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Debate

Secret hand gestures in paintings

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Summary. During the Renaissance period, hands were as important a focus of attention as the face was, because they were the only other visible area of the body. Hence, representation of the position of the hands became a decorative element that was almost as important as the face. Thus, given its high visibility, hand gestures in portraits and paintings have been one of the most effective ways of conveying secrets, codes and messages. From the historical and religious perspective, hand signs in visual art may provide clues about the underlying iconographical symbols. This paper will examine the eventual hidden meanings behind a peculiar hand gesture that has been widely used by several painters. (www.actabiomedica.it)

Key words: hand gesture, art, hand, painting, signs

Introduction

The art of a particular period is a suitable subject of investigation for exploring the existence of congenital deformities or medical illness based on physical depictions in drawings, paintings and sculptures or peculiar gestures and symbolic hallmarks. According to deductions made based on the artists' work, physical depictions in artwork could be an artistic convention, a hallmark of the artist's school, intentional or inadvertent depictions of a real disease that affected the sitter, or symbolic/religious messages or iconographical attributes. In particular, the meanings of secret hand signs and their hidden messages in artworks have intrigued art experts since the Renaissance.

During the Renaissance period, hands were as important a focus of attention as the face was, because they were the only other visible area of the body. Hence, representation of the position of the hands became a decorative element that was almost as important as the face. Thus, given its high visibility, hand gestures in portraits and paintings have been one of the most effective ways of conveying secrets, codes and messages (1-4). From the historical and religious perspective, hand signs in visual art may provide clues about the underlying iconographical symbols. However, because the actual intentions of the artist cannot be confirmed in the absence of historical documentation, any discussion about this topic can be only speculative (4).

There is a peculiar hand gesture that is widely used by painters of several nationalities belonging to the Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque and later artistic movements: It is an unnatural position of one or both hands in which the third and fourth digits are held tight together, as if almost fused, resembling syndactyly, and the second and fifth fingers are separated from the central ones. So far, no one has attempted to understand the common meaning of this representation. Therefore, the goal of this investigation is to discuss the meanings of and to speculate about the reasons for the depiction of this unnatural finger position. Our investigation is specifically focused on the religious meaning and the cultural iconography or the secret message conveyed by the hand posture.

Here, we have studied this gesture in four different unnatural gesture across hundreds of portraits by more than eighty painters:

- *The hand placed on the chest*
- *The hand placed on the flank*
- *The hand pointing upward to the sky or downward to the earth in a blessing position*
- *The hand grasping an object or holding a person.*

Materials

This position can be observed in the works of several artists, including masters such as Titian, Pontormo, Bronzino, Raphal Santi, Michelangelo Buonarroti, El Greco, Raphael Mengs, Juan de Juanes, and among other painters across countries and centuries. Eight portraits constitute the subject of this review, and they were used as an explicative example, with particular focus on the hands of the models (Figure 1 to Figure 8).

Results

Based on the authors' experience in the medico-artistic field (4-11), we think that the unnatural hand position in all the portrayed subjects is most probably an artistic device or a symbolic hallmark rather than a true pathologic depiction of syndactyly, given that the occurrence rate of syndactyly is not very high and that the symbol is repeatedly used in the work of certain artists. Although the idea that this gesture may be a content-laden symbol, a secret physical (hand) sign conveying a higher meaningful idea is fascinating, the present investigation has the purpose to dismiss the gesture to an uncommon oddity.

Hypotheses and criticism about the hand gesture

The hand gesture that we systematically identified is not present in any of the art manuals, symbolism guidelines, religious books, sects, or secret societies in both the western and eastern world. Therefore, five basic hypotheses have been proposed to decipher the meaning of the hand gesture. They are discussed and dismissed below.

Figure 1. *Cosimo I de' Medici*, 1538, Jacopo Carrucci aka Pontormo, Tempera on panel, 95.6x74.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York

1. Crypto-Jew (Marranos) recognition

According to this hypothesis, the gesture was a secret sign used to recognize crypto-jews each other. During the time of inquisition according to the Catholic Kings' order of 1492, Jews living in Iberian Peninsula were forced to accept or to leave Spain. Many Jews, although converted, continued to practice Judaism in secret, especially in the judería, which was the old Jewish barrio (neighbourhood) of Toledo. These last Jews were called crypto-Jews or Marranos, which means *Christianized Jew*, *swine*, or *pig* in medieval Spanish. The derogatory term was used to refer to the ritual prohibition against eating pork, which was adhered to by both Jews and Muslims. In the modern Spanish language, *Marrano* still means *pig* or *dirty*, but it is no longer commonly connoted with religious contents.

