

2,500 Years of nosebleeding in art*†

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SUMMARY

In 132 objects of art (mainly paintings and drawings, a few sculptures, and one mosaic) dating from the pre-classical period in ancient Greece to our days, nosebleeding due to different reasons could be detected in museums, churches, galleries and art-books. Children and adults were bleeding from their noses because of mechanical injury, infectious diseases, haemorrhagic diathesis, and drugs. Some artists depicted nosebleeding in a very realistic manner, others represented this symptom in an exaggerated or caricaturistic way. From a total of 132 examples of nosebleeding 53 are presented, including 18 with figures.

Key words: nose, epistaxis, art, history

INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of nosebleeding and their causes are found in ancient medical sources from Egypt, India, Assyria and Greece as well as in the Odyssey, the Iliad, the Talmud and the Bible (Puschmann et al., 1902; Sigerist, 1963). Compared with bleedings from other regions of the body, epistaxis has been depicted relatively rarely, at least in European art. In the last twenty years we have collected about 132 objects of art, from which this symptom is visible. In this paper some representative examples from the last 2,500 years will be commented on and illustrated.

NOSEBLEEDING IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

In Europe, Greek vases between 550 and 480 BC probably present the earliest illustrations of nosebleeding. Epistaxis is depicted in young men occupied in boxing-matches, for instance on a black-figured neck-amphora made by Nikosthenes, c. 550-525 BC: Two naked boxers wearing leather thongs bound to their fists to form gloves (himantes), are about to exchange blows; the left one's nose is already bleeding (Figure 1). Nosebleeding was not depicted to describe a sick person, but to indicate the side effect of sportive activities, which were privileges of the upper class in ancient Greece. In the period of red-figure style (c. 530-330 BC) blood was painted with an additional purple colour, which disappeared by corrosion during the centuries and is nearly invisible in the black-varnish ground of the vase (Kaesler; personal communication, 1988). Therefore, nosebleeding on these vases can only be detected under special illumination.

The Hellenistic bronze statue of a pugilist, ascribed to Apollonios and dated about 50 BC, can be admired in the National Museum of Rome. The boxer recovers immediately

after a match. His face and body are marked by signs of his brutal professional activities: fresh and healed wounds, a crooked nose and cauliflower ears. The use of red copper has led to a realistic appearance of blood-streams arising from wounds on the nasal dorsum, from the face and auricles. This bronze statue has recently been restored (Sommella et al., 1987).

Four hundred years later, artists created a mosaic with scenes of athletic competitions in the hot baths near the Roman town Capsa (today Gafsa) in Tunisia, among them a boxing-match. Both fighters are injured, one is bleeding from his left nostril (Figure 2) and left ear (Khanoussi, 1992).

In ancient Peru some earthenware vessels from the Moche period (200-600 AD) in the Ethnology Museum in Berlin-Dahlem show drawings of people with severed and bleeding noses. On a bowl (VA 48171) and a stirrup-handled pot (VA 666), in stylized form, blood is depicted as drops indicated by a few short lines falling from the nose, once again in the form of diffuse clouds (VA 666) or as a steady stream (VA 48171). On the vase, the noses of the two bleeding persons are un-injured, whereas on the bowl all four captives show a uniformly mutilated nose like after amputation of the nasal tip (Figure 3). We are thus confronted with two documents of medical history on these earthenware vessels from the Moche culture, showing nosebleeding due to combat and after mutilation of the noses of captives of war (Pirsig and Eisleb, 1988).

