Letter to the Editor

How the art in Rome represented personages with goitre

Keywords:
- Goitre
- Renaissance
- Art

Rome has been always a centre of civilization and art, since the antiquity.

In Rome and in the surrounding region, there is a clear iodine deficiency as testified by the relative high incidence of goitre. During the Renaissance, there was a tendency to reproduce the art of the antiquity, always taking into consideration the reality. In this form of Neoclassicism, the real world was supposed to be represented in its completeness, including errors and defects. Art went far away from the usual schemas of representation, moving to be interested also in social aspects of life, including disparities and injustice [1–4].

I found many interesting aspects, worth to be underlined. About in 10% of the paintings of the Roman Renaissance, there were personages with a goitre. This testifies for sure the high prevalence of iodine deficiency. But, not rarely, the presence of a goitre was associated also to power and beauty. This fact was already evident in many statues of the ancient Rome, which represented influencing people, like the proconsuls and consuls, with a goitre. As consequence, in the classical Italian medical terminology a patient with a goitre was said to have a “collum proconsolaris” (neck like a proconsul). Many artists used their lovers as model. Raffaello Sanzio (Urbino 1483–Roma 1520) used his lover, Margherita Luti, as model for at least 3 paintings, and in all these paintings Margherita has a goitre. Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio (Milan 1571–Porto D’Ercole 1610)) used one of his lovers, Lena (Maddalena), as model for two paintings representing the Holy Mary: La Madonna dei Pellegrini and La Madonna dei Palaniefri. In both paintings, the Madonna has a goitre. The priests who commissioned the paintings rejected the works for many reasons, including the fact that Lena was a well known prostitute in the neighbour.

The artists of Rome understood that a goitre was associated to specific emotional and psychological conditions. The function of the thyroid was known only in the 20th century, after thyroidectomy was started to be performed. In the past it was thought that the thyroid had no importance at all, and rarely a goitre was thought to be an enlarged thyroid. Psychiatric symptoms which accompany hyperthyroidism include emotional mood swings, excitability, tremors and agitation. In severe cases, a patient, in those days, could be defined as “possessed by Satan”. In the Transfiguration of Christ by Raffaello Sanzio (Urbino 1483–Roma 1520), the painting is dominated by the splendour of Christ. In the lower left part, there is a boy “possessed by Satan” with his parents, waiting for a miracle from Jesus that He will do soon. The boy has an enlarged neck, exophthalmos, weight loss, agitation: signs and

Fig. 1. Judith and her Maidervant (Artemisia Gentileschi 1613-Museo Pitti, Florence). In the oil, Judith (a self portrait of the artist) has a goitre.

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symptoms that lead to the suspicion of a toxic goitre. Aggressiveness and neck swelling is present also in many paintings and sculptures describing the crucifixion of Jesus. Many soldiers and people who participated actively in offending and crucifying Jesus have a goitre, prominent eyes and aggressive behaviour [4–7].

Hypothyroidism, if present in childhood, can lead to cretinism with mental retardation, poor growth and dwarfism. In adulthood, hypothyroidism determines physical and mental fatigue and weight gain. In the Renaissance, many paintings and sculptures were commissioned by local churches. The message to care of the less lucky persons, like the ones with cretinism is evident in several paintings. Velasquez (Siviglia 1599–Madrid 1660), one of the greatest European and Spanish painters, spent several years in Rome. He painted in his Christ after flagellation (1628), a young boy with a large goitre, praying Jesus in suffrance [8,9].

Artemisia Gentileschi (Rome 1593–Naples 1656) painted herself with a goitre (Fig. 1), in a moment of high self-esteem. She was raped by her colleague, Agostino Tassi. She had the courage to bring the man to court: This was very unusual for those days. The judges accepted her accusations only after she underwent excruciating tortures, during which she confirmed the rape. In those days, a man accused of rape had to marry the woman. Agostino Tasi was already married, so he had very mild condemn. For her behaviour, considered unmoral by the media, she was accused to be a prostitute and she had to leave Rome. For this reason she painted Judith beheading Holofernes (the Bible episode in which the young Jewish lady slept with Holofernes, the general of the enemy army, to kill him). She represented herself standing glorious, beautiful, holding the head of Agostino Tasi. In this painting she has a clear goitre.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

References