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ICONODIAGNOSIS in Vienna Art Museum (Austria): an example of ISI inventory mission and an useful museal practice for doctors

Charlier Philippe[1,2], *Corinne Dechelette*[1,2,3], *Antonio Perciaccante*[1,2,4]

[1] ISI, International Society of Iconodiagnosis, Paris, France - ph_charlier@yahoo.fr

[2] Laboratoire anthropologie, archéologie, biologie (LAAB), UVSQ/Paris-Saclay, 2, avenue de la Source-de-la-Bièvre, 78180 Montigny-le-Bretonneux, France

[3] PEAUrigami®, La Peau Autrement, Toulouse, France

[4] Department of Medicine, Azienda Sanitaria Universitaria Giuliano Isontina, "San Giovanni di Dio" Hospital, Gorizia, Italy

BACKGROUND

ISI, International Society of Iconodiagnosis, is an international learned society dedicated to advancing the field of iconodiagnosis, which involves the retrospective medical analysis of artworks to identify clinical signs suggestive of medical disorders and diseases (Charlier, 2023). Iconodiagnosis includes not only dermatology/skin (Déchelette, 2023), but all medical specialties and organs (Grau, 2022). Furthermore, it offers a unique and engaging approach to medical education and skill enhancement. While famous paintings have been extensively studied, the learned society (ISI) firmly believes that every museum worldwide, whether local or national, ouses lesser-known or even unknown artworks depicting various visible diseases allowing iconodiagnosis.

The members of ISI have chosen the Vienna Art Museum (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Austria) to carry out an iconodiagnosis inventory test. During the visit of the museum,

by looking closely at the museum's works of art, ISI wanted to find out how many paintings and sculptures from the permanent collection showed iconodiagnosis features across all medical specialties.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

One of the members of the learned society (ISI) carefully examined each work of art presented in the permanent exhibition of the Vienna Art Museum (sculptures, paintings, engravings, other art objects). After this first stage of diagnosis by direct examination, a second stage of counter-diagnosis was carried out on photography by other members of the learned society (ISI). They all focused on skin defaults and potential diseases lesions.

RESULTS

5 iconodiagnosis and 1 pseudo-diagnosis have been identified among the permanent collection on paintings and sculptures (Figure 1, Table 1). The pseudo-diagnosis corresponds to craniofacial dysmorphia in an icon. As this anatomical anomaly is found on all the people represented on this icon, we can conclude that it is clearly due to the painter's style. It would have been more difficult to conclude with just one single person representation. Moreover, it is well known that icons have a transcendental role and do not represent real people. This confirms the importance of always considering the stylistic aspects of a painting during the iconodiagnosis process to avoid mistakes and misinterpretation.

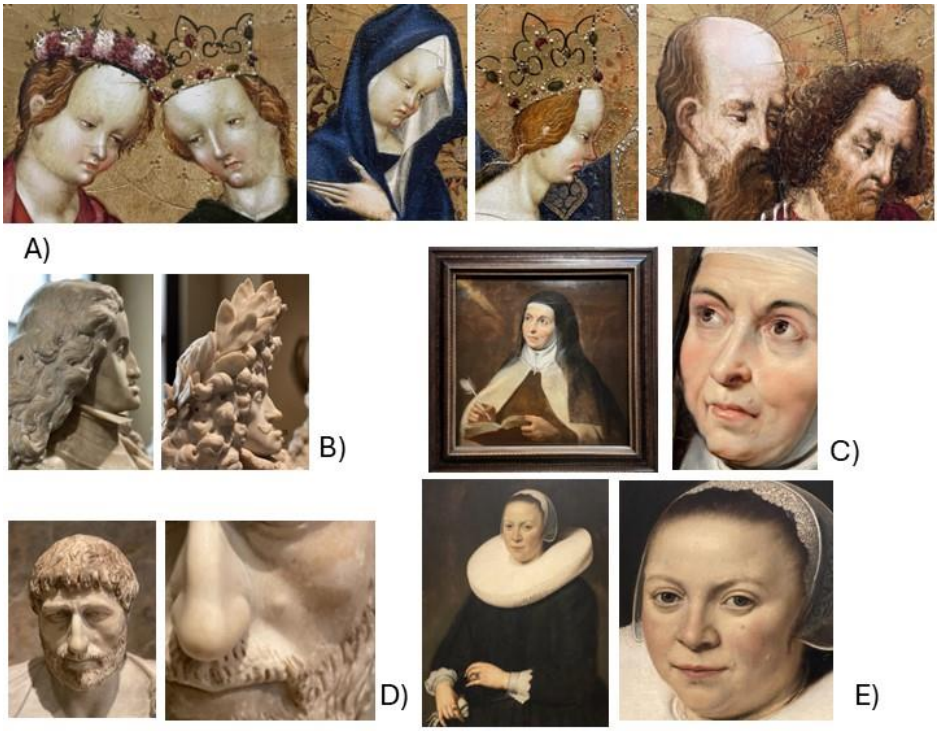

Figure 1. Works of art selected by ISI members in the permanent collection of the Vienna Art Museum

Table 1. Legends of the works of art selected by ISI members in the permanent collection of the Vienna Art Museum

References	Artists	Legends – Date	ICONODIAGNOSIS
A)	A probably french itinerant painter in Central Europe	Annunciation of the virgin and Mystic marriage of Saint Catherine (1410 – 1430)- Icone	Pseudo-diagnosis : Craniofacial dysmorphia is clearly in the painter's style
B)	Unknown	The famous Habsburg jaw Statue	Huge mandibular prognathia of familiar and endogamic origin
C)	Peter Paul Rubens	St Teresa of Avila - around 1615 Oil on canvas	Dermal naevus
D)	Unknown	Bartiger Man – 3rd century AD	Left paranasal nodular lesion : dermal naevus
E)	Dirck Santvoort	Portrait of a couple -1639 Oil on canvas	Mole & dermal naevus

DISCUSSION

The permanent collection of the Vienna Art Museum (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Austria) comprises 800 paintings. According to this test, only 3 paintings allowed an iconodiagnosis, i.e. 0.4% of the permanent pictorial collection. 3 statues of the permanent collection have been identified with cutaneous defaults. We have to keep in mind that the proportion of works of art the museums accessible to the public through the permanent collection is a small part of the content of the museums. In a previous collaboration with a french museum, the access to the museum's reserve allowed us to identify 4 iconodiagnosis cases (Hillion, 2024). So, it will be necessary to collaborate with the museum curator team to gain access to the museum's reserves and take advantage of their extensive knowledge of their museum and their expertise in art history to support the iconodiagnosis with written information (museum archives).

CONCLUSION

This test demonstrates that there are still unknown paintings - not yet referenced in the iconodiagnosis publications - to be analyzed by boards of experts in dermatology and internal medicine. This first test was conclusive and validated the idea of duplicating this iconodiagnosis inventory test in other well-known or smaller museums at the level of the permanent collection but in order to be exhaustive, we need to have access to the museum's reserve

Our ultimate goal is to set up the ISI Iconodiagnosis Database including all the iconodiagnosis cases listed in the international museums. For that, we invite all the doctors to join the learned society (ISI) to contribute to this international, medical and artistic inventory especially since the regular practice of iconodiagnosis may be useful for young doctors in order to develop their visual acuity, ekphrasis and semiology (Dalia, 2020).

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