The Bayeux Tapestry, embroidered between 1088 and 1092 AD, left us a unique pictorial record of the Battle of Hastings in 1066. It shows the conquest of England by the Normans in 72 scenes. At the end of the battle, when "those who were with Harold fell" (*et ceciderunt qui erant cum Haroldo*), an Englishman with-

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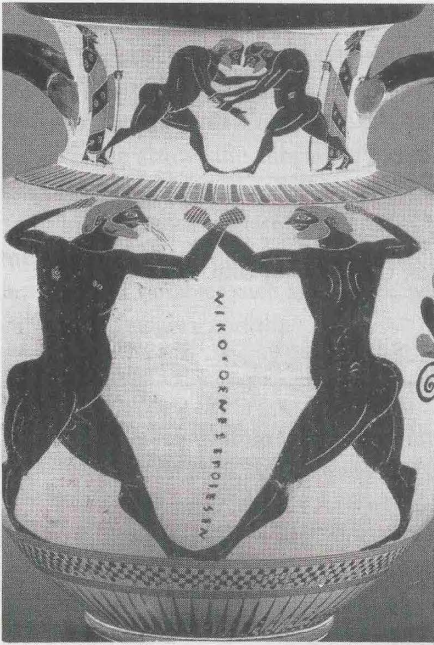


Figure 1. Neck-amphora by Nikosthenes, c. 550–525 BC (British Museum, London).

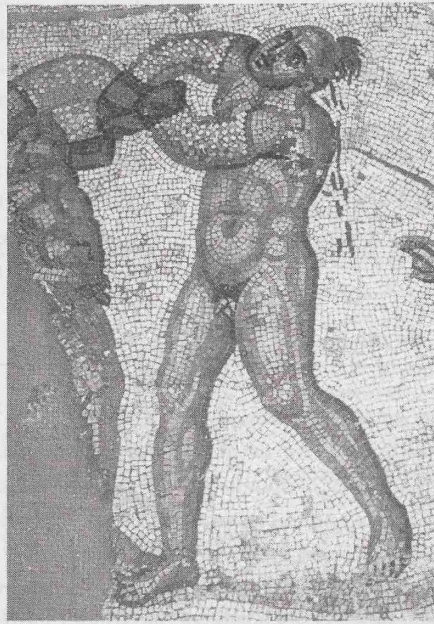


Figure 2. Detail from a Roman mosaic near the town Capsa in Tunisia, first quarter of 4th century AD (Museum Gafsa).

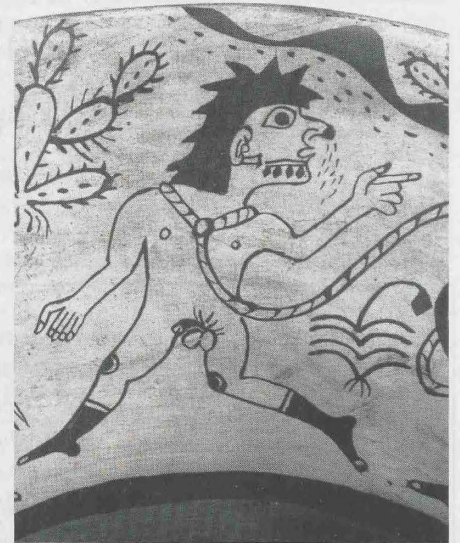


Figure 3. Detail from a bowl (VA 48171), Moche Period, 200–600 AD (Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin). Courtesy of Dietrich Graf, photographer of the Museum.



Figure 4. Detail from Bayeux Tapestry, 1088–1092 (Cathedral of Bayeux).



Figure 5. The thief left to Jesus on "Crucifixion", Master of the Barfüsseraltar, c. 1420 (Landesmuseum, Hannover).

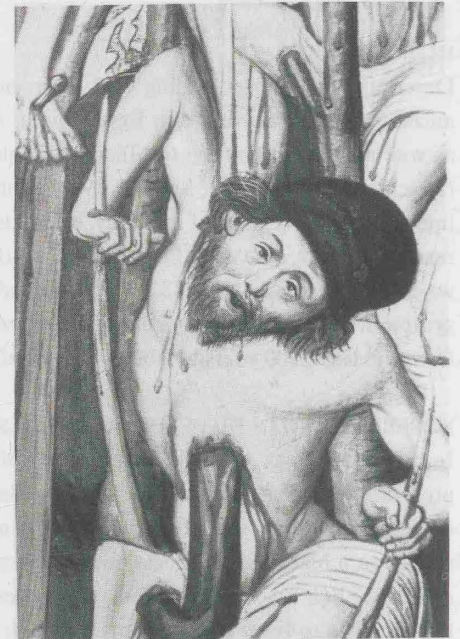


Figure 6. Detail from "Ten Thousand Martyrs", Altarpiece from Berki, 1480–1490 (National Gallery, Budapest).

out weapons and with his nose bleeding is pushed down at his hair by a Norman soldier who has his nose protected by a nose-piece (Figure 4).

