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## Blemished noses in the art of three masters: Ghirlandaio, Rembrandt, and Warhol

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**Abstract** Blemished noses are portrayed in the paintings of such noted artists as Ghirlandaio, Rembrandt, and Andy Warhol. Sometimes, the deformity results from a skin disorder such as rhinophyma as in Ghirlandaio's *An Old Man and his Grandson* or a saddle nose deformity from congenital syphilis as in Rembrandt's *Portrait of Gerard de Lairese*. Andy Warhol's *Before and After* portrays a large nose before and after cosmetic surgery. This contribution explores some of the lessons that can be learned, both artistically and medically, from these famous works of art.

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### Introduction

The human nose is a delicate bony-cartilaginous structure, strategically located in the center of the face. Due to its prominent position, the nose invites scrutiny, while its size, shape, and skin qualities are important to a person's esthetic look. The appearance of the nose has received great emphasis in the art world, often being portrayed with perfect proportions, very straight and slender. Some artists have chosen to depict real-life noses, even if they were blemished by skin diseases.

This contribution presents three famous paintings that feature disfigured noses:

- *An Old Man and his Grandson* (c. 1490) by Ghirlandaio, depicting rhinophyma (Figure 1)
- *Portrait of Gerard de Lairese* (1665-1667) by Rembrandt, which shows a saddle nose deformity (Figure 2)
- *Before and After* (1961) by Andy Warhol, that depicts nose profiles before and after rhinoplasty

How these three artists, working centuries apart, portrayed blemished noses tells us something about their artistic styles, the artists themselves, the contemporary view of medicine, and perhaps even something about ourselves.

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**Fig. 1** Domenico Ghirlandaio. *An Old Man and his Grandson*, circa 1490. Tempera on poplar wood. Louvre Museum. Reproduced with permission from Wikipedia Commons.

### ***An Old Man and his Grandson* by Ghirlandaio**

Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494) was an Italian Renaissance painter born in Florence. He led a large and popular Florentine workshop, and among his many apprentices was the famous Michelangelo. Ghirlandaio is best known for his frescos and received many commissions to decorate various churches, including the Sistine Chapel. Ghirlandaio also worked on a number of panel portraits later in his career, with the best known being *An Old Man and his Grandson*.

The format of the painting is that of an interior space with a view of a landscape outside the window. The picture shows an old man in a red robe embracing a young child, also wearing red. The most striking feature of the painting is the bulbous deformity of the man's nose, portrayed in great detail and consistent with a diagnosis of rhinophyma. The man also has a small lesion on his right forehead. With this depiction of a real-life blemished nose, Ghirlandaio dispensed with the contemporary convention of painting a well-proportioned nose, thus introducing realism into Italian Renaissance art. Ghirlandaio, at the same time, emphasized the tender human relationship between the little boy and his grandfather, which helps to divert our attention away from the old man's nose.

The term *rhinophyma* comes from the Ancient Greek and means "nose tumor." Perhaps the earliest use of this term was by Ferdinand Ritter von Hebra (1816-1880), some 350 years after Ghirlandaio's painting of this subtype of rosacea.<sup>1</sup> Hebra mentions rhinophyma in his three-volume *Atlas der Hautkrankheiten*. In volume II of the 1865 edition, he depicts on Tafel (plate) 6 a man with a massive rhinophyma.<sup>1</sup> The plate is inscribed at the bottom with the words "Acne rosacea. Rhinophyma." In the accompanying text on page 73, Hebra writes verbatim the word "Pfund-Nase" and thereafter the word "Rhinophyma." During the 19th Century, many eponyms were used to describe rhinophyma, including *pound nose* (*Pfund-Nase*), *elephantiasis nasi*, *bulbous nose*, *hammer-nose*, and *copper nose*. *Rhinophyma* gradually replaced all these names in the medical literature.

### ***Portrait of Gerard de Lairese* by Rembrandt**

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669) was perhaps the greatest genius of Dutch art during the 17th century, when Holland enjoyed its golden age of painting. He is especially remembered for his self-portraits, portraits of his contemporaries, and illustrations of biblical scenes. He opened a



**Fig. 2** Rembrandt van Rijn. *Portrait of Gerard de Lairese*, circa 1665 to 1667. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduced with permission from Wikipedia Commons.

studio in Leiden, Holland around 1625 and in 1631 moved to Amsterdam.

