



Disability & Visual Art

UKDHM Broadsheet 2017
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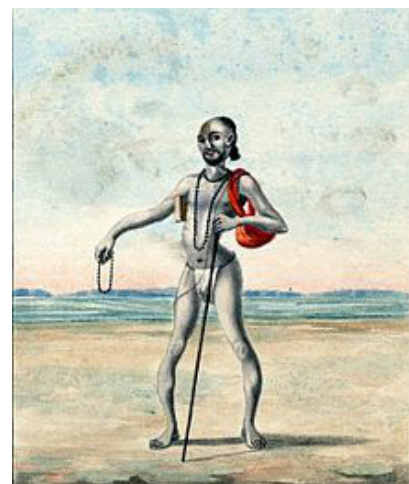
Introduction

The urge to portray, draw, paint, carve, sculpt our existence is an essential part of being human. The fundamental desire to communicate and make art is a way of understanding ourselves and our place in the world. Having an impairment (long term loss of physical or mental function) has always been part of the human condition. The theme of this year's Disability History Month looks at how these realities interact.

Throughout most of human history, having an impairment has made individuals *feel different from other people, less able, unable or not normal*. Even when accepted as part of their local community, as happened frequently, disabled people found themselves with real barriers in carrying out a productive life, as this usually involved physically struggling for existence. Superstitions, myths and beliefs attributed strongly held prejudices to disabled people and led to them being treated unfairly and as non-human. These attitudes crossed all cultures and times and are found in our representation in art. Many artisans and artists were themselves physically or mentally impaired and had to struggle against prejudice, leading them to produce art which challenged and inspired.



Senab, a high ranking ancient Egyptian official c.2520 BC



Astavakra, born with multiple physical impairments, grows up to be a celebrated Hindu sage.

Throughout most of history this was a solitary activity, but with the development of 'human rights' from the Enlightenment and in the last 70 years, universal human rights, Disabled people had solidarity, expressed through the Disability Movement and the Disability Arts Movement.

The paradigm shift, from viewing long term impairment as a disempowering medical condition to an empowering social model/ human rights approach, is still one of the great universal struggles for equality. Examining art and artists from different cultures and times helps bring about this transformation, from seeing impairment as a deficit, overcome by miracles, a curse, a sign of evil, dependency, a burden, a butt of jokes, being perpetual children, asexual and incapable; to recognising our inalienable right to get the support to achieve the things we can do, rather than judging us by what we cannot do.

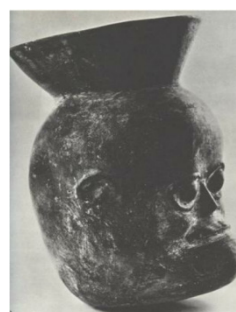
In the richer parts of the world, medical science has eliminated many earlier impairing conditions, replaced by stress, longevity and diet created cancers, heart and mental conditions. In the poorer parts of the world, because of inequality, many eradicable conditions still prevail. Impairment will always be with us, created by technology, genes, war, disasters, diseases and lack of genuine care and love. Moves to redistribute wealth, stop global warming, mitigate natural disasters, develop health, democracy and educate everyone, contained in the World's Sustainable Development Goals, will only work if we can create an inclusive understanding of humanness. This broadsheet and our theme help to create this understanding.



Luttrell Psalter, England.
Figures of fun? c.1325 AD



David Hevey, 1980s



Subject with Down's Syndrome,
Vase, Peru, 1200–1500 AD

Art and Disability

Several of the carvings in the British Museum Ice Age exhibition showed representations of disabled people 23,000 years ago. See the ivory carving of a woman.

