

## HISTORICAL PAGE

## Infant with epistaxis painted in the 1320s by Simone Martini

The 4th International Conference on Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology was held in Siena, October 2–5, 1996, under the presidency of Desiderio Passàli. He inspired us to visit some of the cultural treasures of this old town of Tuscany, for instance the Pinacoteca. In this Museum, four scenes of the “Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece” (198 × 257 cm) caught my special attention. The altarpiece was painted around 1324 by Simone Martini (between 1284–1344) who was considered one of the greatest Sienese painters. Simone was very accurate in his realistic depictions of persons, town scenes and landscape views. In his book “Vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti italiani” (1550) Giorgio Vasari said about Simone’s realism: “He loved to portray from nature and in this he was considered the best master of his day”. Thus, in mediaeval painting the first individual portraits are to be found in the work of Simone.

The altarpiece is composed of a central area with the figure of Agostino and of two side areas with Agostino’s miracles depicted in four scenes: a child attacked by a wolf, a child falling from a balcony, a knight falling down a ravine, and a *child falling out of his cradle*. According to the composition of ex-votos, each scene is divided into two sections: the accident and the miracle, followed by a thanksgiving prayer.

The last scene (see inlet below) probably shows the earliest example of epistaxis depicted in an infant. The upper part this painting enables us to look into the bedroom of a house where a cradle is hanging above the bed of the parents. The empty cradle is inclined toward an open door frame due to a torn suspension rope. A woman in a pink dress, probably the mother, kneeling in the door frame between the bedroom and a flat roof,

is calling for help by turning up her eyes to Agostino who is floating down through the air from the upper right corner. Agostino holds his right hand over a wrapped infant being recumbent on the floor. A woman dressed in a dark green gown who obviously found the fallen infant on the floor, is on her knees to support the infant’s neck and right shoulder with her left hand, while she tries to lift the infant’s slack left arm with her other hand. The infant’s head is embedded in a puddle of blood. The eyes are closed, and small separate streams of blood come from the closed mouth and from the nostrils. These realistic details depicted by Simone allow the diagnosis of an unconscious infant caused by a severe skull injury with bleedings from the mouth and nose. In the lower part of the painting we find the recovered infant in a black cowl sitting in the arms of a woman with a red garment.

The anatomical details depicted in the recumbent injured infant give me the idea that Simone must have observed such an accident in reality. It is known that Simone personally went to see the places he wanted to depict. In Europe, Greek vases between 550 and 480 BC probably present the earliest illustrations of nosebleeding. Epistaxis was depicted in adolescents occupied in boxing matches (Rhinology 1994, 32: 151). However, epistaxis in young children or infants was not depicted before Simone Martini.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the team of the Pinacoteca of Siena for the photographs of the painting and to Desiderio Passàli who helped me to get them for reproduction.

Wolfgang Pirsig

