

Painting and sculpturing with “broken” hands: the victory of Renoir

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Pierre-Auguste Renoir, the French painter, developed rheumatoid arthritis when he was around 50. The consequences of his disease were elucidated by his grandson Paul Renoir at the 13th European meeting of rheumatology which was held in Amsterdam in 1955 (1). The disease typically began in the small joints of the hands and the feet. After some years the arthritis became very aggressive causing deformity, loss of function and ankylosing of the wrist, interphalangeal joints and metacarpophalangeal joints. Ankylosis involved also the shoulders and twice the broken right arm. He manifested pleural effusion, facial palsy, weight loss, nodules in the back and suffered severe pain especially during the night. He was unable to pick up a brush and to hold a palette, walked with difficulty and progressively became prisoner of a wheelchair. But in these years Renoir did not humbled himself and painted more than 400 pictures with an incessant activity until the end of his life. The day he died at 78 years he had spent several hours painting a still life and said to his assistant: “I think I am beginning to know something about painting”.

What is absolutely surprising, is that his severe illness did not negatively influence his joy of living and working. He adapted his painting technique continuously as the difficulty of moving shoulders, hands and fingers increased. The brushes were wedged in his fingers by his family members, the palette was fixed on his wheelchair and the canvas instead of hanging on the easel was turning around a roll allowing Renoir to paint large pictures as *Les Grandes Baigneuses* which measures 160 cm by 110 cm. Even the arm fractures could not prevent him from painting: Renoir became ambidexter. His infirmity did not alter the extraordinary mastery of his expressive style and the skilful matching of the colours. But, paradoxically, the objects of his pictures became more joyful than in the past: he was painting young, shapely, calm, fleshy nude women. The colours are light and the picture seems extremely bright, suffused in the sunlight of the Mediterranean landscape of *Cagnes sur Mer* where he was living for the warmth of the climate. The Renoir's late period was a continuous search for the plasticity of his painting shaping figures without contours in a symphony of luminous colours. This strong wish to acquire the volume of the figure drove him towards the sculpture in the



Figure 1 - Renoir in the last years of his life painting with the brush fixed to his deformed hand.



Figure 2 - “The Bathers”, a painting that Renoir finished just before his death in 1919.

last years of his life. Renoir utilized for modelling the sculptures the hand of a young man who translated what his mind thought and his eyes saw. Finally, he was gratified: he felt close to the great painters of the past from Raffaello to Ingres whom he observed and studied during the trips in Italy or the visits of Louvre. Always during his life, painting was his enjoyment, now was also the best medicine for the pain of the arthritis and the weakness of the old age.

References

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