In Christian art nosebleeding is relatively rarely depicted although there are many artifacts in the course of the centuries showing injured, tortured and killed people. There are a few examples of epistaxis in connection with the Passion of Christ who bleeds from his nose due to flagellation, for instance on

paintings on wood by Hans Multscher ("Christ carrying the Cross" painted 1437; Wurzacher Altar in Berlin), by Matthias Grunewald ("The Mocking of Christ" painted 1503; Alte Pinakothek in Munich) and by Lukas Cranach the Elder ("Christ as Man of Sorrows" painted 1520–1525; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, No. 107).

We found more artifacts where nosebleeding is depicted in the dead Christ, the crucified thieves or in other persons who died



Figure 7.
Detail from "The
Lamentation of
Christ" by P.P.
Rubens, 1617
(Koninklijk Museum
voor Schone
Kunsten, Antwerp).



Figure 9. Suicide of Dorothy Hale, Frida Kahlo, 1938/39
(Art Museum, Phoenix).

for Christ. Matthias Grunewald painted the dead Christ with his nose bleeding on the panel "Crucifixion" (1510-1512) as part of the Isenheim Altarpiece, Antonius van Dyck on his panel "The Mourning of Christ" (painted 1534; Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp) and Lucas Cranach the Elder on the panel "The Mourning of Christ" (1538) displayed in the monastery Lüne in Lüneburg (Germany). On a few panels the crucified thieves are painted with realistically looking nosebleeding such as on the Altarpiece of the Master of Barfüsseraltar from 1420 in Landesmuseum Hannover (Figure 5) or on a panel from an unknown painter from the Netherlands ("Crucifixion," c. 1480) displayed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest.

On the Saint Mary Magdalen Altarpiece from Berki (1480-1490; Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest) the unknown painter confronts us with the depiction of the sufferings of the "Ten Thousand Martyrs", dying with Christ. Some of the impaled martyrs bleed from their noses in agony (Figure 6).



Figure 8.
Nosebleeding due to
small-pox, unknown
artist from China,
18th century
(Bibliothèque
Nationale, Paris,
ms. chinois 5224).

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) liked to paint dramatic scenes with fighting and battles. Repeatedly, he depicted blood in a realistic manner arising from wounds all over the bodies, including the nose. The crucified Christ, for instance, is bleeding from his nose on the painting "Le Coup de Lance" (1620; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), on the oil painting "The Lamentation of Christ" (1617; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, No. 301; Figure 7), or on the oil painting "The Descent from the Cross" (1611-14) which is displayed in the Antwerp Cathedral.

CAUSES OF EPISTAXIS

Apart from the examples of epistaxis being caused by mechanical injuries, it is not easy to draw conclusions about other causes for nosebleeding in the works of most artists.

The wax figures (Calvi, 1986) by the Italian Gaetano Guilio Zumbo (1656-1701) describing the horrors and sequelae of the plague ("La Peste", 1691; Museo della Specola, Firenze) seem to be taken from life. Like on a photograph epistaxis has been depicted by Zumbo in a dead man and in a baby.

In the 18th century, an unknown artist from China (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, ms. chinois 5224) left a representation of a girl with a rash and nosebleeding due to smallpox ("blossom of heaven") painted on Chinese silk (Figure 8).

The Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) depicted the body of Dorothy Hale who committed suicide by a fall out of the window (1938-39; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix). The dead woman (Figure 9) is shown with open eyes, bleeding from her nostrils and her right ear as signs of her fractured skull-base in a manner which brings to mind the votive plate painting.

NOSEBLEEDING DUE TO AGGRESSION AND BRUTALITY

Quarrels and disputes among people often end up in fighting and actions, which affect most frequently the midface with the nose. Thus, nosebleeding is not only the sequel to such aggres-

sive behaviour, but may indicate the death of the attacked or tortured individual.

