

HEALTH CULTURE ELEMENTS IN THE FRESCOES IN THE HOLY TRINITY CHURCH OF HRASTOVLJE, SLOVENIA

Lejla Peternelj Uran*

SUMMARY

This paper represents some elements of medicine in the frescoes painted in 1490 AD by Ivan of Kastav in the Holy Trinity Church in Hrastovlje, Slovenian Istria. Part one deal with some traditional patron saints (Christopher, Cosmas and Damian, Apollonia, Agatha, Rocco and Sebastian). In the series of paintings representing the 'Creation of the World' and the 'Life of Adam and Eve', this country artist has incorporated numerous details from everyday medieval life, such as farm work, or breast-feeding of the twins Cain and Abel. In part three, the fresco 'The Dance of Death' is dealt with in detail. Further to primarily moral and social elements, the artist points to his own interesting anatomic imaginations in presenting the human skeletons, which reflect not only his, but also the general ignorance of the human anatomy at that time.

Key words: Ethnomedicine, the Middle Ages, Medicine in art, Istria, Slovenia

The aim of this presentation is to exhibit some genuine proof of traditional lifestyle of the rural population (peasants) in this region, surpassing the narrow religious platform, on the basis of the traditional medieval sacral painting. For this occasion, we have selected some elements of health culture which can be traced in the frescoes of a small church in Hrastovlje, a village in the Slovenian Istria. Reference is made to similar research on the frescoes from different aspects - separately¹⁻⁵ or in the context of the Istrian Gothic fresco

* Bolnica Izola, Oftalmološki oddelek, (General Hospital Izola, Department of Ophthalmology). Polje 35, SI 6310 Izola, Slovenija. Correspondence: Lejla Peternelj Uran, M.D, M.Sc. Dolinska cesta 17 a, 6000 Koper, Slovenia. E-mail: uran@siol.net

painting⁶, and this work presents a part of research by the author in her home town, as a part of her Master's thesis [7].

On a hill above an unpretentious village of Hrastovlje, not far from Koper in the Slovenian Istria Region, we find a small Holy Trinity Church of a remarkable artistic value, which had sprung up at the junction of three cultures. Today, it is protected by the State as a cultural and historical monument, bearing witness to the times past.

The features of a Romanesque architecture date the church back to mature Middle Ages, the 12th, 13th or maybe 14th century, to the time when Gothic forms first emerged in the Littoral.

It is positioned in a fortified place surrounded with high stone walls (called 'tabor'), built in the 15th or 16th century as a response to the Turkish raids that had not spared these places [1-3].

After two or three centuries of its existence, this church became a stronghold which was purchased by Leander Zarotus (L. Zarotti), a doctor of arts and medicine, in 1581. This is confirmed by the inscription on the wall above the entrance: CASTRUM HOC CRISTOVI-AE RUSQ IPSUM ADIACENS CUM JURISDICTIONE REDDITI-BUS ET PRIVILEGIIS SUSIS LEANDER ZAROTUS AR.ET MEDI-CINE DOCTOR A FAMILIA NEAUSER NOBILI GERMANICA EMIT MDLXXX. In translation: This stronghold of Hrastovlje and the appurtenant estate comprising the jurisdiction, levies and privileges, was purchased by Leander Zarotus, Doctor of Arts and Medicine, from the German family of Neuhauser in 1581 [2-3].

The church was decorated with paintings only after some three hundred years, as evidenced by the Glagolitic and Latin inscription under the painting of the Three Kings, on the northern nave.

On St. Margaret's holiday (13 July 1490), a major representative of Istrian medieval painting, Johannes, or Ivan, or Janez resp., called "Janez from Kastav (Vincent's schoolmate) is said to have completed his painting ordered by Tomić Vrhović, the Vicar of Kubed.

He was also known as the Master with Inscription Strips, as he used to write out the name(s) of his characters on a strip fluttering above the head in his paintings [1].

The columns divide the church into three naves, which are bathtub vaulted and end in built-in semi domed apses. The bell tower built on the west side distinguishes it from the other Romanesque churches.

Stimulative and instructional religious painted work spreads over the whole interior, all walls, columns, and vaults. With its eloquent narrative, this paintwork served as the Bible to the average non-educated person of that time, replacing the Book and its teachings. These pictures are magnificent, so realistic and convincing transferred directly from the Scriptures to the medieval Istrian environment, which has been in some parts preserved up to the present time. In the 18th century, the whole interior was whitewashed, as the whole paintwork was believed to intrude on the worshippers of that age. The restoration work was again undertaken from 1949 to 1955-6.

The church of Hrastovlje differs slightly from other churches of its era in its conception, architectural design, and primarily in the choice of the themes in its paintwork. In addition to common biblical themes, such as the homage by the Three Kings, there are some rare scenes from the Genesis - the creation of the world, the life of the first family - Adam and Eve and their sons, the scenes from the calendar, and one of the rarest themes of the medieval painting - the Dance of Death.

