

## DEFORMITY – A MODERN WESTERN PREJUDICE WITH ANCIENT ORIGINS

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### ANCIENT EGYPT

In modern Western society discrimination continues towards those with some physical deformity. This negative stereotype is considered to be a cultural legacy of Ancient Greece, but is it? Cultural attitudes to deformity in a much earlier period differed. In Ancient Egypt deformity was viewed favourably, even as a mark of divine beneficence, elevating those affected from all social strata to important magico-ritualistic positions. As the Egyptologist Warren Dawson remarked, 'The Pharaohs of Egypt and their nobles, from the earliest times, had in their households dwarfs and other misshapen human beings.'<sup>1</sup> This adulation of deformity took many guises. Achondroplastic dwarfs obtained positions of seniority in Ancient Egypt, and in so doing they gathered numerous titles and privileges within Pharaonic society, and often enjoyed magnificent burials. Especially striking is the full-length nude figurine on a granite sarcophagus lid of the dwarf Djeho, son of Petekhous from the XXXth Dynasty (Dyn.) 380–342 BC. The achondroplastic dwarf Seneb (VIth Dyn.) was buried at the royal necropolis in Gizah. Of those who bore significant positions in the Royal households, the dwarf Khemhotpe held the title of 'Keeper of the Royal Wardrobe' and Seneb was known as a 'Prophet of Cheops and Buto'.<sup>2</sup>

Deformity was apparently associated with ritualistic and religious significance. Not only are dwarfs associated with individual cult worship, as in the case of Seneb, but numerous figurines and amulets of dwarfs and misshapen bodies have been found. Deformed individuals also feature in religious and magical texts. In Papyrus Leiden there is a spell to facilitate birth, the so-called 'Spell of the Dwarf'.<sup>3</sup>

Even acquired deformities were no barrier to holding high office in ancient Egypt. On the Stela of Roma (XVIII/XIXth Dyn. 1539–1295 BC) the Royal doorkeeper is depicted with a wasted and shortened leg with an equinus deformity.<sup>4</sup> A Middle Kingdom (Vth Dyn. 2565–2423 BC) official is depicted on the temple of Raneferef at Abu Sir with a prominent hunchback.<sup>5</sup> In Egypt the artist does not attempt to 'beautify' deformity which suggests that there was a prevailing attitude of cultural acceptance of deformity. An extant text reinforces this conclusion. A papyrus in the British Museum containing the teachings of Amenemope instructs, 'Laugh not a blind man, nor tease a dwarf'.<sup>6</sup>

Why then is there so little evidence of prejudice against deformity and disfigurement in Ancient Egypt? The answer to this may lie in the religious beliefs of the Ancient Egyptians. Many of the divine protectors in their pantheon were deformed, e.g. Bes and the protector of the Nile, Hapi. These gods represented a fusion of animist and human forms to create gods and goddesses. As compared to later religions, deformity may not have been viewed as an expression of sin and punishment meted out in consequence. In Ancient Egypt physical deformity may have been received as a positive mark of divinity.

### GREECE AND ROME

The cultural change in attitudes towards deformity came about with the rise of Greek culture and could not have been more opposite. Robert Garland expressed the opinion that our attitudes towards deformity are a product of a particular value system inherited from Classical Greece. Insofar as the extant Greek literature is concerned, e.g. Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Plato's *Laws*, the importance of a sound and hale body is strongly emphasised. Aristotle took this a step further by proposing a law to prevent parents rearing deformed children.<sup>7</sup> In Sparta parents were legally obliged to abandon deformed infants to their death.<sup>8</sup> This negative stereotyping of deformity appears at odds with the enlightenment of classical Greece, and it is difficult to trace the origins of these strongly held views. Although a belief that deformed children were an expression of divine anger is certainly present in early Greek literature, e.g. in the works of Hesiod,<sup>9</sup> there are no surviving artistic representations of deformity for comparison. During this early, or Geometric, Period (1100–700 BC), only painted pottery and small scale sculptures were undertaken. By the seventh century Near Eastern and Egyptian art began to influence local style (Orientalising Period, 725–650 BC), but again it is impossible to gauge any attitude to deformity from the works produced. It is only in Ptolemaic Egypt that the Fayyum portraits start to provide a true depiction of facial features. It is not until the end of the Archaic period (c. 480 BC) that Greek art begins to depict what we now describe as the 'classical' proportions of man.

