

## SPECIAL ARTICLE

# The Gouty Joseph in Giulio Romano's 'Holy Family'

George M. WEISZ,<sup>1,2</sup> William R. ALBURY,<sup>2</sup> Donatella LIPPI<sup>3</sup> and Marco MATUCCI-CERINIC<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of History and Philosophy (Program in History of Medicine), University of New South Wales, Sydney, <sup>2</sup>School of Humanities, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia; <sup>3</sup>History of Medicine, Department of Anatomy, Histology and Legal Medicine, University of Florence, and <sup>4</sup>Department of Biomedicine, Division of Rheumatology, AOU-Careggi, Denohe Center, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

### Abstract

Joint diseases in antiquity and the Renaissance were generally known by the all-encompassing term, gout (*podagra* or *gotta*). Only in later centuries was there a differentiation in the types of joint diseases, distinguishing gout in the modern sense from other arthritic and rheumatic disorders. The present article illustrates one pictorial representation of joint disease from the early sixteenth century, a case that seems typical of gouty tophi.

**Key words:** gout, joint disease, renaissance painting.

### INTRODUCTION

The study of normal anatomy was a part of Renaissance philosophy, and was of interest to both artists and physicians. When it appears that deformities or lesions have been depicted by Renaissance artists who were otherwise skilled in representing normal anatomy, the historian's duty is to establish whether these characteristics resulted from the personal style of the artist, or the inadvertent representation of a deformity by an artist unaware of the underlying pathology, or the intentional representation of a pathological condition.

Unless the depiction of a pathological condition in an art work has been specifically identified in a trustworthy written account that is meaningful for modern medicine, the diagnosis remains for the medico-historian to decipher. This retrospective Medico-Artistic Diagnosis is necessarily speculative, but can be close to reality if systematically done. Such a diagnosis may assist in the identification of genetic diseases, where portraits of members of the same family are available; and it may also aid in the identification of individuals,

when it can be correlated with known data concerning their medical conditions.

### St Joseph's foot in Romano's 'Holy Family'

The art historian Michael Baxandall<sup>1</sup> once noted that 'A medical man perceives a human body differently from the rest of us: he has learned certain kinds of alertness and discrimination and he has terms and categories to help him. Baxandall's comment on past history, applies equally today.'<sup>2</sup> An example of Baxandall's principle may be found by examining the painting of the *Holy Family* (Fig. 1) in the Getty Museum (Los Angeles). This work dates from the High Renaissance years of 1520–1523 and comes from the brush of Giulio Pippi (or Lippi), commonly known as Giulio Romano (1499–1546), a leading pupil of Raphael (1483–1520). The medical observer will be struck by a feature of St Joseph's left foot which has escaped the notice of modern art historians (Fig. 2). The foot is large and wide, and there is a prominent swelling on the side of the little toe, which is identifiable as a typical chronic 'gouty pouch', or localised swelling at the metatarsophalangeal joint of the little toe. Romano has emphasised the swelling by means of the shadow immediately behind it and by the normal shape of all the other feet in the painting.

*Correspondence:* Dr George M. Weisz, PO Box 543, Vaucluse, NSW 2030, Australia. Email: gmweisz@aol.com



**Figure 1** Giulio Romano (Giulio Pippi) (Italian, 1499–1546). *The Holy Family*, about 1520–23, oil (Possibly mixed with tempera) on panel, 77.8 × 61.9 cm (30 5/8 × 24 3/8 in) unframed. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. (Reproduced by permission of the J. Paul Getty Museum).

In the Renaissance historical period, ‘gout’ was the diagnosis given to most joint diseases.<sup>3</sup> Many cases which were described as gout during that period have since been identified as various rheumatic disorders, but this particular picture shows a true gouty arthritis. It was not typical in Renaissance art to depict St Joseph with a deformed foot, but a few examples of this practice have been found. A gouty pouch, similar to that of Romano’s St Joseph, is also visible on the left foot of St Joseph in Francesco di Giorgio Martini’s (1439–1501) *Nativity* of 1475 (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena),<sup>4</sup> and a similar swelling has been noted in the left foot of St Joseph in Raphael’s painting of *The Marriage of the Virgin* of 1504 (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan).<sup>5</sup> A group of medical writers has proposed a diagnosis of polydactyly for Joseph in Raphael’s painting, but the visual evidence presented in support of this diagnosis is not decisive.<sup>6</sup> It is unlikely that such highly skilled artists as Martini, Raphael and Romano would have introduced an apparent foot deformity



**Figure 2** Detail of Figure 1. (Reproduced by permission of the J. Paul Getty Museum).

into their paintings inadvertently, for example through poor draftsmanship. It is certainly not a regular feature of their other depictions of elderly men. An alternative explanation is that St Joseph’s deformity represents the actual condition of the model’s foot in each case, as was suggested in relation to Raphael’s painting.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from gout, a differential diagnostic process would consider whether the swelling at the fifth toe might be either a Taylor’s bunion, unlikely as this would be more bony than soft; it could be a lipoma or an old post-traumatic calcification. There are no signs of inflammation, therefore paronychia or abscess would not be easy to accept. However, an arthritic process, dactylitis of psoriatic or reactive arthropathy type, could be a possibility. As there were no other visible systemic arthritic changes in these images, perhaps these specific joint diseases would to be less likely.

## CONCLUSION

It is our view that whatever the explanation of its presence in Romano’s *Holy Family*, the depiction of St Joseph’s foot deformity gives an accurate representation of a gouty tophus and provides further evidence of the close association that existed in the Renaissance between the visual arts and the careful study of both normal and diseased anatomy. The presentation of a

real gouty patient, differentiated from the generalised, 'collective' gout, encompassing all joint diseases in the Renaissance period, is of importance.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Baxandall M (1985) *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 107.
- 2 Bradford EH (1897) The human foot in art. *J Bone Joint Surg Am* **s1-10**, 148–61.
- 3 Copeman WSC (1964) *A Short History of the Gout and the Rheumatic Diseases*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp 2–6.
- 4 Bellosi L (ed) (1993) *Francesco di Giorgio e il Rinascimento a Siena 1450–1500*, pp 20, 110. Electa, Milano. [Cited 13 June 2011.] Painting viewable at: <http://www.wga.hu/cgi-bin/highlight.cgi?file=html/f/francesc/2paintin/7nativi.html&find=nativity>
- 5 Meyer zur Capellen J (2001) *Raphael: a critical catalogue of his paintings. Vol. 1, The Beginnings in Umbria and Florence, ca. 1500–1508* (trans. Potter SB), pp 138–41. Arcos Verlag, Ergolding. [Cited 13 June 2011.] Painting viewable at: <http://www.wga.hu/cgi-bin/highlight.cgi?file=html/r/raphael/1early/10spozal.html&find=virgin>
- 6 Mimouni D, Mimouni FB, Mimouni M (2000) Polydactyly reported by Raphael. *BMJ* **32**, 1622.