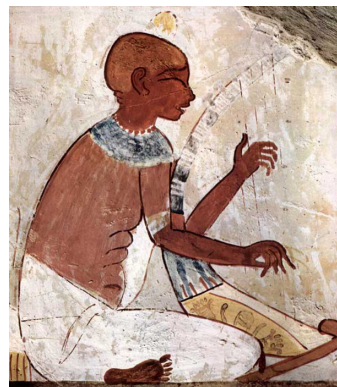
Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman Culture (5000–1500 years ago)

In Egypt, disabled people, especially those of short stature or blind, were accepted and are plentiful in their representation in carvings, statues and paintings. Blind people were seen as prophets or musicians and venerated e.g. Gods such as the *dwarf* Bes and female Beset. Bes was a God of dreams and dancing, celebrated as the protector of women especially during child-birth, he was often reproduced at birthing chambers. Images of Bes are found throughout the Egyptian culture from Old Kingdom (c.4700) to Roman Occupation (c.2000). From Mesopotamia to Egypt votive offerings were made, showing or describing impairments which people wanted to be rid of.

Ancient Greek pottery represents the tales of blind Homer e.g. Odysseus escapes *blinded* Polyphemus's cave clinging to a ram. The *club footed* God, Hephaestus, having survived being cast out of Heaven by his mother, Hera, because of his impairment, worked as a blacksmith, giving him incredible strength. He made a golden chair, imprisoning Hera, only releasing her when it is agreed he can marry Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. As a *cripple*, the other Gods think they can take his wife, leading to fights creating thunder across the heavens. The Roman's *Vulcan*.



Bes



Blind harp player

In Roman and Greek culture, disabled babies were got rid of. Those who developed or acquired impairments were tolerated. *Dwarfs* featured, often seen as figures of fun as gladiators, boxers or as warding off the evil eye, as were *hunchbacks*. Emperor Claudius was thought to have cerebral palsy and Julius Caesar epilepsy. Claudius walked with a *limp* and had speech difficulties, but was made Emperor (AD 41–54) by the Praetorian Guard, against the wishes of the Senate as he was disabled and not seen as suitable. Eventually accepted, he was an able Emperor, securing the invasion and annexation of Britain. Representations of him disguised his impairment. Julius Caesar's epileptic fits were also kept secret.



Statue of Claudius, with left leg obscured by his toga.

Mediaeval Europe

Much of this representation of disabled people came from the spread and adoption of Christianity, with the visual interpretation of Biblical stories, in mosaics, frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, church windows, drawings and oils, then the more widely distributed prints. Miracle cures of blindness, *lameness* and *leprosy* featured strongly. William II of Normandy colonised Sicily and in what is now Palermo built the cathedral Montereale in the Byzantine style. This was decorated with a large number of glass mosaics including these two of Christ curing lepers (1174–1182 AD).

Hand written and painted manuscripts have numerous illustrations of disabled people. e.g. Christ or Saints healing spinally paralysed people—'take up thy bed and walk' and blind people, or healing by their relics .



Christ healing paralytic at Bethesda, Mosul, Iraq, 1216–20.



The Holy Grail is carried to Jerusalem (*La Queste del Saint Graal*, Fance, 1316). Note the lame man cured by contact with the grail, helping the knights carry it.

Mediaeval manuscripts illustrated the widespread presence of disabled people in society, going on pilgrimages for cures, getting on with life in their villages or if life was too difficult, seeking support in monasteries. The possession by demons subject to exorcism, (most likely people with acute psychosis, mania and other mental health issues), were shown being cured by the demons leaving them.

As the Renaissance began, accelerating the breakdown of feudalism, with more trade and the development of wealthy merchants alongside aristocrats and royalty; there was more scope for commissioning works of art. Across Europe painters took on apprentices & began formal training of artists. It combined thinking on Mathematics, Science and Philosophy, much coming from the Islamic, Indian and Chinese cultures, with a move back to the classical portrayal of the idealised body from ancient Greece and Rome. These ideas accelerated from 1400 in Italy. New perspectives were around but stereotypes of disability prevailed.

Giotto de Bondane (1270–1337) is identified with moving away from idealised people to bringing three dimensional people into his pictures. Despite the new air of realism there are very few Italian Renaissance pictures from the C15th which just include disabled people. If one considers war was common and disfiguring diseases were widespread, then we are presented with idealised people following the classic tradition. Piero della Francesca's portrait of *Frederico Duke of Urbino* is unusually in profile (1467). The Duke was a mercenary and had a serious disfigurement of the right side of his face so chose in several pictures to be painted in



Pilgrims, two lame and one blind, on way to Mount St Michel.
Luttrell Psalter, 1325.



