

E1. Art and breast cancer

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Professor van der Schueren was an authority in the field of breast cancer treatment and loved the fine arts. A discussion on aspects of breast cancer in connection with art may therefore honour the memory of this great clinician and researcher.

Art is related to emotion and to beauty. The disease we are dealing with in this conference is impairing beauty in many ways; therefore we may consider breast cancer not to be a strong basis for creation of art. However, this disease being the source for deep emotions is the subject of a number of great works of art created both by breast cancer patients and by artists who are not personally affected.

In covering the theme of this lecture, it is to be mentioned that in some work by great artists women are shown to apparently have breast cancer, illustrating the tendency to naturalism in art for those periods. Rembrandt's "Bathseba after the bath" from the Louvre shows the disease, that has afflicted his second wife and model Hendrickje Stoffels [1]. Lately, it was recognised that signs of breast cancer were also shown in one of Michelangelo's statues in the Medici's Chapel in Florence [2].

Much more impressive, when discussing the relationship of breast cancer and art, are the expressions of emotions, caused by both the life-threatening and mutilation aspects of the disease; this frequently is art of high quality. Breast cancer is a creative malady. Indeed, one of the many definitions of art is that art should be seen to be the highly individual expression of a most individual emotion.

Three categories of such artworks can be distinguished as follows:

- Artists (writers, painters, sculptors, composers) found inspiration in breast cancer, being patients themselves or knowing patients amongst relatives. It is self evident that when the theme is chosen or commissioned without such a personal confrontation these artists also will go through an emotional involvement.
- Patients who for the first time express their feelings in images, poetry or other works of art, being "occult" artists before.
- Patients induced to produce images as part of courses organised to help them in coping with the disease [3].

Certainly, many of the works produced by the two last categories should be considered to be "art brut", "prim-

itive art" or to be technically imperfect. Yet they can be of great importance, not only for the patients themselves, but also in the artistic sense. Here we touch upon the difficulty of finding universally accepted definitions of art.

Fragments of literature by well-known writers – and by unknown patients with this disease – teach us about the impact on well being and body image.

A show of many beautiful pictures, watercolours and drawings, sculptures and photo-series from all of the three mentioned categories certainly illustrates impressively that breast cancer can be an important source of inspiration for great art.

It is not astonishing that in several religions breast cancer is a subject for amulets, ex votos and is the theme for the patronage of a number of saints. The most venerated by breast cancer patients is the holy Agatha (Fig. 1). She was a beautiful girl living in Sicily in

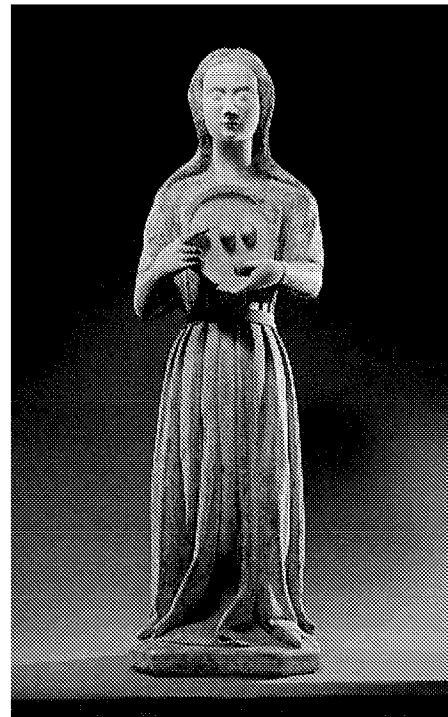


Fig. 1. Saint Agatha, Portuguese; 14th century (attr. to Mestre Pero). H: 122 cm; Stone, traces of polychrome; Coll. Museu Nacional de Machado Castro, Coimbra, Portugal.



Fig 2. Examination of the breast; Byzantine Empire, 13th century. Illustration in *Chirurgia*, by Theodorik of Cervia. 8.9 × 8.4 cm.; Coll. University Library, Leiden, The Netherlands

the early Christian time, who at a young age decided to dedicate her life to Christ. After refusing the sexual demands of Quintinianus, the governor from Rome, she was tortured and both breasts were cut off. The following night an angel restored her breasts, but shortly after she was sentenced to be burned alive; however an earthquake destroyed her city and she passed away together with a great part of the population of Catania (5 February 251). Many sculptures, stained glass in churches and paintings have illustrated these cruel events and one of the first baroque opera's had Agatha's story as the theme. Apart from the importance for the faithful, these works are often of high artistic value [4].

Illustrative pictures showing breast cancer patients and therapy for the disease in scientific and educational works

can be of good artistic quality; in the older times engravings for such books were commissioned to well known artists. Even in the early manuscripts on medicine, we can find fascinating miniatures e.g. showing diagnostic breast palpation (Fig. 2). These categories of artworks give the link to the fascinating history of medical treatments, a usually neglected part of the curriculum of those training in medicine. Many commemorative pictures from the last centuries show famous medical workers at work or as portraits for "Ahnengalerien". We may see the surgeon in the operation theatre lecturing on breast cancer treatment, as depicted in the famous "Agnew Clinic" by Thomas Eakins in the University of Philadelphia.

This "documentational" art is interesting, but the other above mentioned groups of artworks affect us also emotionally and will induce more mental reflections.

The advancements in the possibilities to cure all breast cancer patients and to attain this without mutilation will be addressed during this congress; if this goal is achieved, breast cancer would lose the point of being so often the theme of works of art. I am sure that Manu would indeed have been happy when this goal was reached.

References

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