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Malevolent or Benevolent Brushstrokes?: Exploring the Depiction of Disability in Renaissance Paintings Using a Critical Disability Studies Lens

Représentations problématiques du handicap : exploration de la représentation du handicap dans les peintures de la Renaissance à l'aide d'une lentille d'études critiques sur le handicap

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Abstract
It may be important to situate disability historically to move toward understanding the rise of contemporary and often dominant ableist approaches to thinking about and representing disability today. The arts serve as "living artifacts" which store historical ideas about disabled bodies. Using a critical disability studies (CDS) lens, we explored the historical depiction of disability through Renaissance paintings created between 1300 and 1700. Our formal and semiotic analysis suggests that disability was depicted in ways that reinforce a medicalized notion. Malevolent representations seem to focus on the notion that a disabled body exists in service to an able-bodied other, the healing of disability by a god, or disability as a source of entertainment. In contrast, disability and tenderness may be seen as a more benevolent portrayal but not without paternalism and infantilization. Although paintings of children were few, disabled children were depicted in a more compassionate and vulnerable light than disabled adults, perhaps highlighting differing degrees of acceptance on the basis of age. Our use CDS in this paper highlights the problematic persistence of biomedicalization and pathologizing in Renaissance art. We encourage further use of CDS perspectives in art history analysis in the future, given the potential to generate emancipatory artistic movements and new conversations about bodies in space and time.

Résumé
Il peut être important de situer le handicap historiquement pour avancer vers une compréhension de la montée des approches capacitistes contemporaines et souvent dominantes afin de penser et représenter le handicap aujourd'hui. Les arts servent d'« artéfacts vivants » qui emmagasinent des idées historiques au sujet des corps handicapés. À l'aide d'une lentille d'études critiques sur le handicap, nous avons exploré la représentation historique du handicap dans des peintures de la

Haute Renaissance créées entre 1400 et la fin du XVI^{e} siècle. Notre analyse formelle et sémiotique suggère que le handicap a été décrit de manière à renforcer une notion médicale du handicap. Les représentations malveillantes semblent se concentrer sur la notion qu'un corps handicapé existe au service d'un autre sans handicap, sur la guérison du handicap par un dieu ou sur le handicap comme source de divertissement. En revanche, le handicap et la tendresse peuvent être vus comme une représentation plus bienveillante, mais non sans paternalisme et infantilisation. Bien que les peintures d'enfants soient peu nombreuses, les enfants handicapés étaient représentés d'un point de vue plus compatissant et vulnérable que les adultes handicapés, soulignant peut-être différents degrés d'acceptation en fonction de l'âge. Dans l'ensemble, notre utilisation des études critiques sur le handicap dans cet article met en évidence la persistance problématique de la biomédicalisation et de la pathologisation dans l'art de la Renaissance. Nous encourageons l'utilisation des perspectives des études critiques sur le handicap pour analyser l'histoire de l'art, étant donné le potentiel de générer des mouvements artistiques émancipateurs et de nouvelles conversations sur les corps dans l'espace et le temps.

Keywords
Disability; Painting; Child; Adult; Renaissance; Art History

Introduction and Background

In Euro-Western thought, the Renaissance is generally considered to be the historical period following the Middle Ages. In this paper, we trace art produced between 1300—1700, during what is known as the Renaissance (King, 2017). Importantly, however, the exact dates of the Renaissance are somewhat debated. In so doing, we join a small community of activists, artists, and scholars, such as Riva Lehrer, who have worked to bring a critical lens to the world of disability and fine art (Lehrer, 2019).

The Renaissance in Italy and Northern Europe was the site of a "re-birth" in philosophy, the sciences, and the arts in the west. It has been characterized as a period of substantial artistic and technological innovation and achievement (Nash, 2008). Although it is not without critique, the Renaissance is often characterized by a shift from the "era of darkness" to the "era of reason"

(Rockmore, 1987). Thus, the Renaissance was strongly marked by the notion that "man" was no longer subject to forces outside of his control, such as the influence of God and religion (Rockmore, 1987). Rather, the Renaissance man (sic) was one who controlled his own destiny as the master of his own life. Renaissance thinking is perhaps no more evident than in the arts and culture that were characteristic of the time. During the Renaissance, there was a substantial investment in the visual arts by wealthy patrons and priests, most especially in the city of Florence, Italy (Nash, 2008). For social scientists and artists such as ourselves, the artistic paintings produced during the Renaissance offer much data to explore how beliefs, cultural practices, and attitudes at the time were reflected through painters' brushstrokes. In this paper, we explore the portrayal of disability, including adults and children, in Renaissance paintings between 1300 and 1700 AD to understand dominant constructions of disability at the time.

We understand that disability language is rife with tension and conflict. We are choosing to employ identity-first language so as to recognize the entanglement of disability in identity. We also refute the notion that disability is somehow secondary to personhood (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Here, we also take disability to be a historical, bodily, and social phenomenon that spans both structural and embodied dimensions. It may not be necessary to choose either a bodily or social approach to the self (Kyselo, 2014). Rather, we recognize the social structures that disabled people face every day– such as lack of access to work, school, and play (Oliver, 2013) – and also acknowledge the reality of disability as deeply embodied ways of being in the world that mark and shape the flesh. Thus, we do not overlook the corporeal materiality of the body (Imrie, 2003). Further, we are considering both visible and non-apparent disabilities as well as congenital and acquired disabilities. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine Renaissance paintings featuring disability through a revisionist interpretation using a critical disability studies

lens (CDS). Such an approach allows us to break from traditional ways of artistic study and interpretation that may reinforce oppressive views toward disability. Such a CDS approach also enabled us to focus on disability and representation.

Review of the Literature

Given the massive investment in the arts (Goldthwaite, 1980) and the role of the Medici family in championing the arts, the origin of the Renaissance is thought to date back to Florence, Italy. In Florence, the Renaissance brought with it a great emphasis on realism as well as revived focus on classicism, humanism, and a Greco-Roman history. Exemplified in Leonardo Da Vinci's famous Vitruvian man, artists created works that drew heavily from "real life", with an emphasis on proportions, linear perspectives, harmony, order, beauty, and symmetry. Indeed, Millet-Gallet & Howie (2022) suggest that such preoccupation with order and symmetry was inherently ableist and served to Other the non-uniform — or disabled — as monstrous. As well, during the Renaissance, there was a strong association between beauty and goodness so that one's external physical form and state was seen as indicative of internal wholeness. Conversely, any kind of "deformity" in art was actively hidden or concealed, or at times, associated with evil, sin and monstrosity. In this way, the art of the Renaissance was inherently ableist and served to marginalize disability as Other and evil.

