

## Varia litteraria

### Breast cancer and Art

Joop A. van Dongen

#### Rak piersi w sztuce

To present the opening lecture of the first Congress of Polish Oncology is a great honour for me. Poland has impressively contributed to the development of oncology; the work of Marie Skłodowska-Curie, twice winner of the Nobel price, had an enormous impact on the curability of cancer. She is worshipped not only in Poland, all over the world we find the signs to memorize her influence in science. Poland has continued her work, especially in medicine. Long time ago already the ring of Polish cancer institutes was created, the mother institute in Warszawa proudly bearing her name. I am happy to contribute to the ultimate development: this conference.

My contacts with your country go back to over 25 years ago, when colleagues from your country visited the Amsterdam Cancer Institute. We kept close contacts; over the years I was regularly your guest visiting among other centers Gdansk, guest of our good friends: the families Jaskiewicz and Jassem.

When, years ago, I lectured for the first time on the relation of art and oncology, I showed a cover picture of a Polish journal, edited to inform lay people on breast cancer treatment, just to illustrate how also the theme breast cancer can create works of – applied – art and I thought it most appropriate to use this slide today again as entry to my talk.

Art certainly is related to beauty, but, in general, emotions are considered to be the most important drive in creation of art giving more than beauty alone. The emotional aspect certainly is the most important background for art related to breast cancer. I want to give you in this lecture a more or less systematic iconography, a documentation of the art created on themes related to breast cancer and breast cancer treatment.

Art scientists, but mainly medical researchers have drawn our attention to famous works of art showing, they think, women with breast cancer. That part of the iconography relates to the interpretation of the onlooker,

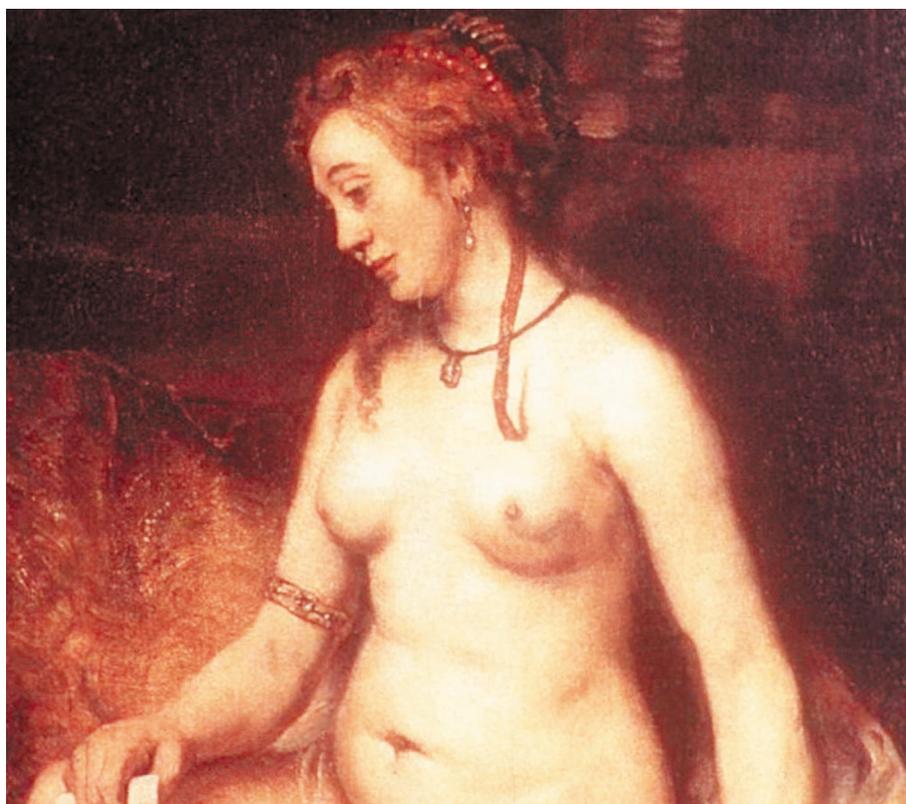
of the spectator more than that it gives an account of the intention of the artists.

