



CODA

‘Epidemic’ of hand deformities in the French baroque paintings of Jean and François Clouet

Summary

This article analyses the nature of the multiple finger anomalies found in portraits by the French Renaissance artistic dynasty, the Clouets. The multiplicity of finger anomalies could be either innocent congenital variants, or pathological and traumatic deformities. In view of the presence of such ‘beautifying variations’ in the works of other Renaissance artists, the authors decided that these features were not the result of an epidemic of deformities, but instead represented a stylistic approach in paintings of this period at the French Court.

Introduction

Jean Clouet junior (1480s–1541) and his son François (1522–1572) were official painters at the French royal court. Their many depictions of members of the royalty, nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie of France are of particular medical interest because in almost all cases where the sitter’s hands are visible, they exhibit anatomical abnormalities.

Jean and François Clouet came from an artistic family, probably of Flemish origin.¹ Jean (or Janet or Jeannet) Clouet junior was probably born in Brussels but grew up in Tours, France. The family eventually moved to Paris where Jean’s talent came to the attention of the king. He became ‘Groom of the Chamber’ (*valet de chambre*) to François I, a position of honour which did not involve menial duties but instead provided a stipend to support his artistic work. He was one of the king’s favourites and remained in his position until his death in 1541.

After the death of Jean his son François, born in Tours, succeeded to his father’s position at court, inheriting all his properties and titles, and becoming the most successful portraitist of 16th century France.

The Portraits

The portraits done by Jean and François Clouet, some as finished paintings and others as preliminary drawings, typically show half or full length figures, elegantly clothed and in static poses. The finished paintings have been particularly praised for their detailed rendering of beautiful garments and sparkling jewellery, and their ‘penetrating interpretation of individual character.’¹

The hands are rarely a topic of detailed comment. They are often artistically inferior to other features of the paintings. Indeed, they may have been executed by apprentices, or may have been altered during later restorations.¹ Despite uncertainty about their origins, however, it is striking that nearly all of them display anatomical abnormalities.

For purposes of illustration the hands are collated in combined images (Figure 1 for paintings attributed to Jean Clouet and Figure 2 for paintings attributed to François). Some show arthritic changes corresponding to sclerodactyly at the level of the metacarpo-phalangeal (MP) and inter-phalangeal (IP) joints.² Most variants are found in the little fingers, corresponding either to camptodactyly (a congenital fixed flexion deformity of the proximal IP joint in combination with hyperextension of the MP and the distal IP joints, affecting most commonly the little finger),³ or to clinodactyly (a finger deviation in the coronal plane, affecting the little finger most often, caused by an abnormally-shaped short tubular bone),³ or to the after-effects of an injury.

Discussion

The finger anomalies in these paintings correspond to three types.

- i. Non-pathological variants. These conditions are non-disabling, asymptomatic, congenital, usually bilateral (e.g. Figures 1b, e and i, 2a, c–e). In the portraits these variants are not suggestive of genetic predisposition because they are found not only within family lines (e.g. Figure 1b, 2c and d) but also in unrelated individuals (e.g. Figure 1e, i and 2e).
- ii. Acquired deformities resulting from inflammatory, autoimmune arthropathies such as rheumatoid arthritis, systemic

Received: 21 February 2016; Accepted: 8 March 2016

© The Author 2016. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Association of Physicians. All rights reserved. For Permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com



Figure 1. (a) *Portrait of Charlotte de France or Charlotte de Valois* (1516–1524), daughter of François I. Jean Clouet (1522), oil on panel, 17.78 × 13.34 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, USA. (b) *Portrait of Madeleine de France or Madeleine de Valois* (1520–1537), daughter of François I. Jean Clouet (1522), oil on panel transferred from canvas, 16.8 × 13.3 cm, current location unknown. (c) *Portrait of François I de Valois* (1494–1547), king of France. Jean Clouet (1535), oil on oak panel, 96 × 74 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (d) *Portrait of Marguerite de Navarre or Marguerite d'Angoulême or Marguerite d'Alençon* (1492–1549), sister of François I. Jean Clouet (c. 1527–30), oil on wood, 61.2 × 52.6 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK. (e) *Portrait of Guillaume Budé* (1467–1540), humanist scholar. Jean Clouet (c. 1536), oil on wood, 39.7 × 34.3 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. (f) *Portrait of Claude de Lorraine* (1496–1550), duke of Guise. Jean Clouet (1528–30), oil on wood, 26 × 26 cm, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence, Italy. (g) *Portrait of Louis de Cleves* (1495–1545), count of Nevers. Jean Clouet (c. 1530), oil on oak panel, 24 × 20 cm, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, Italy. (h) *Portrait of a banker*. Jean Clouet (1522), oil on panel, 42.5 × 32.7 cm, Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, USA. (i) *Portrait of Marie d'Assigny, Madame de Canaples* (1502–1558), an aristocratic lady at the court of François I. Jean Clouet (c. 1525), oil on panel, 36 × 28.5 cm, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, UK.

sclerosis or psoriatic arthritis. These conditions are disabling, symptomatic, mostly but not always bilateral (e.g. [Figure 1c, f, g and 2g](#)).

- iii. Post-traumatic deformities. These conditions are disabling, symptomatic, usually unilateral (e.g. [Figure 1h](#) left hand, [Figure 2f](#) left hand).