Giotto, *Jesus enters Jerusalem*, 1304



Giotto, *Healing of Justina by St. Cosmas & St. Damien*, 1305.

profile. http://www.worldofinclusion.com/res/qca/Federico_da_Montefeltro.doc

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1506) and Michelangelo's *David* (1501–05) are now thought to have both been on the autistic spectrum, with Asperger's syndrome. This is because of their prodigious out-put and attention to detail as well as lack of friends, isolation. This is not reflected in their works, which were the most well known artworks from this time.

Italian and Spanish artists only included disabled people when linked to biblical references, such as Tintoretto *St Augustine Healing the Lam*e (1549, left) and El Greco's *Christ Healing the Blind* (1567, right). Northern European artists of this period, perhaps because of the reformation, were more prepared to portray disabled people in their works, sketching them in detail and then working them into their pictures. The Dutch painter Hieronymous Bosch sketched cripples (right) and then included them as monsters in his triptych *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500). Bosch wanted to portray a non-idealised humanity. In painting the *Ship of Fools* (1500–1510) he focused on people with learning difficulties or used fools as a metaphor for behaving badly.

Other Dutch artists went further in painting disabled subjects, such as Peter Breugel the Elder (1525–1569). *Blind Leading the Blind* (1568, below left) is a picture of six blind men holding onto each other. The first has fallen and the viewer is left to draw the conclusion the rest will fall. The first of many portrayals making fun of blind people. In the same year Breugel painted a picture of beggars dancing, called *Cripples*. They have



Piero della Francesca, *Portrait of Federico Duke of Urbino*, 1467



El Greco, *Christ Healing the Blind*, 1567



Hieronymous Bosch, *Cripples*

fox tails pinned to their backs denoting evil.

Peter's son was only 5 when Breugel died. Later in his life he took up painting and copied a number of his father's works. *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (1616) emphasises pity and charity as an approach to disabled and other poor people. It was painted from his father's sketch by Peter Breugel the Younger.

An earlier Italian painter, Mantegna (1431–1506), included young people with Down's syndrome in a number of his religious paintings. *Virgin with Saint Jerome and Louise of Toulouse* (1455). Doctors writing in the *Lancet* believe models used have classic Down's Syndrome features, suggesting that Mantegna had a child with Down's syndrome, and was breaking the Italian trend of idealisation.

Persian miniature painting largely excluded showing disabled people. But Tamberlane or Timur the Lame was shown, a Tartar warlord born in Uzbekistan, 1336 who swept across most of Asia capturing a large empire. Receiving a devastating injury in his right hand and leg, (as his skeleton attests), he was still undefeated king of 35 years when he died in 1405. His empire stretched from North India to Turkey.

With these few exceptions, disabled people who would have been plentiful, were generally not shown in artistic portrayal in the mediaeval period, unless there was a moral or religious point to be made. Rembrandt Von Rijn (1606–1669) was a Dutch artist, generally considered one of the greatest painters and printmakers in Europe. Several researchers believe that Rembrandt may have had stereo blindness (dissimilar



Pieter Bruegel the Younger,
The Seven Acts of Mercy, 1616



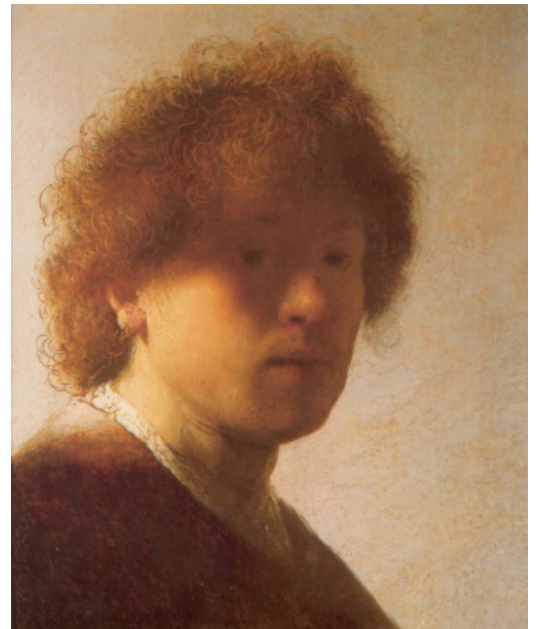
Mantegna, *Virgin with Saint Jerome and Louise of Toulouse*, 1455



Tamberlane, or Timur the Lame

visual images received by left and right eyes) since many of his self-portraits show his eyes looking in different directions. This gave him a visual advantage in his large tableau paintings.

