

Sexuality of the elder individual presented on paintings

*A sexualidade de uma pessoa idosa apresentada em
pinturas*

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ABSTRACT: The sexuality of the elder has a history of negligence, seen as a taboo, both by society and by the individual himself, contributing to maintain the oppressive cultural standards related to the theme of sexuality related to aging. In the great majority of paintings, the elder individual is presented as an asexual character. The representation of the elder in paintings is usually shown in the following contexts: domestic (“St Joseph, The carpenter” – George de La Tour, 1642; “The Paralytic” – Jean Baptiste Greuze, 1763) and in the decadence of health (“Old man in sorrow” – Van Gogh, 1890; “The old guitarist” – Picasso, 1903). On the few paintings that retract the sexuality of the elder, we can see a clear prominence of the male gender (“Susana and the elders” – Artemisia Gentileschi, 1610; “Elderly nude in the sun” – Mariano Fortuny, 1871). Sexuality of the elder woman is little referred to, being predominantly portrayed in her domestic role. When sexuality is shown it is in the context of prostitution, as in the work “The Salon I”, of Otto Dix, 1921. Between painters of the 20th century, there are self portraits in which artists of both genders paint themselves naked in advanced age, showing a tendency in changing the current paradigm: “Painter working, Reflection” – Lucian Freud, 1993 that portrayed himself at the age of 70; and “Self Portrait” – Alice Neel, 1980, at the age of 80.

Keywords: Sexuality; Elder; Painting.

RESUMO: *A sexualidade da pessoa idosa tem uma história de negligência, vista como um tabu, tanto pela sociedade quanto pelo próprio indivíduo, contribuindo para manter os padrões culturais de opressão relacionadas ao tema da sexualidade relacionada ao envelhecimento. Na grande maioria das pinturas, o indivíduo mais velho é apresentado como um personagem assexual. A representação da pessoa idosa em pinturas é geralmente mostrada nos seguintes contextos: doméstico (“St Joseph, carpinteiro” - George de la Tour, 1642 ; “O Paralítico” - Jean Baptiste Greuze, 1763) e na decadência da saúde (“Velho na tristeza” - Van Gogh, 1890; “O velho guitarrista” – Picasso, 1903). Nas poucas pinturas que expõem a sexualidade do idoso, podemos ver uma clara predominância do sexo masculino (“Susana e os anciãos” - Artemisia Gentileschi, 1610; “Idoso nu ao sol” - Mariano Fortuny, 1871). A sexualidade da mulher mais velha é pouco referida, sendo a mulher predominantemente retratada em seu papel doméstico. Quando a sexualidade é mostrada é no contexto da prostituição, como na obra “O Salão I”, de Otto Dix, 1921. Entre os pintores do século 20, há autoretratos em que os artistas de ambos os sexos se pintam nus em idade avançada, mostrando uma tendência na mudança do paradigma atual: “Pintor de trabalho, Reflexão” - Lucian Freud, 1993, que retratou a si mesmo com a idade de 70 anos; e “Auto-retrato” - Alice Neel, 1980, aos 80 anos de idade.*

Palavras-chave: *Sexualidade; Idosos; Pintura.*

Introduction

Humanities are an important components on the formation of the health practitioners, mainly when considered in context of biopsicossocial medicine. Contemplation of a work of art, such as a painting, widens vision and human thinking for what is beyond what is demonstrated, an essential fact for quality health assistance.

During a life cycle, expectations and beliefs about behaviors play an orientation role on the actions of people on others and on themselves. Since infancy, they develop expectations about what happens during a normal and expected life cycle, including those that old age brings different physical, psychological and social deficits. These

learnings are taken from contact with symbols, exemplified by a variety of arts, which promote learning by behavioral habits observed by individuals in different cultures, times and ages.

This way, being the artistic language full of different meanings, it is possible to trace interpretations of the image of the elder sexuality shown in imagery as a reflex of the collective imagination, bringing reflexions about the prejudices that accompany human aging. Under an ideology that emphasizes the losses of aging, these prejudices have historically generated stagnation of the sexual activities, with consequent compromise of quality of life of individuals with advanced age.

The negative aspects rooted in the image of advanced age are not restricted to non-elders since the elders themselves prejudice this stage of life, in a proportion almost identical to the rest of society: 88% of elders and 90% of non elders associate advanced age with degrading aspects.

It is important to emphasize that sexual life exists and remains alive until advanced age. What changes is the frequency of desires and the rhythm of intercours. Nevertheless, sexuality of elders is still a theme that is little discussed and very stereotyped. The elder is seen as an asexual being under the eyes of society, on both micro and macro-social planes, involving family, small groups and community. Sexuality is a human characteristic that is not lost with time, but is drawn, according to the history of the living body in its existence (Vicente, 2005). Innumerable myths, social attitudes and negative stereotypes are attributed to the elders but the most intense are those related to sexuality, making difficult any manifestation of this area in their lives (Covey, 1989).

