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# 8

## ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF GOITRE IN EARLY MODERN ART IN ITALY

*Danielle Carrabino*

### Introduction

An Italian proverb states that ‘he who is born with a weak intellect and a goitre can never be cured’.<sup>1</sup> This statement offers a window into common perceptions about goitre and its association with low intelligence at a time when its cause and cure were unknown. According to the ancient humoral theory of medicine, goitre was defined as a cold abscess (*apostema frigidum*) in the neck caused by an accumulation of phlegm, for which there were several remedies but no definitive cure.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes accompanied by cretinism, which stunts physical and cognitive development, goitre was described in ancient and early modern texts alike as especially prominent, or ‘endemic’, among the low, labouring class living in the mountainous regions of Italy. Figures with goitre also appear frequently in art from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and have sparked great interest among endocrinologists, historians of science, medical professionals, and, in a few instances, historians of art. Long before its causes were known, goitre may have carried culturally coded meanings that would have been understood by contemporary viewers but have been lost to most modern viewers. It is for this reason that my main focus is on early modern perceptions of goitre, without making the assumption that the condition was understood then in the same way as it is now.

Today, we know that goitre is a pathology of the thyroid gland that causes swelling in the neck due to the lack of iodine, especially in older women. When iodine is present, the thyroid secretes hormones that regulate growth, heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, and metabolism. In areas with little iodine, such as mountainous regions, residents are particularly prone to goitre. The thyroid gland, its functions, and its pathologies were not entirely understood until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when iodine was discovered. The artistic representation of an infirmity informs us about how it was perceived before its cause was known.

Modern scientific publications on the representation of goitre in art have contributed significantly to the literature on this subject by compiling a growing list of the occurrences of goitre observed in art, perceived or actual. Beginning with *The History and Iconography of Endemic Goitre and Cretinism* (1971) by Swiss surgeon Franz Merke, medical professionals became interested in tracing goitre in works of art.<sup>3</sup> In this comprehensive study, Merke argued that goitre appeared in art due to five ‘artistic intentions’: to create revulsion, mock, commiserate, document endemic regions, or ‘give anecdotal verisimilitude to genre scenes’.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, Carol Z. Clark and physician Orlo H. Clark provided an updated version of Merke’s study. Containing over 200 paintings, their book *The Remarkables: Endocrine Abnormalities in Art* (2011) differentiates between ‘the goitre beautiful’ and ‘the goitre grotesque’.<sup>5</sup> Articles published in medical journals have also identified numerous works of art in which figures with goitre are purportedly present. Unfortunately, their diagnoses disregard the historical contexts in which images were created, leaving the reader wondering why such figures were depicted.

The present study examines early modern texts alongside a selected group of works of art containing figures with goitre within the contexts of humoral definitions of goitre as well as other cultural and historic contexts in which they were created. Rather than attempting the impossible and subjective task of accounting for reputed instances of goitre in art, as in previous studies, I will focus on works created in areas of Italy in which contemporaries recorded that goitre was endemic. Texts by artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci will be considered alongside other written sources, including theoretical writings on beauty. Close analysis of the sculptures at the Sacro Monte of Varallo, Caravaggio’s *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*, Neapolitan *presepi*, and Ribera’s prints will expand on Merke’s categories to demonstrate that the representation of goitre in this period was varied and complex. In some cases, as seen in the examples from the Alpine area of Varallo, goitre signalled low intelligence, animal-like nature, moral corruption, and poverty associated at the time with mountain-dwellers, eliciting repulsion and mockery. However, these same figures were also viewed with empathy and performed moralizing roles in the scenes represented. In other examples, such as in Caravaggio’s painting and *presepi* created near the mountainous areas around Naples, figures with goitre carried more positive associations, such as humility and piety, evoking responses of empathy and wonder in the viewer. These individual examples illustrate how goitre carried different meanings in accordance with the function of the work. These figures share a common role of adding to the sentiment and significance of the works of art in which they appear.

### Ancient and early modern texts

Before turning to specific examples of representations of goitre, it is useful to note how this condition was described in early modern medical literature, and in the ancient texts on which they relied. Hippocrates’s *Epidemics* (400 BCE) provides one of the earliest textual descriptions of swelling of the neck.<sup>6</sup> According to this and later texts, goitre was thought to be caused by drinking snow water in mountainous

areas. In his treatise, *Airs, Waters, Places*, Hippocrates defined endemic disease as particular to a certain place, whereas epidemic diseases did not have locally specific causes. Hippocrates also claimed that endemic diseases were due to both the drinking of local water and a locale's orientation to the winds and the sun.<sup>7</sup> By the sixteenth century, this notion was widely accepted.<sup>8</sup>