The work that perhaps best represents the division of endogenous Greek from Near Eastern and North African influences is the *Kritikos Boy* (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> It marks the beginning of the Classical Period and reflects the search for perfection in the human form, with concomitant rejection of deformity and disfigurement. Whether one takes the reclining *Dionysus* from the east pediment of the Parthenon (British Museum), or the *Dying Niobid* (Museo del Terme, Rome), the prevailing artistic attitude is of perfection and symmetry. Where deformity was depicted in Classical Greek art, it is through the medium of mental, rather than physical, anguish; encompassing as it did that most Classical of concepts, pathos. This pathos, with its associated physical beauty, can be strikingly found in such sculptures as the *Dying Gaul* (a Roman copy of a Classical bronze original c. 230 BC from Pergamun, now in the Museo Capitolino, Rome) and the *Barberini Faun* (Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich). So too, the deformity that senescence brings is beautified; one only has to view the *Lacoön Group* (Figure 2) to see how classical sculptors bestowed perfection upon old age, without reference to the reality of time on the physical form.<sup>11</sup> Even in Greek mythology the gods and goddesses are firm of limb and fair of head. The only cripple is the god of metalwork, Hephaestus. Physical curiosities such as dwarfs were only



FIGURE 1  
*Kritikos Boy*. Acropolis Museum, Athens.

tolerated for the amusement of their owners.

As the heirs of Greek culture, values and philosophy, the Roman attitude towards deformity was similar. However, unlike the Greeks, the Romans regarded the birth of a deformed child as portentous. According to Livy, the finding of hermaphroditism was an ill-omen.<sup>12</sup> The Romans also went further than the Greeks in their use of deformed slaves for entertainment. In fact, the demand for deformed slaves was so great that Plutarch reports of a separate agora for their sale.<sup>13</sup> Juvanel often referred to the plight of the decent man in Rome seeking honest employment as akin to a cripple who had lost one hand – this being a literary metaphor for a complete outcast. Plato, whose writings were considered to be a moral template for Christianity, had judged that the physical condition was important for the ascent of the soul. Likewise, Roman authors, such as Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*,<sup>14</sup> acknowledged that the body determined the ‘shape’ of the soul. This belief in the shape of the body determining the quality of the soul is still found in Western culture through the maxim *‘Mens sana in corpore sano’*.

Indeed, the horror of deformity was deeply implanted into Graeco-Roman psyche. One can find expressions of this in their mythology. Hephaestus is said to have fathered a grotesquely deformed child named Erithanios. Confined to a box by Athena, the daughters of Cecrops were instructed to watch over it and never to open it. Disobeying these orders they opened the box and were horrified by

the extent of Erithanios’ deformity. Through fear, and in an attempt to escape, they jumped to their deaths over a cliff. However, a paradox emerges when we read of the descriptions of Hephaestus himself. Although physically deformed (he was lame as a result of being cast out of Olympia by his mother Hera; his fall lasted an entire day, and he eventually landed on the Greek island of Lemnos), Hephaestus was still able to win hearts of beautiful women, including Aphrodite.

Classical art was not an apparition, rather it evolved out of the Greek artists’ palette after the Dark Ages following the collapse of the Mycenaean culture. It embraced and reflected many of the prevailing seminal attitudes towards the body and soul that were scripted in the great literary works of this period. Its legacy found fertile grounds in Roman culture, and much of our Western Classical tradition can be traced back to fifth century BC Greece. Its legacy has a profound effect upon our own modern philosophical, moral and religious development. It also sowed the seeds of intellectual and artistic intolerance towards deformity during the Medieval period and the Renaissance.