The absence of disability identity in the Renaissance has been noted by both disabled and non-disabled scholars and artists alike (Lehrer, 2019). For example, although disabled activist, artist and scholar Riva Lehrer has mainly studied contemporary art and disability (Lehrer, 2019), in a recent You Tube video of a Ted X talk, she reflects on her time in graduate school when she was particularly fascinated by the Renaissance. Lehrer suggests that much like the field of

theatre and acting, the painted subject loses who they are and disappears into the world and story that the painter has created (Lehrer, 2019). Thus, paintings can be seen as psychological projections from the painter. Although Lehrer studied hundreds of slides of Renaissance paintings, she does not recall a single portrait of a disabled person during her studies. In this way, for Lehrer, disability during the Renaissance is absent (Lehrer, 2015)

Building on Lehrer's observation of the absence of disability identity in the Renaissance, in their seminal new text on art criticism and disability in antiquity, Millet-Gallet and Howie (2022) spend time unpacking the aesthetic, historical, and contextual concerns of the Renaissance that allowed the long tradition of artistic creation in Florence, Italy, to flourish. These authors also suggest that despite the period being one of considerable artistic endeavour, little attention appears to have been given to disabled bodies. Similarly, disabled scholar Elizabeth Bearden reflects on a painting titled Las Meninas (1656) by Diego Velazquez, that her mother introduced to her during childhood. As a visually impaired artist drawn to the visual, Bearden (2019) must listen to stories of the visual to consume the arts. She notes that most consumers of the painting fail to even take notice of the two "dwarfs" on the periphery of the painting. Here, note that the term "dwarf" may be read as ableist in modern times. Instead, they remain focused on the Spanish monarchy. In this way, Bearden's observation of the failure to notice disability is a part of disability's absent-presence in the arts.

In the rare cases where disability has been represented in visual culture, however, it has been misrepresented, or historically contingent—represented precisely according to the understanding of the body at the time. Disabled people were most often represented as theological and religious signs. Christ's story left a lingering impact on the course of art history. Religiously themed art forms the mainstay of Renaissance works. In the wake of Christ's

"miracle", disability was portrayed as a way to allude to divine signs and theological omens (Ghadessi, 2018). However seemingly benevolent these artistic portrayals were intended to be, they have resulted in anger among some members of the disability community (Shakespeare, 1994). Indeed, Christ-like metaphors may further the notion that disability arises from divine intervention, or a natural wonder of God's ingenuity (Ghadessi, 2018). Alternatively, disability might be thought of as a divine punishment for some ancestral transgression – a scare tactic to encourage compliance with theological doctrines (Shakespeare, 1994).

Disability in art also served as a way to generate humour, folly, satire, and jest. Patrons of the court might have enjoyed reveling in the mystery of the deformed human body because it provided them with a temporary escape, a relief of sorts, from the confines of courtly life. Many court patrons were fondly attached to their court "dwarfs" who provided endless hours of entertainment (O'Bryan, 2012). The reliance by the Renaissance court on disabled people — termed fools, oddities, monsters, and curiosities — likely influenced the proliferation of these representations in art. Perhaps the most significant crystallization of early civilizations' attraction toward human oddities for entertainment was the development of the "freak show" in the 19th and 20th centuries (Craton, 2009). These touring circus shows, which showcased disabled bodies as performers, traveled across North America and Europe, merely serving to entrench the notion of disability as folly and freakish.

In addition to disability as a source of humour, the final prevalent artistic representation in the literature is that of disability as ***sinful.*** Associating disability with moral decay is not uncommon in the arts. In fiction, for example, disabled characters have long since been associated with evil, such as Captain Hook of Peter Pan or the Hunchback of Notre Dame of Les Misérables (Ghadessi, 2018; Shakespeare, 1994). During the Renaissance, when there was an

emphasis placed on drawing realistically from life — in an effort to depict the world as it is through realism — the dominant belief at the time was that the outer body reflected the inner soul (Ghadessi, 2018). Physical attributes were thought to reflect moral states (Millet-Gallet & Howie, 2022; Shakespeare, 1994). Renaissance artists drew heavily from Aristotle and Aquinas' philosophies on the nature of beauty. According to these principles, beauty is comprised of symmetry, order, and structure. The deformed body in the Renaissance, then, was not only the antithesis of beauty but also indicative of a flawed, morally depraved soul (Stainton, 2004).

What may be missing from work on disability and artistic representation in the Renaissance is a sort of formal, contextual, and semiotic analyses of the portrayal of disability through Renaissance paintings using a critical lens. The literature has also not compared the depiction of children versus adults in Renaissance paintings. Here, we explore the depiction of disability through Renaissance paintings while offering a comparison between disabled children and adults.

Research Design

We undertook a semiotic analysis of a corpus of paintings from the Renaissance. The *objective* of our study is to 1): analyse the depiction of children and adults with disabilities in Renaissance paintings between 1300 and 1700 using a critical disability studies lens; 2) to compare the depiction of disabled children and adults in Renaissance paintings and 3) identify how visual materials and techniques differ between depictions of disabled children and adults during the Renaissance. For our research design, we adopted a semiotic art historical approach while also undertaking a visual analysis informed by cultural anthropologist Gillian Rose (2001).

Theoretical Framework

We adopted a CDS conceptual approach in the study. Thus, we are cognisant of the structures of power, control, and exclusion that have served to maintain an able-bodied social order in contemporary society (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). CDS scholars have helped to develop the field of disability studies so that social justice concerns are no longer only relevant to just economic and political agendas. Rather, CDS scholars also consider the realm of the psychological, the discursive, and the bodily, all of which are highly relevant to artistic works of disability. Further, using Foucauldian inspired ideas, CDS allows scholars to re-think the role of institutions and everyday life and how such institutions come to shape and mark bodies. Indeed, these institutions, such as the institution of fine arts, have also served as tools in which to normalize and control the body (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). We thus use a critical lens to question taken for granted truths about the representation of disabled bodies in art in an effort to offer something new via a revisionist interpretation. Even this, however, is limited. We also know that through the eyes and lens of the present, we can never know what disability truly meant within its socio-historic context during the Renaissance. Examining these artworks through a critical disability revisionist lens is truly the novelty that we bring to the current evidence by unsettling taken-for-granted truths about disability and art.