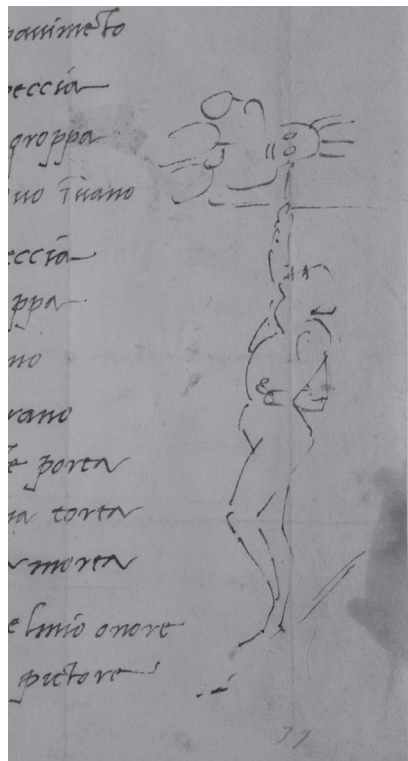
Goitre is endemic to mountainous areas, including the Alpine region, as was mentioned repeatedly in ancient and early modern texts. Pliny the Elder explicitly referred to the harmful waters of the Alps twice in his *Natural History* (c. 77 CE). In the first instance, he wrote, 'Only men and swine are subject to swellings in the throat, which are mostly caused by the noxious quality of the water they drink' (Book XI, 68).<sup>9</sup> He also described the amber necklaces worn in that area by women peasants, both as jewellery and as a remedy for tonsillitis and 'other affections of the pharynx', likely implying goitre (Book xxxvii, 11). In *On Architecture* (Book VIII, 169), Vitruvius, in the first century BCE, warned against construction in the Alps due to the local waters, which cause goitre. That goitre was caused by drinking snow water was a commonly held belief, prompting Juvenal, in *Satires* (XIII, 136), written in 127 CE, to quip, 'Who wonders at a swollen throat in the Alps?'

Ancient writings continued to be revived and elaborated throughout the Renaissance, often repeating and reinforcing certain beliefs concerning goitre. Swiss physician Paracelsus wrote that 'all goitrous persons are more disposed to foolishness than to cleverness'.<sup>10</sup> In his revival of the Vitruvian concept of building on sites that would foster good health, Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti assumed the reader's familiarity with goitre when he stated, 'I shall not dwell here on the goitres and stones for which water may be responsible'.<sup>11</sup> The perception that people afflicted with goitre belonged to the lower classes and lacked intelligence is instead gleaned from *Book of the Courtier* written by Baldassare Castiglione, who mentions 'anyone gazing too intently with dull eyes after the manner of an idiot, or laughing as stupidly as those goitrous mutes in the mountains of Bergamo'.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the Bergamasque *Commedia dell'arte* character Zanni, who is comic and foolish, sometimes wore a mask fitted with a false goitre.<sup>13</sup> In seventeenth-century England, Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (Act III, Scene 3) referred disparagingly to 'mountaineers/Dew-lapp'd like bulls, whose throats had hanging at 'em/Wallets of flesh', while John Evelyn took note of people with 'monstrous gullets, or wens of flesh, growing on their throat' when he travelled through the Alpine Simplon Pass in 1646.<sup>14</sup> These references to goitre, whether fictional or factual, attest to the belief that people with goitre were considered beast-like, monstrous, and lacking intelligence.

While medical writings from the Renaissance did little to expand upon the ancient understanding of goitre, it was during this period that dissections led to a better understanding of the anatomy of the neck. Leonardo da Vinci produced the first accurate drawing of the human thyroid gland around 1500 for his treatise on anatomy (Fol. 3r, MS A), graphically indicating the correct position of the thyroid as well as its shape—two rounded half-moon lobes rather than the shield-like form Galen had proposed.<sup>15</sup> The thyroid gland is one of many parts of

the body, both human and animal, included on the page along with the larynx, tongue, and pharynx, which Leonardo believed were all involved in the production of voice. Next to these anatomical drawings, Leonardo penned a few lines of explanation: ‘These glands are made to fill up the space where the muscles are missing and to keep the trachea away from the clavicle’.<sup>16</sup> Present-day physicians, such as Fernando Vescia and Luigi Basso, have identified Leonardo’s caricatures known as the ‘grotesque heads’ as ‘real goitres’.<sup>17</sup> While it is tempting to relate Leonardo’s anatomical studies to his fanciful drawings, we have no evidence that he recognized any correlation between the thyroid and his caricatures of figures with swollen necks.<sup>18</sup>

Caricature is the vehicle for another source of the definition of goitre in early modern Italy. In a celebrated letter penned by Michelangelo Buonarroti in 1509, the artist writes about the physical labour involved in painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling (Figure 8.1). In words and a quick sketch, he created a vivid image of himself straining to such an extreme extent that he claimed to have developed ‘goitre’



**FIGURE 8.1** Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sonnet to Giovanni da Pistoia and Self-Portrait of the Artist Painting*

Source: Casa Buonarroti, Florence; © Associazione Metamorfosi, Rome

(*gozzo*), 'such as water gives the cats in Lombardy'.<sup>19</sup> The artist thus draws on the popular beliefs that goitre was widespread in the sub-Alpine area of Lombardy and was contracted by drinking the water. Most probably, 'cats' here refers to a common nickname for peasants.<sup>20</sup> This poetic use of goitre is intended to demonstrate the artist's physical deformations, reducing the artist to a lowly, manual labourer.<sup>21</sup> To give visual form to his text, and to ensure great dramatic effect, Michelangelo sketched a caricature of himself to the right of his poem. This drawing contains an unmistakable protrusion in the neck. This is an example of what several modern scientific publications have identified as 'pseudogoitre',<sup>22</sup> which also includes thick necks and prominent Adam's apples.

This caricature and its accompanying poem of similes have erroneously led two physicians to take Michelangelo's self-description too literally, arguing that the artist actually suffered from goitre,<sup>23</sup> although there is no firm evidence that he suffered from this condition.<sup>24</sup> Some authors have even detected goitre in the Sistine fresco of *God Separating Darkness from Light*.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Michelangelo's sonnet and sketch provide a secure example of an early modern artist intentionally and unmistakably representing goitre. Moreover, the sheet provides evidence for the popular conceptions of goitre in early modern Italy as an infirmity that was socially coded and associated with the labouring classes. Finally, it allows us to distinguish between the undeniable representation of goitre in the caricature with a swollen neck (or 'pseudogoitre') in the Sistine Chapel fresco.

