Twin artists and twins as a source of inspiration for painting

WITOLD MALINOWSKI, MARTA MELKA-ROSZCZYK

Abstract

Twins have always been a phenomenon of nature. Perhaps that is why they have fascinated artists for ages and their images are found on the walls of caves and in sculptures that date back to many centuries ago. Also, in biblical times the wonder of twins was so intriguing to people that narrations about twin labors found their way into the Old Testament. In the twentieth century several of monozygotic pairs of twins became world-famous painters, for example the Seidenbeutel brothers, Menasze and Efraim, as well as Tony and Domenic Martino. It is very possible that they often worked together on one and the same painting and until today art critics and experts are not always able to unequivocally determine which of the twins was the author.

Key words: twins, artists, history

The higher the phylogenetic development of a particular species, the less numerous the offspring. In case of humans who occupy the highest place on the list, the dominant reproductive feature is singleton pregnancy. That is why the birth of two or more children has always been met with considerable interest. Since biblical times the miracle of twins has been such a fascinating phenomenon that narrations of twin births have found their way into the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the Genesis, there are descriptions of biblical twins [1], the first of Jacob and Esau (Fig. 1) [2], sons of Isaac and Rebekah [Genesis, 25: 24-26], the second of Pharez and Zarah, sons of Judah and Tamar [Genesis, 38: 27-30]. The labors are described in great detail, thus allowing contemporary obstetricians to clearly identify monoamniotic twin pregnancies with accompanying complications.

25:24 And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, [there were] twins in her womb.
25:25 And the first was born red, all over like a hairy garment: and they called his name Esau.
25:26 And after that his brother was born, and his hand took hold on [was] sixty years old when she bore them.

Genesis, 25: 24-26

38:27 And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that behold, twins were in her womb.
38:28 And it came to pass when she travailed, that [the one] put out [his] hand; and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, This came out first.
38:29 And it came to pass as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out; and she said, How hast thou broken forth? this breach be upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez.
38:30 And afterwards came out his brother that had the scarlet thread upon his hand; and his name was called Zarah.

Genesis, 38:27-30

Fig. 1. Birth of Esau and Jacob, Jean de Mandeville, c. 1360-1370 [2]

The abovementioned narrations of labors are clear examples of monoamniotic twin pregnancies because in the first example Jacob held his brother Esau by his heel [And after that his brother was born, and his hand took hold on Esau’s heel; and his name was called Jacob], and in the second example the hand of the second fetus presented before the first one [And it came to pass when she travailed, that [the one] put out [his] hand; and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread,
Twin artists and twins as a source of inspiration for painting

saying, This came out first. And it came to pass as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out; and she said, How hast thou broken forth? [this] breach [be] upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez]. Contemporary medicine knows that such possibility may happen only in case of monoamniotic twin gestation due to lack of the septum between the fetuses. Since every monoamniotic pregnancy is also a monozygotic one, the twins should always be of the same sex and, indeed, Jacob and Esau, as well as Pharez and Zarah, were all male newborns.

For ages twins have been an inspiration for artists, particularly painters. One of the most frequently portrayed mythical gods of the world was Zeus – the supreme ruler of Mount Olympus – who fathered at least three pairs of twins: Pollux and Helen by Leda, Amphion and Zethos by Antiope and Apollo and Artemis by Leto.

One of the most famous myths about Leda and the swan is connected with Zeus. Already in Antiquity people believed that multiple pregnancy is the result of more than one sexual intercourses which took place in a short period of time (superfecundatio) and that myth was quoted to confirm the theory. According to it, Zeus – the king of all gods – took the form of a swan and seduced Leda, the beautiful wife of the Spartan king, Tyndareus. Leda had sexual intercourse with her husband on the same night. Thus, she was impregnated twice in one day and as a result gave birth to two different dizygotic pairs of twins: Pollux and Helen – the children of Zeus, and Castor and Clytemnestra – children of Tyndareus. The legend was portrayed by Leonardo da Vinci (Fig. 2) [4].

Regardless of his admirable knowledge of human body and its anatomy, he did not realize that dizygotic twins cannot come from a single egg. Zygosis was obviously an unknown notion at that time. That is why he painted only two swan eggs (instead of four) from which two dizygotic pairs of twins hatched.

Conjoined twins have equally captured the imagination of people for centuries. It is believed that in Greek mythology the Monocephalus form of conjoined twins might be the archer of one of the gods, Ianus, who had two faces (Fig. 3, 4) [5, 6], whereas centaurs, mythical creatures part human and part horse, might be mirrored after the Parapagus form of conjoined twins that usually had four lower limbs (Fig. 5, 6) [6, 7].