Oppenhejm in his book suggested that the hand gesture was a type of a 16th century secret sign used in

Figure 2. *Christ carrying the cross*, 1577-87, Domenikos Theotokopoulos aka El Greco, Metropolitan Museum, New York

Figure 3. *Penitent Magdalene*, 1533, Titian Vecellio, oil on wood, 85x68 cm, Galleria Palatina, Rome

Figure 4. *Separation of Earth and Waters*, 1511-12, Michelangelo Buonarroti, fresco, 155x270 cm, Sistine Chapel, Rome

Toledo among the crypto-Jews (i.e. false Christians) to recognize each other (12). Although this meaning of the hand gesture may be associated with the sitters of the Spanish painter of that time, a lot of criticism has been raised because such signs/symbols are not illustrated or mentioned in any of the full-bodied Sephardic and Kabbalistic manuscripts/books from this period or their antecedents. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to assume that all the Iberian (or those who worked there) painters, such as El Greco, Luis El Divino Morales, and Juan de Juanes, were Jewish or that their patrons and sitters were Jewish. In addition, the term *Marrano* was mostly used in Toledo's judería, and not all the Spanish painters included in this investigation came from there or were working there. Therefore, it is possible that Oppenhejm confounded the gesture of the hand (herein analysed) with the well-known symbol in which the thumbs with the second and third fingers of each hand are held touching each other and separated from the fourth and the fifth fingers, conceiving a sort of fan also known as the Kohanic Blessing. This last symbol can be found carved on Jewish tombstones throughout Europe; for centuries, it has represented a cosmic symbol, and even in modern times, the gesture refers to 'an ancient matriarchal sign for strength and

Figure 5. *El caballero de la mano en el pecho (Gentleman with his Hand on his Chest)*, 1580, Domenikos Theotokopoulos aka El Greco, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Figure 6. *Posthumous portrait of Christopher Columbus*, Sebastiano del Piombo, 1519, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Someone consider Colombo a Jewish. [Marrano Jewish explorer, aided by Marranos Louis de Santangel and Antonio de Marchena]

power' (13, 14). Finally, there is no letter or religious gesture, Hebrew or otherwise, similar to the splayed hand. Therefore, the stylized gesture of the hand investigated in this paper is actually non-existent in the known Hebrew tradition of the 16th century, whereas the gesture of the Kohanic blessing existed for centuries prior to that period. Thus, the hypothesis of a widespread depiction of Marranos' hand recognition sign in several portraits seems inconsistent.

2. Freemasonry or Masonic membership and rank

According to this hypothesis, the gesture was a secret sign used to recognize masonic followers each other. The enigmatic posture of the hand has fascinated a lot of scholars of hidden societies, who cryptically connoted the unusual splayed fingers with the letter M, which indicated not only Masonic membership and rank, but also possession of occult secrets. The speculation that the hand gesture herein presented is a freemasonry's conveyed code is fascinating, but it is hard to accept.

3. Satanism (multiple V's and I's for 666)

According to this hypothesis, the gesture was a secret sign conveying satanic meanings. The hand gesture may be read as the letters M and W, which may be interpreted as multiple V's and I's to symbolise 666. This is because the letter V is pronounced as 'waw' in Hebrew and 'vav' in Gematria and is the 6th letter in both alphabets. However, there is no evidence to show that Renaissance, Mannerist and Baroque art had any connection with Satanism.