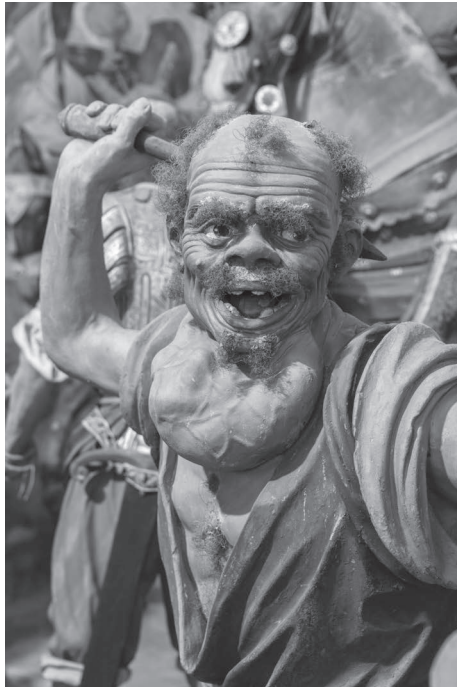
## Figures with goitre in the Sacro Monte of Varallo

Early modern visual evidence of goitre and its association with the labouring class appear in the art at the Sacro Monte of Varallo ('sacred mountain') in the Alpine region of Lombardy. Established in the last decades of the fifteenth century by Franciscan Observant friar Benedetto Caimi as a 'new Jerusalem', this mountainous site was intended to simulate the experience of pilgrimage to the Holy Land.<sup>26</sup> Visitors to this devotional site would be moved to 'imagination, emotional participation and identification'.<sup>27</sup> By the early seventeenth century, pilgrims were able to visit a series of forty-three chapels, each dedicated to individual scenes from the life of Christ, where they were inspired to meditate and pray. Formerly assumed to appeal only to the lower classes, these scenes were intended for audiences of all levels of society, local or otherwise.<sup>28</sup> The Alps stood in for the hilly topography of the original sites just as each chapel was richly decorated and the figures were painted and sculpted with a high degree of naturalism, so that the visitors could imagine themselves witnessing first-hand these historic events.<sup>29</sup> Figures with goitre appear at least twice in the Sacro Monte of Varallo, namely in the chapels dedicated to Christ on the Road to Calvary and the Calvary.<sup>30</sup>

The Sacro Monte chapels were decorated in various campaigns over more than a century. Architects, sculptors, and painters collaborated to re-create each scene in hyper-realistic fashion and on a life-sized scale. Among these artists was Lombard painter and sculptor Gaudenzio Ferrari, who is credited with the overall design

of the Road to Calvary and Calvary scenes.<sup>31</sup> In the frescoed backgrounds and sculpted figures in these two chapels, Ferrari was influenced by Leonardo's 'grotesque' caricatures.<sup>32</sup> In total, more than ninety polychrome terracotta sculptures were adorned with clothing, real hair, and other accessories to make them appear life-like.<sup>33</sup> Often described as *tableaux vivants*, these scenes were not so much frozen as they were activated by visitors. With Franciscan guides to help chart their paths, pilgrims were allowed to wander through the spaces, fully immersing themselves in the scenes.<sup>34</sup> To add to the illusion that this scene is taking place in the viewer's own time and space, the figures with goitre, known to be mountain-dwellers, further stress the immediacy of the experience at Varallo.

Chapel XXXVI depicts Christ on the Road to Calvary with about forty painted terracotta figures (Figure 8.2). Standing to the left of the fallen Christ figure, an executioner with a large goitre tugs at a rope that is attached to a chain around Christ's neck. Kneeling between this figure and Christ is Veronica, with her veil on which Christ's face has just been imprinted. The juxtaposition of these two holy figures and the executioner with goitre is stark. The idealized faces of Christ and Veronica and their rich, detailed drapery are skilfully modelled. They



**FIGURE 8.2** Giovanni Tabacchetti and Giovanni d'Enrico, *Christ on the Road to Calvary*, detail

Source: Santuario del Sacro Monte, Varallo

both appear stoic and inward-looking, in spite of their suffering. By contrast, the executioner is much more crudely sculpted, perhaps even indicating a different hand. His splayed stance with feet akimbo, arms flung open, and mouth agape to reveal a few missing teeth present an outwardly expressive figure that elicits a response of repulsion and fear in the viewer. Moreover, the executioner bares more skin than others in the scene, exposing his arms, legs, and chest. The viewer cannot miss his enormous goitre, which has been carved and painted with a great degree of naturalism, including veins and numerous nodes. His face is tracked by wrinkles and marred by moles and patchy hair. His eyes are wild and may indicate mental deficiency.