Methodology

We adopted Gillian Rose's updated visual methodology to guide this study from a methodological perspective (2001). Gillian Rose is a cultural geographer who has furthered the understanding of the role of the visual world in contemporary society. From an epistemological perspective, visual methodologies are housed within a critical approach that recognizes the role of powerful groups in society in reinforcing and maintaining the status quo (Rose, 2001). In this

way, our use of critical visual methodologies is highly compatible with CDS. Indeed, Rose's critical approach is ideally suited to a study on disability and the arts, given the systemic barriers that disabled people have faced throughout time and history. Further, disabled people have rarely, been given the opportunity to wield power in society. Gillian Rose posits several other methodological principles. She suggests that images, and the visual world, must be taken seriously. Images not only represent the contexts in which they are from but are worthy of investigation and meaningful in their own right. Rose suggests that scholars be attentive to the contextual influences and social conditions that give rise to the production of images (2001). For instance, cultural notions of compassion toward the disabled stemming from particular societies might have shaped the kinds of artistic productions that were created at the time. Rose also encourages scholars to self reflexively consider how our social positions shape our ways of seeing. For instance, two of us work at a children's hospital and one of the authors is also the parent of a disabled child. One member of our team has past art history education and is a practicing visual artist. Another research team member is a person of colour. These personal identities and social positions have influenced the ways in which we see the arts. For instance, valuing the arts and being disability advocates are personal assumptions that have guided this work (Rose, 2001). Additionally, we always consider the ways in which the high arts serve to uphold the centrality of whiteness.

Data Collection

Over the course of several months in the first half of 2021, the third author, who is a highly trained visual artist and art historian, conducted a scan of museum databases and art historical logs to identify works of art between 1300 and 1700 from the Renaissance in which

disability features as a part of the content. Museums in Canada, the United States, and Europe were searched. We found high resolution images online, most often on museum websites. Based on our search, we collected nine works of art. Guided by our onto-epistemology, we recognize that the art we are looking at now was produced under the social norms of the past – in a specific time and place. So, here, we recognize that we are examining art through our contemporary lenses. Thus, we wrestle with the tension between a past where disability is depicted as the "other" — or an "Other" — and our contemporary understanding of disability as socially/institutionally produced through power relationships. Therefore, we look at these works through a contemporary critical disability studies lens that contrasts with "normal" Renaissance thinking about disability.

Data Analysis

We also followed Rose's guidelines for the analysis of visual culture. Rose suggests that the meaning of these visual works can be derived from them. Rose terms these three modes as "sites" (Rose, 2001). First, at the "site of production", scholars consider technology as well as the particular artistic medium that guided the creation of the work, such as oil painting, for example (Rose, 2001). Next, at the "site of the image", the researcher gives consideration to the content and the formal qualities of the composition itself, such as lines, shapes, forms, colour, and focal points (Rose, 2001). Lastly, at the site of the audience, the researcher considers the range of social, economic, and political relations and institutions that surround each of the images, providing the context for that image (Rose, 2001). This type of analysis is more contextual in nature.

We analyzed the *site of the image* in two particular ways. First, we engaged in a formal analysis/compositional analysis by analysing each work on the basis of formal qualities that are embedded in the image itself. These include lines, shapes, colours, use of space (linear perspective or atmospheric perspective), emphasis, and contrast (Rose, 2001). Further, we also used the *semiological analysis* within the broader analysis of the site of the image (Rose, 2001). The semiotic approach aims to understand the meaning of signs (Rose, 2001). Signs are comprised of two facets, including both the signifier as well as the signified (Rose, 2001). The signifier is an image or material that represents an underlying concept, such as a person walking on crutches. In contrast, the signified is a mental concept that is evoked in the mind by the signifier (Rose, 2001). In this case, the signified concept is "disabled" or "injured". The referent is the actual object in the world that the sign is referring to (Rose, 2001). Specifically, we looked at signs that relate to humans and disability, bodily form, facial and bodily expression, pose and posture, movement, disability props, and atmosphere and setting. These are all signs that are bearers of meaning (Rose, 2001). By finding commonalities between the compositional and symbolic elements of each painting, we generated five themes in relation to how disability was depicted. The findings are presented below.

Findings

From a critical disability studies perspective, all four of the themes that we found reinforced negative or pathologizing disability discourse. Thus, in these paintings, disability is largely seen as a pathology in need of correction or remediation. Only a few of the themes we found spoke to central ideas from CDS, such as radical meanings, intersectionality, power and resistance (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). We return to this discussion in our analysis.

1. Disability and Entertainment

A very prominent theme in our analysis is the notion of disability as a source of entertainment, jest, humor, or mockery for prominent nobility and members of society. The first painting in this theme is "Henry the Eighth and his Family", painted in the year 1545 ("British School," n.d.). The artist is unknown and the painting is held at the Hampton Court Palace Royal Collection in London, England ("British School," n.d.).

Unknown. (1545). *Henry the Eighth and His Family*. Hampton Court Palace Royal Collection, London, England.

Royal Collection Trust. (n.d.). British school, 16th century - the family of Henry VIII. Retrieved from: https://www.rct.uk/collection/405796/the-family-of-henry-viii.

Under the two archways leading outdoors, on either side of the painting, are Will Somers and Jane the Fool (Doran, 2008; "The King's Fools-Disability in the Tudor Court", 2012). Using modern nomenclature, to be a "fool" or "born foolish" may refer to cognitive, intellectual, or mental disabilities.

During the 16th century, royal fools were often distinguished as either "artificial" or

"natural" (Lipscomb, Hurren, & Betteridge, 2011; "The King's Fools-Disability in the Tudor Court", 2012). Artificial fools were those that offered entertainment through "jest" or the imitation of those that acted foolishly, while natural fools often referred to those that, using modern nomenclature, had a learning disability (Lipscomb, Hurren, & Betteridge, 2011; "The King's Fools-Disability in the Tudor Court", 2012). According to "The King's Fools-Disability in the Tudor Court", Will and Jane represent natural fools, as they are not dressed in garb that was common to court jesters (2012). Although Will and Jane were accepted into King Henry's court, he favoured them for their ability to entertain him and provide an escape from his "melancholy" ("The Family of Henry VIII", 2015).

Although fools were an accepted part of King Henry's court (Lipscomb, Hurren, & Betteridge, 2011), it should be noted that neither Will nor Jane are positioned front and centre in the painting. Rather, they are cast off to the periphery and margins of the painting. Further, the fools are located in an outdoor environment while King Henry's family is centrally located in an indoor luxurious environment. Indeed, frontal centrality or diagonal periphery of figures is noted to dictate the level of engagement with the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In this way, spatial organization can reinforce power imbalances where the viewer may see those who are not in the compositional centre as less worthy of attention, and thereby less significant. Further, while King Henry's family's gaze is cast to the front and centre, Will and Jane's faces are viewed in profile or downcast, perhaps suggestive of insignificance. Together, these symbols of spatial organization and figural positions emphasize the lesser significance of the court "fools".