Conclusion

Because hand deformities are found in almost all portraits by Jean and François Clouet, and are not limited to sitters of a particular age or family, they are most probably stylistic features of the two artists' work rather than accurate depictions of anomalies in the subjects' hands. Note particularly the hands in [Figure 2d](#) and [e](#), which are presented in the same way in the portraits of these contemporary but genetically unrelated women. Two further observations support this conclusion: first that other Renaissance artists are known to have regularly shown finger anomalies in their paintings for stylistic reasons⁴; and second, that it is highly improbable that there was a veritable epidemic of deformed hands at the 16th-century French court. The Clouet portraits suggest instead that it was fashionable for high-status French sitters to be depicted with certain types of hand abnormalities, and that these features signified elegance and refinement rather than deformity.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

G.M. Weisz^{1,2}, W.R. Albury², M. Matucci-Cerinic³ and D. Lazzeri⁴

From the ¹School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, ²School of Humanities, University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia, ³Department of Experimental and Clinical Medicine, Division of Rheumatology AOUC, University of Florence, Italy and ⁴Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery, Villa Salaria Clinic, Rome, Italy

Address correspondence to: Davide Lazzeri, MD, Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery, Villa Salaria Clinic, Rome, Italy. email: davidelazzeri@gmail.com

References

1. Germain A. (1906) *Les Clouet: biographie critique*. Paris: Laurens.
2. Merlino G, Germano S, Carlucci S. Surgical management of digital calcinosis in CREST syndrome. *Anesthet Plast Surg* 2013; **37**:1214–9.
3. Goldfarb CA. Congenital hand differences. *J Hand Surg Am* 2009; **34**:1351–6.
4. Hermans PJ. (1987). A systematic study of the pictorial hand from Botticelli to Rembrandt. In Appelboom T (ed). *Art, History and Antiquity of Rheumatic Diseases*. Brussels: Elsevier, pp. 38–40.

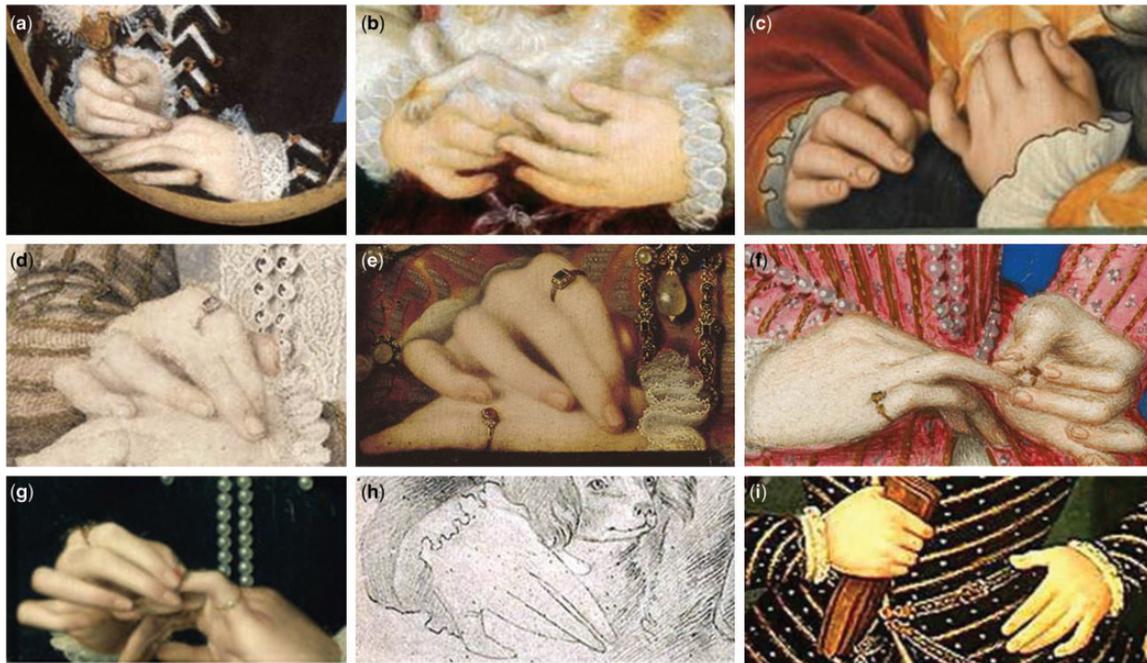


Figure 2. (a) *Portrait miniature of Catherine de' Medici* (1519–1589), wife of Henri II and queen of France. François Clouet (1555), watercolour on vellum laid down on card, 60 × 44 mm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK. (b) *Portrait of Hercule-François, Duke of Alençon, Anjou and Brabant* (1554–1584), son of Henri II and Catherine de' Medici. François Clouet (c.1556/58), oil on canvas, 41 × 51 cm, current location unknown. (c) *Portrait of the young Henri de Valois* (1519–1559), later king Henri II of France. François Clouet (unknown date), oil on oak panel, 30 × 23 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. (d) *Portrait of Marguerite de Valois or la reine Margot* (1553–1615), daughter of Henri II and Catherine de' Medici, queen of Navarre and later queen of France. François Clouet (unknown date), pencil and chalk on paper, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. (e) *Portrait of Elisabeth d'Autriche* (1554–1592), queen of France. François Clouet (1571), oil on canvas, 36 × 26 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (f) *Portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1542–87), wife of François II and queen of France. François Clouet (c. 1558–60), watercolour and body colour on vellum rebacked with card, Royal Collection, UK. (g) *Portrait of Diane de Poitiers, Madame de Valentinois* (unknown date), French noblewoman. François Clouet (unknown date); oil on canvas, Galleries and Museums, Sheffield, UK. (h) *Portrait of Marguerite d'Angoulême* (1492–1549), sister of François I and queen of Navarre. François Clouet (1560), Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. (i) *Portrait of Charles IX* (1550–74), son of Henri II and Catherine de' Medici, king of France. François Clouet (1565–72).