Similarly, in Chapel XXXVIII, a figure with goitre participates in the scene of the Crucifixion at Calvary (Figure 8.3). This figure, which has been compared to Leonardo's grotesques, holds the sponge, one of the instruments of the Passion of Christ.<sup>35</sup> This 'sponge-bearer' is positioned at the foot of the cross, holding up to Christ a long rod to which is attached a sponge soaked in vinegar, according to the Gospels of John and Matthew.<sup>36</sup> Similar to the figure in the Road to Calvary scene, the goitre is oversized and impossible to miss. He also shares with the figure in the Road to Calvary a short tunic, open at the chest to bare more skin, open mouth, and lack of hair. Underscoring his debased condition, soldiers surround him. Some are finely dressed in colourful and ornate armour and sit astride equally adorned horses, while the afflicted figure is set apart from the soldiers: he is perhaps associated with



**FIGURE 8.3** Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Crucifixion at Calvary*, detail

Source: Santuario del Sacro Monte, Varallo



the animals, given that one of the horse's heads is positioned extremely close to his face. Like the tormentor in the earlier scene, this figure also interacts directly with Christ to inflict pain, mockery, and suffering.<sup>37</sup> As such, they take on a moralizing role, reminding the viewers to practise kindness unless they should want to be physically marred.

These two figures in the Sacro Monte of Varallo seem to represent the human world, complete with its imperfections, unlike the saints and saviour nearby, who are idealized to correspond with their spiritual roles. Even the soldiers are portrayed as more noble than those whom they direct to inflict torture. Moreover, the deformed features of the executioner suggest that he suffers from cretinism, which resonates with the Christian notion that he knows not what he does.<sup>38</sup> Merke and others have rightly noted that figures with goitre indicated to the viewer that their physical disfiguration was a sign of their inherent evil character.<sup>39</sup> They play the role of the hated and bestial tormentors of Christ. Of course, not all tormenting figures in Varallo had goitre.<sup>40</sup> In these two cases, goitre was perhaps viewed not only as an expression of one's inner character but also as an outward disfigurement of that nature that evoked a response of disgust.

Though the figures with goitre appeared as repulsive and moralizing, they also may have inspired curiosity and wonder.<sup>41</sup> Allie Terry-Fritsch convincingly argues that the 'somaesthetic' experience at the Sacro Monte of Varallo produced a sense of wonder, or 'meraviglia', in pilgrims due in equal parts to the naturalism of the scenes and their artifice.<sup>42</sup> Early visitors to the site often commented on the naturalism of these figures. For example, in 1566 Francesco Sesalli remarked that 'they are so natural as if nature herself and not art had made them'.<sup>43</sup> Artist Federico Zuccari recorded his visit to Varallo in 1604 in his *Il passaggio per Italia* (1608); he noted that the painted and sculpted figures 'seem alive and true to life'<sup>44</sup> but also described the 'artifice of many chapels'.<sup>45</sup> The figures with goitre may have elicited empathy or repulsion in the viewer, but their physical malformations and the naturalistic way in which they were artistically portrayed were also a source of wonder, no matter how common the infirmity.

### Caravaggio's 'crucifixion of Saint Andrew'

Goitre carried somewhat different meanings in art created in Naples, near another mountainous region where it was long known to be endemic. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio painted the *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew* in 1607, in which the saint is depicted during his martyrdom (Figure 8.4). According to the *Golden Legend*, Andrew was martyred in Patras, where he was tied to an X-shaped cross, from which he continued to preach for two days.<sup>46</sup> The weary and aged Andrew occupies most of the canvas, his feet crossed in a subtle X-shape and his lips parted in the act of speaking. Four people have gathered at the foot of the cross to represent the purported thousands who listened to Andrew in the final days of his life. When the crowd pleaded with the Emperor Aegeas to end Andrew's suffering, he issued an order to release him from the cross. However, when the executioner,



**FIGURE 8.4** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*  
Source: The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

here seen on the left, attempted to untie the binding ropes, he suddenly was unable to proceed, leaving Andrew to fulfil his destiny as a Christian martyr. The flash of light from the right side of the canvas indicates the precise moment when the executioner was paralyzed and the last moments of the saint's life.

Caravaggio's painting is rare in its subject matter of depicting this miraculous moment of paralysis and Andrew drawing his final breath: two difficult states to render pictorially.<sup>47</sup> Also curious is the elderly woman with a goitre who stands by herself to the left of the cross and looks up at Andrew, her hands clasped at her waist. She wears seventeenth-century garb, is pushed close to the picture plane, and, like the viewer, bears witness to the scene. She is physically separated from the crowd, and her clothing identifies her as a peasant. Although her goitre is not as heavily caricatured as in the Varallo figures, the lump at her throat is pronounced. X-ray analysis of the painting reveals a *pentimento* precisely in the area of the woman's neck where her hands were originally joined in prayer. Her hands were later lowered and a large goitre was painted in their place.<sup>48</sup> This change indicates that initially, Caravaggio either did not paint the goitre or hid it behind the woman's praying hands so that it would have been decidedly less prominent than in the final composition. As such, the fully exposed goitre indicates a deliberate choice that necessitates further examination.

Scholars have often interpreted the old woman's curious presence in the scene in relation to Andrew's role as the patron saint of neck and throat ailments.<sup>49</sup> In their 1977 comprehensive study of the painting, Ann Tzeuschler Lurie and Denis Mahon described the woman as follows: 'Her enormous goitre unsparingly exposed injects a disturbing note of naturalism into the painting. As a rule, when goitres appear in art they are to be found in depictions from those regions—mostly mountainous—where they are common'.<sup>50</sup> This statement relies on Merke's study, recently published at that time, and has remained uncontested. While there does seem to be a correlation between the appearance of figures with goitre in art created in mountainous areas, the 'rules' governing the appearance of goitre in art are not fixed. Reducing the woman with goitre in Caravaggio's painting to an example of naturalism is to misunderstand the deeper implications of her presence in the scene. Similarly, a physician's diagnosis of the woman in the painting as exhibiting signs of 'metastatic thyroid carcinoma (rather than lymphoma of thyroid or cervical nodes)'<sup>51</sup> is of little use in explaining her role in the painting.