Nosebleeding as a sign of death has been depicted by an unknown Chinese artist in the Late-Sung or Yuan-Period (Grosskoenig vom T'ai-Berge, 13th or 14th century; Staatliche Museen, Berlin) on a roll of silk, showing the Ten Sovereigns of Hell of Buddhism. Two men are fastened to the ground with daggers and ropes and bleeding from their nostrils, probably due to the lethal blows on their heads.

An everyday event is depicted in a late medieval manuscript from 1459–71 illustrating the “four temperaments” or “humours” being rooted in Hippocrates and Galen (National Library, Zürich, Ms.C.54). The choleric chap, characterized by hot yellow bile for his dominant humour, all violent, fierce and full of fire, is beating a woman, with the result of blood streaming from her forehead and nose.

In Christian art fighting groups are frequently depicted, but persons with nosebleeding are rare. We found a scene painted by an artist of Haarlem around 1470 (Catharijne Convent, Utrecht, ABM.S. 126) showing the fighting soldiers dividing Christ's garments at the bottom of the Cross. A bleeding wound in the cheek, heavy nosebleeding and a dagger in one soldier's fist clearly characterize the situation.

Circa 1530 Jörg Breu the Elder (1475–1537) painted two dying Philistines who were struck by the strong Samson using the mandible of a donkey. The bleeding noses of these two moribunds show the evidence of Samson's power (Kunstmuseum, Basle).

Peter Paul Rubens (1555–1640) painted the cut-off head of Medusa (1617–18; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) with a realistic clot of blood in the right nostril. In Ruben's huge oil painting “Sieg und Tod des Konsuls Decius Mus in der Schlacht” (1617; Liechtenstein Galerie, Vienna) we see the same realistic depiction of clotted blood in the nares of two dead warriors. Rubens is one of the few painters who painted blood like a medical observer.



Figure 10. Chinese woodcut against European missionaries (lampoon, 1891).



Figure 11. Drawing by George Grosz (1935).

It was surprising to find only one lithograph and one drawing depicting epistaxis in the work of the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746–1826), who left many objects of art in which people are combating or killing each other. On the lithograph “Duel” (c. 1824–25; Museo del Prado, Madrid) and the similar drawing “Duel” (1819; Museo del Prado, Madrid, No. 286) we see the end of a duel in which a man is pierced through his chest with a sword and blood is ousing out of his nose and mouth.

In a Chinese woodcut (Figure 10) from a lampoon against European missionaries (1891) we see European books being burnt, while two “white devils”, i.e. Europeans, are slain by Chinese “Boxers.” The stakes of the Chinese hit the Europeans' heads causing severe nosebleed (facsimile of a popular album, published 1891 in TchangCha, Province Hou-nan).

The brutality of “Hitler's vassals” is expressed in a pen-and-ink drawing (1935) by the German George Grosz (1893–1959): A battered man in his underwear, bleeding from several wounds –among them the nose (Figure 11) – is addressed by his torturers: “We'll teach you!” (Hess, 1982).

EPISTAXIS IN OLD MEDICAL BOOKS AND ON VOTIVE PLATES

Illustrations in ancient medical manuscripts and codices were performed by special artists in the manner of miniatures. Among these early medical documents there are a few depictions of nosebleeding like in the Codex Vindobonensis 93 (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna) dating from the first half of the 13th century. In this codex nosebleeding can be found in two types of drawings: one presenting the official illustration for the text (Figure 12), the other thirteen are drawings by laymen, probably the studying physicians or monks, painted on the empty margin of the page next to the text which often refers to the treatment of nosebleeding, for instance phlebotomy (Figure 13).

Well-known is epistaxis depicted in a manuscript from the 13th century (MS Ashmole, 1462; Bodleian Library, Oxford), which is due to the surgical removal of nasal polyps: *Fungus de nare sic*



Figure 12. Detail from Codex Vindobonensis 93, Folio 59r, 1st half 13th century (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek).