#### MEDIEVAL

The triumph of the Huns, Vandals, Goths and other assorted barbarian tribes over the senescent Roman Empire was to be short-lived. By AD 732 the Arabs, under the banner of Islam, had conquered the Mediterranean, North Africa and Spain. The Roman Church broke with the Byzantine East and looked for support in the Germanic North where the Frankish kingdom under the Carolingian dynasty resided. By AD 800 Charlemagne had been crowned emperor by the Pope, and a new, bipolar world emerged; Charlemagne in Aachen and Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad.



FIGURE 2  
*Laocöon Group*. Vatican Museum, Rome.



FIGURE 3  
Gero Crucifix. Cologne Cathedral.

Art became the domain of religion and it was through this new religious desire that deformity once more became a tool of the artists' imagination. The striking Gero Crucifix in Cologne Cathedral (c. 975–1000 AD, Figure 3) is particularly marked by the lifelike agony of the crucified Christ; the bulging body and twisted sinews convey a deep agony into the mind of the viewer. But this physical deformity reflects an underlying spiritual perfection rarely seen again in other Medieval art. It is work that reflects the artist's security, belonging as he did to a Germanic nation that was both culturally and politically dominant during this period.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, the Dark Ages of the Medieval period initiated the association between deformity and sin in Western culture. The corruption of man in the Garden of Eden removed forever in the eyes of Christianity physical salvation. The classical proportions and beauty of man were incompatible with the new doctrine of an omnipotent God. In effect, the worship of man's beauty represented his fall from divinity.

The association of deformity and damnation in the *Last Judgement* (c. 1130), on the west tympanum of Autun Cathedral, also expressed another, newer fear. Unlike the Graeco-Roman cultures that were perhaps more sympathetic to the 'noble savage,' this new, religiously polarised world became intolerant of differences, be they racial or religious. In the Christian kingdom fears of Islam manifested in a fear of all things foreign; a view that was to be entrenched within Christian dogma by portraying those races as pagan. On a portion of the tympanum of Ste. Madeleine at Vézelay, one can still view bas-reliefs of deformed, pig-snouted Ethiopians. This association between deformity, sin and xenophobia was subsequently exaggerated during the Gothic Period. Although a term, in its strictest

sense, only applicable to architecture it also came to epitomise a new realism in artistic style. Lorenzo Maitani's *The Last Judgement* from the façade of Orvieto Cathedral (c. 1320), is a wonderful example of just this type of change. The Gothic style of sculpture became equated with an almost 'deformed' realism. Through the *Roettgen Pietà* (fourteenth century, Figure 4) we are acquainted once again with the now familiar depiction of the crucified Christ. But now realism is the vehicle of expression. This Christ is emaciated, blood-encrusted, draped over the arms of an expressionless, androgynous Mary, like a mannequin.

By the Late Gothic, Early Renaissance art continued to mirror the cultural belief that deformity was an expression of spiritual sin. The Dutch artist Hieronymous Bosch provides the most compelling evidence for this. *The Garden of Delight* (c. 1510–5) is a moral triptych expressing didactic lessons on sin and damnation. No one who has seen this picture in the Museo del Prado in Madrid can be left in any doubt as to the meaning of the human chimeras and deformed persons depicted in the right panel.<sup>16</sup> Deformity is once again used as an artistic representation of original sin.

#### THE RENAISSANCE TO TODAY

The association between deformity and sin is strikingly reversed in the Early Renaissance, especially among the Italian artists. In Luca Signorelli's *The Damned Cast from Hell* (1500, in Fresco S. Brizio Chapel, Oriveto Cathedral) the condemned humanity are now shown in proportioned Classical style. This contrasts with a far more honest realism *per se*. The rhinophyma of an elderly gentleman is delightfully depicted in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *An old man and his grandson* (Musée du Louvre, Paris). In Piero Di Cosimo's *The discovery of honey* (c. 1499, Worchester Art Museum, Massachusetts) the short, chubby boy on the donkey has



FIGURE 4  
*Roettgen Pietà*. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn.