The lack of documents concerning this painting's patronage and original location or function makes it difficult to draw secure conclusions, but the context in which it was painted and the image itself provide important clues. Though she is significantly less threatening than the figures in Varallo, the woman may provide a counterpoint to the saint, and specifically to his preaching. Both have parted lips, but due to her goitre, the woman will not produce the same clear and melodious sound as the saint beside her. Though few people suffering from goitre lost their voice,<sup>52</sup> a growth of this size pressing against the larynx would have likely interfered with the woman's ability to speak.<sup>53</sup> I return here to Castiglione's observation of

lower-class people with low intelligence from the mountains of Bergamo as ‘goitrous mutes’.

In a treatise on the voice published between 1600 and 1601, just a few years before Caravaggio completed his painting, Giulio Casserio posited that the primary function of the larynx is to produce fluid that makes the voice more harmonious and pleasant.<sup>54</sup> Casserio cited the importance of voice in humans, providing ancient and biblical examples of great speeches that shaped history, including the examples of Christ’s apostles, whose mission was to preach.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the subject of this painting becomes not so much about the martyrdom of Andrew but the miracle of his voice as he preached the word of God from the cross in his last two days of life. As the first apostle, Andrew’s mission in life was to preach, an act to which he devoted himself in body and soul up to his final breath.

Caravaggio painted this work in Naples, not far from Amalfi, where Saint Andrew was patron saint and where his remains are housed in the cathedral of Sant’Andrea. The mountainous area around Naples has long been known to be endemic to goitre.<sup>56</sup> Scholars agree that the woman with goitre in the painting was likely a peasant native to the surrounding hills of Naples. The underlying assumption is that the artist painted the woman from life. Biographers of the artist, including Giovan Pietro Bellori, claimed that Caravaggio painted exclusively from the live model,<sup>57</sup> an idea that has sometimes been overstated and one that ignores his remarkable visual memory.<sup>58</sup> There is no firm evidence, technical or otherwise, that this figure was indeed painted from life or even that she had goitre, as the pentimento may demonstrate. Moreover, an old, unidealized woman closely resembling this figure but without goitre appears in other paintings by Caravaggio.<sup>59</sup> These figures typically evoke empathy, prompting this emotion in the viewer. The woman with the goitre who leads our eye upward towards the saint is therefore present in the scene to facilitate spiritual contemplation of Andrew’s martyrdom.

This figure with goitre in Caravaggio’s painting recalls Merke’s category of this medical condition to inspire the viewer to empathize with humble subjects. Erin Benay argues convincingly that the woman’s position at the foot of the cross on the left is typically reserved for the Virgin Mary in scenes of Christ’s Crucifixion. By association, Caravaggio’s woman with goitre may represent humility and piety.<sup>60</sup> As in Varallo, the figure with goitre provides the viewer with a model of humility and represents a typical person often seen in the area in which the work of art was created and viewed. She is an indication that this event is taking place in the viewer’s time and place. However, unlike the figures with goitre in Varallo, this woman does not appear to lack intelligence or be the perpetrator of malfesance. Her presence reinforces the devotional aspect of this painting and the miracle Caravaggio captured in the scene.

## Presepe figures

Similar to the old woman in Caravaggio’s painting, the *donna gozzuta* was a fixture in *presepi*, or nativity scenes, especially those created in Naples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Figure 8.5). Although not always women, these figures



**FIGURE 8.5** D. Tagliaferri, *Old Couple* (*Presepe* figures)

*Source:* Collezione Corrado Catello, Naples

were often elderly. The Neapolitan *presepi* are among the first and most studied of their kind, even though this tradition extends well beyond the Italian peninsula. Several publications have highlighted these figures, explaining their inclusion as related to the theme of the humility of Christ's beginnings.<sup>61</sup> As in Caravaggio's painting, the people afflicted with goitre represented in Neapolitan art signalled humility and inspired empathy. They are of the same lower strata of social class as the figures with goitre in Varallo, and are also mountain-dwellers, but share more with Caravaggio's old woman.

The figures with goitre in *presepi* are difficult to overlook. *Presepi* are often cast in the time in which they were created, providing a glimpse into everyday life. In *presepi*, such as the one illustrated here, vendors sell their wares, while others carry out their daily routines and occupations. In a remote corner of the composition, the Virgin Mary and Joseph adore the Christ child along with tradespeople and shepherds. This scene is dominated by the quotidian bustle of a town. This



accessible and familiar scene may be a way to draw viewers into an extension of their own world, as in Varallo.

The old woman with goitre is usually dressed as a peasant, like many of the other figures that populate *presepi*. In some cases, she sells chestnuts or other produce. Gennaro Borrelli noted that this figure often appears in tavern scenes from the 1630s, largely due to the liturgical dramas from about a decade earlier on which *presepi* were based.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the earliest *presepi* were placed on top of the altar as backdrops for *sacre rappresentazioni*, or liturgical dramas, that recounted the nativity.<sup>63</sup> By the end of the sixteenth century, *presepi* became larger structures arranged in churches or private homes, particularly in southern Italy, for temporary display at Christmas. As at Varallo, the hilly settings of most *presepi* represent the Holy Land, in which these historic events took place, as well as the mountainous areas outside Naples, in which these people reside.

