

## Letters to the Editor

### The hands of the Halberdier

Sirs,

An enduring topic in art history is the crossroads between art and science and it is from this perspective that the portrait of "Young Halberdier" will be considered. This particular crossroads between a Renaissance painting and Medicine was illustrated in 2003 on the front cover of volume 290 of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

In the same issue, on page 161, there is a commentary on the painting, concentrating on the life of the painter, Jacopo Carucci, known as Pontormo (1494-1556), in which there is a description of the facial expression of a defiant, beautifully dressed young man, exemplifying the resistance of Florentines to foreign invaders at the time. The organic pathology of the young man was, however, omitted from the discussion.

The painting, dated 1528-30 was the topic of academic disputation regarding the identity of the young man. Perhaps his medical condition, recognisable but not mentioned in previous commentaries, could throw light on a disease which was current and on the identity of the sufferer.

The left hand of the young man is resting beside a sword with the last four fingers visible. It is possible to recognise a deformity of the proximal interphalangeal joints (PIP): swelling in a position of flexion, with the distal interphalangeal joint (DIP) fully extended. Also visible is the depressed metacarpo-phalangeal joints (knuckles), contrasted with the flexion of the PIP joints. This rather unnatural and painful position would correspond to a rheumatoid condition, documenting the existence of this juvenile form of rheumatoid arthritis in the early 16th century.

Also of interest is the adjunct position of the third and fourth fingers, almost a syndactyly (finger fusion) position and a rather wider separation of the other two neighbouring fingers. This rather specific hand configuration is quite likely to assist in the identification of the portrayed person, namely by observing such hands in images depicted in years to come. (Reproduced with permission from the collection of The Getty Museum California).

G.M. WEISZ<sup>1</sup>, MD, BA, MA, FRACS (Ortho).

W.R. ALBURY<sup>2</sup>, BA, PhD.

<sup>1</sup>*School of History and Philosophy, University of New South Wales, Sydney;*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Humanities, University of New England, Armidale, Australia.*

E-mail: gmweisz@aol.com



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