

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The value of art in modern dermatology and medicine

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Dear Editor,

The representation of dermatologic diseases and other medical conditions in fine art is well known, and in a number of cases, many hypotheses have been proposed for the interpretation of the images.^{1,2} A specific disease can be

recognized carefully observing the subjects represented in different scenarios or it can be intentionally illustrated by the author as the main message or in the title of the masterpiece.²⁻⁴ Though, it is uncommon to observe a full collection dedicated to medical conditions, as realized by

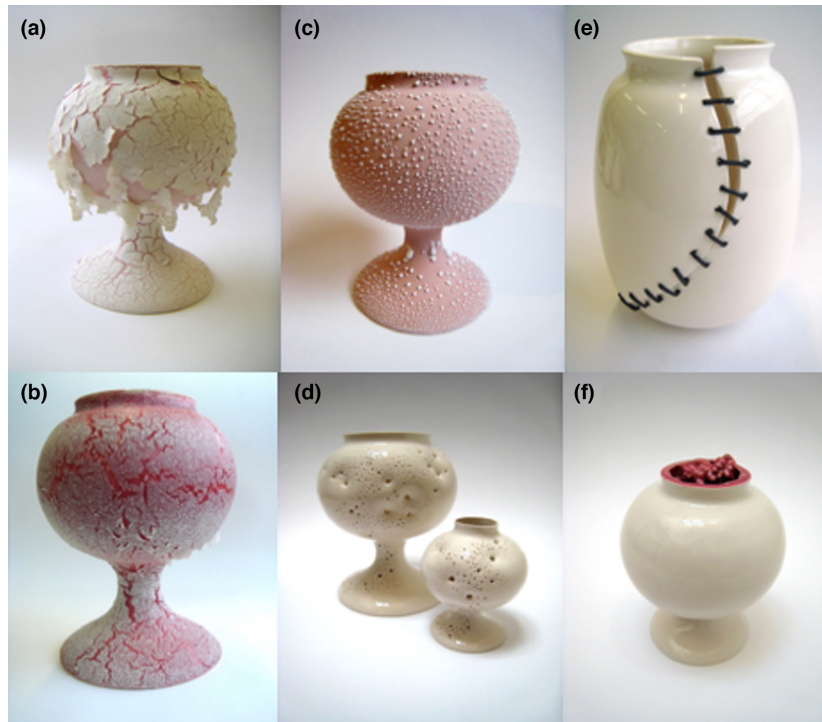


FIGURE 1 Single pieces from the collection 'Medical Heirlooms' by Tamsin van Essen consisting in ceramic vases representing: (a, b) psoriasis, (c, d) acne and (e, f) scars.

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the artist Tamsin van Essen (1975—in activity), a London-based artist mainly working with ceramics. In her ceramics collection ‘Medical Heirlooms’, inspired to 17–18th century apothecary jars, she imitates specific dermatologic and systemic conditions underlying defects and blemishes (Figures 1 and 2). This idea offers important insights for the community of dermatologists.

The development of new drugs, the discovery of therapeutic targets and the use of tissue-sparing surgical procedures (i.e. Mohs micrographic surgery – Tübingen technique) have led to the possibility to reach a great therapeutic success, often with a complete control of the disease.^{5,6} However, many conditions typically show a chronic relapsing course (i.e. psoriasis, Figure 1a,b), or can be treated with a subsequent permanent scarring or functional limitations and deformities (i.e. skin cancer or acne, Figures 1c–g and 2a).^{7,8} In a number of cases, patients can suffer an heavy social burden related to their condition (i.e. teenagers with acne, psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, Figure 1a–d), be classified as non-responders to the available therapeutic options or deal with the side effects of previous therapies (i.e. osteoporosis due to long term corticosteroid use, Figure 2b).⁹ The impact of the disease can be massive and perceived as a stigma, as with previous sexually transmitted diseases (i.e. syphilis, Figure 2c) or genetic diseases (i.e. ichthyosis, Figure 2d).

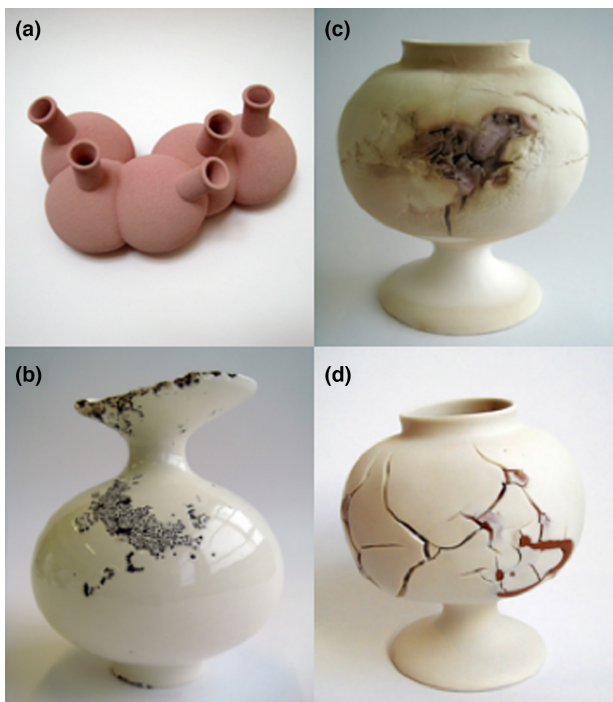


FIGURE 2 Single pieces from the collection ‘Medical Heirlooms’ by Tamsin van Essen consisting in ceramic vases representing: (a) cancer, (b) osteoporosis, (c) syphilis and (d) ichthyosis.

The assessment of the physical, psychological and social impact on patients' quality of life is constantly increasing in the clinical practice. A dynamic and longitudinal evaluation of the signs and symptoms during the dermatologic consultations is encouraged with a greater amount of data in the current literature, guidelines and position papers.¹⁰ Still, physicians should contribute to the increase of patient's self-esteem and the acceptance of the disease, especially in chronic diseases, favouring a multidisciplinary approach including psychologists and psychiatrists. The artist Tamsin van Essen clearly specifies her intention to represent the interest and uniqueness that can be added to a subject's appearance by the consequences of a disease. As family heirlooms, the art pieces can be inherited as the hereditary medical conditions. We believe in the power and high value of visual art and the possibility to share this message, as realized with ‘Medical Heirlooms’, through exhibitions or social networks, especially in period when there is a constant pursuit of beauty.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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