

The figures in El Greco's paintings have signs of Marfan's syndrome

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Abstract

In this article, the hypothesis that figures in El Greco paintings have signs of Marfan's syndrome, is presented.

Key words: Marfan syndrome, El Greco

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One of the world's eminent painters living in Spain, Domenikos Theotokopulos, commonly named El Greco, used for his works unique figures which distinguished him and fascinated with their individual style. The strange world of these models was explained by the right of the artist to deformation or Byzantinism. Nevertheless, it was only in the second decade of the 20th century that several medical publications began to interpret such curiosities by mental or physical disorder of the painter.

In 1911 A. *Goldschmidt* published in *Suddeutsche Monatschrifte*: "El Greco Augenkrankheit" – "Eye illness". *Juarros* in 1914 wrote the article "The madness of El Greco".

Beritens advanced the opinion that the sight defect astigmatism deformed the artist's vision.

In 1953 *Perrera* proposed that El Greco was a hashish addict.

The thesis put forward by *Marañon* in 1955 and published in 1960 explained that the painter used for his models patients from the mental hospital in Toledo.

The typical malformations observed in our own patients with Marfan's syndrome are as follows: a tall, slim figure, strange proportions, limb elongation and thinning bones, protruding ears; long, "spidery" fingers (arachnodactylia) with hyperextensible joints enabling the fingers to tilt back, congenital subluxation of the muscles of the eye lenses (ectopia), frequent squint or crossed eye (strabismus), sad looking long face, elongated skull (dolichocephaly) "tower skull" (Figures 1-3). Some patients have only a few deformations of varying intensity.

Authenticity of the authorship of the painting *Saint Francis Ecstasy* (Figures 4-6) from Kosów Lacki is

confirmed by two authors of its discovery, Mrs. Izabela Galicka and Hanna Sygietyńska. The proof of authorship is the signature made in Greek alphabet Domenikos

