

Syphilis in art: an entertainment in four parts. Part 1

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Abstract

It is widely recognised that the history of art reveals the contemporary attitudes of societies and artists to changing patterns of social and sexual behaviour. This collection of artistic creations shows that representations of syphilis in art, over more than five centuries, are consistent with this view.

The first quarter century of the morbus gallicus in Europe, starting in 1493, coincided with the spread of Renaissance influence, including printing. A host of pamphlets with woodcut illustrations reflected public alarm at the epidemic proportions and severity of the new disease, with its disabling and sometimes deadly consequences. Also revealed in these early works are the astrological and theological beliefs of disease causation as well as identifiable and serious attempts at public education. These twinned themes of understanding and educational endeavour recur together throughout the centuries and take many forms as man attempts to outline and influence attitudes and so improve his medico-social health.

Attitudes to causation changed with experience so that by the beginning of the 17th century the morbus gallicus is no longer a mere contagion but recognised socially and represented artistically, as a morbus venereus. Its clinical presentation had changed remarkably from the alarming early days; and so too had its prevalence—from epidemic to endemic proportions.¹ We find that the artists of both the 16th and 17th centuries, while somewhat reticent about syphilis, are nonetheless at pains to suggest that sex is not without its serious side effects. Their artistic exhortations suggest women as the source of the disease, so that we find Venus shown as both ideal love and the source of contamination.

Such attitudes contrast strikingly with what follows. The 18th century is characterised by the sophisticated elements of European societies taking an irreverent or satirical view of sex and syphilis. In England this is reflected in the works of Hogarth and other notable caricaturists. The fierce castigation of men and their follies is matched by more understanding and rational attitudes towards women. But it does not last. Indeed it seems almost to invite the studied censoriousness of the 19th century with women again stigmatised as a source of degradation and disease.

In essence this collection of examples of syphilis in art illustrates wide variations in attitude and behaviour from alarm to tolerance and from intolerance through liberality to licence and much the same again, over nearly five centuries. Just occasionally an artist seems to be ahead of his times.

Of all the intriguing aspects of the history of syphilis few surpass the contemporary observations on changing personal and public attitudes to the disease. To date the most fruitful sources of such information have been medical or sociological textbooks and popular literature. This study aims to broaden the perspective.

The endeavours of a wide variety of artists of diverse gifts from the 15th to the 20th century are assembled chronologically and an attempt is made, by collating them, to extend our understanding of how men, and occasionally women too, have viewed one of the hazards to which their flesh is heir.

The Fifteenth Century and before

The oldest known artistic representation of syphilis is said to be a fourth century Peruvian jug (fig 1). It is one of a series of matching clay jugs each manifesting a disease, such as leprosy and leishmaniasis. They are to be found in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.² Most of the jugs are of heads and show damage which may be the result of regular usage or be sacrificial or punitive in origin. As in the example shown, noses seem to be most at risk.

The jug measures 19.2 × 16.6 cms. It shows a

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Figure 1 Syphilitic mother with child. Fourth century, Peru. Rose coloured ceramic 192 × 116 mm. Courtesy Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

mother and her partially wrapped child. The child appears to be healthy but the mother has two features of congenital syphilis—a broad, depressed bridge to her nose and upper central incisors notched at their free margin. How much of the nasal and dental change is due to wear or to wanton or accidental damage cannot be determined.

Damage to sculpted noses is also not uncommon. The devil mask (fig 2) from a fourteenth (sic) century house in Carcassonne in southern France, is an example.³ In the common practice of devil mask sculpture the skin is leonised and this with the corneal damage, is compatible with 14th century writings on leprosy. On the other hand, the corneal damage could be the result of weathering or it could be meant to represent a common feature of congenital syphilis, that is, interstitial keratitis. The piece is included to emphasise the need to continue the search for pre-Columbian evidence of syphilis in Europe.

Figure 3 shows another pre-Columbian work of art allegedly showing evidence of syphilis. It is the High Altar of St Mary's Church in Cracow, Poland. It was



Figure 2 Devil's mask depicting leprosy. Fourteenth century. Courtesy Wellcome Institute Library, London.