Contemporary disability scholars Imrie and Kumar (1998) refer to special signifiers as they pertain to disability. For example, "The built environment is, however, marked out by spatial signifiers which serve to separate disabled people from their 'normal' counterparts.

Respondents in their study repeatedly referred to what they termed the 'back door treatment'. In this way, the positioning of Will and Jane, through a contemporary lens, also resonates as a historically situated example of disability in the background.

The second painting in this theme is entitled *"Portrait of a Sixteenth Century Disabled Man.* The year of its production and artist are unknown (Barsch, 2016). It is held in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria (Barsch, 2016). Although the speculated disability is not known, it is likely related to a disability or deformity in the lower body and legs.

Unknown. (n.d.) *Portrait of a Sixteenth Century Disabled Man*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

Josefson, C. (2018). Disability depicted: the Old Masters, Part 2. Retrieved from:

https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/disability-depicted-old-masters-part-2/

The stark nudity of the man makes it difficult to interpret his identity and social class (Barsch, 2016). However, the hat and ruff around the man's neck were items that were worn by various classes during the 16th century, including princes, artists, scholars, and even fools (Barsch, 2016). Furthermore, it has been speculated that the naked body of the disabled man was

originally covered with a red panel of paper that could be lifted by the spectator (Barsch, 2016). This emphasizes that the gaze of viewers at the time was often imbued with curiosity, fright, as well as amusement (Barsch, 2016). It is most likely that the nude man was an artificial fool, or court jester, used for courtly mocking or entertainment (Barsch, 2016).

The disabled man is illuminated against a dark background, suggesting that the artist may have wanted to focus the viewers gaze solely upon the naked body of the disabled man. Indeed, light is often used to illuminate objects that the artist wants to emphasize for the viewer (Rose, 2001). It seems that the artist did not want to detract from the stark nudity of the disabled man. In addition, the upright "dressed head" creates a striking contrast to the horizontal "naked" body. The alert expression of the man also stands in stark contrast to his somewhat feeble body (Barsch, 2016). The visual juxtapositions often evoke complex and dynamic emotional responses in viewers (Deacon, 2006)—perhaps alluding more to its use as a source of entertainment. Like the ambiguous social class of the disabled man, his sexuality is also ambiguous and unreadable. His legs are crossed, and his genitals are not possible to decipher. His buttocks, too, are unreadable. His unreadable sexuality may have been indicative of portrayals of hermaphrodites at the time, or, rather, used to symbolically associate disabled bodies and deviant sexualities (Gowland, 2001). His unreadable sexuality may have also been used to provoke folly or jest.

2. Disability and Healing

The first painting in our disability and healing theme is known as the *Three Miracles of St. Zenobius*, painted by Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli in approximately 1500 ("Three Miracles," n.d.). Whether fact of romanticized fiction, Sandro Botticelli is thought to have pledged unrequited love to the married Simonetta Vespucci who later died of tuberculosis at an

early age. The face of Bella Simonetta is thought to have haunted all of his later work until his death (Downing, 2012). When he died, he was laid at the feet of Simonetta's grave. Much film, TV, books, and literature have been inspired by Botticelli's love for Simonetta.

Botticelli's Three Miracles is housed at the National Gallery, London ("Three Miracles," n.d.). The speculated disabilities in these paintings are epilepsy and blindness.

Sandro Botticelli. (1500). *Three Miracles of St.Zenobius.* National Gallery, London, England.

The National Gallery. (n.d.). Three Miracles of St.Zenobius. Retrieved from:

https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/125ieter-botticelli-three-miracles-of-saint-zenobius.

This painting depicts the different acts of healing offered by Zenobius—a 5th century bishop and Florentine Patron Saint ("Three Miracles", n.d.). On the left, St. Zenobious aids two youth who have been cursed by their mother, and in turn, possessed. During the Middle Ages, Christians interpreted epilepsy not as an illness, but rather as a case of "demonic possession". This common belief was one of the main reasons why epilepsy was often referred to as "morbus daemonicus" (the demonic disease) at the time (Schneble, 2003). Centrally, the Saint resurrects a boy who is deceased. On the right, he restores the vision of a blind pagan once he has agreed to

convert to Christianity. Given this context, it is clear that disability in the form of epilepsy and blindness warranted " healing" through acts of divine salvation or religious devotion to Christianity.

The sense of dynamic movement that is created across the painting from the left to the right of the composition illustrates a sense of time lapsing, and, ultimately, how divine power and healing can transcend time and place. The dynamic movement across the piece also conveys almost a panicked and urgent effort to fix the disabled bodies. It can also be noted that the figures to be "fixed" have little agency, ultimately unable to move to the place of their salvation independent from the help of Saint Zenobius. Symbols of Christian iconography are present in this image, such as the depiction of St. Zenobius with a beard (Stracke, 2015). Thus, together, the formal elements of this image as well as symbols indicate the strength of religion and faith in offering salvation and healing from disability.

The second painting in the disability and healing theme is known as the "Transfiguration". It is held at the Vatican, in Vatican City and was painted by Raphael between 1516 and 1520 ("Rafaello Sanzio," n.d.).

Raffaello Sanzio. (1516-1520). *The Transfiguration.* Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City.

Musei Vaticani. (n.d.). Raffaello Sanzio, The Transfiguration. Retrieved from: https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/la-pinacoteca/sala-viii---secolo-xvi/raffaello-sanzio–trasfigurazione.html.

This painting composition juxtaposes the New Testament parables of the Transfiguration of Jesus and the Healing of a Sick Boy with a Spirit within a single composition ("Bible gateway passage: Matthew 17:1-13 – new international version," n.d.). In accordance with the textual accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the upper scene of Raphael's Transfiguration illustrates the New Testament miracle in which the apostles James, John, and Peter accompany Jesus to a mountain where he is divinely lit before them. Diagonally flanking the centrally located Christ are Moses and Elijah, respectively (King, 1982). Below, Raphael depicts the scene in which the nine remaining apostles are called to cure an epileptic boy. However, they fail to do so without

Christ's assistance. Christ subsequently deems them as "faithless", explaining that such a cure for the boy could only result from prayer (King, 1982).