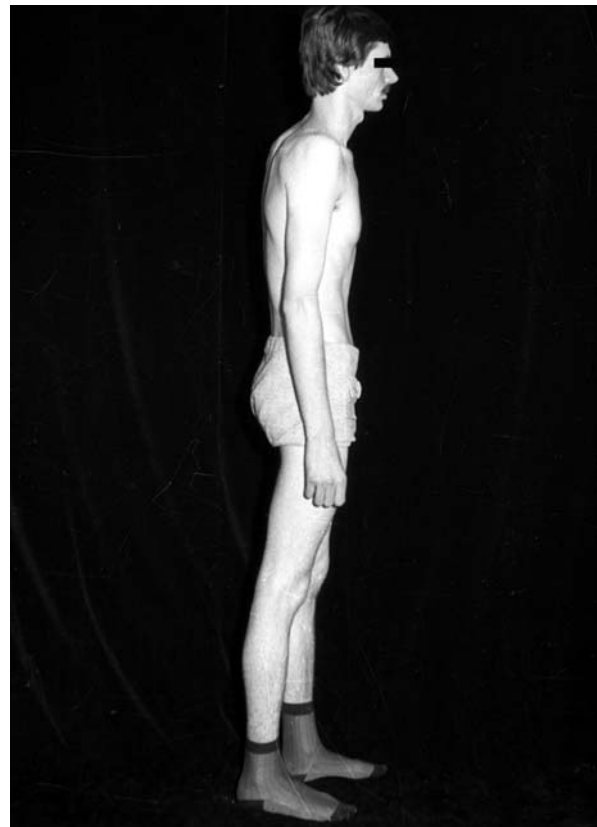


Figure 1. Patient with the signs of Marfan's syndrome – profile

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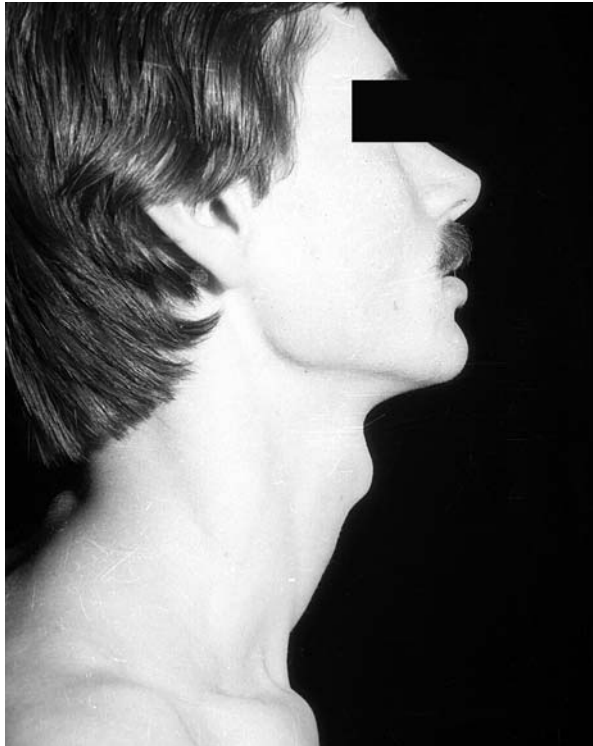


Figure 2. Head and neck of the same patient



Figure 3. X-ray of the “spidery fingers” of the same patient

Theotokop(...) hidden under two layers of repainting and false signature.

When in the following centuries the fascination with this style disappeared, museums admitted that exhibiting El Greco's paintings was below their dignity as they were absurd and unworthy caricatures. Repainting and false signature increased the chance of selling the painting [2].

El Greco was born in 1541 in Crete and died in Toledo, Spain, in 1614. The painting from Kosów Lacki now displayed in the Diocesan Museum in Siedlce is dated to the period 1575-1580.



Figure 4. The picture *St. Francis Ecstasy* from Kosów Lacki



Figure 5. The hand – a detail of the picture from Kosów Lacki



Figure 6. The glare of the lens – a detail of the picture from Kosów Lacki



Figure 7. A detail from the picture of Bassano – *Adoration of Shepherds*

The author (J.K.) noticed that in Bassano's painting (Giacomo and Francesco) *Shepherds' Adoration* (Figure 7), also described by Izabela Galicka and Hanna Sygietyńska, one of the shepherds is presented as

a man resembling beyond a doubt the figure of Saint Francis from Kosów Lacki. This means that the same person, well known in the circle of painters, was portrayed by both artists. It suggests that the



Figure 8. Lower part of the picture *The funeral of Count Orgaz*



Figure 9. A central detail from the wall of the human shapes

existence of the same physical features did not derive from the imagination but was taken from the reality of the surrounding world. The source of malformations was nature and the living model who in 1576 was around 35 years old in both paintings.