This current research had the objective, using the plurisignificance of the artistic language, to present the representations of the elder in paintings, tracing interpretations regarding the sociocultural image of their sexuality. This study will contribute to the analysis of the content of symbolic media, helping to understand the values of a determined social-cultural context and reflecting the traditional conceptions that attributes only losses to aging.

Method

For the making of this study, initially an exploratory method was used with research of books and electronic archives of art and of gerontology. The paintings found were classified and interpreted in accordance to the main social paradigms of aging.

It must be noted that pictorial images that represent the old subject do not fit the current concept of old individual proposed by the World Health Organization that defines one older than 60 years of age in developing countries and 65 years in the developed ones. This difference arises from the lower life expectancy at the time of the classics and its significant increase in current times.

At different periods, few images were found depicting the elder and his sexuality, possibly due to devaluation of the individual in this period of life, when the aesthetic beauty standard is considered lost. Besides this, the taboo of sexuality of the elder is associated with strong influence of religion, that turns the image of the elder associated to the angelical.

Results and discussion

The images found were classified in three contexts

- The elder in the domestic context: the elder grandparent/the sick elder;
- The elder in the decadence of old age;
- Sexuality of the elder: the pervert old man/the abandoned old woman.

The elder in the domestic context

The works depicting the old subject in the domestic context lead to the idea of aging associated to asexuality, showing an angelical form to the old person, with wisdom and fragility.

Old age and wisdom are concepts strongly associated. Wisdom depends on knowledge derived from life experiences, that works as a bond between tradition and

group values, helping with advices, the resolve important questions related to pragmatic life. Wisdom permits an optimal capacity of judgement and counseling of controverted and important themes of human condition, combining intelligence and virtue (Baltes, 1993).

As for the fragile elder, it is known that he is dependent on other people. The care given from informal groups of health made up by children, relatives and friends, constitute important source of support for the elder. However, in the majority of the time, the caretakers are only one and in general, care is given by old spouses, half aged daughters and widows (Kane & Kane, 1990). Therefore it is important for the elder to maintain interaction with the family, with special attention to the relation with the young, the children and other elders, how family members relate to them, showing patterns of acceptance, valuation and proximity. Nowadays, multigenerational homes do not necessarily assure affective care to the elders due to changes in the configuration of families, due to population aging, fewer number of births and the insertion of women in workforce. These changes lead to difficulties in giving care and protection to the growing elder population.

The work “St Joseph, the carpenter”, of George de La Tour (1642), (Figure 1), brings an angelical representation of the elder, in the context of his relation to his granddaughter. It is a baroque representation, in which the technique of the dark-bright favored by the expression of “grandfatherhood” showing the admiration on the face on the granddaughter and serenity in the face of the aged grandfather. On the other side, it could be suggested a favoring of the representation of a young face, that is much better lighted in detriment of the face that shows white hair, baldness and wrinkles.

The paralytic, by Jean-Baptist Greuze (Figure 2), shows a sick elder, sheltered by his family, probably as a picture of an elder individual loved by his descendents, harvesting the fruits of his dedication and love to them. On the other side, it brings the paradigm of asexuality translated by the image of a sick individual, bedridden and incapable.

The elder in the decadence of old age

Old age is a social construction permeated with prejudice and limitations, commonly associated to loss of vitality, abandon, depression and end of life. This paradigm strengthens the taboo of asexuality, by exposing the image of an old individual to loss of independence and body decadence, that is not attractive anymore. The elder, destituted of his important place as a vital and productive individual, put away from society, summed with body decadence and loss of vital functions as a prediction of death, sees himself limited in the possibility of intervention over his habitat, retiring to a world of depression.

The isolation to which elders are submitted picture them as people far away from the social world of the adults since they do not make decisions and do not bring solutions. People learn since infancy that it is normal and expected that, by the occasion of physical and psychological decadence that characterizes the final third of existence, individuals retire themselves, in order to give place to the younger and better equipped for social life. This theory (disengagement theory) assumes that the loss of roles and status, caused by the distancing, determined depression, feelings of inferiority, dependence and social misfit in elders (Passuth & Bengston, 1988).

Capodieci (2000) shows that the conturbed clinical state of elders as reflex of an expectancy of a life of dependency, feeling of impotence and loneliness generating serious sexual problems:

... about 50% of elders suffer from anxiety disorders, depression – which many times, is not perceived by family and caregivers, seen as a natural characteristic of aging – or of psychosomatic syndromes and more than 25% have severe psychiatric pathologies (Capodieci, 2000, p. 25).

