Hand Deformities in the Paintings of Giacomo Ceruti (1698–1767), Nicknamed ‘il Pitocchetto’ for his Depictions of the Poor

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ABSTRACT: Giacomo Ceruti was a renowned painter in northern Italy during the middle third of the 18th century, although he is not well-known today. He produced pictures in several different genres but his reputation after his death was based primarily on his portrayal of beggars and poor working people; hence, his posthumous nickname, il Pitocchetto, the little beggar. Of medico-artistic interest is the realism with which he depicted the hands of his impoverished subjects, a quality that enables them to be examined for signs of pathology or trauma. The present article displays some representative examples of hand deformities in Ceruti’s paintings, thus extending into the 18th century the authors’ previous research on medical aspects of art works from the 15th to the 17th century.

KEY WORDS: Giacomo Ceruti, hand deformities, medicine in the arts

Giacomo Antonio Melchiorre Ceruti (1698–1767) was born and died in Milano, Italy; but he spent the majority of his professional life in the Italian cities of Brescia and Venezia [1]. He was a popular painter in northern Italy during his active years, although he is not well known today outside of his native country. Even in Italy his work was mostly forgotten during the late 19th century, and it only began to be rediscovered in 1922 [2].

Ceruti’s paintings followed the artistic fashions of the Baroque period, which was popular during most of the 17th century and extended into the 18th century. His style was an outgrowth of the techniques of Caravaggio (1571–1610), one of the founders of Baroque painting, with an emphasis on a high degree of realism in the depiction of people and objects, and the frequent use of dark backgrounds to emphasize foreground figures.

The realism of Ceruti’s portraits, and the care he took in depicting hands as a defining feature of the subject’s character [3], enable us to examine the hands in his paintings for signs of pathology or trauma. The present study follows our previous research on deformities in European paintings from the 15th to the 17th century [4–8] and now extends it into the 18th century.

The majority of Ceruti’s paintings fall into one of four types: formal portraits of aristocrats and other well-off people, individual and group depictions of the working poor and beggars, religious art for churches, and still life genre paintings. Since the present study focuses on the hands of Ceruti’s subjects, we have not included works in the still life category.

ARISTOCRATIC AND WELL-OFF SUBJECTS

Nearly 60 portraits by Ceruti are considered to be part of this category. The subjects include not only aristocratic men and women but also well-dressed people who appear to be associated in some way with courts or noble households. In most of these portraits the hands of the subjects are normal with no evident pathological changes or deformities. Since the majority of these people are middle-aged or older, one would normally expect to see more examples of hand malformations due to age or illness in the population concerned.

Thus, it is probable that the hands of these well-off people were idealized, either on the artist’s own initiative to gain favor for his work, or because the commissioning patron insisted on it, hoping to present himself and his family in the best light. In 18th century Europe, people from the upper classes were not supposed to engage in manual labor, so any coarseness in the hands would have given them a lower-class appearance.

THE WORKING POOR AND BEGGARS

Ceruti painted many pictures of the poor, including not only impoverished working people but also beggars. Images of this kind represented a new theme in realistic art, and Ceruti is now considered one of the greatest 18th century painters of this genre [3]. In these pictures the subject’s hands are very often affected by illness and possibly by trauma as well [Figures 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, 2C]. Some of these people are relatively young, so their swollen fingers and hands are likely due to overwork.

The Print Seller [Figure 2A] provides an example of hand deformity and also other pathologies. The metacarpophalangeal joints (knuckles) on the right hand are prominent and in ulnar deviation, likely indicative of rheumatoid arthritis in a man of early middle age. This deformity, together with visible
those depicting beggars. In these paintings beggars of all ages are portrayed, often barefoot and always in rags or dilapidated garments. Many of the figures are shown with definite hand deformities, mostly arthritic or neurological. For example, the Beggar Resting [Figure 2B] shows swollen hands and bulging MP joints.

In Ceruti’s Two Beggars the younger man appears with his right hand deviated in extreme flexion at the wrist such as in radial palsy, while the left hand is truncated, no knuckles being visible [Figure 2C]. The scarring on the back of the left hand is consistent with the possibility that one or more fingers may have been traumatically amputated or perhaps lost through leprosy. The brown streak along the top of the left hand and wrist is smudgy, which the younger man is about to inhale. His facial expression suggests a degree of intellectual disability that may be congenital or perhaps the result of a stroke that paralyzed his right arm and caused the misalignment of his eyes.

RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS

In Ceruti’s religious art the figures who represent high-ranking clergy such as bishops are usually treated in the same way as the aristocrats in Ceruti’s portraits, but many of the others are depicted with the kinds of hand deformities that are shown in the pictures of impoverished workers and beggars.

For example, Ceruti’s paintings in the church of Santa Lucia, Padova, include a portrayal of St. Mark as an old man, with apparent syndactyly at the proximal interphalangeal joints of the third and fourth fingers of his right hand [Figure 3A]. In the same cycle the right hand of St. Prosdocimo, who is also shown in old age, appears with deviated metacarpophalangeal joints and interphalangeal joints, indicative of osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis [Figure 3B]. With their worn faces and hand deformities these saints are presented to the viewer as men of the people rather than aristocrats in clerical garb.

CERUTI’S SELF PORTRAITS

Ceruti produced a number of self portraits. In one he appears as a painter at work, holding a palette and brushes in one hand. It appears to be his left hand but it is actually his right hand, because self portraits were painted using a mirror, reversing the image. The nodules on the thumb of this hand are probably inflammation or osteoarthritis [Figure 4A]. His face is clean-shaven, his jacket has a fur trim indicating that it is expensive, and he wears a turban-like cloth. Beneath the turban, one can see that his head is shaven to enable him to wear a powdered wig on formal occasions. Here he is shown as a fashionable painter, an associate of aristocrats.

In another self portrait, however, an older Ceruti presents himself as a beggar at rest [Figure 4B], with shaggy hair and beard, a worn coat, and a walking staff in his left hand (which of course appears to be his right hand in the painting). Beards were out of fashion in 18th century Italy and only men in the lowest classes of society wore them [3], so by wearing a beard in

scars and the suggestion of erythema on the face, raise the possibility that his condition may be autoimmune in origin. The man’s pathological features, together with the shabbiness of his cloak, indicate the harsh life he has been leading.

Similar and even more extreme characteristics may be seen in the most impressive and numerous images painted by Ceruti:
Figure 3. Examples of hand deformities in religious paintings
[A] Detail from San Marco, c. 1740, showing apparent syndactyly at the proximal interphalangeal joints of the third and fourth fingers. Complete painting available for viewing online at https://www.beweb.chiesacattolica.it/lenistorico/bene/3173207/Ceruti+G.+%281738-40%29%2C+San+Marco+evangelista
[B] Detail from San Prosdocimo, c. 1740. Complete painting available for viewing online at https://www.beweb.chiesacattolica.it/lenistorico/bene/3173148/Ceruti+G.+%281738-40%29%2C+San+Prosdocimo

Figure 4. Examples of Ceruti’s self portraits

this picture Ceruti more closely identified himself with beggars and the working poor. The hand that showed nodules on the thumb in the earlier self portrait is now hidden in his clothes, possibly to cover a more advanced deformity.

This hypothesis about the progressive impairment of Ceruti’s right hand is consistent with a third self portrait, painted slightly later than the second one, in which the artist places himself as an onlooker on the margin of a religious scene that he painted for the basilica of St. Antonio, Padova [10]. Here the right hand is visible, with the fingers held in an unusual flexion position suggestive of arthritic deformity. Since Ceruti painted with his left hand, as shown in the first self portrait mentioned above, a deformity of his right hand would not have impeded his artistic activity, which indeed continued up until the time of his death [1].

No stranger to suffering himself, with all his children dying in infancy and with a possible disabling condition affecting one hand, Ceruti painted his impoverished subjects as genuine individuals rather than stereotypes [9]. By doing so he affirmed their humanity and dignity [3].

CONCLUSIONS
Because of this affinity with the poor, Ceruti was given the posthumous nickname ‘il Pittocchetto’ (the little beggar) at the beginning of the 19th century [1]. He was an impressive artist with a social conscience, one who has not achieved the fame which he deserves more than many other less talented but better known artists today.

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References