the facies of Down's syndrome. This new openness may have been an artistic expression of the esoteric Neo-Platonic doctrine that had become prevalent within educated society. However, the complexity of this association makes the evaluation difficult. Unfortunately, the trend for sympathetic depictions of deformity in art was to be transitory. The High Renaissance returned to the 'Classical' depiction of human form found in the works of Michaelangelo, Titian, Raphael, Bramante, Giorgione and Leonardo de Vinci. The relatively unknown period between High Renaissance and Baroque, often but misleadingly termed the Late Renaissance, was by all accounts more of a *mêlée* of various styles, dominant amongst which was mannerism. During this period deformity was used as an allegorical instrument to depict madness, e.g. in Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegory of Venus* (1546, National Gallery, London).<sup>17</sup> By the end of the Renaissance, art had equated deformity with sin, madness and physical corruption. Although there had been some sympathetic depictions of deformity, the prejudicial legacy of Classical Greece had been preserved.

During the Renaissance various moral questions regarding the place of deformity in society were raised in the religious literature. In *De Baptizandis Monstris*,<sup>18</sup> Roman Catholic moral theology considered the question of what constituted humanness, and thus who was entitled to the sacraments. Judeo-Christian moral theology had also long debated the meaning of '*imago Die et hominis*'.<sup>15</sup> This latter exposition was to lead directly to physiognomy, a 'science' that had been widely practiced since Classical times. Kaspar Lavator's *Essays on Physiognomy*, much admired by Goethe, is considered seminal in this field. His 'theorem' of deformity, echoing classical authors, concluded: 'The morally worst, the most deformed'.<sup>20</sup> This was an attitude towards deformity that many scholars have argued is inherent in Biblical teachings. Harry Yeide Jr suggests that the Bible 'supports prejudice against deformity, justified by a concern for ritual purity and/or a belief that deformity is a result of divine wrath'.<sup>21</sup> One can find an interesting corollary of this in ancient Greek and Roman priesthoods. Both required the absence of physical blemish to hold religious posts.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps then, with this religious and artistic legacy, it is unsurprising that in concepts of Western anthropocentricity there has been more concern with the design of the body viz. it being a 'living organism'.<sup>23</sup> Aestheticism has been subjugated to design.

Perhaps the most disturbing legacy of this religious and cultural intolerance towards deformity in the modern period is to be found in the application of eugenics; or what is often, and inappropriately, termed Social Darwinism. The abuse of this theory by the Third Reich led to countless deaths because the individual was physically deformed and/or suffered mental illness. The Nazi project was not Social Darwinism but a vision of absolute control over the evolutionary procedure of humans. Such deformed individuals in Nazi society were deemed, as Robert Lifton put it, 'life unworthy of life'.<sup>24</sup> Death was administered by inhalation of carbon monoxide, mostly under the auspices of doctors. Although most killings were of mentally incapacitated individuals, those who were unable to work due to physical deformity were also exterminated. It was a vision of homogenous utopia that was to manifest in the reality of genocide. Massive steps were also taken by Nazis to purge their socialist society of 'degenerate' art. Prior to

the rise of the National Socialism, Germany had enjoyed a wide-ranging, expressive and challenging reputation as a centre for modern art. Concepts of deformity had been sympathetically and sensitively integrated into artistic conventions. But this was contrary to Nazi ideology. In 1937 the National Socialists staged what is probably the most virulent attack against modern art in their *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition. By taking works of 'degenerate' art by such artists as Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Amedeo Modigliani, and juxtaposing them with photographs of facial deformities, the Nazis coerced a compliant population into equating modern art with something that was intrinsically flawed. Deformity once again became 'unhealthy'. Where avant-garde art could have become the vehicle of tolerant expressions of deformity, it instead became the whipping-horse of Nazi distrust and eugenic ideals.<sup>25</sup>

If modern art can be extended today to include magazines and advertisements, then they provide a still disquieting reflection of society's attitudes to deformity. As McGrouther noted, 'Image and beauty are marketing tools...[for] the desired "look", diminishing the value of individuals who deviate from the face or form of the moment'.<sup>26</sup> This is not an attitude that can be corrected overnight. No amount of political or lobbying willpower can alter such an inherent cultural reaction to deformity and disfigurement. Rather, it will be a gradual process that must start at the very beginning of life through education and acceptance of differences.

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