Raphael appears to emphasize the transfigured Christ as he wears a "dazzling white cloak". At the same time, he is elevated by the clouds that radiate behind him. The lower half of the composition is darker, illustrating "chiaroscuro"—that is, the contrast of light and dark values—perhaps. This may also signify the need for salvation (The National Gallery, n.d.). A semiotic analysis can also be conducted on the symbolic meaning of the gestures of the figures. In *Tropes of Revelation in Raphael's Transfiguration*, Jodi Cranston identifies her as a "figura serpentata"—a classically inspired figure that disperses his or her weight divergently into three distinct areas of space (2003). Raphael's "figura" diagonally shifts her right leg towards the group of apostles, pushing the other limb into the lower foreground towards the viewer, while simultaneously twisting her torso and arms in the direction of the boy. The boy, in turn, points upward towards Christ, perhaps suggesting the need for salvation. There is also movement and urgency in the piece to come to the aid of the disabled.

The final painting that will be discussed in this theme is the *Blind Leading the Blind,* created by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 1568 ("The Blind Leading the Blind," n.d.). The Blind Leading the Blind is a literal translation. Today, we may use the words blind, sight-loss, or visually impaired. It is held at the Museo Real Bosco di Capodimonte in Naples, Italy ("The Blind Leading the Blind," n.d.). The speculated disability in the painting are various "ocular afflictions" such as corneal leukoma, atrophy of the globe or removed eyes ("The Blind Leading the Blind," n.d.). It is believed that this painting portrays a parable from the Gospel of Matthew, which states that when the blind lead the blind, they shall fall into a ditch (Bible gateway passage: Matthew 15:14 – new international version, n.d.). The location of the church in the

background, which the blind men may have missed or simply departed from, may suggest that individuals with bodily differences were incapable of guiding themselves towards salvation.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder. (1568). *The Blind Leading the Blind.* Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

Web Gallery of Art. (n.d.) Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Retrieved from:

https://www.wga.hu/html_m/b/129ieter129/129ieter_e/11/01parabl.html

The linear perspective that demonstrates the church in the background is contrasted with the frontal diagonal path of the blind leading the blind in the foreground. This contrast could represent how the blind have deviated from the linear path of the church, religion, and faith, thus warranting the need for divine salvation and healing. It is evident that each blind man is working with another to move through space, as they hold onto each other's shoulders, until they come into contact with a physical limitation in their environment. In this regard, the men move in a collective and relational manner, that is rooted in trust, until they are impeded by their physical environment. Thus, this piece may also portray how disability may be produced by one's physical environment.

3. Disability and Subservience

One painting represented very clearly the theme of disability as subservient or in service to powerful able-bodied members of society, such as noblemen or gods. The first painting in this theme is called "Portrait of Charles Emmanuel of Savoy with Dwarf", painted by Giacomo Vighi in 1572 (O'Bryan, 2015). The artist was born in 1510 in Italy and the painting is held at the Galleria Sabauda in Turin, Italy (O'Bryan, 2015). Of note, it was extremely challenging to find art historical evidence about this particular painting.

Giacomo Vighi. (1572). *Portrait of Charles Emmanuel Savoy with Dwarf*. Galleria Sabauda, Turin.

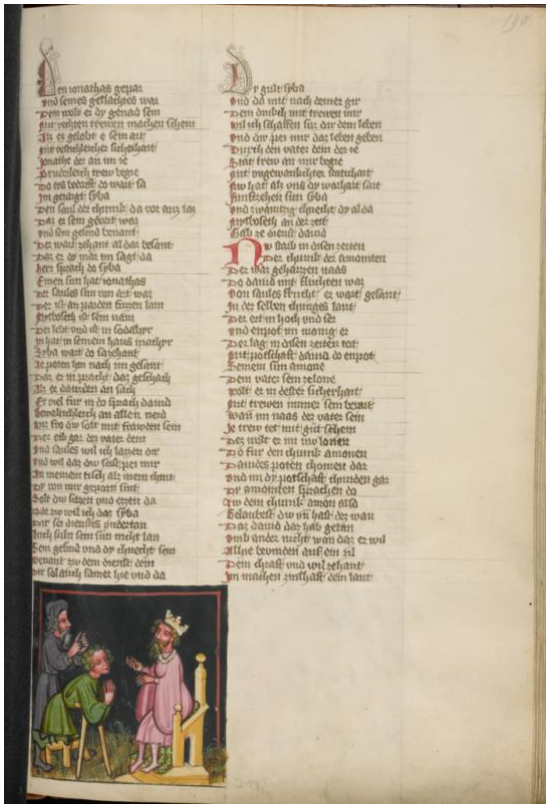
Web Gallery of Art. (n.d.). Giacomo Vighi. Retrieved from: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/v/vighi/carlo_em.html

The speculated disability in this painting is "dwarfism", which appears to also be a part of modern nomenclature. In this painting, Giacomo Vighi depicts the dwarf as a "sidekick", play-

thing, or servant to the youthful Charles Emmanuel of Savoy (O'Bryan, 2015). Given this context, one may speculate that dwarfs were seen as subservient to those in positions of authority.

The dwarf "sidekick" is adorned in dark attire that blends into the darkened background, perhaps indicative of his invisibility and subservience to his master. The boy is adorned in rich and ornate attire and has his left-hand is placed on the centre of dwarf's head, as one would a dog or a child, or a piece of furniture – as if posing for a photograph. Of note, the dwarf appears to be an adult who is at service to a child, and, in this way, there is a reversal of typical child-adult hierarchies. The boy stands upright and front-facing with an air of confidence and nobility while the viewer must gaze down at the adult dwarf who is side-facing. These techniques may also diminish the power of the dwarf.

Although most sources say that the painter is unknown, it is speculated that the *Lame Mephibosheth Before David* was created around 1400-1410 ("The Lame Mephibosheth," n.d.). The painting, which appears in a book, can be found at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, United States ("The Lame Mephibosheth," n.d.). The disability speculated in this painting is physical "lameness". In modern lexicon, this disability would most likely be referred to as a physical or mobility disability.