Rembrandt, unlike many of his contemporaries, was a great humanist and often drew and made non-patronising prints of disabled people. Leprosy was widespread in Holland and the State had decreed that those who contracted the condition (as they were punished by God) were to be penitent sinners. They and their families had their worldly goods taken and had to survive on handouts or alms. To signify they were lepers they had to wear a white headband.



Rembrandt Von Rijn, *Self-portrait as a young man*, 1629



The English King Henry VIII had a favourite painting—*Family Portrait*, (1545, above) painted by an unknown artist. It was not a completely realistic portrayal as Jane Seymour the King's wife was dead. Left to right Princess Mary, Prince Edward, the King, Jane Seymour and Princess Elizabeth. Far left, Mother Jak, a female jester with learning difficulties. Far right, Will Somner the Jester, hunchback and natural fool. The Tudors believed people with learning

difficulties spoke the word of God and had them live at court, to give honest answers and amuse them. More information and a re-creation at www.allthekingsfools.co.uk

Cartoons, Comic Strips and Narrative Paintings

Printing presses meant images could get much wider distribution across Europe after 1488. They were used to send a message, to a still largely illiterate population, and disability reinforced their messages. Italian transformation print *The Dangers of Love*, (1600). The lovers are chastised for their love and become disabled. The male lover ends up going to the mad house in a sedan chair. Mitteli (1634–1718) used disability to show moral bankruptcy and for humour. Mitteli Dwarf drawing academy with hunchback model (below).

Louis XIV shown as weak by using crutches, led astray by his mistress and his chariot of state is attacked by the Protestant Dutch lion. Romeyn de Hooghe (1701). Hogarth (1697–1764) often used disability to show weakness and moral corruption in his popular prints. In *Work and Idleness* (1747) the industrious apprentice is contrasted with the beggar 'Billy in the Bowl'. His colleague Rowlandson (1756–1827) lampooned the rich taking the waters in bath with *Bath Races*, (1811). The future of Britain was reduced to a cartoon character John Bull by Gilray (1793) and his fate in fighting the French was shown by his return on crutches. This tradition continued with Marvel comics where bad looks bad and good is perfect – *Two-face* (right) (facial disfigurement), *the Riddler* (mental health issues) or *the Penguin* (ambulant impaired). This tradition was successfully inverted by



Mitteli Dwarf drawing academy with hunchback model



Batman *Two-face*
(facial disfigurement)

present day disabled cartoonist such as Crippen.

Diego Velazquez (1599–1660) A very talented Spanish painter who recorded earnestly and with dignity the disabled jesters, fools and people with *deformities* at the court for the amusement of the courtiers. Over 20 years he did a series of these paintings. Then in 1656 he painted *Las Meninas* which featured the five year old princess, adult attendant, two *dwarf* companions, the artist and in a mirror the King and Queen. This painting challenged the normal court protocol. Picasso did many versions of this.



Diego Velazquez *Don Sebastian de Morra*, 1645

Francisco Goya (1746–1828) was a successful Spanish court painter. Goya had developing deafness and depression, which partly explains the shift from court painter to his 'Black paintings' after 1793 when his conditions deteriorated. His belief in the Enlightenment was seriously challenged after French Napoleonic savagery to Spanish citizens.

Henri de Toulouse Lautrec (1864–1901) was a French artist, born into an aristocratic family who married their cousins. He had a genetic condition that affected the growth of his legs and head, leaving him very depressed. He learned to draw when confined to bed. He moved to Montmartre, Paris and used his talents to submerge himself in Bohemian life. His friends were prostitutes and he painted them with great insight, as well as recording the life of that time. His condition was a major factor in him becoming a great artist and then drinking himself to death.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Claude Monet (1840–1926) founder of

French Impressionism had a philosophy of expressing perception before nature. He had poor sight for much of his work, worsening after moving to Giverny 1883 and developing his garden and the characteristic Water Lilly pictures. Analysis shows Monet's cataracts had an increasing impact on the colour and form of his pictures, which may owe as much to his sight issues as his philosophy. However, they represent a great new art.