Between 1665 to 1667, Rembrandt painted a portrait of Gerard de Lairese (1641-1711), a celebrated Dutch painter and art theorist. In the artwork, de Lairese sits in an armchair, turned to the left and looking at the viewer. In the early 20th century, it was recognized that the face of de Lairese, as portrayed by Rembrandt, features a saddle nose deformity, which is a stigma of late congenital syphilis. The only other clinical information we have about de Lairese is that he went blind in 1690.<sup>2</sup>

Destruction and deformity of the nose by syphilis was well known during the times of William Shakespeare, who mentions this clinical finding in his play *Timon of Athens* (Act IV, Scene 3): "...down with the nose, down with it flat; take the bridge quite away."<sup>3</sup>

The first well-documented description of a saddle nose deformity in syphilis comes from the French physician Jean Astruc (1684-1766) in his pioneering treatise on venereal diseases, *De Morbis Veneriis Libri Sex*: "and from hence a Caries of the spongy Bones of the Nose, of the two triangular Bones, and the Vomer itself upon which these last rest, from hence the whole Arch of the Nose being destroyed and the Bridge of it falling in, those who had an aquiline Nose, became flat faced like an Ape."<sup>4</sup>

Early descriptions of the face of late congenital syphilis were made by the noted British surgeon Sir Jonathan Hutchinson (1828-1913). In 1858 he described the nose of such patients as being "sunk and flattened."<sup>2</sup> Hutchinson later related the story of a patient he read about named Benjamin Lawson, born in 1798 and hospitalized in 1815, whose portrait showed the face of congenital syphilis. Hutchinson writes, "The portrait prefixed showed the bridge of the nose sunk level with the cheeks, and the forehead large, with prominent frontal eminences."<sup>5</sup>

Over the following decades, various eponyms were used to describe the sunk and flattened nose of congenital syphilis. These have included "pug nose," "fleur de lis nose," "boxer's nose," and "saddle nose," which became the most popular eponym, dating back to at least 1886, if not earlier.<sup>6</sup>

The saddle nose of congenital syphilis represents one of the healed bony stigmata of the periostitis from the early stage. Typically, there is destruction of the bony frame of the nose with contraction of the scar tissue on the inside of the nose. This causes a collapse of the nasal bridge with upward retraction of the tip of the nose, producing the characteristic saddle-shaped appearance (Figure 3). Besides syphilis, a saddle nose may result, most commonly, from traumatic injury. Other causes include relapsing polychondritis, granulomatosis with polyangiitis, cocaine abuse, and leprosy.



Congenital ectodermal defect, showing the characteristic nose which resembles the "saddle nose" of congenital syphilis. The scalp is covered by a wig which hides the almost total alopecia. —Goeckermann, page 13.

**Fig. 3** Saddle nose deformity in a patient with congenital ectodermal defect. Reproduced with permission from Ormsby OS and Mitchell JH, eds. *The Practical Medical Series, Vol. VII: Skin and Venereal Diseases*. Chicago, IL: The Year Book Publishers; 1920: plate I.

### **Before and After by Andy Warhol**

Andy Warhol, born Andrew Warhola (1928-1987), was an outstanding American artist who pioneered the Pop Art movement, which portrayed commonplace objects and people drawn from everyday life. He became famous for his

paintings of Campbell's soup cans and images of Marilyn Monroe. Warhol reportedly suffered from rosacea and was bitterly teased at school about this skin ailment by other children, who called him "Andy the red-nosed Warhola."<sup>7</sup> In 1957, he underwent dermabrasion presumably to treat rhinophyma.



**Fig. 4** Cosmetic surgery advertisement from *National Enquirer*, April 1961.

Rhinoplasty became a focus of his 1961 painting *Before and After*, which depicts an enlarged version of a black and white advertisement for cosmetic surgery (Figure 4). It features two profiles of the same woman before and after nose surgery. On the left is an enlarged, curved nose, and on the right is the surgically corrected, cute, upturned nose. This type of advertisement, promoting a cosmetic procedure, is common today, be it for hair transplants or antiwrinkling creams and so on. Warhol lets us contemplate such an advertisement and what it might suggest about the value our society places on good looks. Plastic surgery and cosmetic dermatology can help many people to correct undesirable blemishes, thus improving their appearance and self-esteem. There has also been a welcome trend in advertising to embrace curvy, plus size models or more mature models, showcasing that beauty comes in all body types and looks. We should continue the ongoing discussions in schools about protecting children from body shaming and the kind of teasing Andy Warhol endured while growing up. Hopefully, in the process, we can become more accepting of others, no matter how they look, and of our own perceived cosmetic deficiencies.

## Conclusions

At the center of the face lies the nose, which has challenged dermatologists and intrigued artists when it becomes blemished. Ghirlandaio introduced realism to the art world of his time through his amazingly detailed depiction of rhinophyma. Rembrandt captured, in his painting, a saddle nose deformity

from congenital syphilis, although the artist had no conception of its clinical meaning, which only became defined two centuries later. Andy Warhol held up an artistic mirror inviting us to reflect on how people view their body image. Let us continue to enjoy the magnificent paintings of these master artists, learning from them about art, life, and most importantly, ourselves.

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