It is the best thing to follow the paintwork as it was carefully thought and designed by its authors. The frescoes can be roughly structured in sixty units. Numerous frescoes contain elements of the health culture that prevailed at that time, and a medical historian can find a lot of interesting details. The paintings follow meticulously and consistently the iconographic requirements and encyclopaedic biblical mission of the Middle Ages.

This paper brings an overview of the health culture elements therein. For example, the fresco of St. Christopher was overlooking the village before the walls were built, so the villagers could turn to this

saint directly from their houses in their daily morning intercessory prayers for a happy last hour, praying to protect them from a sudden death that day. In the Middle Ages, this saint had the role of the Intercessor. The worshippers who looked at him piously in the morning did not die of a sudden death on that day [2,3].

In the north apse (on the left side), on the pew of the rich, the Three Kings are seated, holding the gifts for the newborn in their hands. Next to them stand the holy physicians Cosmas and Damian, with receptacles to prepare medicine. The Christian Church has canonized these two physicians as saints. Presenting the Three Wise Men in this way was the idea of the Author, and differs from a classical iconographic presentation. The Latin inscription on the clothes of the apostle St. Peter in the main apse, who is reporting on the plague of the year 1630 in Koper, is particularly interesting for a historian of medicine.



*St Cosmas and Damian
and Three Kings*

The upper part of the south apse depicts the three intercessors against the plague that raged in Europe at that time. St. Rocco, St. Sebastian and St. Fabian were believed to protect people before the 'black death'. St. Rocco, on the left, is characteristically wearing a short violet overcoat, a large hat with a traveller's shell and his right hand obviously pointing to the wound on his left leg (this part of the painting is ruined). St. Sebastian, with his naked body pierced by arrows, is standing on his side. His papal clothing and tiara can recognize St. Fabian. The fresco also bears an inscription from 1637, during the mayoralty of Michael Kocjančič, who ordered a new altar image of St. Rocco and St. Sebastian [1].

In the corner of the southern wall we find the women saints (presented in their half-length): St. Apollonia with a pair of pincers (to be

used for teeth), and Santa Lucia holding a plate with two eyeballs. She was considered the intercessor protecting the eyes and eyesight, against blindness. The central figure, Santa Agatha, points with her left hand to a large open wound on the breasts, visible through her torn clothing. Being a Christian, she was tortured in the 3rd century and her virgin breasts were cut off [12].

The central nave is painted with the scenes from the creation of the world and the life of the first parents and their sons. After the exile from the Paradise, Adam and Eve need to earn their living by the sweat of their brow. Adam sets up a house and cultivates the barren earth, and Eve is mother and does all the housework at the same time. The mother breast-feeds their twin sons, sitting each on one of her knees, while spinning as well. Numerous details in this painting depict the life of the Istrian villager at that time. Today, it is recommended to nurse one baby first, and then the other on the other breast. We can also see that they were not afraid of cold weather and the children are almost naked, though the painting represents the summer. The fresco on the Exile of Adam and Eve reveals the then knowledge of the anatomy of the human body [8].



The mother breast feeds her two sons

We find the Dance of Dead, which raises the highest curiosity among all other Hrastovlje frescoes, on the southern wall of the nave. On the right, the Death represented as a skeleton is sitting on a chair next to an open grave, prepared to receive the dead. The painting shows a peculiar procession of eleven couples, in which a friendly skeleton leads one, representative of each class (profession) towards the open grave. All are equal before the Death. The Death is inexorable and everybody must follow her, the pope, the king, representatives of all classes, the rich and the poor, the young and the old.

A satisfactory explanation to the origin and meaning of the Dance of Death has not been given yet. As a theme in medieval painting it is very rare, it emerged in the 15th century and disappeared in the 16th century. Death, which does not spare anyone, could be its starting point. In such a form it successfully replaces the dreadful sermon on the nothingness of this world, and on the uselessness of scrambling for the attractions thereof [3,9,10].

The composition of the Dance of Death corresponds greatly to that painted by Vincent from Kastav in the Church of the Virgin Mary on Škriljine in Beram near Pazin. Compared with the painting in Škriljine, the element of music is missing in Hrastovlje, as the skeletons have no musical instruments. In contrast to other west European frescoes, our ancient painters have both shown particular favour to the Istrian peasant by excluding him from the procession. Their whole painting was done for the people of their milieu, to which they belonged themselves. The paintwork is simple and easy to understand for the poor and illiterate peasants in Istria nevertheless, their artistic value is not reduced at all [10,11]. This six-meter long fresco displays a genuine document on clothing, the way of life and position of different classes/professions of that time. The strict hierarchy is highlighted in all frescoes. The painting also shows a beggar with an amputated right leg and a wooden limb below his knee, and a support reaching up to his armpit, similar to a crutch. In contrast to Ivan, Vincent has intentionally left out the physician, who was fighting the plague on his own. On the other hand, Ivan in Hrastovlje pointed to his unsuccessful struggle and the physician's equality with others before the death, and placed the physician-apothecary in the centre of the procession, that is in the sixth place. This allows us to disclose some information on a physician of that time, his appearance and position in the society [7,10,11].