Fig. 2. Leda and the Swan. Leonardo da Vinci 1505-1510 [4]

Fig. 3. God Janus. Ancient Roman religion and mythology [5]

Fig. 4. Monocephalus (has two faces). Depicted by French Renaissance surgeon Ambroise Pare [6]

Fig. 5. Minerva and Centaurus, Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) [7]

Another very interesting example of conjoined twins of the Parapagus type were Ni-anch-chnum and Chnum-hotep brothers who lived in Ancient Egypt during 15th
dynasty of the Old Kingdom in the palace of Pharaoh Nyuserre Ini (about 1000 year BC) (Fig. 7) [8, 9].

In 1964 an Egyptian archeologist, Ahmed Moussa, discovered in the ancient necropolis of Saqqara a series of tombs with rock-cut passages facing the pyramid of Unas. In one of the tombs he found a representation of two identical conjoined men. Due to the fact that in that tomb there were other paintings of people buried there, the tomb was said to be the burial place of the twins, and recent years brought the theory that they were perhaps conjoined twins of the Parapagus type. The unique nature of the discovery lies in the fact that it was the first known tomb shared by two men buried at the same time, bearing identical titles of overseer of the manicurists in the palace of the king [8]. Also, they were the first pair of conjoined twins portrayed.

Another early example of conjoined twins is a stone carving by unknown artist, dated to 80 BC, representing Pygopagus twins. The piece was discovered in Fiesole, Italy and is currently housed in the San Marco Museum in Florence, Italy (Fig. 8, 9) [6].

Yet another well-documented example of conjoined twins and the first in Europe, was the example of Mary and Eliza Chulkhurst, known as the Biddenden Maids. The sisters were born in 1100 to a wealthy family in a small village of Biddenden, Kent, England [11]. They were joined at the shoulder and the hip, so supposedly they represented the Pygopagus type [Fig. 10] [12].

They lived for 34 years and were very close, although according to historians, they had their little quarrels which occasionally resulted in blows. After the death of one sister, a surgeon from Staplehurst offered to surgically separate them but the surviving sister refused, stating they came to this world together and together they would leave it, and died 6 hours later. According to their last will, the local parish inherited 20 acres of land and was instructed to distribute cakes imprinted with an image of two conjoined twins, bread, cheese and beer (since 19th century: tea) among the poor on every Easter Sunday [10]. The following text from 1876 is proof that the
tradition has been kept for centuries: "On Easter Sunday in Biddenden, near Staplehurst, Kent, Biddenden cakes, bread and cheese are distributed among the poor. The cost of the treat is covered by the income from the lands, known as the Bread and Cheese Lands. 300 cakes made of flour and water and bearing the imprint of the twins (4 inches long and 2 inches wide), 540 loaves of bread and 470 pounds of cheese are distributed by members of the local church" [10]. The tradition prevails until today and every year on Easter Sunday the bread, cheese and cakes are distributed among the poor in Biddenden. The cakes are so hard they are almost inedible but make a nice souvenir for visitors. Thus, almost 900 years after the death of the sisters, the Biddenden Maids remain to be present in the awareness of both the local community and visitors, whose number steadily grows as the famous cakes make Biddenden an increasingly popular tourist destination.

The case of conjoined twins of different sexes born in 1547, Löwen, Austria causes controversy in the medical world. The twins were of the Syncephalus type (having a single head) and died probably a few hours after the birth [Fig. 11] [13].

A wood block with their representation has been preserved until today. Either independent fertilization by two different sperms of two different eggs developing in the same oocyte with subsequent secondary grown together (such possibility has not been yet proven) or chromosomal abnormalities occurring during an incomplete division of an originally one zygote into two new embryonic structures (XY and XO – Turner syndrome, always female sex) were believed to be the etiological factor behind their creation.

The first representation of twins born with twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome (TTTS) probably dates back to 1617 when male twins were born to Jacob Dirkszoon de Graeff, the mayor of Amsterdam [14]. Most probably they were born alive (their eyes are open in the painting) but unfortunately died soon after the birth. A grief-stricken father commissioned an artist from Muidersloot of unknown name and origin to portray them. He did so in a most realistic manner and the difference of their skin color (one very pale, the other unnaturally red) allows to diagnose TTTS and to distinguish between the "donor" and the "recipient" (Fig.12) [15].