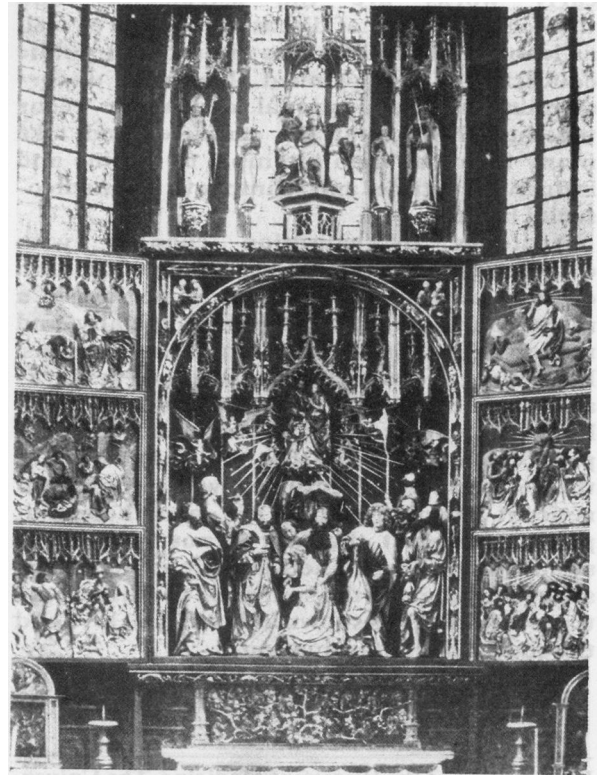


Figure 3 Veit Stoss. Altar of Church of Our Lady (St Mary's) Cracow, 1477–89, 13 × 11 metres. Courtesy of Phaidon Press Ltd.

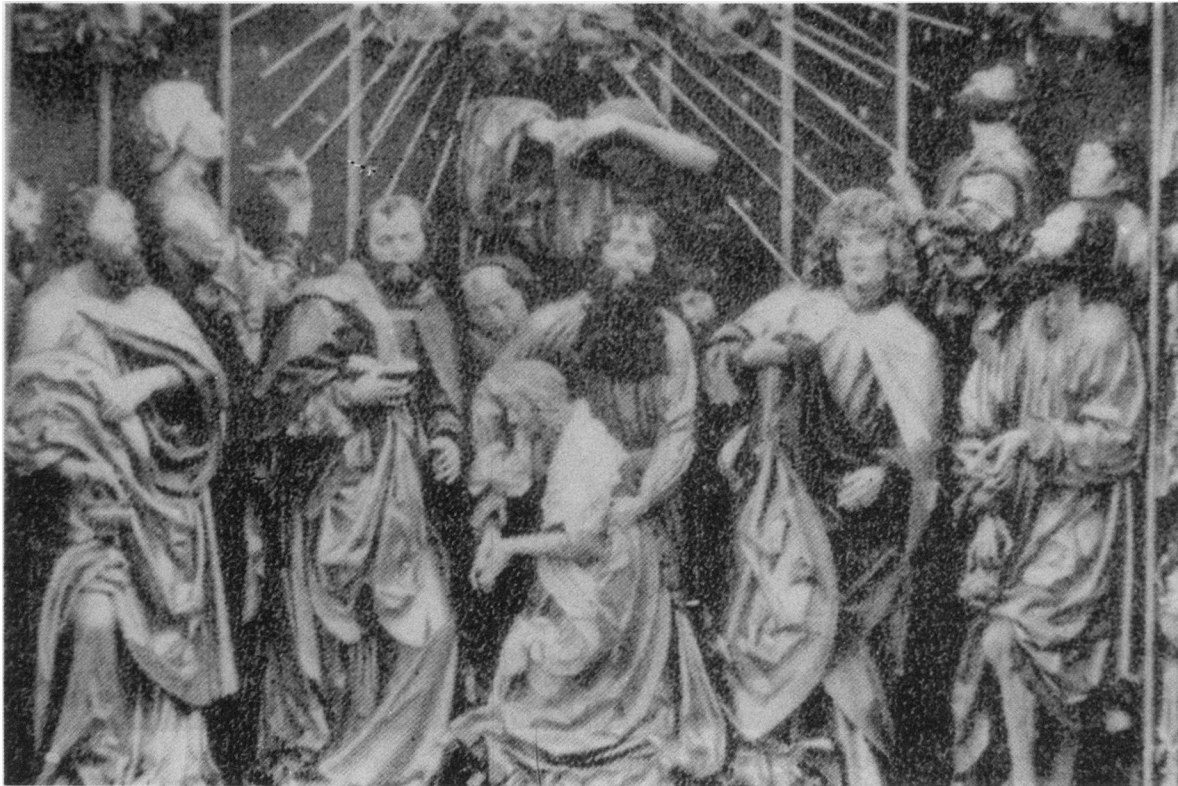


Figure 4 Detail of Figure 3. Courtesy of Phaidon Press Ltd.