Unknown. (1400-1410). The Lame Mephibosheth Before David. J. Paul Getty Museum California, United States. J. Paul Getty Museum (n.d.). The Lame Mephibosheth before David. Retrieved from: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/1962/unknown-rudolf-von-ems-the-lame-mephibosheth-before-david-german-about-1400-1410/?dz=0.5000,0.5000,0.50

Mephibosheth is depicted kneeling before King David. He appears to use a walking or mobility aid. Mephibosheth is the son of Jonathan, and the grandson of King Saul ("Mephibosheth at the table of the King", 2019). When Mephibosheth was five years old, his caregiver learned of the death of King Saul and Jonathan ("Mephibosheth at the table of the King", 2019). This caused her to leave abruptly, and, in her haste, she tripped and dropped the child ("Mephibosheth at the table of the King", 2019). Both of his legs were fractured during the fall, and he did not ever receive corrective medical attention ("Mephibosheth at the table of the King", 2019). Indeed, the story is recorded in 2 Samuel 4:

> … Mephibosheth came to David in humility and acknowledged his underserving position, referring to him as a "dead dog". He considered himself less than worthless. David said "Don't be afraid, I will certainly show you kindness for your father Jonathan's sake. I will give back to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table (Bible gateway Passage: 2 Samuel 4 – new international version, n.d.).

Mephibosheth bows before King David in a subservient manner and vocalizes his lesser position in comparison to the King by referring to himself as a lifeless animal and re-emphasizing the charity model. The subservient position of Mephibosheth to King David is illustrated by symbols such as colour and attire. Mephibosheth appears to be in less formal attire than King David as he is not adorned in jewelry, a crown, nor a flowing garment. According to Hollander, nobility was tied to loose-fitting clothing (Hollander, 1975). Furthermore, the pink/red hues worn by King David were often seen as symbols of wealth, loyalty, and high social status (Condra, 2008; Sidsel, 2019). In contrast, Mephibosheth's is wearing a tighter fitting, green shroud. Green was often a colour that symbolized youthfulness and is perhaps used to denote the young age of Mephibosheth (Sidsel, 2019). Together, these symbols and formal elements reflect how the young Mephibosheth is subservient to the King.

The Beggars was created by Pieter Bruegel The Elder in 1568 and is currently held at the Louvre, in Paris, France (Musée du Louvre, 2020). Although the exact year and location of his birth are not known, he was likely born in a peasant village in the Netherlands between 1525 – 1530. Although the impairment in this painting is not specified, through a modern lens, such visible disabilities may be called physical or mobility disabilities.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder. (1568). *The Beggars*. Louvre, Paris, France. Pieter Bruegel Complete Catalog. (n.d.) The Beggars. Retrieved from: https://www.pieterbruegel.net/object/the-beggars

This painting depicts five disabled beggars, whom are each supported by a pair of crutches. They are situated within a courtyard, which houses a hospital (Musée du Louvre, 2020). It is of course unclear just how the configuration of the subjects' bodies occurred.

The Beggars depicts the notion that disability is associated with poverty and the act of begging for charity. Much of Millet-Gallant and Howie's critical work has focused on the association between disability and want in Renaissance frescos and accords with our finding here. Begging is an act of subservience—a leaning toward the other for help. Begging implies a distinct power imbalance in which the beggar turns toward others for aid. Although this painting suggests the subservience of the disabled beggars, it also features components that allude to disability as an avenue to claim agency and power. Scholars have suggested that the different hats worn by the beggars may symbolize the different hierarchical classes in society ("The

Beggars", n.d.). For example, one individual is wearing a peasant's cap, another the Bishop's Mitre, and one even possesses a cardboard crown ("The Beggars", n.d.).

The painting appears to function as a satire—the beggars mocking the difference between social classes, and perhaps even their ranking within such classes. Another symbol noted by scholars are the foxtails that are pinned to the torso of each beggar (Musée du Louvre, 2020). According to the Louvre, foxtails were a motif that the beggars identified with, signifying a sense of identity, agency, and rebellion (Musée du Louvre, 2020). Alternatively, the foxtails may have been an allusion to the festival of Carnival (Musée du Louvre, 2020). Although these symbols may indicate that the beggars are claiming agency through their exhibitory disdain for class hierarchies, there are some symbolic elements that may indicate otherwise. In the right corner of the painting, there is an able-bodied woman walking away from the beggars with her head cocked straight ahead. She pays little attention to the beggars, perhaps indicative of how the disabled were viewed as subservient and unimportant.

4. Disability and Tenderness

Two images in our dataset reflected the notion of *Disability and Tenderness.* The painting, titled, *"Madonna and Child",* was painted by Andrea Mantegna in 1460 (Josefson, 2018). Mantegna was born in 1431 in the Republic of Venice (Josefson, 2018). Currently, it is held at the Accademia Carrara in Berrgamo, Italy (Josefson, 2018).

Andrea Mantegna. (1460). *Madonna and Child.* Accademia Carrara, Berrgamo, Italy.

Wikipedia. (n.d.) Virgin and Child. Retrieved from:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna_and_Child_(Mantegna,_Bergamo)#/media/File:Mantegna,_madonna_dell'accademia_carrara_di_bergamo.jpg

We speculate that this disability may be what is known today as Down syndrome. However, in the 1400 and 1500's, the clinical label "Down Syndrome" and any sort of medicalized understanding, would not have existed. A scholar in developmental disabilities, Dr. Brian Stratford, has suggested that Mantegna modelled his depiction of Christ after a child with Down syndrome (Josefson, 2018; Stratford, 1996). Dr. Stratford also notes that perhaps Down Syndrome was familiar for both Mantegna and the patron of this piece, the Gozanga Duke of Mantua (Josefson, 2018; Stratford, 1996). Both Mantegna and the Duke apparently had children with what they termed an "unidentified sickness", which Dr. Stratford hypothesizes was Down Syndrome (Josefson, 2018; Stratford, 1996). The depiction of the Christ Child may also be filled with a sense of grace and tranquility because the artist and patron had children close to them with this disability.

It appears that the Madonna and the Christ Child are symbolic equals as they are both crowned with halos, at an equal level, and shrouded in blue. One is not elevated above the other. According to some, blue is a symbol for "sacred" and "divine" and is associated with the Virgin Mary (Kelleher, 2018). As well, blue is associated with the sky and the notion of "heaven" (Kelleher, 2018). Thus, the colour blue may show how both Christ Child and Madonna are enveloped in divinity. Together, the spatial arrangement and symbolic colours may indicate that this child with Down Syndrome was viewed with a sense of tenderness that many adult depictions did not display at the time. Of note, however, the child is looking up which may imply a need for salvation from God.

The second painting in this theme is the "*Adoration of Christ*", painted by the Follower of Jan Joest of Kalkar, and dated to 1515 (Levitas & Reid, 2002). It is currently held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Levitas & Reid, 2002). In this painting, art historians have focused on the angel to Mary's left, and the centrally located shepherd located above the angels (Levitas & Reid, 2002). Scholars such as Levitas and Reid (2002) suggest that both figures appear to have facial features that resemble Down syndrome, such as a "flattened midface, epicanthal folds, upslanted palpebral fissures, small and upturned nasal tip, and downward curving of the mouth corners" (p.401).