Braithwaite published in the *Lancet* years ago his suggestion that Rembrandt showed in his *Bathseba*, now in the Louvre in Paris, signs of a breast tumor in the left breast (Figure 1). Baum created more background for the hypothesis that Rembrandt's supposed model, his second wife Hendrickje, died a number of years later from breast cancer. The intense sorrow of *Bathseba* in this picture might indeed be interpreted as expression of Rembrandt and the model being aware of a most serious illness.

Rembrandt's etching of a woman in a hospice probably also shows a patient with breast cancer. Some people postulate that here also is shown his wife and model Hendrickje, but now the disease is located in the other breast. This might be explained by the frequent exchange of left and right by Rembrandt in his etchings. He was not used to correct the mirror effect of the etching technique.

Michelangelo's famous sculpture, the *Night* on one of the tombs in the Medici chapel in Florence was described in the biography of Ascanio Condivi, written already during Michelangelo's life, as "being made in the form of woman of marvelous beauty". However, as recently was mentioned by Stark and Nelson in a letter to the Editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* the left breast shows deformations suggesting a locally advanced tumor, but this has up to now not lessened the greatness of this wonderful statue and the interpretation of this breast harbouring a malignancy may be questioned.

A same postulate is often mentioned for the famous *Fornarina* by Raphael. This beautiful picture from the Galleria Barberina in Rome, painted in 1518 was recently on view at the Raphael exposition in the Musee de Luxembourg in Paris. The right hand hints to a possibly diseased breast. There are many theories but nothing is known with certainty as to who has been model for this picture; many suppose that she has been Raphael's great love. Like for Michelangelo's sculpture, I do not know of any reliable indication mentioned in the arthistorical literature to support the idea that here a breast cancer case is shown. Perhaps, the searching eyes of oncologists are too much focused on such interpretations.



**Figure 1.** Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) *Bathseba*; Louvre, Paris, France;  
The left breast shows signs of a malignant tumor

Our colleague and friend Jean Pierre Julien, drew my attention to a picture by Jan Lys, a Dutch painter in the first half of the 17th century, (1600- 1657) now in the museum of Esztergom in Hungary (Figure 2). This is different from the previously mentioned artworks. It is a Vanitas: the painter want to show the perishableness, the worthlessness of the human existence. It shows purposefully a woman with an advanced breast cancer with the intention to remind the spectator of the impending death. As usual in this genre d'art, the picture also shows objects of vanity and of pleasure, like, in this case, music instruments.

Romeyn de Hooghe, showed in an engraving a mastectomy performed in the 17th century; it is meant as symbol for a moral lesson (Figure 3). The book is written by van Hoogstraaten in 1667 and is a collection of ethical instructions. The etching is an illustration in the chapter where the harm caused by publications of abject authors is compared with a cancer and should be cut out with a sharp knife. This metaphore is a reference to the only place in the Bible where cancer explicitly is mentioned. In Timothy 2, the Apostle Paul expresses his disapproval of godless people whose “word will eat as does the cancer”. This engraving undoubtedly gives us a vivid picture of breast operations in that time and is thereby a fascinating document of medical history.

Many illustrations in old medical books give us information on views on breast cancer and breast cancer treatment. Illustrations usually were commissioned to important artists and often are of high artistic value but also

more simple illustrations are interesting from historical and iconographical point of view. In the late middle ages the miniatures illustrating the Arab and christian medical instruction books include notes on how the breast should be investigated. A good example can be found in a 13th century copy of a manuscript of the 6th century, the codex 93 now in the National Library in Vienna.

The technique of breast surgery in the 15th, 16th and 17th century was conditioned by the need to perform the operation very fast; anaesthesia was not yet developed. Patients and surgeons needed to be courageous. Illustrations in the books of the German surgeon Scultetus from the beginning of the 17th century, show us details of the procedures used in that time.

Somewhat later special instruments were designed to perform the amputation in a very short period of time. We know from several descriptions by both patients and surgeons that, as we may expect, these in that time rare operations usually were not successful; many patients died of blood loss or infection or fairly soon from recurrent disease.

Also modern publications use drawings and engravings; they are excellent tools for education; the illustrations in Halsted's publications date from the beginning of the period of effective breast cancer treatment. Very instructive indeed, it is evident that they are the work of an excellent artist.