The Istrian masters have not simply copied the well-known motifs of the era; they also added their own attributes to them. They were masons and painters at the same time. However, man's anatomy was their weak point. Likewise, our artist did not know the structure of human body. We can trace many incorrect details that prove their lack of knowledge of the human anatomy. The skull is presented qui-



The begger and the physician, detail in Dance Macabre Composition

te well. The processus alveolaris maxillae and the mandibula are not adequately expressed, so it appears that the latter is grown with the remaining bones of the skull, leaving only a narrow fissure between them, into which some teeth overlook from above. The neck is shaped as a robust cylinder, passing over to the chest of a similar cylindrical form, surrounded by a surplus number of ribs (from 13 to 20 pairs) in the form of sticks.

Upper ribs part gradually and form a triangle with the base on top, which could be seen as the breastbone. Lower ribs are shorter and form a narrow epigastric angle. The shoulder section is improvised, there is no collarbone. The upper part of shoulder blade is in the form of a slanting stick, with a fairly well shaped upper humerus, which distally spreads with the hollow in the middle, from which only one forearm bone continues. The structure of the palm is faulty as well, with fingers directly emerging from the forearm bone. The backbone has faulty and superficial traits. The biggest fault can be seen in the pelvic structure consisting of two simple, distant and upright bones. Femurs continue directly from them, which are shorter or at least equal to the tibia. Below the knee, there is again only one bone, from which long toes emerge, consisting of one bone only [7,10,11].

At first, we get an impression that it is only a rough and superficial approximation of the anatomy of humans, subordinating it to the basic goal and purpose - the symbolic. However, a closer look reveals that the artist did not know the actual structure of human body. Nevertheless, this does not reduce the value and importance of this work or art: also the renowned artists of best education available at that time painted in great detail only the external appearance of the human body, reaching to the upper muscular layer at the most [10,11]. In addition to the symbolic aspect and purpose, the interested historian of medicine gets an insight into the health conditions of that time, the class of physician and his - and general - ignorance of the human anatomy at the time our frescoes were painted.

We also find interesting the anatomic personification of the Death, which in these Istrian frescoes differs from other West European paintings. In other paintings, the Death is represented as decaying, live, merry cahectic 'corpses', while in Hrastovlje it is displayed as inexpressive skeletons [10,11].

LITERATURE

1. Fučić B. Majstor Ivan iz Kastva i njegova sredina. Bilješke uz epigrafski materijal na zidnim slikarijama u Hrastovlju. Zbornik za umetnosno zgodovino. Nova vrsta V/V, Ljubljana, 1959., p. 305-322.
2. Zadnikar M. Hrastovlje. Ljubljana: DSZ, 1973.
3. Zadnikar M. Hrastovlje, Romanska arhitektura in gotske freske. Ljubljana: Družina, 1988, p. 37-41.
4. Černeka-Šubic Z. Freske u srednjovekovnoj crkvi u Hrastovlju u Sloveniji s elementima zdravstvene kulture. Acta hist med pharm vet 1988;28:173-80.
5. Fučić B. Istarske freske. Zagreb: Zora, 1963, p. 7-78.
6. Hofler J. Srednjeveške freske v Sloveniji. II.knjiga. Primorska. Ljubljana: Družina d.o.o, 1997:91-98.
7. Peternelj L. Razvoj zdravstvene misli i prakse na području Kopra do kraja 17. stoljeća. Magistarski rad. Rijeka: Medicinski fakultet, 1992.

8. Škrobonja A, Krpan K, Pahor Đ, Perić D. Dijete u pučkoj medicini Istre. Acta Fac Med Flum 1990,15:75-82.
9. Tartalja H, Kovačić D. "Mrtvački ples" kao tema fresaka u Istri. Saopćenja 1969;12(1):39-44.
10. Korin N, Korin M, Škrobonja A. Ples mrtvacu s istarskih fresaka - Analiza umjetničkih i medicinskih elemenata. Acta hist med pharm vet 1971;11:17-23.
11. Škrobonja A. Istarske freske s motivom plesa mrtvacu kao antropološki i povijesnomedicinski izazov. In: Škrobonja A. Medicina zavičaja. Rijeka: EDT, 2000, p. 15-24.
12. Dorn V. Zdravstvene teme u ikonografskim motivima starijeg zidnog slikarstva Istre. U: Krmpotić F. ur. Zbornik radova 26. sastanka Naučnog društva za historiju zdravstvene kulture Jugoslavije. Poreč, 30. IX. - 2. X.. 1996. Rijeka, 1978, p. 57-68.