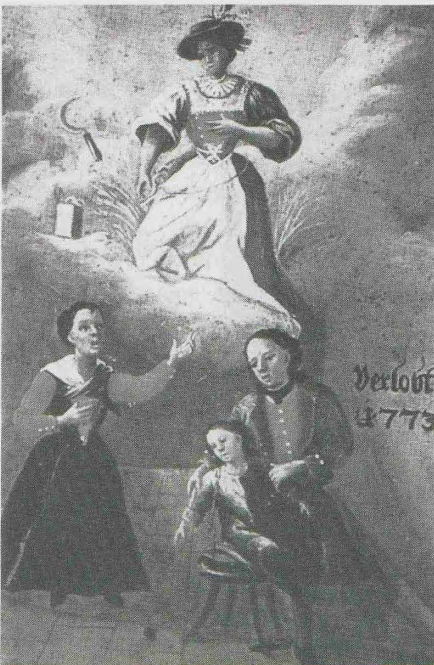


Figure 14. Votive plate with Saint Notburga, 1773 (Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde, Vienna).

inciditur. In stylized form, the blood arises from the nose in three streams obliquely falling into a pot held by the patient.

Epistaxis has been depicted several times on votive plates, gifts to the gods or saints in the hope of attaining lasting health or to beseech a god or saint to cure a specific disease. On such an *ex-voto* from 1773 (Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde, Vienna) Saint Notburga with her typical symbols (sheaf, sickle, bunch of keys, bucket for milk) is asked to help a child with nosebleeding (Figure 14). The earliest depiction of a child with epistaxis that we could find, is dated to 1520.

Another *ex-voto* from the Kunterwegkirche in Ramsau, dated 1766, tells the story of a cured 25-year-old bachelor, who was without conscience due to permanent nosebleeding over a period of 5.5 days (Theopold, 1981). The reason for this haemorrhagic diathesis remains unknown.



Figure 13. Detail from Codex Vindobonensis 93, Folio 67r.

On the votive plate (1808) from the Church of pilgrimage Sammerei in Bavaria we learn how nosebleeding was treated by the help of another man compressing the patient's nostrils (Theopold, 1982).

NOSEBLEEDING IN CARICATURE

Since the 19th century nosebleeding has become a domaine of the caricaturists. The leading French caricaturist Honoré Daumier (1808-1879) – “the political pencil of *Le Charivari*, the pencil of truth, portraying public life, the sovereign ministers, the course of justice, [...] the glories and scandals of the moment [...]” (Feaver, 1981; p. 74) – left some lithographs with i.a. nosebleeding (Figure 15): “Après une discussion vive et animée” (H.-D., 1949) and “Nose-shutting reflex of Leonard Hill” (Némésis Médical, 1840). The latter caricature, which has been reproduced several times in literature, shows a popular treatment for epistaxis: A large cold key is placed on top of the bent neck. In the series “Professeurs et Moutards” (NGD 135 Deteil 1444) Daumier presents a lithograph (1845) showing nosebleeding in a pupil who had injured his nose during gymnastics. Daumier entitled this drawing: “Comme quoi la gymnastique forme les membres mais déforme les nez.” By the way, the teacher of sports is depicted with a remarkable saddle nose, and it is not difficult to guess the reason for this deformity.

About 70 years later, Heinrich Zille (1858-1929), a popular caricaturist in Berlin, described the violating effect of soccer on the growing nose in a lithograph, where a boy with nosebleeding is weeping because he has injured his nose in a game of soccer (Figure 16).

In a caricaturistic allegory Henri Daniel Plattel (1803-1859) made fun of the competition between the traditional copperplate engraving and the new lithography. Of course, Plattel chose the lithograph for his idea (1833): the copperplate engraver is bleeding from his nose due to a blow by the winning lithograph (Sottriffer, 1966).