Follower of Jan Joest of Kalkar. (1515). *The Adoration of the Christ Child.* Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. The Met. (n.d.) *The Adoration of the Christ Child*. Retrieved from: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436781

Based on the angel's youthful appearance, it is possible she may be a child. The angel is positioned frontally with the rest of the family, on equal footing with the entire plane of angels. Indeed, this may speak to notions of equality and tenderness towards disability. The young angel appears to be gesturing with her arms that are crossed on her chest. This is speculated to be a symbol of humility, or an allusion to the "submission of the crucified Christ" (Wilberding, 1989, p. 2.). Therefore, the crossed arms of the disabled angel may represent unity with Christ (Wilberding, 1989)—a divine connection that further demonstrates notions of tenderness towards disability.

Discussion

We have reported four main themes in our art-historical analysis of the depiction of disability during the Renaissance. These include *disability and subservience or service to an*

abled "other", disability and entertainment, disability and healing, and disability and tenderness. In addition, we situated one painting within the smaller theme of *tension between agency and subservience*. These themes will briefly be discussed within the context of the literature, below.

Three paintings that comprised our disability and healing theme included the Three Miracles of Zenobius, The Transfiguration, as well as the Blind Leading the Blind. A common occurrence across the contextual analysis of all three of these paintings was the notion that disability is inherently a state that is in-need of help, salvation, aid, rescue, and fixing (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). For instance, in the parable, it is assumed that if the Blind Lead the Blind, they will invariably fall into a ditch. Similarly, in the Transfiguration, it is thought that the apostles – with the aid of Jesus – are able to cure an epileptic boy through the act of prayer. In the Three Miracles, a saint is simultaneously able to cure a blind pagan while also resurrecting a dead boy and exorcizing devils.

In the formal and semiotic analysis for this theme, techniques such as time lapse and radiating light through clouds are used to elevate the all-powerful status of the religious saints, Christ, and other religious figures. Further, symbolic gestures like pure white cloaks point to the divine status of the religious figures. In turn, as observed in the Blind Leading the Blind as well as The Transfiguration, disabled bodies often point upward, their arms outstretched in a supposed need for salvation and help. Finally, churches in the background of the landscape also signify the need for salvation.

Through a critical lens, this contextual, formal, and semiotic understanding reproduces the dominant notion that disability is essentially unable to help itself without the aid of the able-bodied powerful other (Rose, 1997; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This historically persistent

conceptualization of disability precedes the rise of the social model of disability, and subsequent decades of ontological debate regarding what disability is and how it is produced (Oliver, 2013). These notions also showcase a divine understanding of disability, so common prior to the rise of the modern medical movement (Rose, 1997). This discourse perpetuates the notion that disability is caused by God and saved or rescued only through a divine hand (Rose, 1997). Disabled persons rarely ever receive open acceptance through many religious institutions and disability continues to be conceived of as a sin from God by many (Rose, 1997). That disability also needs saving by said religious figures reflects a contradictory relationship between disability and religion where it is simultaneously villainized, excluded, but also seen as in need of aid. Our study has provoked novel insights, however, on how formal elements like time-space movement that conveys an urgency to aid disability, churches in the background, radiant light through clouds, and disabled bodies reaching up for help appear to be particular artistic techniques that serve to undergird deficit perspectives on disability. Future scholars may wish to devote more attention to these formal artistic elements and the meanings of disability they shape.

Another prominent theme was the notion of disability as a form of entertainment, humor, and jest. Henry the Eighth and His Family as well as Portrait of a Sixteenth Century Disabled Man comprised the images in this theme. From a contextual perspective, in Henry the Eighth, we know that fool's during the Renaissance occupied a liminal space, one that was neither here nor there. They resided in the in-between space of a family member, an employee, and a serf. Liminal spaces are those that reside on the edges of society, on the margins (Rollock, 2012). Since the status of a liminal person is not fully embraced nor accepted, it can be suggested that the fools liminal, ambiguous, and uncertain place in the Renaissance courts did little to further the advancement of disabled people in society. Further, the primary function of the fool was to

engender a sense of foolishness among the patron saints. While the mockery of disability did not reach its height until many centuries later in the 20th century touring "circus freakshows" (Craton, 2009), the literal and symbolic association between disabled people and foolishness in the Renaissance courts are also ~~can also be~~ seen as demeaning and oppressive.

From the formal and semiotic analysis, we also learned that the modest attire of the fools – in simple dress rather than the luxurious robes of their masters – was also another way in which to demarcate social status differences between disabled people and those whom they served. Further, the fools occupy a marginal place at the ends of the painting in a side-long portrait glance. In contrast, their masters are front and centre, with a head-on gaze. It has been suggested that the physical placement of compositional elements on the margins rather than centre — and looking away rather than looking toward — are techniques to connote insufficiency and inferiority (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In the portrait of a 16th century disabled man, the artist manages to conjure a deeply ambivalent gaze toward this disabled body. We might ask: Is he naked? What parts of his body are missing? Is he virile? Wearing such a crown, is he rich? In so doing, the gaze that is conjured might make the viewer feel confused, curious, or frightened, to name a few. The naked disabled man is also cloaked in darkness which historically has been used to associate bodies with evil (Norden, 2007). The confidence of his face and the helplessness of his body further conjure liminality and ambiguity. More research might be devoted toward understanding how artistic tools and conventions — such as the use of the margins versus the centre, looking toward or looking away, as well as conjuring up a deeply ambivalent gaze for the viewer — are used to portray the bodies of disabled people through the arts.

The theme of disability and subservience — or using the disabled to serve able bodied people - was also prominent in our analysis, and, to our knowledge, is a novel finding. This theme was comprised of The Beggars as well as the Portrait of Charles Emmanuel of Savoy with Dwarf. The act of begging itself may be a demonstration of servitude or serving the other. The beggar's faces appear to be distorted and they also appear to be poor and poverty-stricken. The woman who walks away appears to be unconcerned about the beggars and continues to march forward. For the dwarf, he too emerges from a dark corner, once again perhaps indicative of the symbolic association between darkness and disability. The dwarf appears to be an insignificant "side kick" for the use and service of the richly adorned boy. Future researchers might consider how these artistic techniques of distorted disabled faces, disorganized social groups, disability, and darkness, and being an insignificant "side kick", conjured views toward disability at the time.