carved in wood between 1477 and 1489 by Wit Stoss (?1440/50-1533) a leading German sculptor.⁴ He was summoned by the church's congregation to undertake the commission. His talent was widely recognised. Stoss was well known for having carried the hypnotic Italian Renaissance style of wood carving over the Alps and to have integrated it successfully with established Gothic church architecture. The work, measuring 13 × 11 metres, was completed four years before Columbus returned from his first voyage of discovery in 1493. The early Renaissance features most in evidence are the very expressive faces of the Apostles (fig 4) and the extremely realistic crumpling of their drapery. It has been said that two of the Apostles show stigmata of congenital syphilis, one having a broad, depressed bridge to his nose and the other having hydro-arthritis.⁵

"The Birth of Venus" (fig 5) appropriately heralds the outbreak of the morbus gallicus in Europe. It was painted in 1485-6 by Sandro Botticelli. His Madonna-like, Renaissance Venus, so coy and self-conscious of her nudity, contrasts with the original Roman concept of the goddess. The same may be said about her fuller figure. The gentle breeze which so lyrically disturbs her hair and billows her garments,

ensures her stately passage to the shore. The shower of falling roses suggests that a welcome awaits her.⁶ This contrasts sharply with the presence of a serpent round the goddess's neck. The theme of Botticelli's painting is said to be based on a poem, by one Poliziano, in which the heroine dies of consumption. The snake symbolises the fatal illness. Considering the epidemic circumstances which were soon to follow the execution of this work, one cannot escape noticing the resemblance of the serpent to a treponeme.

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) would be in his twenties during the early years of the morbus gallicus epidemic. Figure 6 is a self-portrait.⁶ What a serious young man he appears to be. He was well aware of the widespread nature of the new disease but, like most of his contemporaries, he did not at first associate it with sexual activity. Later, in August 1506, however, Dürer wrote from Nuremberg to his patron, Willibald Pirckheimer; "Give my compliments to our Prior and tell him to pray to God for my protection, particularly from the French disease; I know of nothing of which I am more badly afraid right now. Nearly everybody has it, and many people are quite eaten up by it so that they die".⁷ Some of

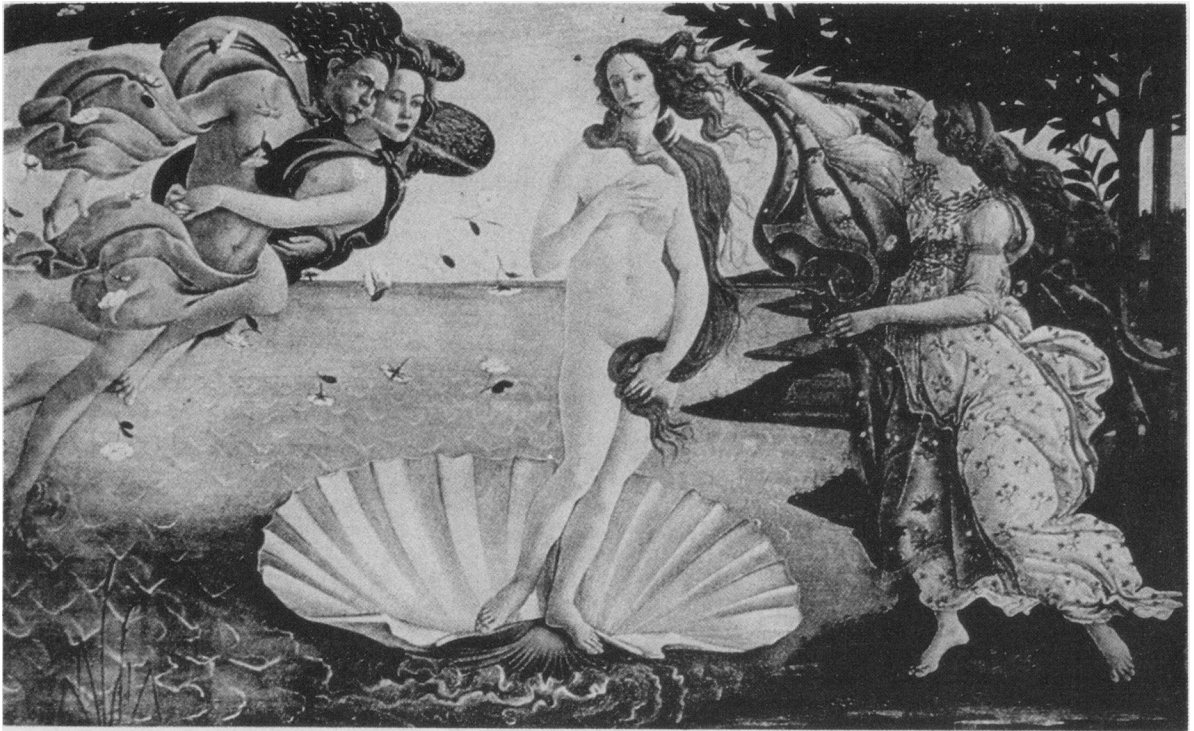


Figure 5 Sandro Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*, 1485–6. Canvas 1.725 × 2.785 metres. Courtesy Galleria Degli, Uffizi, Florence.