In the 19th century, the period of great developments in medicine, the vanity of professors, the proud of universities and the admiration of the students created the tra-



**Figure 2.** Jan Lys (1600-1657) *Vanitas*; Museum of Esztergom, Hungary;  
The left breast contains a malignancy, illustrating the perishableness of the human existence



**Figure 3.** Romeyn de Hooghe (1645-1708) *Mastectomy*; Engraving in "Voorhof der Ziele" published in 1667  
by Francois van Hoogstraaten; here the mastectomy is a metaphor for stating that abject publications should be cut out with a sharp knife



**Figure 4.** Henri Gervex (1852-1929) *Professor Péan teaching*; Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France; The great professor at the start of a breast operation

dition of what the Germans name Ahnengalerien. In a way this is a revival of the tradition to paint “anatomy lessons” in the 17th century. Great artists were commis-

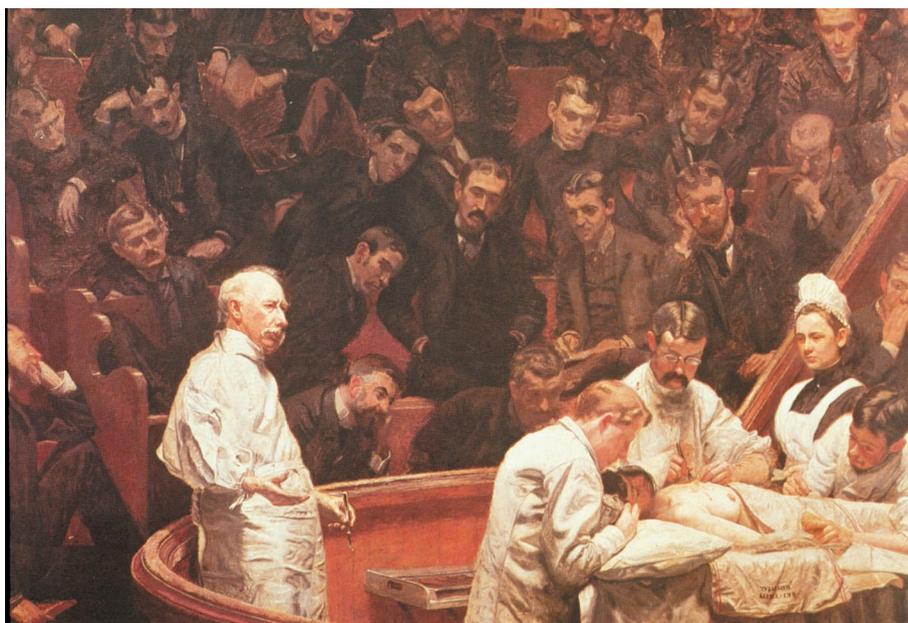
sioned to make portraits of the famous surgeons at their educational work. Henri Gervex, in his time the leading painter in Paris, created in 1886 a portrait of Péan showing the moment just before the start of an operation (Figure 4). To note is the elegant costume of Péan, in no way specific for surgical work. This fascinating picture is in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

That same museum organized last year a great exhibition of the American painter Thomas Eakins. Central in the exposition was a work painted in 1889. It is of great size, his largest painting, about 2 by 3 meter. It shows the Agnew clinic: The great professor Agnew lecturing during the just started breast operation (Figure 5). It is fascinating to see in this picture the differences with the previous discussed painting. Now special operation clothing is used and Agnew also uses gloves. Only a difference of 3 years, it gives an accent to the difference between the classical Europe and the modernism of the new world! Art indeed illustrates history.

