in all three Graces, the left Grace evidences flat feet; hyperextension of the right metacarpal joints; signs of rheumatoid arthritis (even fibromyalgia has been proposed); lateral deviation of the nipple (Mondor’s disease?); varicose thighs, and right hallux vagus. The central Grace (Clara Fourment?), in turn, shows cellulite and, interestingly, positive Trendelenburg sign. Finally, the Grace on the right -Susanna Fourment- has been subject of a long debate on signs of a locally advanced breast cancer in the left external upper quadrant. In fact, several specialists agree in the observation of signs of an open ulcer; redness of the surrounding skin (an inflammatory sign); nipple retraction; reduction of the left breast volume, and enlarged axillary lymph nodes [2-3]. Rubens was one of main Baroque and realist painters, i.e. he painted whatever his eyes captured. If the Graces were sisters, then they are likely to share genetic traits. The latter, together with all the other signs described, favour the working diagnosis of familial benign hypermobility syndrome. Observation has a key role in clinical medicine; the paleopathological observation in art show us how artists could record abnormalities long before doctors did [2]. Therefore, artworks still represent useful teaching tools for refining visual skills in traditional and innovative medical education.

References

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Keywords

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