The *presepe* assemblages were often commissioned by upper-class patrons for whom such stereotypes would have reinforced their positions of privilege. In an age when caricature and theorized notions of beauty were coming to the fore, the woman with the goitre in *presepi* and other works of art created around this time should be considered as part of the larger body of images of the grotesque and the unusual, often low-class workers, that fascinated seventeenth-century Italy.

## Theories of beauty

Texts by art critics and natural scientists alike featured definitions of beauty which may provide insight into how works of art featuring goitre could have been understood by contemporary viewers. As demonstrated earlier, goitre was recognized as a condition requiring medical attention, but, unlike other infirmities, it was not known to cause death. Perhaps the need to cure goitre had more to do with the unsightly swollen neck it caused than a life-threatening disease. As we have seen, bodies that were disfigured, misshapen, or 'ugly' were viewed with pity and disgust but also sparked wonder in early modern society. Understanding what constituted ugliness and its counterpart, beauty, further explains why goitre may have been cast in a pejorative light.

As we have seen, one of the first early modern artists who thought about beauty and the 'grotesque' in art was Leonardo da Vinci. While it is true that Leonardo was employed at the Sforza court at Milan for several years and probably had seen people with goitre, his 'grotesque' heads are not necessarily portraits of specific individuals. Similar to Caravaggio's old women, these caricatures constitute types that are the products of an artistic exercise that employed the creative powers of the artist.<sup>64</sup> Leonardo recorded his thoughts on beauty, stating:

If the painter wishes to see beauties which will make him fall in love with them, he is a lord capable of creating them, and if he wishes to see monstrous things that frighten, or those that are grotesque and laughable, or those that arouse real compassion, he is their lord and their creator.<sup>65</sup>

Monsters were one source of curiosity that became popular over the course of the seventeenth century. Ulisse Aldovrandi's *Monstrorum historia* (1642) provided a compilation of a wide range of humans suffering from birth defects and other infirmities who he called 'monsters'.<sup>66</sup> Aldovrandi did not illustrate people with goitre in his study, but he did write about it as a cursed condition and one that resulted in a 'putrefying sensual humour lodged in the gullet'.<sup>67</sup> The current reception of visibly infirm people may also be gleaned from Giambattista della Porta's treatise on physiognomy in which he associated beauty with good proportions and ugliness with bestiality.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the negative reception of disfigured people in art, such as the two tormentors of Christ in Varallo, may have encouraged the viewer to adore the 'beautiful' holy figures beside them, further focusing their religious meditation as a juxtaposition of good and evil, saintly and terrestrial, or sacred and profane.

Art theorists continued to ponder these motifs in art throughout the Renaissance and beyond. For example, in *Trattato della pittura* (1607–15), Giovanni Battista Agucchi noted that ideal beauty could only be apprehended by a noble audience, while low-life subjects were suited to vulgar artists and viewers.<sup>69</sup> This may help explain the figures in the Sacro Monte of Varallo, which was a site accessible to all pilgrims. It is less helpful when considering Caravaggio's painting, probably intended for the viceroy of Naples or another viewer of similar repute. That said, Caravaggio was often viewed by contemporary art critics as vulgar, because his presentation of subjects in painting was 'somewhere between the sacred and the profane'.<sup>70</sup>

One of the staunch defenders of the representation of beauty in art was Caravaggio's biographer, Bellori. In his preface to the *Lives of the Artists* (1672), Bellori reiterated his speech championing the 'idea del bello', or the ideal of beauty in art, criticizing artists such as Caravaggio, whose works were 'too natural' because they were merely copied from nature.<sup>71</sup> Thus, to include a figure with goitre in a religious scene would have been unthinkable for Bellori. Yet, other artists took deformed or 'ugly' people as their subjects. Examples include Annibale Carracci's drawing of a young, nude hunchback boy (Chatsworth House, c. 1580–90), and his brother Agostino's painting of three physically or mentally disabled men (Capodimonte Museum, c. 1598–60).<sup>72</sup>

Jusepe de Ribera was another artist who took 'ugly' or misshapen figures as his subjects. As noted by Jonathan Brown, the man featured in the *Small Grottesque Head* (c. 1622) bears a strong resemblance to the executioner in the later *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* print (1624).<sup>73</sup> This is particularly interesting in light of the role of the executioner, as seen in the Varallo example. All of these figures share rough, unidealized features to communicate their grizzly profession to the viewer.

Goitre has also been identified in Ribera's *Large Grottesque Head* (c. 1622), but not adequately explained.<sup>74</sup> The print shows the head of a man in profile with several warts or small tumours on his face and two large flaps of skin hanging from his neck. This does not appear to be goitre at all, but something more in the realm of fantasy.<sup>75</sup> Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, biographer Bernardo De Dominici noted 'alcune teste deformi intagliate per ischerzo' (some deformed

heads, engraved as a joke) by Ribera; the quote may indicate that the then current perception of such an image was that it was produced for comic effect, reminiscent of the Bergamasque Zanni character.<sup>76</sup> This agrees with Barry Wind's observation that the figure wears a ruff and a hat, both typically associated with buffoons and fools from the *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>77</sup>

Artistic depictions of deformed bodies provoked both repulsion and curiosity for the seventeenth-century viewer.<sup>78</sup> As a print, it could be disseminated widely, indicating that such images may have filled a market niche. Craig Felton astutely noted that Ribera produced other 'grotesque' images of infirm or disabled bodies, as in the paintings of *Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband and Son* (1631, Museo Fundación Lerma) depicting a bearded woman, and the *Club-Footed Boy* (1642, Louvre).<sup>79</sup> For Edward Payne, the print by Ribera is not quite a caricature and was probably not created from life; rather, it belongs to a category of exaggerated and capricious images of 'ugliness' that sometimes elicit repulsion and at other times, pity.<sup>80</sup> Reactions to goitre were thus varied and complex and were intrinsically tied to contemporary perceptions of physical appearance at the time.