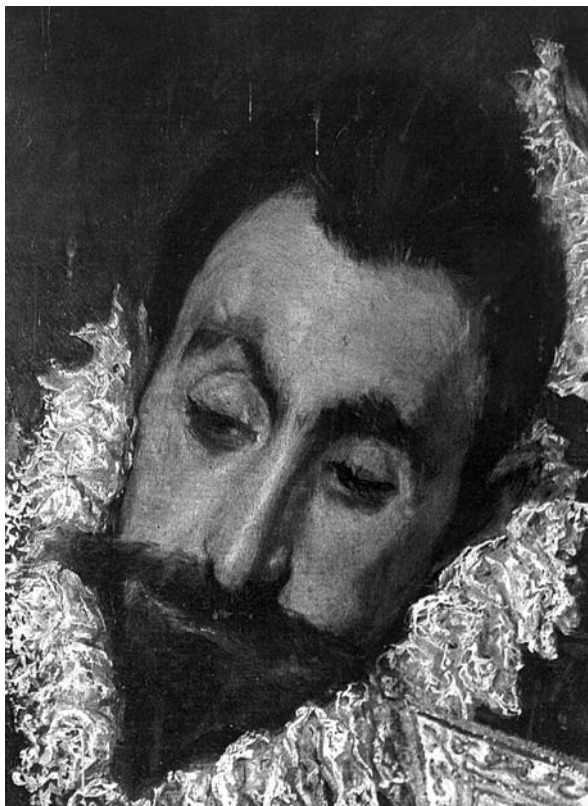


Figure 10. A detail – the face looking down

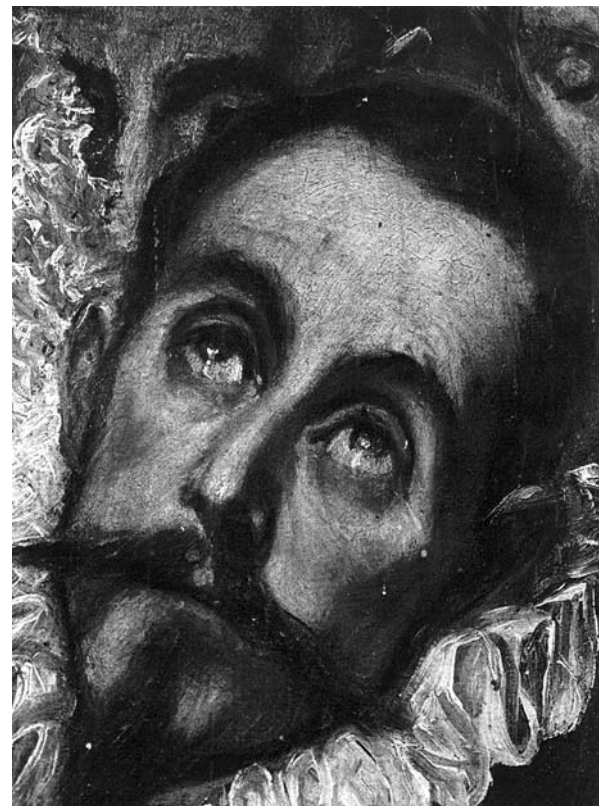


Figure 11. A detail – the face looking up – the glare of the eye lens

Did El Greco show the anomalies of sickness unintentionally or was the artist a carrier himself? If his supposed self-portraits were confirmed it would strengthen the idea that each artist paints himself – *Ogni pittore dipinge se stesso* (Leonardo da Vinci) – by attributing his own features to the models. Finding the same face supports the hypothesis about the physical characteristics of the painter himself and makes it more real.

Medical examination reveals other signs of Marfan's syndrome such as highly arched palate, distortion of the chest in the form of depressed pectus excavatum or conversely protruding "pigeon breast", arched backward spinal curvature (kyphosis), frequent flat foot. The antero-posterior distance of the eyeball results in glassiness owing to the reflection of light on the longer vitreous body "the blue sclera".

The distance from the pubic symphysis to the sole is much longer than the distance from the pubic symphysis to the head. In fully developed cases there occur heart, aorta and conductive tissue malformations. Predominantly, it is annulo-aortic ectasia. Medicine defines this clinical entity, irrespective of the degree of aggregation of the signs, as Marfan's syndrome, which is



Figure 12. *Saint Lucas*

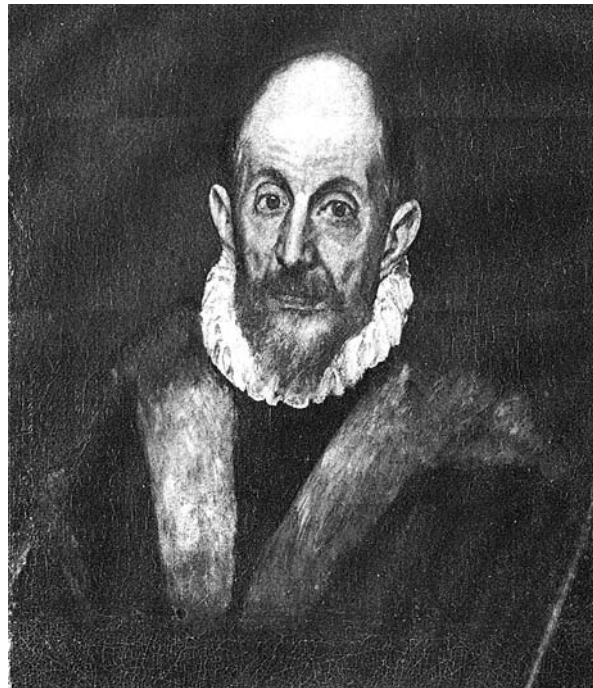


Figure 13. *The portrait of the old man*

an inherited disorder of the connective tissue. The serious cardiovascular anomalies confirm the incorporation of Marfan's syndrome in cardiology.