Dürer's contemporaries had first hand experience of the ravages of the dreaded disease. In one case, "his nose dropped off"; and in another, a doctor friend, "the face had been eaten away by pox, with exception of a bit of beard on the chin".⁸

The realities and indignities of the disease were to be faced by another great artist some 400 years later. When Paul Gauguin returned to the south seas in 1895, his former mistress refused to care for him because she was frightened by his late syphilitic sores.

Dürer is the most celebrated of all German artists.⁹ From his travels he brought to Nuremberg the real feel and quality of the Italian Renaissance in art. Of all his great skills he was probably at his best in making woodcuts. But it is not only his skill with the knife, the chisel and the gouge which is outstanding. He introduced into the printing of woodcuts, fresh forms, a sense of space and a harmonious balance of light and shade. The latter often meant cutting several blocks and using an over-printing technique previously untried.⁸

An example of Dürer's work accompanied a broad-sheet issued to the public on 1st day of August 1496.



Figure 6 Albrecht Dürer. *Self Portrait*, 1498. Panel 520 × 410 mm. Courtesy of the Prado, Madrid.



Figure 7 Albrecht Dürer, Woodcut illustration accompanying broadsheet by Theodoricus Ulsenius, Nuremberg, 1 August 1496. Courtesy Wellcome Institute Library, London.

The broadsheet was written by the Nuremberg physician, Theodorus Ulsenius. The first edition, but not the second, was dated (fig 7). In it Ulsenius apologises for his, a doctor's excursion into poetry. He warns about the new disease that is sweeping the country, describes its signs and symptoms, says it cannot be cured and purports to establish a direct connection between the epidemic and the great astrological conjunction of 1484. Note this date on the globe with the signs of the Zodiac. The decastich, a poetic footnote by Ulsenius, admonishes the reader to keep calm and advises any victim of the disease to drink the waters of Jordan, presumably a reference to 1 Kings, 5, 14, where Haaman is cured of leprosy by dipping himself seven times in the river Jordan.

Dürer's major woodcut (fig 7) is available in colour and this illustrates some points more dramatically than the black and white specimens.¹⁰ The stance of the figure is new to German work and shows how early Dürer came under the influence of the Renaissance and utilised its new ideas. The general treatment of the subject, the sparse landscape and such details as the signs of the Zodiac round the dated globe are pure Dürer. The astrological origins of the new plague, presented in the text, are thus clearly

emphasised. The same dramatic authority depicts the victim of the disease. The lantern-jawed, woebegone figure is undoubtedly a victim of the morbus gallicus, or French disease. Note the palmar syphilides and the lesions of limbs, trunk and face. For some observers the fact that the gaunt figure is dressed in the contemporary French style will underline Dürer's artistic command of the subject.

The innovation of printing in Europe had developed to a useful level and coincided with the growing epidemic. No less than ten pieces of illustrated pamphlet literature, varying from the simple and informative to the earnest and educational, appeared in the last five years of the 15th century. These tracts made the new disease a living question of the day and in their informative way contributed to the early Renaissance of science. A few samples repay study.

Grünpeck's tract was accompanied by two woodcut prints by Sebastian Brandt, already famous for his "Ship of Fools". Like Ulsenius's piece, Grünpeck's text is dated 1496. Figure 8 shows the crowned Virgin with barbed shafts passing from her child to punish the infected. Note their sores and ulcers. The Emperor Maximilian I, who ruled much of Europe at



Figure 8 Sebastian Brandt. Title page woodcut illustration accompanying tract by Joseph Grünpeck. First State. Basle, September 1496. Courtesy Wellcome Institute Library, London.