## Conclusion

It is impossible to create a single explanation that applies to all images of goitre. As demonstrated by the preceding examples, each was created for a specific audience and had an intended function and meaning. Unfortunately, we know very little about how goitre was perceived in early modern Europe due to the lack of records. Until more evidence is gleaned, the secondary literature that mentions goitre and works of art that document its prevalence must suffice. The present study aims to contribute to ongoing research on the problem of goitre in art with reference to its particular historical and cultural context. The examples may help explain other works in which this condition is given visual form and the possible reasons for its inclusion.

From the tormented figures in the Sacro Monte of Varallo and Ribera's prints to the peasants in Caravaggio's paintings and Neapolitan *presepi*, goitre carried many associations in early modern Italian art. While all of the figures in these examples were lower-class inhabitants of mountainous areas, they varied in the responses they possibly elicited, from mockery, to repulsion, to sympathy, to wonder. Written sources further substantiate the claim that peasants living in mountainous areas were viewed as unintelligent. Among others, Michelangelo supported this idea when comparing his 'goitre', which developed due to the labour involved in painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Drawing on the exaggerated features of Leonardo's grotesque caricatures, the tormenters with goitre in Varallo and in prints by Ribera are presented as ugly, animal-like, and evil. Their disregard for the torture they inflict on holy figures is made manifest in their goitres, whereby they take on a moralizing function. Less exaggerated goitres appear on the old woman in Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew* painting and the peasants in the *presepi* of Naples, who are non-threatening and epitomize humility and piety.



Despite the different roles these figures play in their respective works of art, their goitre represents a deliberate choice made by the artist, not a detail required by the subject or artistic tradition. While it is true that each of these examples is a work of art created in the areas in which goitre was endemic, they are not mere studies in naturalism. Rather, the figures with goitre localize the scenes in which they are included and reinforce their narratives and devotional function. Regardless of their varied meanings, negative or positive, each figure with goitre appears to spark wonder in the viewer. Their physical malformation separates them from the unblemished bodies that often surround them, drawing further attention to their difference. As such, figures with goitre, in all of their complexity, may also be understood as the result of artistic embellishment and the power of the artist to re-create these stories pictorially to communicate with their viewers. To imagine these scenes without the figures with goitre, these Crucifixions, martyrdoms, and Nativities would lack the *varietà* that was so prized in art at the time.

## Notes

- 1 *Chi nasce smemorato e gozzuto non ne guarisce mai*. This was first published as one of Franco Sacchetti's tales that focused on the gullibility of goitrous peasants. Sacchetti, *Novella*, 267.
- 2 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 127.
- 3 Merke, *Geschichte und ikonographie*.
- 4 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 288–300.
- 5 Clark and Clark, *The Remarkables*.
- 6 Craik, *The Hippocratic Treatise*, 7.
- 7 Jouanna, *Greek Medicine*, 128.
- 8 Hermitte, *Il gozzo*, 136.
- 9 Medvei, *History of Endocrinology*, 59.
- 10 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 196.
- 11 Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 13.
- 12 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 258.
- 13 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 260.
- 14 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 259, 260.
- 15 Galen had identified the thyroid, described its shape as resembling a shield, and noted its function to lubricate respiratory passageways, including the larynx (or 'voicebox'), which he located just behind it. Merke, *History and Iconography*, 84.
- 16 O'Malley and Saunders, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 386.
- 17 Vescia and Basso, 'Goiters', 29.
- 18 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 315; Vescia and Basso, 'Goiters', 29; Clark and Clark, *Remarkables*, 14, 26, 73; Hermitte, *Il gozzo*, figures 49 and 50; Sterpetti, De Toma, and De Cesare, 'Thyroid swellings', 591–96; and Martino and Vitti, 'Leonardo da Vinci', 781.
- 19 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 154.
- 20 The Florentine poet Burchiello (1404–49) also employed 'gatti' to refer to peasants. Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, 70–72, note 2.
- 21 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 155.
- 22 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 296; and Vescia and Basso, 'Goiters in the Renaissance', 29.
- 23 Martino and Mariotti, 'Michelangelo', 1081.
- 24 Gil and others, 'The mystery', 1–5 and Tamargo and Suk, 'Concerning the concealed anatomy', E503–05.