Claude Monet *Japanese Bridge*, 1924

Impressionism had a great impact on many artists. An American **Mary Cassat (1844–1926)** worked in France alongside them, with loss of sight which affected her pictures. **Georgia O'Keefe (1887–1986)** another American, after many paintings became blind, instructing helpers to complete them and working by touch on pottery. **Degas (1834–1917)** also had diminishing eyesight in later years, using only pastels.

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) had polio as a child and at 19 a serious motor accident led to back and leg problems. It was during her long hospitalisation and trauma that she began to paint. Kahlo underwent many operations during her short life of 44 years and had to endure enormous physical pain. Along with her socialism and love of native Mexican culture, her impairment became her main subject. During her life she produced over two hundred paintings, many of them were small format self-portraits often painted with a mirror while lying in bed. Kahlo was the first artist to proudly focus on her disabled identity.



Frida Kahlo *Two Sisters*, 1939

Picasso (1881–1973) (Blue Period) By 1901, Picasso was well established and had shown brilliant perception and promise. Then his



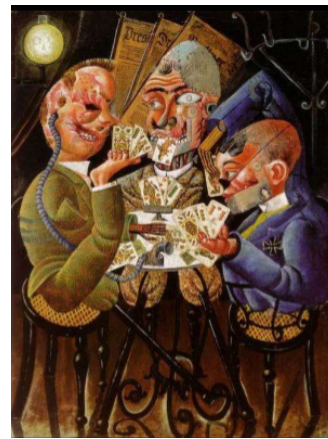
friend, Carlos Casagemas, committed suicide by shooting himself in the temple. For a while Picasso's output continued, then he withdrew from friends, became isolated and mainly painted pictures in shades of blue of the outcast, destitute and disabled people until 1904. He was no longer earning much and he continued for a number of years only using pinks until he started Cubism. Picasso was depressed and later had further bouts later.



Picasso *Femme au Bar Crises*, 1901

Otto Dix (1891–1969) and the German Expressionist school, after World War 1, used disability as a metaphor for a broken society, but also sought to depict the forgotten status of disabled war veterans.

Boris Kustotodiev (1878–1927) was an established Russian artist, sympathetic to the revolutionaries. He developed tuberculosis of the spine and by 1916 was confined to his studio – 'now the world is my room'. This did not stop him painting, producing some important symbolic works.



Otto Dix *Skat Players*, 1920

Mental Health and Art

The unending power of human creation is perhaps most demonstrated by those with severe mental health issues, eclipsing and inspiring those affected. This covers established artists and 'Outsider Art'. **Edvard Munch (1863–1944)** grew up in a family stalked by death and mental illness. He developed Bi-polar and depression. *The Scream* has become a symbol of mental distress. He also had long periods when he did not appear depressed. **Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890)** had led a varied life unable to settle, as teacher, preacher and eventually with his brother's encouragement turning to art. His early sombre pictures changed in Paris and more so in the South of France. During the last years of his life he painted



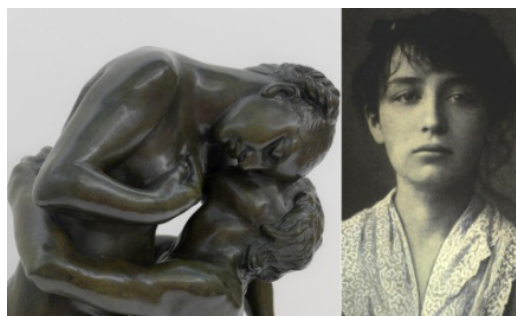
Vincent Van Gogh *Self Portrait*, 1889

with greater mental health problem. After cutting off his ear he was hospitalised. After a short, very productive time he went back into hospital for a year coming out in May 1890. He then produced some of his best known work until on 27th July he shot himself.