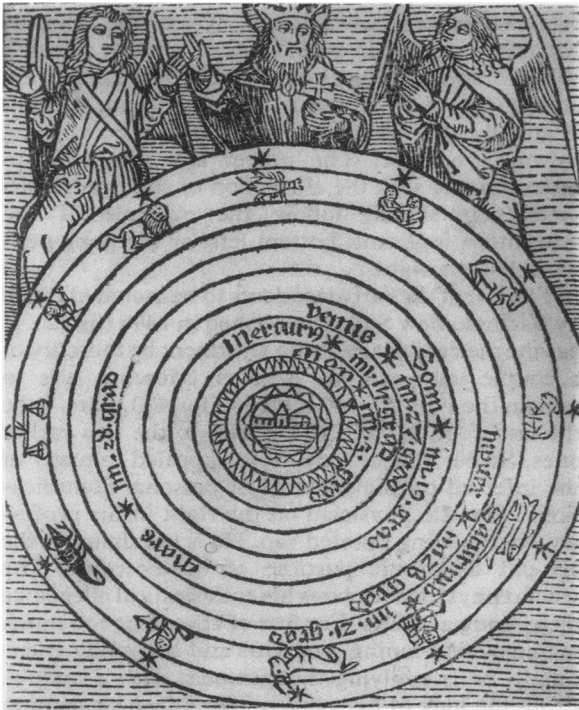


Figure 9 Sebastian Brandt. Woodcut illustration accompanying tract by Joseph Grünpeck. (Figure 8). Courtesy Wellcome Institute Library, London.



Figure 10 Sebastian Brandt. Title page woodcut illustration to second state (edition) of tract by Joseph Grünpeck. 17 December 1496. Courtesy Wellcome Institute Library, London.

the time, stands ready, with his Knights, to receive a crown. His banner bears the Crusaders' cross and the shield shows the Hapsburg eagle, Maximilian's family crest.¹¹ Figure 9 accompanied the broadsheet. It shows that four planets, in ascendency, "met" in the sign of the Scorpion—incidentally the sign of the Zodiac concerned with the genitals.

Treating the infected like sinners to be punished was in keeping with Maximilian's edict which stated that the new plague was the direct result of sin and blasphemy. In contrast to the Ulsenius pamphlet the emphasis here is on theological origins for the epidemic rather than on the astrological. A new woodcut (fig 10) was used in a reprint of Grünpeck's pamphlet. In it the rays from the child Jesus are beneficial rather than barbed. The supplicants look fitter and the rash-ridden corpse is separated from them. The emphasis now is towards a more Christian compassion, a virtue so seldom manifest in this study that a cynic might be forgiven for observing that the change was prompted only because Grünpeck and his woodcutter Brandt had become aware that they were in competition with the astrological ideas of causation. On the other hand we could see, and with a greater sense of generosity, the influence of Maximilian himself. He did after all have a reputation for



Figure 11 Georg Stuchs. St Denis, Patron Saint of Syphilitics. Nuremberg 1496. Woodcut 350 × 240 mm. Courtesy Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.



Figure 12 Bartholomew Steber. *Cure of the Morbus Gallicus*. Vienna 1498. Courtesy Wellcome Institute Library, London.

being “a gifted amateur in politics”. In educational terms Grünpeck’s pamphlet was something of a failure; he himself contracted the disease and at the age of 30 years, published a book doubting the value of available treatments. Nevertheless Grünpeck’s tract was popular and ran into many editions.

My first excursion into print on the subject of the history of syphilis stemmed from learning that St Denis was the patron saint of syphilitics.¹² In the course of researching the subject I managed, while holidaying in Bavaria, to have a painted woodcut with a prayer to St Denis unearthed from the vaults of the Bayerische Staats Bibliothek in Munich.¹³ It is dated 1497 (fig 11) and measures 35 × 24 cms. It is the work of Georg Stuchs. A reproduction in colour is available to all.¹⁰

There was of course but one Christian church at the end of the 15th century. It maintained a cadre of

fourteen emergency saints.¹⁴ When the morbus gallicus ravaged Europe St Denis was “next on call”. When drafted at short notice emergency saints were always shown in woodcut prints with the Virgin. Prints like this one were painted before being hung by one’s bedside. The prayer asks St Denis to intercede and seek the alleviation of suffering. Each intercessor should follow the example of the syphilitic supplicant, bottom left, or the poxy penitent, bottom right.

The last of the early woodcuts to be included is one by Bartholomew Steber published in 1498 (fig 12). It has the merit of dealing with treatment by mercury of a couple with morbus gallicus. Mercury was to remain the syphilitic’s salvation for 400 years. Like the last woodcut, and in contrast to the two earlier ones, Steber’s piece must have appealed to many of the infected on the grounds of personal identification. Note the physician on the right in his profession-designating pointed cap. He is indulging in the age-old diagnostic pastime of urionoscopy. The second physician declares his ecclesiastical allegiance by wearing a biretta. For fear of absorbing too much mercury, developing gingivitis and becoming edentulous, he is applying the ointment with a spatula. From the look of his sunken jaws I fear his caution comes too late.

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