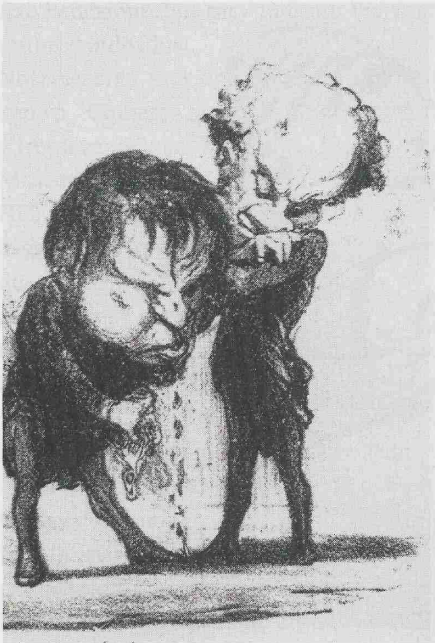


Figure 15.
Detail from the lithograph by Daumier entitled: "Après une discussion vive et animée" (D. 1949; Le Charivari 13.10.1849).

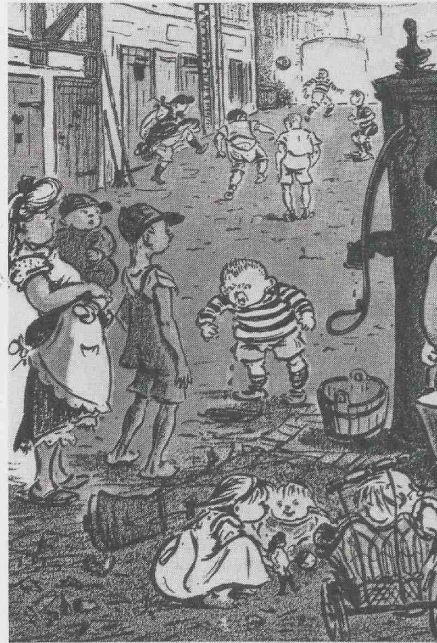


Figure 16.
Detail from a lithograph by Heinrich Zille, c. 1920 (Zillemuseum, Berlin).

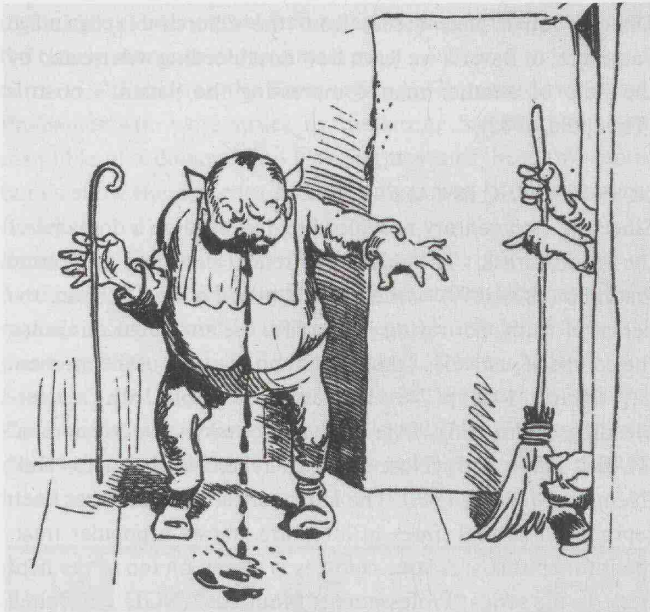


Figure 17. Detail from "The Glasses" by Wilhelm Busch (Münchener Bilderbogen, 1859-71).

In Germany, Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908), the first modern representative of the art "caricature" (Feaver, 1981; p.81), developed the picture-story, like "Max und Moritz", the forerunner of the modern comic strip. Busch combined his literary work with humorous drawings, which satirically and charmingly sketch narrow-minded behavioural patterns. In seven of his drawings (Busch, 1966) we found epistaxis depicted to characterize the clumsiness and absent-mindedness of people, and the effects of peculiar injuries to the nose by stupid servants, bad boys, or animals. "The Glasses" is a typical such story (Series "Münchener Bilderbogen"; 1859-71): After a quarrel about a hair in the soup, Mrs. Aktuar takes away her furious husband's glasses who, unable to see, bumps against a door,