The author (J.K.) for the first time sent a 24-year-old patient, a nurse with developed symptoms of Marfan's syndrome, from the Cardiology Clinic in Warsaw to the Cardio-Surgery Clinic in Stockholm headed by Professor Clarence Crafoord, where in 1965 an artificial aortic valve was successfully grafted on a patient.

There is also the well known fact that President Lincoln showed signs of Marfan's syndrome.

The genetic background of the disturbance of connective tissue development is indicated by the greater excretion in urine – particularly among children – of hydroxyproline needed for collagen and elastic fibre.

Marfan's syndrome was described in 1896 by the French podiatrist Antoni Bernard Jean Marfan in a Paris medical journal under the title: "The case of inborn deformation of four limbs mostly expressed by bone elongation and thinning" [1].

In 1974 I had a chance to put forward the new hypothesis in the English journal "The connoisseur" that El Greco's models had typical signs of physical anomalies known in medicine as Marfan's syndrome. The idea was mentioned in the article written by Izabela Galicka and Hanna Sygietyńska as part of note 8 which I quote here: On 13 November 1974 Professor Jan Kwoczyński (Head of Cardiology Department, Postgraduate Medical School, Warsaw) at a meeting of

the Association of Art Historians in a paper prepared by the authors (I. Galicka and H. Sygietyńska), "El Greco's painting of Saint Francis: Problems of iconography and style", advanced a new hypothesis that the combination of physical characteristics appearing in El Greco's subjects correspond to Marfan's syndrome, an inherited disorder of the connective tissue.

The question arises how the passing time shapes the faces of El Greco's models. A figure standing over the grave of Count Orgaz was suggested as a self-portrait. However, the selection of this person is not widely accepted.

The altar painting on canvas *The funeral of Count Orgaz* (Figures 8-11) is almost five metres high and presents in the upper part the heaven's world. Its bottom part pictures the 13th century legend about a miracle seen by participants of the funeral. The miracle was the arrival of Saint Augustine and Saint Stephan, who put the body of the religious knight to the grave. The spirit of legend is induced by, standing over the grave, a wall made up of a thick row of figures, their heads at the same level and faces with moustaches and beards, wearing black clothes which perfectly contrast with the whiteness of subtle ruff. One of the central figures over the grave, whose ruff is touched by the front wing of Saint Augustine's mitre, leans out and blesses with a raised hand whose "spidery" fingers tilted back can evoke the model's silhouette of bulging eyes and high, thick, regularly semicircular eyebrow arches. His high forehead

is a result of the baldness which forms curves on the temporal-frontal corners. The painting is dated 1586 when the model was 45 years old.

The head situated close to the back wing of the mitre has full face resemblance with high forehead, bulging eyes and eyebrow arches. As a result of the upward glance we notice a sparkle of the eye lens already known from the model in the *Saint Francis Ecstasy* from Kosów Lacki painting.

In the row of figures forming the wall the model's face appears twice as a kind of decorative motive.

We see great similarity to this model also in the *Saint Lukas* (Figure 12) painting dated around 1605, the late period when the figure was 64 years old. We can recognize the same face in holy figures in the painting of *Saint family with Saint Ann*, but the time of its creation creates doubts concerning the model's age.

The *Portrait of a nobleman with a hand on his breast* from 1590 is believed to be a self-portrait. In turn, *Portrait of the old man* (Figure 13) is considered to be the last one and is said to be mentioned on the post mortal list by the son of the artist, Jorge Manuel; it is exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bulging eyes and high, regularly semicircular eyebrow arches confirm the likeness. The elongated chin and conical head express sadness and the tragedy of time

already passed by. The latest dating changes the painting's time of creation to the years 1605-1610.