- 25 Bondeson and Bondeson, 'Michelangelo's Divine Goitre', 609–11, and Bondeson and Bondeson, 'The creator', 189–92.
- 26 Göttler, 'The temptation of the senses', 394. Bram de Klerck noted that Carlo Borromeo visited this site days before his death in 1584, and referred to it as 'nuova Gerusalemme'; the Latin inscription over the entrance gate also qualified it as such. Klerck, 'Jerusalem in Renaissance Italy', 281.
- 27 Klerck, 'Jerusalem in Renaissance Italy', 232.
- 28 See Nova, "'Popular" art'. Kühnel also argues that the Sacri Monti were often not considered high art by art historians and, as such, have only attracted more attention recently. Kühnel, 'Virtual pilgrimages', 244.
- 29 Lasansky, 'Body elision', 252.
- 30 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 300–03; Dionigi and Dionigi, 'Iconography of goitre', 1301–04; Leatherbarrow, 'Image and its setting', 120.
- 31 Hood, 'The *Sacro Monte* of Varallo', 294.
- 32 Agosti and Stoppa (eds), *Il Rinascimento*, 101–03 and 109–20.
- 33 Klerck, 'Jerusalem in Renaissance Italy', 219.
- 34 Terry-Fritsch, 'Performing the Renaissance body', 123–24.
- 35 Göttler, 'The temptation of the senses', 411.
- 36 Jordan, 'The last tormentor of Christ', 21.
- 37 William Chester Jordan notes that the sponge-bearer was often represented in art as a Jew, usually physically deformed, impoverished, or in other manners to indicate his wickedness. See Jordan, 'The last tormentor of Christ'.
- 38 Giampalmo, 'Il gozzo endemico', 101.
- 39 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 303; and Clark and Clark, *The Remarkables*, 76.
- 40 For example, the executioner figure in Chapel XXXII pulls Christ by a rope. This figure's face is riddled with wrinkles, moles, and a dropping eyelid, and his hair is dishevelled but he does not have goitre. See Agosti and Stoppa (eds), *Il Rinascimento*, 32.
- 41 Göttler notes the women and children respond to the sponge-bearer with expressions that are 'a mix of curiosity and compassion'. Göttler, 'The temptation of the senses', 411. For Luigi Sena, figures with goitre created reactions of either wonder or fear in the viewer. Sena, *Arte e tiroide*, 17.
- 42 Terry-Fritsch, 'Performing the Renaissance body', 126.
- 43 Göttler, 'The temptation of the senses', 411.
- 44 'vive et vere paiono'. Göttler, 'The temptation of the senses', 444.
- 45 'artificio di molte capelle'. Göttler, 'The temptation of the senses', 413.
- 46 de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*. See also Pedro de Ribadeneyra, *Flos Sanctorum o Libro de las vidas de los Santos* (1601, Italian translation from 1604–05) as cited in Lurie and Mahon, 'Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*', 13.
- 47 In her recent comprehensive study of this painting, Erin Benay noted that Ippolito Scarsellino's *Martyrdom of Saint Andrew* (Verona, San Massimo all'Adige) also includes a figure with goitre who witnesses the scene. In his youth, Caravaggio might have even seen this work in its original location, the church of San Pietro al Po. See Benay, *Exporting Caravaggio*, 55; and Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 315.
- 48 This pentimento was left more visible in the most recent conservation of the painting by Dean Yoder at the Cleveland Museum of Art. See Benay, *Exporting Caravaggio*, 118.
- 49 For the somewhat tenuous identification of Saint Andrew as patron saint of throat ailments, see Lurie and Mahon, 'Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*', 18, n. 59. Although it appears that this saint is popularly associated with infirmities of the neck and throat, there is no textual evidence to suggest that this was the case when Caravaggio painted his picture.
- 50 Lurie and Mahon, 'Caravaggio's *Crucifixion*', 18.
- 51 Ferriss, 'The *Crucifixion of St. Andrew*', 518.
- 52 I thank Michael Stolberg for this observation.
- 53 Benay's argument differs slightly from mine. She notes that the saint and the man with the open mouth are rendered mute; Benay, *Exporting Caravaggio*, 38.
- 54 Casserius, *The Larynx*, 18–19.

- 55 Casserius, *The Larynx*, 13.
- 56 The School of Salerno was the earliest place where treatment was available for goitre. Merke, *History and Iconography*, 84.
- 57 Bellori, *Le vite*, 249.
- 58 Carrabino, 'Ascondersi per la Sicilia', 118–19.
- 59 Many Caravaggio scholars have noted the recurrence of this figure in his paintings, including Lurie and Mahon, 'Caravaggio's *Crucifixion*', 18; Carrabino, 'Ascondersi per la Sicilia', 69; and Benay, *Exporting Caravaggio*, 40.
- 60 Benay, *Exporting Caravaggio*, 40.
- 61 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 323–24; Martino, 'Woman of Naples', 300; and Sena, *Arte e tiroide*, 272.
- 62 Borrelli, *Il presepe*, 43.
- 63 Berliner, 'The Origins', 260.
- 64 Payne, 'Ribera's grotesque heads', 89.
- 65 McMahon, ed. and trans., *Treatise on Painting*, 35.
- 66 Biancastella, *Animali e creature mostruose*.
- 67 Wind, *A Foul and Pestilent Congregation*, 53.
- 68 della Porta, *Della fisionomia*, 97–98, first published in 1677.
- 69 McTighe, 'Perfect deformity', 78.
- 70 Paleotti, *Discourse*. For the significant influence of Paleotti's text, see Schildgen, 'Cardinal Paleotti'.
- 71 Panofsky, *Idea*, 155–75.
- 72 Wind, *A Foul and Pestilent Congregation*, 19–48.
- 73 Brown, 'Jusepe de Ribera', 169.
- 74 Merke, *History and Iconography*, 315 and figure 156. See also Wind, *A Foul and Pestilent Congregation*, 53.
- 75 Craig Felton, Personal communication, August 16, 2018.
- 76 Payne, 'Ribera's grotesque heads', 98.
- 77 Wind, *A Foul and Pestilent Congregation*, 53.
- 78 Much of the modern literature related to Ribera's print has diagnosed the man depicted as suffering from von Recklinghausen's disease or multiple neurofibromatosis. Brown, 'Jusepe de Ribera', 169.
- 79 Felton and Jordan, *Jusepe de Ribera*, 211.
- 80 Payne, 'Ribera's grotesque heads', 99–100.

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