



## Was the subject portrayed in “A Man” by Cornelis Anthonisz around 1530 really affected by progressive supranuclear palsy?

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Dear Editor,

In June 1963, J. Clifford Richardson, John C. Steele, and Jerzy Olszewski presented the first clinical report of eight cases who showed supranuclear ophthalmoplegia, pseudobulbar palsy, nuchal dystonia, and dementia. The following year, they published the first comprehensive clinicopathological description of progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP) [1]. In an extensive bibliography survey, Brusa and colleagues [2] found that there were descriptions of PSP before 1963. In 1889, Adolphe Dutil presented the first photographs of a woman with habitus strongly suggestive of PSP [3]. During one of the famous Tuesday lessons (June 12, 1888), Jean-Martin Charcot showed a man, named Bachère, who had typical signs of PSP [3]. Larner proposed the intriguing hypothesis that the first description of PSP was unconsciously made by Charles Dickens in 1857 [4].

Recently, LeWitt hypothesized that the subject in the portrait “A Man” painted by Cornelis Anthonisz around 1530 (Fig. 1) may have been affected by PSP [5]. LeWitt’s conjecture was based on the recognition of some typical signs of this neurodegenerative disease in the subject of the painting: a vertical wrinkling in the bridge of the nose and glabellar region due to corrugator and orbicularis oculi muscles dystonia, and a particular left hand position with the thumb and index finger extended together with the other fingers flexed (pointing-gun sign). Moreover, since the man in the painting does not look at the object in his right hand, LeWitt assumes that the man may have been affected by a downward gaze impairment, one of the most specific signs of PSP. However,

we have some doubts that the man painted by Cornelis Anthonisz was really affected by PSP. Cornelis Anthonisz (ca. 1505–1553) was a Dutch-painter; much of whose work was either portraits of heads of state or allegorical prints. However, one of his most famous paintings is the *Banquet of Members of Amsterdam’s Crossbow Civic Guard* (1533; oil on panel, Amsterdam Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands), a very early example of a group portrait of guardsmen. The 17 Dutch civic guards in the painting are sitting around a banquet table. Some of the men are looking toward the viewer, some of them elsewhere, but nobody is looking down, including those who are holding an object in their hand, such as a written document, a pen, or a tool. Thus, the act of not looking down could be related to the painter’s style, which was typical of the Renaissance period. In the same painting, some of the subjects have their thumb and index finger extended and their other fingers flexed, in the same way as in “A Man.” In the early modern Netherlands, the civic guard (or schutterij) was made up of a group of volunteers dedicated to the defense of the city through weapons such as crossbows or guns. Thus, it is probable that the peculiar hand position could simply point to their role as defenders of their city. Furthermore, the painter’s attempt to show a proud look in the schutterij might justify the vertical wrinkles in glabellar region evident in at least two subjects in the painting.

In support of this argument, the pointing-gun sign is present in other portraits by Cornelis Anthonisz: *Nicolaus Cannius* (1534; oil on panel, collection of the Begijnhof, Amsterdam, Netherlands) and *Mary of Hungary* (1538–1558; paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands). Of note, Nicolaus Cannius does not look at the object in his right hand. Furthermore, the pointing-gun sign is repeatedly present both in the iconography of Saint John the Baptist, as in the *Portrait of François I as St John the Baptist*, by Jean Clouet (1518; oil on panel, Louvre Museum, Paris, France), and in other paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as in *The laughing philosopher Democritus and the weeping*

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**Fig. 1** “A Man” by Cornelis Anthonisz, 1530. Oil on panel. Reproduced with permission of the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, Detroit, MI, USA

*philosopher Heraclitus* by Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem (1588; oil on panel, current whereabouts unknown) and in the *Portrait of Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem* by Robert Willemsz de Baudous (1610; paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands). Noteworthy, Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem does not look at the brushes in his left hand and presents a vertical wrinkling in the glabellar region.

In conclusion, although the retrospective diagnostics in neurological research via the arts remains absolutely important [6], we believe that the diagnosis of PSP hypothesized in “A Man” should be discarded.

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### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflicts of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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