In this figure we can spot the resemblance to the youthful figures in the paintings *Saint Francis Ecstasy* and *Shepherds' Adoration*.

Is it not true that the art of El Greco was a phenomenon so unique because it was the work of a man whose genius happened to combine with particular features of sickness?

This is why nobody could or had an inner need to imitate the artist in impression and conviction. The essence of his art is beyond the possibility of understanding and the desire to imitate it.

Figures 1-3: Jan Kwoczyński (1963 r.), 4-6: Krzysztof Drozd, 7-13: Wikimedia Commons

References

1. Marfan AB. Un case de déformation congénitale des quatre membres plus prononcée aux extrémités, caractérisée par l'allongement des os avec un certain degré d'amincissement. *Bull et Mem Soc Med Hôp de Paris* 1896; 13: 220-1.
2. Galicka J, Sygietyńska H. An El Greco Confirmed. *The Connoisseur* 1975 Oct, 117-9.
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Postacie z obrazów El Greca mają cechy zespołu Marfana

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Streszczenie

Na znalezionym w Kosowie Lackim obrazie El Greca *Ekstaza św. Franciszka* można zobaczyć „pająkowate” palce oraz błyszczące soczewki oczu, co jest objawem zespołu Marfana. Autor (J.K.) zauważył, że na obrazie Bassanów (Jacopo i Francesco) pt. *Pokłon Pasterzy* – jeden z pasterzy jest niezwykle podobny do postaci z obrazu El Greca. Obraz z Kosowa (obecnie w Muzeum Diecezjalnym w Siedlcach) został namalowany w latach 1575–1580, a obraz Bassanów – ok. 1576 r. Można więc przypuszczać, że ta sama osoba była modelem El Greca i Bassanów. Występowanie tych samych cech fizycznych u postaci na obu obrazach dowodzi, że nie pochodzą one z wyobraźni, lecz że zostały zaczerpnięte z rzeczywistości. Źródłem pokazanych na obrazach deformacji był żyjący w tamtych czasach model, który w 1576 r. miał ok. 35 lat.

Obserwowane na obu obrazach deformacje znane są w medycynie jako wrodzone zaburzenie tkanki łącznej o nazwie zespół Marfana [1]. Odpowiedź na pytanie, czy El Greco pokazał anomalie chorobowe zaobserwowane przypadkowo, czy takie cechy miał jego konkretny model, czy też sam artysta był ich nosicielem, pozostaje sprawą otwartą.

W badaniach Autor zaobserwował podobieństwo autoportretów El Greca do postaci na innych obrazach oraz to, że żłobie nie ich twarzy podobnie zmieniało się wraz z upływem czasu. Potwierdzałoby to pogląd głoszony przez Leonarda da Vinci, że: *Ogni pittore dipinge se stesso* – każdy malarz maluje siebie samego (...), obdarzając własnymi cechami świat swoich modeli.

W pracy powołuję się na informację ogłoszoną w angielskim czasopiśmie *The Connoisseur* w 1975 r. Cytuję: *Profesor Jan Kwoczyński, Kierownik Kliniki Kardiologii w Instytucie Kształcenia Podyplomowego w Warszawie, przedstawił nową hipotezę, że zestaw cech fizycznych widocznych u postaci na obrazach El Greca odpowiada zespołowi Marfana, który jest wrodzonym zaburzeniem rozwoju tkanki łącznej* [2].

Czy sztuka El Greca była zjawiskiem tak jednorazowym i niepowtarzalnym właśnie dzięki temu, że była wytworem człowieka, którego geniusz połączył się przypadkiem z określonymi cechami chorobowymi? Być może dlatego nikt nie potrafił ani nie miał wewnętrznej potrzeby go naśladować. Istota jego sztuki wymykała się możliwości pojmowania, zrozumienia i chęci naśladowania.

Słowa kluczowe: zespół Marfana, El Greco, objawy

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