The only somewhat benevolent theme was that of disability and tenderness. In this theme, there was a greater propensity to showcase children and youth with disabilities, rather than adults. The paintings include Madonna and Child and Adoration of Christ. In this theme, disability is seen through a more compassionate lens. Particular artistic techniques, such as elevating the baby close to the face of the Madonna so they are seen as symbolic equals, may be considered as a means to humanize and equalize disability. The soft blue hues, rather than the use of black as seen in other themes, might also be artistic techniques that connote divinity, kindness, benevolence, and compassion. Similarly, in the Adoration of Christ, the angel with Down syndrome appears to be on equal footing with the rest of the family and the other angels, perhaps suggestive too of equality. Like the baby in the Madonna, the Down syndrome angel's face appears to be soft, gentle, and kind.

Although we categorized the *Lame Mephibosheth Before David in the theme of Tension between Agency and Subservience,* this painting also demonstrated elements of tenderness toward children with disabilities. Although Mephibosheth is depicted on a lower footing than the baby or the Down syndrome angel, the scripture addressing the lame boy speaks to kindness and generosity, suggesting that the lame boy be allowed to "eat at my table" and "I will show you kindness". Although it is not without critique and still upholds ability, these words appear to connote more compassionate views toward disability (Turner, 2012). Future researchers might wish to explore how the use of equal planes with disabled bodies– rather than hierarchical planes as seen in the other themes – appear to connote perceptions of equality. The use of soft colour palates and the softening of facial features, might also be deserving of future research attention.

Importantly, more benevolent content tended to consist of infants, children, or youth with disabilities, such as the piece of King David. This stood in stark contrast to the other three more malevolent themes which tended to depict adults. To our knowledge, this is the first visual analysis that has ever documented more benevolent images toward disabled children coupled with more malevolent images of disabled adults. The association with disabled children and compassion may speak to the greater cultural acceptance and tolerance society holds toward children with disabilities in comparison to adults. For example, the disability charity model often fosters notions of compassion, care, and pity (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). Indeed, society may feel more pity, charity, and compassion toward disabled children. In contrast, the association between adult disability with entertainment, servitude, and aid reflects more malevolent views.

Two of the kinder images in this theme portray what we know today to be Down syndrome. Whether there was greater cultural acceptance for Down syndrome during the time of

the Renaissance begs further consideration. Finally, according to disability scholars in contemporary society, notions of pity and charity can still be viewed as oppressive tropes (Hayes, 2003) toward disabled children. Although they may not at first glance appear outwardly hostile, they can serve to undermine the agency of the childhood disability community. In this way, even the more benevolent theme is still oppressive. Artistic audiences and disabled and non-disabled consumers of fine art should be educated on the pervasiveness of ableism in the arts.

Although it was not a dominant theme from our analysis, it is evident that disability in the Renaissance was also associated with poverty and want. Many of the disabled figures were depicted as "beggars" in need of material and financial aid. In Millet-Gallant & Howie's (2022) critical analysis of the frescoes in the Brancacci chapel of Florence, Italy, they too found a close correlation between disability and want where the disabled body was used as a cipher to propel charity and to further the salvation of able-bodied saviours.

Finally, our use of a CDS perspective allowed us to consider issues such as power and resistance. Our use of a CDS perspective also allowed us to see how most themes reinforced medicalized notions of disabilities or problematic religious views. CDS can enrich art history analysis in the future. For example, a CDS perspective might draw attention to issues of power and resistance, gender, and intersectionality (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), whereby researchers carefully examine how these conceptual elements are rendered in historical paintings. However, following Riva Lehrer, contemporary art, which invites radical conversations about the body, might be a better site in which to engage critical discussions about disability. For example, there is already a radical group of disabled artists dedicated toward emancipatory issues. Tangled Art and Disability for instance, in Toronto Canada, engages a disability justice approach,

dedicated toward dismantling white supremacy, anti-blackness, and colonization (Tangled Arts, n.d.)

Although it was not discussed in our analysis, activist, scholar, and artist Riva Lehrer has also drawn our attention to the liberational possibilities of disability portraiture in a more modern and contemporary way. Riva Lehrer suggests that,

> I hope, by painting the people who move me, who attract me, that I can create a space for looking and thinking, to have a preliminary way of being comfortable in the face of the unfamiliar. If we have an intimate and non-judgmental forum to look at people with disabilities, perhaps a more mutual recognition may arise (p. 381).

Thus, through a critical lens, in addition to unpacking the problematic ways that disability has been represented through the ages, perhaps we can also consider disability portraiture as a way in which to develop comfort, emotional intimacy, and social connection with the unfamiliar and the strange. In this way, Lehrer points out the radical disability studies possibilities of portraiture.

Limitations

Although we used a formal visual analysis to help reduce speculative musings, our analysis cannot fully capture the intent of the painter, nor the various nuanced societal interpretations of each work. For instance, were dwarfs and court jesters also seen in less passive ways by Renaissance society? What is the relationship between a subject's agency and how and where they are depicted in these works ? What was the true intent of the artist depicting disabled children? How did these painted subjects feel? Our analysis also did not allow us, of course, to capture the feelings and affective states of the subjects being painted. Additionally, many of the words that we have used in this paper, such as "dwarf" or "beggar" were socially acceptable at

the time. However, through modern day nomenclature, they can be considered as deeply ableist. In this way, it is important to consider language in the context of the time.

Conclusion

It is important to explore views toward disability in the past in order to understand dominant ideas today. The arts serve as "living artifacts" which store ideas about disabled bodies at the time. We explored the historical depiction of disability through art Renaissance paintings. By conducting contextual, formal, and semiotic analysis, we found that disability was depicted in four ways including: a) to serve b) to entertain c) to be healed by religious leaders or d) to be tenderly cared for. Several of the main themes portrayed disability in a more malevolent light, including the notion that disability is in service of the able-bodied other, disability needs healing by God, and disability is a source of entertainment. In contrast, disability and tenderness may be seen as a more benevolent portrayal although it is not without paternalism and infantilization. Further, although paintings of children were few, there was a tendency toward portraying disabled children in a more compassionate light than adults. Our use of critical disability studies in this paper allowed us to identity the problematic persistence of biomedicalization and pathologizing in these historical works of art and to carefully consider disability and representation. We encourage the use of CDS perspectives in art history analysis in the future, especially given the potential to generate emancipatory artistic movements and new conversations about bodies in space and time. The past shapes the present and the present is never without historical influence.

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