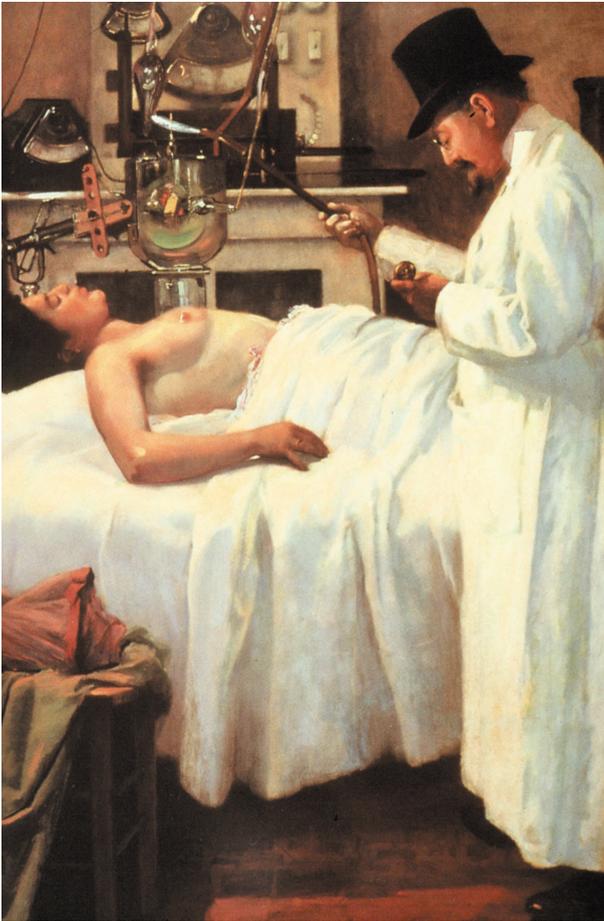
Georges Chicotot was a French physician, one of the first active in treating cancer by X rays. He also was a gifted painter. His selfportrait from 1908, now in the collection of the Musée de l'Assistance Publique in Paris, gives us an impression of the way how radiotherapy directed to the breast was given in the very early times (Figure 6).

We should not be astonished to find that breast cancer is in many religions subject for amulets, for *ex voto*'s, to avert the mischief. A Greek *ex voto*, found on the northern slope of the Athens Acropolis, now in the collection of one of the Berlin museums shows a delicately sculptured breast; the inscription words a supplication for health and beauty.

Breast cancer is the theme for patronage of a number of Christian Saints. In the Roman time and early middle ages many women were tortured by mutilating or even by taking off both breasts. Many of these became



**Figure 5.** Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) *The Agnew clinic*; Pennsylvania University, Philadelphia, USA; Professor Agnew lectures during a breast operation



**Figure 6.** Georges Alexandre Chicotot (19th/20th century); *Selfportrait*, Musée de l'Assistance Publique, Paris, France; One of the first radiotherapy sessions for breast cancer; 1908

Martyrs and Saints. We know, to mention some: Foya, Barbara, Agatha, Christina, Macra, and Aldegundis.

Some of these saints were worshipped and called upon for help by breast cancer patients. The most venerated is the holy Agatha. She was a beautiful girl, living in Sicily in the early Christian time, who at a young age decided to dedicate her life to Christ. After refusing the sexual demands of Quintinianus, the governor from Rome, she was tortured and both breasts were cut off. The 17th century painter Francesco Guarini shows in his work, in the collection of the Naples museum, Agatha covering the bleeding thoracic wall with her clothes. In the night following this horrifying torture, happily, Agatha was visited in the prison by Saint Peter, accompanied by an angel. He repaired the mutilation; we see in a picture by the Italian Alessandro Turchi (1578 – 1649), now in the Strassbourg museum, how the beauty of the breasts was restored.

Then, the enraged Quintinianus sentenced Agatha to death by being burned. A year later Catania was destroyed by an earthquake. There is a fascinating story that a veil taken from her grave by the population of Catania was instrumental in diverting the lava stream that threatened the city.

In many artworks Agatha shows herself the amputated breasts to the spectator; mostly on a plate, like in the

magnificent work from the Spanish painter Zurbaran, from the collection of the Fabre museum in Montpellier (Figure 7). This work is impressively described in one of the first poems of Paul Valery. Apart from the importance for the faithful, many of these Agatha-works indeed are of high artistic value.

When I was studying the beautiful artworks from Wit Stwosz in Kraków, I was surprised to find a similar “presentation on a plate”, very much like the way how Agatha usually shows her breasts, but now bread is offered; without doubt there is some relationship, there are some iconographic links between the two themes.

Behind glass paintings, fascinating examples of 19th century folk art, show that Agatha's story was a still present matter of thought in the Catholic world in that time. Over the centuries this had been the case; Frank McCourt describes in his famous autobiographic *Angela's Ashes*, how he was fascinated as a young boy by all the saints, who had their breasts cut off. In the famous *Il Gattopardo*, the Tigercat, pearl of recent Italian literature, by To-



**Figure 7.** Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1662); *Saint Agatha*; Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France. The holy Agatha shows traditionally her breasts on a plate

masi di Lampedusa the double Agatha image also is mentioned by Don Fabricio, one of the chief characters described in the book, when he tells how he took two pieces of pastry on a plate at a banquet!