Van Gogh, in his work “Old man in sorrow” (1890) (Figure 3) represents his depression through the picture of an old man, associating the image of the elder to feelings of sadness and loss of perspective. One can infer a confirmation of this relation when Van Gogh uses blue, the color of melancholy, to dress the Old man in sorrow.

This relation is also present in Picasso, which in his blue phase paints the work “The old guitarist” (1903) (Figure 4). This work strengthens the idea of asexuality by

depicting comorbidities associated to and acquired by the process of aging: blindness, depression, fragility of the elder (shown by the verticalization of the work, highlighting the structural deformities of the aged body).

Sexuality of the elder

It is in the sociocultural poles of male and female, a true dichotomy inherited historically, that sustain the great psychological confrontations of the living of sexuality on the third age. For women, dominating feelings, emotions and affections, that relegate them the roles of housewives, wives, mothers and grandmothers dedicated exclusively to the family and without any erotic capacity; for men, the dogmatic and moral legitimacy for exercising sexuality and erotic expression, determining, and elder also endowed with sexual powers, with a new situation of psycho-physical debilitation. This way these prejudices, added to the physiologic changes and losses involved with aging, can have as consequence loneliness, affecting directly self-esteem, the perception over the own body and own life, and generating common psychological disturbances in this age group, specially in relation to sexuality.

The aging of the global population seen in the last years, brings new meanings for the relations between elders and people of other social groups. In spite of this, the Brazilian elder continues to suffer cultural repressions inherited from an European culture that impels an individual to act according to his age group. It is in this social-cultural context that sexuality in elders arises as something inadequate, based on a stereotype of asexual aging, branding the men as impotent and the women deprived of physical attributes. From this idea, men and women feel incapable of exercising their sexuality (Santos & Nascimento, 2001).

This way, the sexual act remains as a property of the younger, aesthetically and socially included, despite being sexual development a human necessity, independent of the age group the individual belongs to, since desire of satisfaction, pleasure and love does not end with age (Almeida & Lourenço, 2008)..

According to Capodieci (2000), a true culture of senility is created, offering the elder just two possible forms of living his sexuality: one based in exclusion, more associated to inefficiency than infertility; and another in denial, in which social

acceptance of the elder is tied to the false identification of himself to the young and their prestigious sexual potentiality. For the author, no intermediate sexual modality is offered to the elder, that can take in consideration the physical and psychosocial characteristics of each individual.

The depiction of sexuality of the elder shown in the painting is permeated with social prejudice, although wellness and satisfaction in old age are associated to maintenance of relationships, especially with people of their own generation (George, 1990). In spite of this, rarely are interactions between elders shown in paintings and even couples do not interact, acting in parallel each in their own self, which associated to the lack of episodes of adult interaction, gives a clear idea of the distancing and lack of perspectives in this phase of life.

The work “Susana and the elders”, of Artemisia Gentileschi (1610) (Figure 5) shows the sexual desire exacerbated in the male subject, in the same time it depicts a preference for the young body, in detraction to the aged female body.

The work “The salon I”, of Otto Dix (1921) (Figure 6) strengthens this paradigm of devaluation of the older woman, depicting body deformation and sexuality of the old woman dissociated from pleasure in a context of prostitution and social abandon.

By the other side, it is possible to find in “Old man in the sun”, of Mariano Fortunate (1871) (Figure 7) a greater acceptance of the old male body, showing the face of an elder that expresses pleasure. Although there exists representation of deformities of the elder, sexuality is present showing that deformity and sexuality do not annihilate each other.

With aging, physiology of female sexuality is marked by menopause, which causes the woman to recognize herself in a new phase of her life, involving perceptions of her own body and sexuality that may arise either the search for regaining youth, promoting social inclusion, as well as conscience of the body modifications with aging and the search for beauty in the transformations (San Lucas, 2008).

Capodieci (2000) reinforces the fact that this phase is permeated with beliefs related to the sexuality of the woman, as myths of menopause, in which it would imply a cessation of sexual life and among others, of the sleazy elder, in which only the old man and not the woman, thinks of sex, obfuscating the fact that women present

conditions of having an orgasm until an advanced age while compared to men, whose sexual potential slowly decreases.

The myths described end up favoring the loss of sexual desire, depression, presence of psychiatric problems as well as the prejudice experimented and/or assimilated by the elder. This way, the essential exercise of sexuality by the elder woman cannot have an obstacle characterized by the influence of a perception of sexuality, or even of her own body, adjusted by the social denial of her sexual or even erotic capacity, even less by the aesthetic ideal of youth, that beautify the young and uglify the old, in a way that the physiologic changes typical of aging can be seen as pathologic.