In 2008 The Times reported an interesting piece of news about Tutankhamun "Bodies found in the tomb of 'boy king' Tutankhamun's tomb are twin daughters" [16]. It is commonly believed that pharaoh Tutankhamun could not have fathered any children as he had died before reaching mature age and left the throne to his regents, Ay and Horemheb. In fact he was mature enough to conceive children and he most probably did. In his tomb Howard Carter discovered a wooden, plain box, 62 cm long. The lid had originally been sealed but the seals were broken already in antiquity. Inside the box there were two antropoidal coffins, one 49.5 cm, the other 57.7 cm long, placed next to each other, in reverse. They were painted in plain black resin and had a single inscription "Osiris". In the first coffin there was a single child mummy, in the second mummified fetuses of two small female children, possible twins. One was 30 cm, the other 39.5 cm long (Fig. 13) [17].
The children were most probably born dead, 2-4 months before term. They are supposed to have been the daughters of Tutankhamun and his wife (an sister), queen Anchseamamon. Currently there is much controversy as to the cause of their death. The most popular causes include congenital defects resulting from closely-related parents (brother and sister). The author believes it is highly possible they were twins born of a monochorionic twin pregnancy complicated by TTTS. The arguments in favor include: the same sex of the fetuses, discrepancy in size, stillbirth before term. The only missing proof is the result of a genetic test which might confirm the pregnancy was monozygotic.

For the last few centuries the dominant opinion was the one based on the theory of John Locke that the human mind at birth is a blank slate – tabula rasa and external factors, upbringing and experience gained over the years shape human abilities and character [Fig. 14] [19].

Modern science brings increasing amount of proof that many human-specific features and traits are hereditary. Artistically gifted twins are a good example to support this hypothesis. One might even venture a theory that most artists have genetically received their talents, gifts and abilities from their ancestors.

The painters, Menasze and Efraim Seidenbeutel, (June 1902 – April 1945), were murdered by the guards of the Flossenbürg concentration camp a mere day before the camp was liberated [18]. They were tall and slim, had similar haircuts and wore identical clothes, ties and shoes. Even their closest friends could not differentiate between Menasze and Efraim and often referred to them in plural. It is possible that they worked together on each other’s paintings. Art critics are not able to determine precisely which painting was done by Menasze and which by Efraim. Figure 15 presents one of very few preserved photographs of the twins from that time. They are standing on the balcony over the square in Kazimierz with its old well and rows of Renaissance tenement houses.

In the course of their short life the Seidenbeutel brothers painted many pieces. One of the most famous of their paintings, Portrait of a man in a hat [Fig. 16] [20], is attributed to Menasze by some critics and to both brothers by others, whereas View from a window and Young girl with flowers are attributed to both twins (Fig. 17, 18) [20].
Twin artists and twins as a source of inspiration for painting

The twins often caused a sensation at the Annual Artists’ Ball in Kazimierz. One of the brothers would get into a cardboard box on one side of the stage while the other would jump out of an identical box on the other side of the stage just a second later. The audience was delighted. The twins were so similar that it was very difficult to tell them apart. One time Efraim, shoulder-length hair and long beard, went to a barber and asked for a shave, warning him the stubble and hair grow back very fast. The barber did as asked and Efraim left. After one hour the second brother walked into the barber’s shop, shoulder-length hair and long beard, and said: *I told you so.* The barber collapsed...

Among contemporary twin painters, Tony and Domenic Martino deserve particular attention (Fig. 19) [21]. They are identical monozygotic twins and even their closest relatives cannot tell them apart. Apart from the same clothes, behavior and manner of speaking, they have identical views and opinions about art. Their paintings, the theme of which often revolves around twins, are made with great boldness and excellent knowledge of medical and anatomical details connected with intrauterine development. *Entwined* is an excellent example of that (Fig. 20) [21] because the painting shows in a very distinct manner twins in monoamniotic pregnancy with the most frequent complication – entwined umbilical cord.
The analysis of a few abovementioned examples of famous artists – monozygotic twins – allows to hypothesize that predispositions, gifts and artistic abilities are genetically conditioned. Also, were it not for proper upbringing and education, as well as personal experiences gained through life, those talents might never reveal themselves to the world.

References

[16] Bodies found in the tomb of “boy king” Tutankhamun’s tomb are twin daughters. The Times, September 1, 2008.
[20] Menasze and Efriam Seidenbeutel, jewishpaintings.net

W. Malinowski
Chair of the Department of Obstetric and Gynecology Nursing
Pomeranian Medical University of Szczecin, Poland
71-210 Szczecin, ul. Żołnierska 48
e-mail: witold65@op.pl