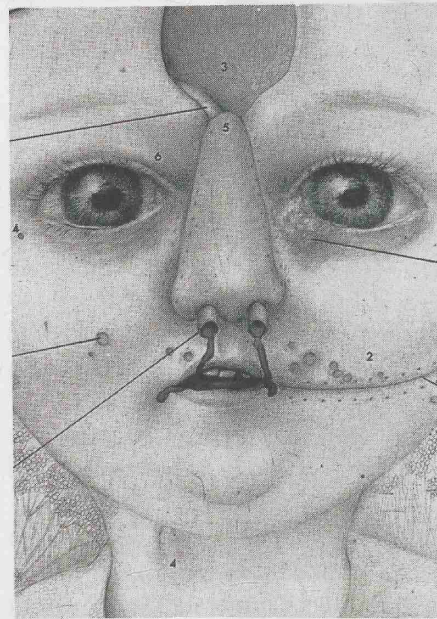


Figure 18.
Detail from "Nasty Child" by Gottfried Helnwein (1970)

which causes a remarkable nosebleeding (Figure 17). In the picture-story "The Mole" (1874) blood, oozing from the nose, indicates the death of the rebellious mole after being smashed on the floor.

In our days, the Frenchman Claude Serre (born 1938) uses nosebleeding in several caricatures to emphasize the brutality of sports, especially of boxing, while the Austrian Manfred Deix (born 1949) belongs to the social satirists who shock people with their often morbid, exaggerating realistic drawings. Looking at many of his victims bleeding from their noses one feels repellent and provoked.

The depiction of epistaxis by the Austrian Gottfried Helnwein (born 1948) is in appalling contrast to this puncturing and defla-

ting type of caricatures. At first sight many of his heads look like photographed portraits, for instance "Das Malheur" (1981), showing a man with a slight nosebleeding after some minor accident. In 1970, this artist drew the portrait of a small girl, "Nasty Child", who had been operated on because of multiple anomalies of the midface. Blood is dripping out of the nasal tubes (Figure 18), installed in the reconstructed nose. What is behind this touching drawing? Many of Helnwein's works present the pain of children hurt, deformed, and subjected to inhuman acts of violence, by human beings or machines. The artist's view of the "Battered Child Syndrome", a special phenomenon of our society today?

One of the most excessive nosebleed in art was depicted by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898-1967) on the oil-painting "Der Bildgehalt" (1947; Gallery Isy Brachot, Brussels): a man who has an outgrowth of three other heads which look like heads of birds. In his right hand the man is holding a revolver, in his left hand a dagger. From the noses of his three additional heads blood of different colours is floating down, melting with other streams of blood arising from his left arm, his right hip and left trouser pocket. The idea behind this painting is left open to the observer's imagination.

In our days epistaxis is often caused by drugs, for instance cocaine or alcohol. Georg Jiri Dokoupil (born 1954) has transformed this experience into a biting "Self-Portrait with Nosebleeding" (1984; Art 8/1991, p. 59), where he adds sex and rock 'n' roll to the drugs as reasons for epistaxis.

As to the therapy of nosebleeding we found a convincing method in *Punch*, where a man has acupuncture the whole nose with long needles and is explaining to his patient: "No promises, now this is the first time I've treated nosebleeding".

CONCLUSION

We presented 53 documents of art depicting nosebleeding in the course of the past 2,500 years. We have to apologize for our confining to mainly European art because of lacking approach to other areas. The artists described epistaxis in different styles ranging from realistic and photograph-like to more abstract modes. It was fascinating how single artists imitated blood: by copper, pigments, woolen threads, mosaic stone, pencil, or wax. Nosebleeding was taken as a sign of various diseases (injury, haemorrhagic diathesis, infections, drugs), or to show the

effects of sportive activities, of aggression, combat, and brutality among individuals. In another sense nosebleeding stood as a symbol for clumsiness and narrow-minded behaviour of the human race, as a symbol for excesses and ecstasy, as a sign of the loser, the sufferer, the tortured human being, and as a sign of death. Nothing has changed during the last 2,500 years.

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