Sigrid Hjerten (1885–1945) was a leading Swedish modernist painter, studying under Matisse. She developed her own unique style, using colours for emotion. As her depression impacted upon her the colours darkened and after a botched lobotomy in 1938 she stopped painting. The sexism of the Art world was to position Grundwald, Hjerten's husband, to overshadow her reputation. Rodin the famous sculptor took on **Camille Claudel (1864–1943)** as an apprentice when she was already an established sculptor. They became lovers and after she continued working, though Rodin claimed several of her pieces as his. The pressures she faced led her to destroy her work (1905) and later to be sectioned by her mother for the rest of her life. 'A revolt against nature, a woman genius' art critic Mirbeau begrudgingly said of her. **Paula Rego**, Anglo-Portuguese artist, fought depression and sexism throughout her successful career.

Outsider Art

Dr Hans Prinzhorn, a German Psychiatrist collected, between 1918 and 1921, some 5000 works by inmates of mental institutions. French Artist **Jean Buffet**, impressed by this, collected more from those with Mental Health and others outside mainstream art and called it 'Art Brut'. These efforts began a long journey of bringing into the light art produced by Mental Health



Camille Claudel *Sculpture*, 1905



Paula Rego *Depression*, 2006

Survivors and others.

Marc Quinn (1964–) Is a successful contemporary British artist who uses many mediums to explore the essence of humanness. Starting with making a frozen sculpture of his own head, with 10 pints of his blood, examining his recovery from alcoholism with *Seven Deadly Sins* and then his Nervous breakdown, Quinn moved on with his *Marbles* series to make sculptures of physically impaired bodies. Through his series *Chemical Support* he examines people sleeping, dependent on chemicals to deal with hidden impairments such as diabetes, HIV or allergies. Best known for *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, erected on Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square (2005) larger inflatable versions at the opening of the Paralympics (2012) and Venice Biennale (2015), Marc continues to challenge perceptions about the body.



Marc Quinn *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005

Disability Arts Movement

In the late 1970s and 1980s this grew up, based explicitly on social model thinking and empowering disabled people to self representation. Initially it was the cultural accompaniment of a political movement against disability discrimination and for enforceable civil rights for disabled people, in the UK and USA. After these were achieved on paper if not in reality, the focus widened to art where disabled people could express themselves and their thinking using music, drama, cabaret, film as well as visual arts. Important visual artists include **Tanya Raabe-Webber** working on multi-media portraiture, **Nancy Willis** expresses her feelings of being a wheelchair user, sexism and LGBTQ issues, **Tony Heaton** sculpts political pieces such as *Gold Lane Invalid*



Tanya Raabe Webber
Baroness Campbell

Carriage and a Pyramid of 2000 collecting cans, knocked over and Riva Lehrer in the USA.

Yinka Shonibare (1962–) is a physically disabled artist of Nigerian origin, who came through art school and has made it in the Art World, challenging colonialism and racism. He has more recently identified with Disability Arts. **Sanchita Islam (1973–)** is a British born of Bangladeshi heritage filmmaker, writer and artist. With psychotic episodes she has painted her inner voice 'Fred' and psychological difficulties around the birth of her children.



Yinka Shonibare *The Age of Enlightenment – Antoine Lavoisier*

Working with Shape Arts, UKDHM have helped produce 4 animations and activities which are part of the National Disability Archive and Collection (NDACA).

ukdhm.org/disability-arts-movement-in-uk.

With more Arts Council Funding and Unlimited there are now more opportunities for disabled artists.

www.shapearts.org.uk/Pages/Events/Category/shape-exhibitions

We have covered a range of snapshots of how disability and disabled people, as a constant of human existence, are interwoven throughout art across the ages. Stereotypes of disabled people still abound across the cultures of the world, exemplified in Art. Today with the challenges of inequality we face, there has never been a better time to challenge our own thinking and support those who are seeking to make a positive difference and a more equal world.

This Broadsheet, time line and on-line materials are available for UKDHM November/December 2017.

www.ukdhm.org

Multiple copies can be posted. Contact rlrieser@gmail.com

Richard Rieser: Research & Author.

*Italics are used for titles and disability language not acceptable today.