When we discuss the relation of breast cancer and art the most impressive are artworks from patients or close relatives expressing emotions, caused by both the life threatening and mutilation aspects of the disease; these frequently are pieces of art. In the literature, the “*belles-lettres*” we find several impressive descriptions of emotions caused by breast cancer. I myself was deeply moved to receive once a very delicate poem on her mastectomy from Elisabeth Eybers, some days after she was dismissed from hospital after her treatment. As many of us know, she is an in Holland living South African poet and well known for the fine subtlety of her works.

The sculptor Nancy Fried, living in the United States, made many selfportraits, torso's showing the mutilation, which obsessed her. These sculptures are of a horrifying, yet cathartic beauty. Here in Poland we know the work of Alina Szaposznikow.

Professor Senn, one of the leading breast cancer scientists and past editor-in-chief of the *European Journal of Cancer* arranged during his St Gallen meeting of 1988 an exhibition of works by Magdalena Graf-Ruegg. Several friends and certainly internal drive stimulated her to take up again after having been treated for breast cancer her work as painter, that she had interrupted during the early years of her marriage. A series of twelve watercolours shows the emotions she felt during the treatment. As was stated in the fine booklet that was published about these watercolours, “the rediscovery of painting helped her to experience and cope with illness and treatment in a positive way”. In the first of the series, the emotions at diagnosis are shown and the chemotherapy period is illustrated with a vulcanolike landscape.

Also Ingeborg Haag, from Germany, spoke of a healing effect of art. She also rediscovered her artistic potential and felt the blessing of again making art during the treatment of a lethal malignancy of her daughter, and shortly after, being treated herself for an advanced breast cancer. She spoke of a healing effect of art. Her self-portrait during chemotherapy is most moving.

Fotographic art of course also deals with this theme. In a series of photos from Eugene Richards (from 1978) he gives us the story of a good friend who was treated for breast cancer; the first “the Biopsy”, evidently illustrates uncertainty and fear. Another image shows the disforming side effect of the chemotherapy. But, most positive is the last picture from this series entitled: “Pamela's first mile run”!

In several countries art is used to help cancer patients to cope with their disease. Many centers speak of “Art therapy”, when discussing this part of the work of those who are active in improving the quality of life in cancer patients; to avoid the difficult discussion on suggestions that this art therapy has impact on survival of the patients, it might be better to leave out the word therapy and speak simply of “Imagery”. That a picture created

during such an imagery series by an Amsterdam patient was titled “consolation at radiation therapy”, indicates that the creative work was of help in this difficult period of irradiation.

It is now generally assumed that art expression may help in coping with feelings of uncertainty and fear for suffering, pain and death. It can be very useful in finding a new balance and act in this way very positively. Stimulation of such art expression individually or in groups are now accepted methods. Patients get the possibility to express their feelings and perceptions and the results are discussed together. During the sessions patients may ultimately find possibilities to accept their fate; the chaotic situation in the mind can come to order and peace; a reconciliation with the unavoidable amputation might be reached.

Even by patients who never earlier were creative artists we may find work of high artistic value. But more frequently we should describe the results of such sessions as “primitive” art or – as the French say – “Art Brut”. As so many pieces of primitive art they yet are often quite moving. Recently an exposition of such artworks created by Dutch cancer patients was organized in Amsterdam and a book was published by the School of Imagery, the name of the organization that deals with this work in Amsterdam. This exhibition and the publication were quite instrumental in introducing the concept of the so called Art Therapy in the world of oncologists as a valuable tool in helping patients to cope with the disease.

I hope I have given some indication that medicine and art may go hand in hand. I am happy that the organizers of most of the oncology meetings certainly feel such: the announcements for the meetings mostly are pieces of art hinting to this interrelationship.

The oncology meeting of the coming days addresses the advancements in the possibilities to cure cancer patients and to attain this without mutilation; if this goal would be achieved cancer would lose the point of being so often the theme for artworks. I am sure that we all would be glad if we come to such a situation; I wish you good luck in this work.

Important literature on breast cancer and art:

- Dominique Gros, *Le sein dévoilé*, Editions Stock, Paris, 1987
- Alfonso Pluchinotta, *Storia illustrata della senologia*, Ciba-Geigy Edizioni, Milano, 1989
- Daniel de Moulin, *A short history of breast cancer*, M. Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1983