4. De' Medici family membership

According to this hypothesis, the gesture was a secret sign used to recognize a sitter as a member of the De' Medici family. In portraits of Cosimo and

Figure 7. *Portrait of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, 1491-1556

his family by Bronzino, each are shown making the distinct hand gesture resembling an *M*. Some argue that this sign indicates their membership in the Medici family. However, this gesture is not uniquely depicted in members of the Medici family. In fact, it is more likely that the gesture conveyed modesty. Indeed, this gesture can be observed in the '*modest Venus*' (also known as *Venus Pudica* and later popularized as *Medici Venus*) (Figure 9), which is a 1st century BC marble copy of a an original bronze Greek sculpture depicting the Greek goddess of love Aphrodite. Some scholars argue that the gesture seen in the Medici portraits may be an allusion to this modesty. The widespread depiction of the gesture in portraits of the de Medici family created by Bronzino (Figure 8) and the paintings of artists that followed makes this speculation interesting, but it is hard to accept it as a unifying explanation.

5. Ignacio de Loyola's gesture for the atonement of sins

According to this hypothesis, the gesture was a sign with a religious meaning used during the spiritual exercises by Jesuits. San Ignacio de Loyola (Figure 7) founded the Jesuits' Order in 1541 and became its first Superior General. The Saint used to recommend a gesture for believers in his spiritual exercises: 'each time one falls into sin, in laying the hand on the breast whilst inciting one's inner self to grief.' (15). After analysing the paintings of one of the painters herein referenced (El Greco), Cassou in 1934 proposed that the painter wanted to depict the gesture with the hand placed on the chest as a sign of moral pain in sinners who were in the act of committing a sin (16). Later on, Veronica de Osa embraced the same hypothesis in her novel, *The mystic finger symbol of El Greco* (1956)

Figure 8. *Portrait of Maria de' Medici*, 1553, Agnolo di Cosimo Tori aka Bronzino, tempera on canvas, 52.5x38 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy

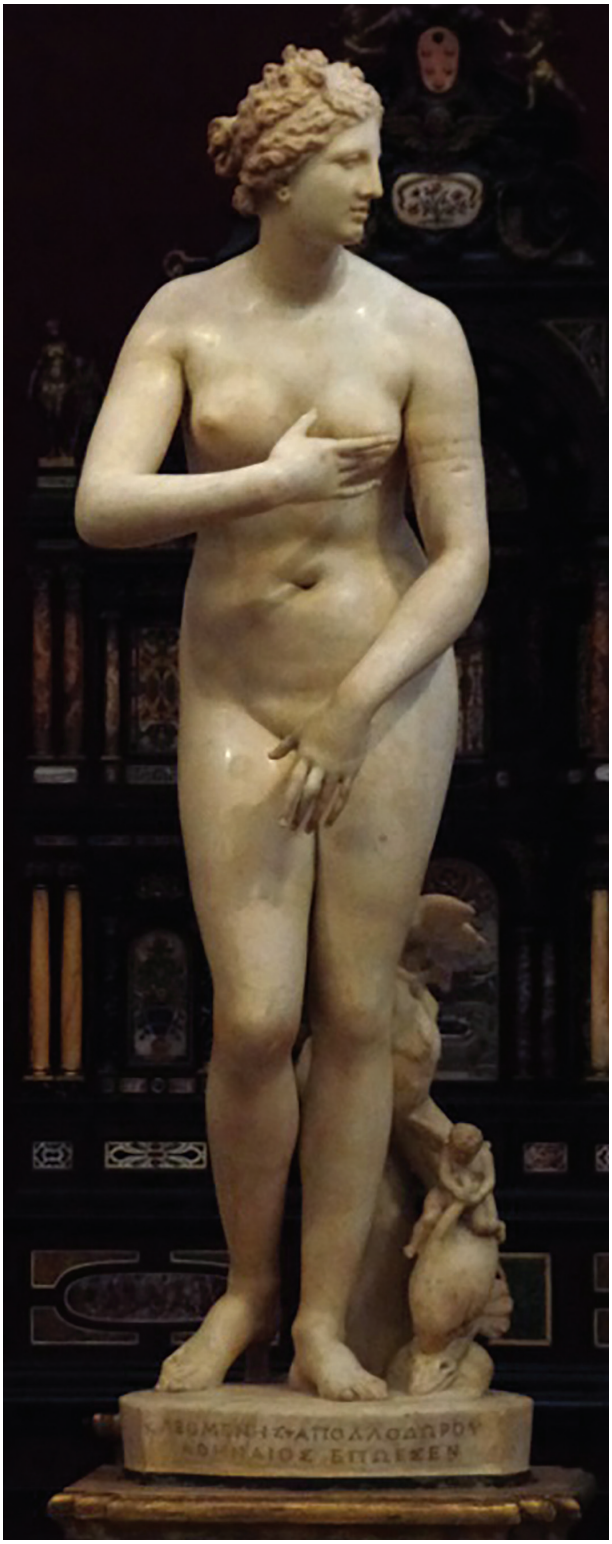

Figure 9. *Venus de' Medici* or *Medici Venus* depicting the Greek goddess of love Aphrodite. Copy of a 1st-century BC marble copy, perhaps made in Athens, of a bronze original Greek sculpture. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

(17). However, this speculation does not explain the widespread presence of the gesture in paintings. The 'Spiritual Exercises' of Loyola was published in the middle of the 16th century (1548), at which time some of the painters had already depicted their sitters with that hand gesture. It may be interesting to accept the Loyolan theory for this gesture, in the case of artists who incorporated this hand gesture after the publication of Jesuit rules, but the hypothesis is still weak.

The description of the penitent gesture by Saint Ignacio does not specify at all the position of the fingers, but it only deals with placing the hand upon the chest. In addition, Loyola warned against the display of the act of penance in public: it could be done 'even in the presence of many others but without their perceiving what the sinner is doing'. Therefore, it would be unlikely that the sitter displayed the act of penance in a painting because it was prohibited outdoors according to Loyolan laws. Further, based on the universal application of the hand gesture in the artworks of so many painters, it seems unlikely that they are trying to depict the same spiritual sense or feeling of penitence. Another speculation that goes against this hypothesis is that many painters have depicted this stylized gesture in Christ, the Virgin, and other figures of Saints, too. However, it is not likely that they would depict such a gesture symbolizing suffering and regret for sinning among non-sinning deities. Thus, it seems unrealistic to label the hand gesture herein investigated as a Loyolan content-label symbol.

Discussion

The present retrospective investigation tried to shed light on the reasons why a peculiar hand gesture resembling syndactyly was depicted in hundreds of paintings by various artists, including the great masters, such as Titian, Bronzino, El Greco, Parmigianino, François Clouet, Hans Memling, Anton Raphael Mengs and Luis el Divino Morales, who adopted this sign in dozens of portraits produced by them (Figures 1-8).

An inaccurate depiction of the model inadvertently drawn by an artist seems unlikely given their high reputation and because of the large number of paintings in which the same hand gesture has been

depicted. Indeed, the pre-Renaissance simplified and ordinary hand depictions were substituted with a more truthful and anatomically accurate hand drawing by the Renaissance artists, who captured the static and dynamic complexity of hands (4, 5). Moreover, in almost all of their works, Renaissance painters provided detailed preliminary studies through cartoons, drawings, sketches or designs, and an erroneous depiction of an abnormal finger position would not have been repeated by accident, especially as such mistakes would have been adjusted in the final piece. Further, since this gesture is found in several portraits by painters belonging to different ages, nationalities and artistic movements, and it is not limited to sitters of a particular age or family, they are most probably stylistic features of the artists' work rather than accurate depictions of anomalies in the subjects' hands. Therefore, although some of the paintings included in the present investigation show human figures with the fingers depicted as resembling syndactyly involving the third and the fourth fingers, it is most likely that the artists in their career merged attributes from various models to create an idealized beauty of the hand.

In conclusion, a lot of Renaissance and later artists are known indeed to have regularly shown finger anomalies in their paintings for stylistic reasons (4, 5); moreover, it is highly improbable that there was a veritable epidemic of syndactyly in the 15th to 17th century in Europe. Our investigation suggests instead that it was fashionable to be depicted with certain types of hand gestures, and that this feature signified grace, elegance and refinement rather than deformity. Several members of the Renaissance and later movements used this unnatural depiction of the fingers following an artistic trend of that period to imbue and to idealize the delicacy and the grace of the hand depiction. It should be considered an artistic device or a symbolic hallmark without any conveyed meaning rather than a true pathologic depiction of syndactyly.

Conflict of interest: Each author declares that he or she has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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