As to the male gender, there is a worry of the man with his own sexuality even before entering old age. This is because the entire organism suffers transformations as time passes by, visibly detected by reduction in physical vigor, lost of elasticity of tissues and in the reduction of muscular strength. The man no more sees himself as a robust youth with high sexual capacity. It is important to emphasize in a specific manner the changes observed in the sexuality of males with aging, mainly because by not presenting sexual organs with the same performance seen in youth, the lack of knowledge of these modifications will culminate, generally, with the diffusion of wrong interpretations or even stereotypes of the elder male, as an impotent being or in the eminence of an irreversible loss of a sexually active life.

Nevertheless, aging in its physiologic form, does not hinder to the male elder the right to exercise his sexuality in a total and satisfactory manner. The changes that affect his sexuality, implying the need for intensified stimulation, end up making possible more lengthy and affectionate love encounters, making the communication with the other and with the world, through the sexual intercourse, even more intimate and pleasurable. On the other hand, such modifications may have the opposite effect, when the male elder, in his need to obtain ejaculation and erection through prolonged and continuous tactile and physical stimulation in order to counter desintumescence, ends up living his sexuality in an anxious way, which can lead to loss of erection.

Between painters of the 20th century, there are self-portraits in which artists of both sexes paint themselves nude in advanced age, showing a greater tendency to changing the current paradigm: "Painter working", reflection of Lucian Freud 1993

(1922) depicted himself at the age of 70; and “Self-portrait”, of Alice Neel, 1980 (1900-1984) at the age of 80.

As we think about old age, we have to consider that it is one of the possibilities of human condition. There is life in old age as in any other period of existence. The narcissistic loss installed by physical limitations does not mean loss of human condition. What keeps the human being alive is affection, dreams, the presence of someone that will hear him and share with him his life. Sexuality is beyond genital intercourse, and is equivocally understood in the other way around, putting the elder in proximity to the idea of death.

Conclusion

In the opposite direction from individualistic values of current society, the sexuality of the elder seems to be a parameter for the reconstruction of myself from the other, in a way that for satisfaction in sexual terms, both men and women need to constantly relearn to love themselves and the other, in a true reeducational behavior that does not encompass over only sexuality and that may serve for the confrontation of social barriers. Therefore, old age is the period of life that can be transformed in a state of the spirit, if the elder has the wisdom of keeping himself at the same time active in his locality, this is, without competing with the younger ones.

Sexuality of the elder implies in not starting from the losses but from the creative possibilities given by what was lived, suffered and accumulated experiences. The elder should never stop loving but reinvent their love forms. As desire, pleasure and the capacity of expressing affection for the other are not lost as time passes by, the elder may not only enrich but experiment a new sexual life, without fears, shame or prejudice. Only knowledge, including self knowledge, of exercising his strength over self-esteem, may transform the elder in a complete being.

It is absolutely necessary that comprehension of the sexuality of the elder individual beyond the biological limits, not mixing the loss or reduction of physical capacity during old age with the loss of the human capability for loving, desiring and

dreaming, easing the not only the sexual life of the elder but also improving his quality of life. In conclusion, we transcript the words expressed by Capodieci (2000, p141): “love in advanced age is possible in a physical level, doable in an emotional level and useful and important for the defense of the physical and psychic well being of the person”.

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Fig.1. *St. Joseph, the carpenter* – George de La Tour (1642)



Fig.2. *The paralytic* - Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1763)

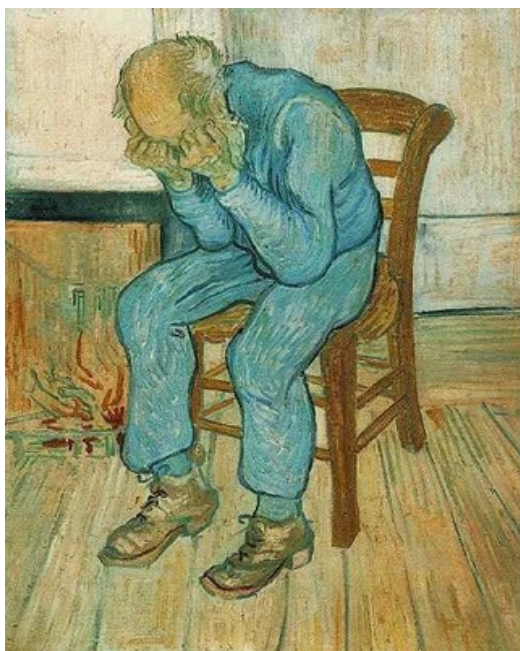


Fig.3. *Old man in sorrow* - Van Gogh (1890)



Fig. 4. *The old guitarist* – Pablo Picasso (1903)



Fig. 5. *Susana and the elders* – Artemisia Gentileschi (1610)



Fig. 6. *The salon I* – Otto Dix (1921)



Fig. 7. *Old man in the sun* – Mariano Fortuni (1871)